

DODD's ARMY



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To Ann, who let me use the PC from time to time.

Chapter 1

Corporal Kelly reckoned being a passenger in the guts of a Wellington bomber was the worst experience he'd ever had, and that was *before* it crashed into the sea.

It was dark, not pitch, but what light there was glinted spookily red off the metal framework of the cavernous space inside the aircraft, like a fire was smouldering somewhere nearby. Something to do with protecting the crews night vision, Kelly hoped. The bomber had been converted to carry soldiers, but the seats were just L shaped bits of steel tube bolted along the sides of the aircraft with canvas stretched across. There was a strong smell of scorched oil and old sweat - and smoke, which, what with that red glow, was a real worry, but nobody else seemed to care. Was it normal? Kelly thought about whether it would be better to clamber up the front and shout a warning to the pilot, do *something*, and risk making a prat of himself, or die horribly in the blazing wreckage of the aircraft. He decided to do nothing.

They were being blown about all over the sky - it seemed to Kelly the aircraft was trying to wrestle its way somewhere different to where the pilot wanted it to go - and it was savagely, bitterly cold, draughts as vicious as daggers coming from everywhere, but the worst part was the *noise*. It beat down on the handful of soldiers like a physical weight, the gigantic unmuffled engines thundering a few feet away, wind screaming past the thin skin of the fuselage, whining through gaps here and there, everything vibrating and rattling fit to fall apart.

'I sometimes wondered how the paras got the nerve to jump,' Kelly yelled to the man next to him, 'and now I flamin' know. Fair dinkum, right now I'd be prepared to think about it, and I haven't even got a parachute.'

The hunched form next to him seemed not to hear, and continued to rock back and forth – Kelly could see his mouth moving, repeating something again and again, but above all the noise, couldn't make out what he was saying. He reminded Kelly of the old Rabbis he'd seen back in East Sydney on a Saturday, and guessed the man was praying. Had the same pinched look of those blokes, too. Not a bad idea, praying, Kelly thought, and racked his brains for something suitable, but the only thing that came to mind was a vaguely remembered hymn about 'for those in peril on the sea.' Kelly thought God was giving him enough aggravation to be going on with, without being reminded about any other possibilities, so he turned to the Jewish bloke, grabbed his shoulder to get his attention and shouted into his ear 'Say one for me mate, OK?'

The man stopped his nodding for a moment and studied Kelly through close-set, hooded eyes for a few seconds, then, as if nothing had happened, turned away and started his rocking and mumbling again.

'Oh, well, I tried' shrugged Kelly, and looked round to see how the others were coping.

The sergeant looked happy enough, his beefy frame and weather beaten face relaxed, the big, gnarly hands at rest. Maybe early forties, Kelly guessed, he had the bearing of a regular soldier, a smudge of colour on his left breast indicating an interesting history, and wore his uniform easily. Had the look of a bloke who'd done a bit of boxing in his time, too.

Even the lanky, grey haired officer seemed to be going OK. Didn't look real fit though. Might have been good looking, in that suave, Noel Coward sort of way, if he'd put on twenty pounds, and get a bit of sun. How could he be so pale, still? Kelly wondered what his story was. How come he was, what, pushing fifty, and still a lieutenant? No medal ribbons, so he'd probably not done a stint in the Great War.

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Must be a 'hostilities only' job, but obviously not a fighting soldier.

Of course, the two big young men, Kelly had already clocked them as commandos, sat down the back with that faraway look of someone who's done it all many times before, and learnt to switch off, oblivious to the roar of the aircraft and the occasional sickening lurch. Kelly studied them again in the dull red light, both just under the six feet, he reckoned, same solid, obviously very fit build, same confident manner, both even had film star teeth – most unusual in private soldiers in 1943: pretty much interchangeable, really, except one had short blonde hair, and the others was dark, wavy, and much longer. Kelly had seen the sergeant's eyes narrow as he'd spotted it, and could tell he was thinking 'If you were one of mine'. Looked good in their desert kit as well, mused Kelly. Most soldiers looked slightly ridiculous in service shorts, like little boys dressed up in their dad's clothes, somehow. It was only these two and the sergeant looked like they were wearing their own kit. *And* their berets sat right. Most of them, their beret just stuck out the side of their head, like it was supposed to go to a vertical point, but had got blown sideways, but these blokes, the sarge too, had the beret worn properly, the floppy bit pointing down, close to the ear. At least they'd stopped that everlasting stuffing about with their weapons. Every time he'd seen them in the transit camp, there they were, sitting aside from all the other poor buggers, talking quietly to each other, and forever cleaning, cleaning. And when they'd finally cleaned their rifles to bugger, they'd start on some other piece of kit. It was really giving Kelly the shits, just quietly.

Incredibly, the young fellow the other side of his twitchy neighbour seemed to be asleep. Kelly couldn't make his mind up about this one. He was one of those lumpy kids, not fat exactly, maybe a bit pudgy, but he had the slightly beaten up look of a bloke who'd seen plenty of action – Kelly

had noticed him back at Alexandria – big scar on the forehead, nose bent out of shape a bit. Young though, didn't look older than nineteen. Must have had an exciting time since joining up. He'd be able to sleep through an artillery barrage. Kelly looked again at the skinny form bobbing next to him, and with a sudden surge of affection, was glad at least one other person was hating this even more than he was.

Kelly was just thinking about whether it had been the worst decision of his life to get on this flight, when *Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom, BOOM*, it seemed to be all round him, the last shell seem to explode right next to him, removed all doubt about it. The aircraft was lifted way up, then staggered right and down, down, the wind screaming louder, the fabric skin rattling and thumping against the ribbed frame, as though some maddened gigantic creature was trying to break in.

Slowly, the great machine levelled out, and the wind and vibration eased a little. Everybody was frozen, like some tableau, listening for new sounds in the cacophony, trying to figure out what was happening, nothing moving but the eyes, watching each other, realising they were all still alive, still flying, looking for clues to what to do, when a black curtain was pulled back from a sort of larder cupboard high up at the front, and a man in RAF uniform half jumped, half fell out and lurched towards them. Everybody watched him in stunned amazement – they'd been in the air for hours, and had no idea there was somebody up there. Afterwards, Kelly thought he couldn't have been more surprised if Churchill himself had leapt down, bollock naked, and started handing out cigars.

At first, it looked like he'd been injured, the way he was staggering about, but it was just the way the aircraft was jinking this way and that, and he glanced at each of the passengers, then saw the officer's uniform, and bellowed into his ear.

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‘Get your men ready to move, lieutenant. We’ve copped some heavy damage up front and we’ll have to put down in the sea.’

The lieutenant stared at him, not really comprehending, and shouted back ‘These aren’t my men; we’re all just passengers I’m an interpreter’

The blue uniformed airman glared at the officer disgustedly, and, moving on to the sergeant, bellowed ‘It’s up to you Sarge – we’ll be in the drink in a few minutes, and the officer’s no use at all. Make sure your chaps are belted up tight, then as soon as we’ve stopped, get ‘em out that hatch.’ He pointed to a doorway in the side of the fuselage, ‘With any luck, there’ll be a life-raft automatically inflating for you, it’ll take eight, so plenty of room for all. They can take their packs, but they’ll have to leave the rest of their kit, OK?’

‘OK – what about you?’

‘I’ll be helping the boys up front - they’re pretty beaten up – we’ll be getting out the top hatch. There’s a torch and a whistle in the rafts, we’ll use them to find each other, yes?’

‘How long?’

‘Only a few minutes – it won’t hold together up front much longer – I’ll try to give you a warning...’

The sergeant nodded acceptance, and getting up, moved across to Kelly and yelled the news to him, telling him to tell the man next to him, then secure his pack and belt up tight. While Kelly grabbed the Jewish bloke, whose only recognition of the whole thing had been to speed up his bobbing back and forth, and gave him the news, the sergeant lurched back to the soldiers on the other side and filled them in, while the airman swayed forward and disappeared up a little ladder to the flight deck, closing the curtain behind him in a reflex gesture of domesticity.

After a minute or two, unexpectedly, the sound of the engines suddenly backed off, and the vibrating died away too.

In the unaccustomed lull, it sounded eerily quiet, and the soldiers were looking apprehensively at each other when the aviator did his sudden rabbit out of the hat trick again, and moved down among them. Kelly couldn't take his eyes off the blood all over the airman's shirt and trousers. He followed Kelly's stare, and shouted, distractedly, as though it would calm them down, 'Oh, it's all right, mate, it's not mine. Now listen – we can see land up ahead. We think it's Italy, or it might be where we're supposed to be, and it's Sicily, but I don't think so.'

'So you're lost?' the corporal asked.

The airman looked offended, then shrugged. 'Pretty much. Have a look on the map, mate. The space between Italy and Sicily's only small.' As though to demonstrate, he raised a hand, and held the index finger and thumb almost touching, and added 'I'm fairly sure we're still in the Med' as though that was a comfort.

'Jesus, mate, how did that come about?'

'What, getting lost? This was supposed to be easy, a milk run. But that storm came up, and we decided to go north a bit to bypass it, but the bastard thing followed us, then we went out a bit more, and so on. It didn't help, getting shot to buggery. Any rate, we're going to try to put it down close to shore – we can't risk trying to find somewhere on land – we don't have much control. We'll probably hit fairly hard, but once we're down, this thing'll likely take a little while to sink, so there's no need to panic, OK?'

Kelly thought 'Oh, thanks for that, there I was thinking this would be a good time to panic' but stayed quiet – it didn't seem like the right moment for smart comments.

'Now, I've got to get back. I'll switch the lights off and on just before we go in. Good luck, boys. Oh, by the way, we don't *think* it was one of our ships firing on us. And don't get in the raft before it's fully deployed, you'll just swamp it.' And with that, he scampered back up the ladder.

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Kelly was just thinking that until now, it hadn't occurred to him that the anti-aircraft fire might have been a mistake, yet another mistake in a day full of 'em, when the lights went out and on again, and immediately after, even the muted roar of the engines died away, then, breaking the sudden silence, there was a solid thud and a rushing, drumming noise, followed by quiet again. Kelly shouted 'Shit, boys, that wasn't bad at all' and was about to start moving when, with a roaring, juddering, smashing jolt, the aircraft hit the water again, and Kelly realised the first impact had just been a bounce, but this time, with the roaring giving way to the grinding, splintering sounds of destruction, that seemed to go on forever, the Wellington was down for good.

A second's eerie silence, then the sound of water coming in, and screeches and groans from the stricken plane. The sergeant, on his feet now, yelled 'All right lads, out by that door.' He nodded towards the hatch. 'Anybody need help? No? Come on then, off you go, and take your packs.'

He moved to the hatch and opened it, then looked out to find, as the airman had predicted, a life raft emerging and expanding from under the wing somewhere like some great, primitive orange beast, gleaming, writhing wetly in the half moonlight. The wind was still sending broken clouds scrambling across the sky, but easing now, the rain just flurrying but chill across his face.

He barred the hatch for a moment, waiting for the raft to fully inflate, then, noticing it was tethered to the fuselage, turned back to the interior. The orange mass turned into a great inflated doughnut, maybe ten feet across, with a floor of some rubberised material.

'OK boys, off you go.' The two commandos were right there, with all their kit. 'Leave the kitbags boys, and the rifles, you won't be needing them again'

They glanced at each other, then the dark haired one shouted 'Good riddance! Fuck you, you bastard' and flung his

rifle into the sea. For a moment, the sergeant thought the comment had been directed at him, then realised the soldier had been talking to the rifle. The commando smirked at his mate, then dropped into the raft. The second commando looked at him, amazed, then, with a shrug, dropped his weapon over the side and joined his friend.

They were all moving now, urgently, but no panic, and it was only a matter of seconds before the interior of the aircraft was empty. It was easy, as it turned out. There was a bit of a moon to light things, little wind, just a splash of rain and the water was flopping the raft around sleepily. The officer had been last off – Kelly had watched with amused amazement as the lieutenant struggled with a large leather suitcase, before shouting, ‘All right Sir, pass it to me.’ The officer glanced at him gratefully and handed it down. Kelly thought of dropping it in the sea, just, well, because he could, but took it, and even helped the officer into the raft, which was tugging gently on its tether, as though it was anxious to get away.

As the officer settled in the raft, he called ‘Right, all in? Somebody find the torch and whistle, and see if there’s any oars. Free that tether, Sergeant, and let’s get a bit of distance before the aircraft sucks us down.’

Somebody said ‘Sir, the sarge ain’t here yet!’

‘What? Where is he?’

‘Dunno, Sir. I think he went up that ladder thing up the front.’

Kelly realised ‘He must have gone to help the blue jobs.’ And the officer nodded. ‘Well, we can’t hang about here, we’ll get drawn down when the plane goes under.’

Kelly was surprised to hear himself shout ‘I’ll go and chase him up’ and, pulling on the tether, drew the raft close enough so he could grab the bottom of the hatch opening, then slithered and scrambled into the belly of the stricken aircraft. It was even darker in there now, the red light was gone, the

only light from the moon through the hatch. He could hear water sloshing about, and as he let himself down onto the floor, he stepped into water. As he scanned around, trying to get oriented, the aircraft screeched, shuddered and dropped a bit, and Kelly knew he didn't have long. Suddenly, he caught a movement further up the cavernous interior, and in the darkness, could make out the shape of a man, half lying, half kneeling, flailing weakly about in the water - Kelly had the impression he was scrabbling around, looking for something, and called out 'Come on Sarge, for Christs sake!' No response. 'Jesus, this things going down any second, Sarge, come away!'

As though to prove the point, the aircraft did another stagger, accompanied by more grinding and screeching, and water started sloshing in over the bottom of the hatchway.

The sergeant stopped his groping, turned his face towards Kelly and yelled 'Somebody there? Give me a hand, will you, I can't see!'

Kelly called out behind him 'I see him. He's injured. I'm going to get him. Somebody be ready to give me a hand' and yelling 'Hold on Sarge, I'm coming' started working his way carefully towards the injured man, who was now groping his way along, on all fours.

The aircraft did another sickening sway, Kelly lost his footing and surfed right past his quarry, to crash into the end of the compartment, knocking the breath out of him. Regaining his feet, he took a moment to recover, then worked his way back to the sergeant and grabbed his arm. 'Gotcha!' Kelly shouted jubilantly, 'Let's get the fuck out of here! Can you get up?'

The big man raised his bullet head to nod, and Kelly saw his face was a mass of blood and broken flesh. Swallowing a shudder, Kelly helped him up and towards the hatchway, where he saw the outline of a head and shoulders waiting for them, with water pouring in all round it. 'Kin'

‘ell, Corp,’ the silhouette yelled, ‘get a fuckin’ wriggle on. This bastard’s goin’ any second!’

‘All right, we’re coming – here, take him, he can’t see’ and with a final effort, Kelly pushed the sergeant through the hatchway, before falling exhaustedly through it himself.

‘Good work, Corporal’ said the officer, ‘now cast us off, somebody, you men with the paddles get to it, and we’ll find the other raft.’

They were still getting settled, and only a few yards from the fuselage, when, with a final soft gurgling groan, and hardly a ripple, the aircraft slipped below the surface, leaving them alone on the water.

As they regarded the water where the Wellington had been just seconds ago, they were startled by a brief gushing noise twenty yards away. For a split second, Kelly thought one of the airmen must have survived and somehow got free, then another life raft, empty, of course, dragged itself to the surface, glinting in the fading moonlight.

They all watched in silence as the raft finished inflating. ‘We won’t be needing the whistle, then’ commented one of the commandos, and the sergeant said quietly, ‘No, they won’t be coming. I got up that ladder thing to see if they needed a hand – Jesus, what a fuckin’ shambles! Half the front of the plane was gone, and there was bits hanging off all over. Both the pilots were in a shocking state – Christ only knows how they managed to land the bastard, and the other one, the one we saw, must have got knocked to buggery in the crash. Any rate, none of ‘em will be joining us. I’d just turned back when the plane did a pitch, and I fell back down to where we were sitting. Must have whacked my face on the way – it’s beginning to hurt now.’

He started to probe his face with his fingers, muttering, ‘Oh, shit, oh, Christ.’ The officer said gently ‘Best leave it for now Sergeant. There’s land up ahead, we’ll have a better look at you when we’re ashore.’

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The sergeant responded 'Mind your own fuckin' business' and continued running his fingers over his face, then, after a minute, turned to where the voice had come from and said 'Er, was that the officer speaking?'

'Yes, Sergeant, it was me.'

'Sorry, Sir, Bit shook up, like. It's scary, not being able to see. Could you have a bit of a look at me now, to be going on with, and tell me what you reckon?'

The lieutenant moved closer, and gently turned the wrecked face towards him. Kelly watched, surprised: the officer didn't bat an eye as he peered through the gloom at the torn and bloodied face.

'You can move your jaw OK?'

'Yes. It's me eyes I'm worried about.'

'Can you open them?'

'Oh – I thought they *were* open'

'Can you move your eyeballs?'

A pause, then, 'I think so, not really sure. It hurts.'

'Look – oh, sorry - as far as I can see just quickly, I'm not sure there's any permanent damage. There's plenty of blood, but with a bit of luck, all you're going to have is the best pair of black eyes I've ever seen, and some interesting scars. Frankly, Sergeant, I don't think you'll be having a lot to do with the ladies for quite some time, but until it's light and I can see properly.....'

'Thanks, Sir, I'm grateful, and I'm sorry about you know.'

'Never mind about that. Just stay still for a bit, while we try to paddle to shore.' And with that, he turned, and said 'Come on lads, we'll be losing the moon shortly. I want to be on the beach by then.'

Two of the men had found paddles, and got stuck in, but achieved little. Luckily, the wind and tide were nudging them in the right direction, and they half paddled, half drifted down a glittering path of moonlight towards the shore. It

wasn't long before they were into a line of small and weary surf, and as though on a secret signal, the commandos dropped one each side off the raft to pull it onto the beach.

But after getting onto the raft so easily, getting off turned into a farce. The two big privates had gone overboard with perfect timing, but too far out, and both disappeared under the water before, spluttering and cursing, they re-emerged, clinging to the raft, pulling the sides low enough so wavelets flopped in.

'Fuckin' 'ell boys, be careful, you'll 'ave us all in there with you' warned the little private, who had been sitting on the doughnut, and, as he said it, flailed at the air before tipping backwards in slow motion off the side. The dark haired commando grabbed him as he sunk and hauled him up, but the extra weight on the side immersed it further, and the raft immediately began to fill with water and abuse.

Soon, all the others except the injured man were in the water, hanging on with one hand and kicking hard, mostly in the same direction, until first one, then another, found purchase on the sandy bottom, and, soaked and exhausted, they staggered ashore, dragging the raft behind them.

'All right, Sarge?' somebody whispered.

'I don't think you need to whisper,' the sergeant replied. 'You made enough bleeding noise getting here, splashing about like a pack of kids on their 'oliday, to wake the dead. And yes, I'm abso-fuckin'-lutely wonderful. Apart from being blinded, half me face gone missing, wringing wet, cold, hungry and completely fuckin' lost, I'm just lovely, thanks for asking.'

The lieutenant had been peering around, and said, 'All right lads, settle down. We have to assume we're in enemy territory, until we know for sure, so we need to get off this beach and into shelter, quick as you like. I imagine that dark clump is trees, over to the right there.' He pointed. 'Everybody get your kit – look after the Sergeants for him,

would you, Corporal, and you two,' indicating the commandos, 'one each side of the Sergeant, hold an arm and help him along. All right, follow me, and keep the noise down – we don't know what's round the corner.'

And with that, the lieutenant struck off over the sand, pleased with himself for being so, well, officer-like, not aware of a thin stream of water dribbling from his suitcase.

It was only a matter of metres before the sand began to give way to straggling grass and low shrubs, just about hanging on to life, and in the fading moonlight, they could now make out the edge of a stand of trees, though they couldn't tell whether it was just a few, or the edge of a forest. The lieutenant was making a beeline for the nearest trees when he stopped suddenly, and the others blundered into him, one at a time.

'Barbed wire' he said, and the commando repeated it to the sergeant, as though he was deaf as well as blind. The officer suddenly realised the blond commando had been giving the blinded man a running commentary, and nodded thanks. 'Corporal, follow the wire that way a little way, and you, private' nodding to the small man, 'have a scout around the other way. See if there's a break. We don't want to advertise our presence by cutting the wire if we can help it. The rest of you take a break. No smoking, and keep it quiet'

Kelly refrained from pointing out they had nothing to cut the wire with, and crept carefully away.

Kelly was back in less than ten minutes, grinning broadly. 'Well, Sir, I have good news, and very good news. First, the wire's down about a quarter mile along, right where the trees start.'

'Excellent,' said the lieutenant, 'Would that be the very good news?'

‘No Sir, that was just the good news. The very good news is that as far as I can make out from a sign up there, we’ve just walked through a minefield.’

There was a long and pensive silence, until the little private, who had just returned, sighed, and said ‘Kin’ ‘ell.’

‘All right, lead on, Corporal, and you men stay close to the wire. Chances are the sign was a bluff, but no point taking chances.’

Kelly moved forward, the small crocodile of soldiers trailing behind him, and, after silently pointing out the sign, he soon found the gap in the wire again. Looking at it again, he saw the wire had not been broken down, the fence just stopped there. Nearby lay a couple of coils of wire, half hidden by grass growing over it. It seemed somebody had got this far then given up, or lost interest. ‘Whatever’, Kelly thought, ‘You bloody ripper,’ and led the men through, and into the trees.

He stopped as soon as they were all under the dark canopy of the trees, and waited for the lieutenant to come up to him. ‘I think the first priority is to get the men under cover, eh, Corporal? See what you can do.’ It sounded like he was asking a waiter to find him a nice table in a crowded restaurant. Kelly replied, ‘Righto, mate, I’ll have a nose around’ and slipped away into the murk.

The others stood round, peering into the darkness, feeling bone weary and shaky now the immediacy of the crash and evacuation was gone. Reading minds, the sergeant said ‘No smoking, boys, ‘til we know what’s what.’

After a few minutes, the lanky Australian was back. ‘Well, all I can find close by is forest, so I don’t think there’s too much chance of getting run over by a milk cart. It looks like it’s mostly just trees. Mind, it’s hard to see in this light, so’ He left the sentence unfinished.

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The officer muttered 'And we'll be losing that any minute. We need somewhere to hide and rest.'

Kelly thought for a moment. 'There's some scrubby sort of stuff further in. That's the only cover I saw. I'll go and look a bit further if you like.'

The officer looked at the bedraggled group and decided 'No. The men have had enough, and I don't know how the sergeant got this far, even. You'd better get us to this scrubby place.' Turning to the others, he said, 'All right men, not far now, you can rest soon' and back to Kelly, 'Carry on, Corporal.'

It wasn't long before Kelly had led them to an area that had head high scrubby bushes dotted about among the trees. Kelly found a place where the shrubs were a little thicker, and called quietly 'Reckon this is as good as we'll get tonight, mate.' The officer, grateful for the rest, agreed. 'All right, lads. This is it for now. Help the sergeant down and get him comfortable, you men, and the rest of you, find somewhere for yourselves.'

The commandos carefully eased their charge down, the blond one still talking quietly to him, still giving a commentary, the only voice, before finding places for themselves, and soon they were all on the ground, some lying already, the others sitting in that knees up, head between them posture exhausted men often seem to take up.

After a few minutes weary silence, each man privately reliving the events that had led them here, the wiry private broke the silence with 'Can we 'ave a fag now, Sir?'

He was scrabbling around his pockets and fished out a tobacco tin, the metal, worn to a dull polish, reflecting the last of the watery moonlight. They all watched this performance until the dark haired commando said quietly 'Are you fucking barmy, mate? For all you know, you're squatting in the

middle of a fucking Eye-tie army camp, its black as Newgates knocker, and you fancy a quiet smoke? Why don't you have a bleeding brew-up as well, while you're at it?"

The lieutenant thought about what to do next. He moved next to the sergeant, and said quietly 'Strictly speaking, I suppose we should send out a patrol, or mount guards, or something, but I don't think the men are up to it – I'm certainly not. What do you think?'

'Well, Sir, if the lads feel anything like I do, No, let 'em sleep, Sir, is what I'd do, and take a chance. If anyone came along, there's bugger all we could do about it anyway'

Not to give up a smoke without a fight, though, the little man said, 'OK, Sir, how about I scout out the lay of the land for fifty yards or so, an' if it looks all right, we can have a snout then, and maybe a brew up?'

The sergeant broke in. 'We're surrounded by forest, and there's no light, am I right? The forest is a creepy place at night, even with a moon, so there'll be nobody wandering off, right? If you want a slash or whatever, stay right close, understand'

'It's just fuckin' trees, Sarge,' the soldier persisted. 'There's nothin' dangerous 'ere.'

'Point is,' the sergeant shot back, 'its unfamiliar ground, and the forest in the dark does wassnames, strange things. Bizarre, that's it. Bizarre. You'll be lost or panicking in five minutes. Listen. Back when I was training the Home Guard, Local Defence Volunteers, it was then, one evening there was these two old geezers doing their regular patrol. Any rate, they were stopped at the edge of the local forest for a smoke, or a piss, when they heard this shuffling coming from the undergrowth, like somebody searching round for something. Height of the paratroop invasion scare, this was, and they decided it had to be a German parachutist, lookin' for his kit, so one of 'em crept back to where they'd left their

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bikes, to collect the rest of the platoon before they tackled whoever was in there, while the other one stayed to keep tabs on him. After a while, the messenger comes back with another ten or so men, and they begin to close in on the scrabbling noise. Closer, and closer, but the shrubbery was thick and they couldn't get a glimpse of 'im. Fuckin' hours, they trailed that noise, 'til eventually, they identified the culprit, and do you know what it was?'

He paused, enjoying the dramatic effect, then, 'A donkey!'

There was a long silence, while the soldiers tried to make sense of it. Then the sergeant chuckled, 'A fuckin' *donkey*! Boys, the forest is a strange place at night, so no wandering off, OK? Now, settle down and get some sleep. We'll have a good look round in the morning'

Silence fell again, as the men tried to make themselves comfortable.

After a few minutes, somebody laughed quietly. 'A fuckin' *donkey*!' This was greeted by sniggers, then laughter, quietly at first, and soon they were all hooting with laughter, rolling and thrashing, helpless.

Chapter 2

The sun was up, throwing long, softly golden beams filtering through the trees. There was nothing left of last night's storm, and the air was warming, as the men began to stir, grumbling and cursing. They were used to three luxuries first thing - a brew up, a smoke and a whinge, and if they couldn't have the first two, they'd make a meal of the third. Even though exhausted by the events of the night, they'd had little sleep, rest proving hard to come by in the anxiety of their situation, their wet clothes and hunger, capped off by the absence of tea and a smoke. The sergeants all reckoned the soldier's best friend was his rifle, but the privates knew where their affections lay.

Kelly commented 'Appears it's a dingo's breakfast for us, boys' and got a circle of questioning looks. 'That'd be a piss and a good sniff round' he explained.

The officer sat up, and, straightening his uniform as best he could, said, 'Well, anyway, looks like we're all right for the moment. Next thing is to keep a look out for the locals, while we decide what to do next.'

The sergeant gave a sort of cough; a laugh caught up in a groan. Then, struggling into a sitting position, growled 'What to do! What to fuckin' do! That's fuckin' rich, that is! Due respect, Sir, what *are* we going to do, for Christ's sake, open the second fuckin' front all on our own? Jesus! There's only half a dozen of us, and I'm worse than useless, we got no equipment worth talking about, and we'll be lucky to give ourselves up without gettin' shot to buggery. And we don't want to get found by the locals and get a pitchfork up the arse. Nah, only choice is to surrender to the army or the police. Stands to reason, Sir. Due respect. And if they *are* our lot, that's all right.'

Dodd's Army

They all sat and thought glumly about that for a minute or two, studying the purple-black stripe across the sergeant's face. He'd obviously copped a heavy blow from the eyebrow ridge to the middle of the nose. The whole area was pulpy and badly swollen, the eyes closed, invisible beneath the swelling. At least, the sea water had washed most of the blood off. Last night, in the darkness, it had looked like half his face had gone.

'Sergeant!' the officer barked sharp enough to make them all jump. Kelly could see the sergeant's training kicking in, and his head turned towards the lieutenant with conditioned respect. 'I want no more profanity from you, or anybody else. I know better than to try to stop you swearing, but no more profanity. Is that clear?'

Guilty nods all round.

'Sergeant,' more gently this time, 'as the senior person here, it's my decision, not yours, and I must say I'm not keen to throw in the towel until I have to. Perhaps we could steal a boat, or hide out, or something. Just walking into the local police station, then finding out they're Italian, doesn't seem the right thing to do, to me.'

A few faces brightened a little, and all eyes turned back to the man with the broken face, who slowly chewed at his bottom lip in a way they were all to come to know, then said 'After I got took off Dunkirk, and got past Dover.....' He stopped for a few moments, then, as an aside, 'What a fuckin' shambles *that* was. Anyway, I was a bit gash, a bit spare, like. I'd copped a bit of schrapnel, and my unit was all to buggery anyway - Christ knows, oops, sorry Sir, where most of 'em were - dead, prob'ly, and I ended up attached to the Home Guard, well, Local Defence Volunteers it was in them days, 'til Churchill said that name wasn't right, not military enough, I suppose. Anyway, that *was* a fuckin' shambles. Talk about desperation - there was old blokes, fuckin' kids, bloody cripples - I could tell you stories

Again, a bit of a pause, then ‘Didn’t have hardly any firearms - never mind weapons, most of ‘em didn’t have anything like a uniform. I seen whole platoons looked like they had one uniform between the fuckin’ lot of ‘em, and they had to fight to get a bit each. Jesussorry, Sir Point is, a good few of ‘em had been through the last lot, and even the Boer turnout, some of ‘em. ‘

Once again, he was obviously back in 1940 for half a minute or so, and the rest of them just sat there, intent on his face, until the young private piped up ‘I was in it as well, ‘fore I got called up – the ‘Ome Guard, not the Boer War. Talk about a, a’ he glanced slyly at the sergeant, ‘a fuckin’ shambles.’

The big man turned his head towards him, as though considering whether the piss was being taken, then continued quietly, almost whispering,

‘Point is, at least they had food and drink, and a nice warm missus to go home to. And if they got in trouble, the worst thing would be the army or the Old Bill would have a laugh, but there’d be help all round them.

‘If we stay here, well, we’ve got no food, nothing to drink, no shelter, and that’s just for starters. Chri..... sorry, Sir, we got nothing to cook with, or eat with, if we had food, or even carry water with. Think about that for a minute, then ask yourself if there’s a choice.’

All eyes were on him, his face a dark silhouette against the light behind him. ‘We’re not actually sure what fuckin’ country we’re in, even, never mind which way we ought to go, and if we did, it’s miles of water or, if that fly boy was right, fuckin’ Eye-talians for hundreds of miles, and one of us buggered already. And that’s before you get to the fuckin’ Germans! No, lads, this is not a Boy Scout game, we ain’t got a choice. Stands to reason, don’t it?’

Attention swung back to the officer. Kelly realised the others had got out of the habit of thinking for themselves –

that's what all their training was about – or maybe they had never been much good at it anyway. They were waiting to find out what was going to happen to them, and were too shocked, or too tired, or too docile to come up with an opinion of their own. He was a bit surprised the commandos hadn't had anything to say - they just seemed a bit lost with nothing to be cleaning, but then, he hadn't thought what he wanted to do either.

A soft breeze shifted the lieutenants thinning and unkempt hair, making him look even more bedraggled, but there was firmness in his voice: 'Maybe you're right, Sergeant. I'm sure you've much more experience in the field than me, but myself, I'm not giving up until I know there's no choice.'

The sergeant sucked his lip, then 'A quiet word, sir?'

The officer moved closer, and signalled the others to move away.

'Sir, I'm thinking the weather seems OK, so at least we're not going to freeze, but my first duty, and yours too, is to keep our soldiers alive. I don't think we'll be doing that by keeping them out here to starve, do you?'

'Well, Sergeant, maybe you're right. But I don't think we have enough information to make that decision yet. If we give up now, it's all over, but if we at least have a reconnoitre round, we can decide what to do then. How about this – if we scout around and find we can feed and shelter the chaps, we'll stay out and wait for our lot to catch up with us, but if we can't, I agree we'll have no choice but to surrender. Now, I need you with me on this – I can't do it on my own. Are you with me?'

There was a long silence, then the sergeant seemed to make up his mind, and with a grim smile, said 'All right, as long as we've got a sporting chance, you can count on me, Sir. Would you help me stand up, sir?' and straightening up, called, 'Right, lads, over here, gather round.'

The men did as they were told, and the sergeant spoke quietly, but with the comfortable authority of one used to being obeyed. 'Well boys, the officer has decided that before he decides what's best for us, he needs to know if we can look after ourselves. So what we'll do is, we'll just recce round the immediate area for now, and if we're not in the middle of the main road to Rome, we'll see where we go from there, OK?'

The Jewish lad, much to Kelly's surprise, piped up 'That's good. *I* don't fancy being a fuckin' POW, either, Sir. Blimey, they're only fuckin' Eye-ties, ain't they?'

'What do mean by that, Private?' the officer asked. The soldier regarded him, wondering if he was falling into a trap, but saw the lieutenant was intrigued.

'Er, well, Sir' he hesitated, 'You know, they waited 'til it was all over in France before joining in, and ...'

'Yeah,' his mate joined in, 'then there was Greece, they fucked that up completely, 'ad to get rescued by the krauts'

'And the desert,' cut in the first man, 'kin' 'ell, they couldn't scarper out o' there fast enough. A pal 'o mine reckoned they had a new tank for North Africa – it had one forward gear, and six reverse.' A few grins at the well worn joke, as they waited for the officer, but he wasn't smiling.

'The newspapers and newsreels have done a good job, I see,' he said, looking at each man in turn. 'What do you think, Sergeant?'

He chewed his lip, then replied craftily 'I think you're going to tell us different, Sir.'

'That's right. You probably didn't know that Italian soldiers stood up well to our troops in the Sudan and Ethiopia, but that didn't get reported, for obvious reasons. And you didn't know that in Greece, the Italian soldiers there were raw conscripts, most of them. Over half a million trained troops had been de-mobbed temporarily to get the harvest in, you see. And they had almost no supplies – twenty thousand tons

were left on the dockside, because no transport had been organised for it. *And* they were fighting in the mountains, against ferocious, determined and well equipped locals. No, it wasn't the soldiers at fault there.

'Then there was North Africa. The Germans treated them very badly there, you know. They stole most of the Italian transport and equipment for their own use, and Mussolini learnt nothing from it. He sent troops to fight in Russia, and exactly the same thing happened there. Mind you, his troops didn't have anything like enough equipment anyway. Initially, he sent sixty thousand men, and when he promised to make it up to two hundred thousand, his generals complained they couldn't supply the first lot. Even so, the Italians did remarkably well at the river Don. When the Russians attacked the Italians there, they were heavily outnumbered, and they were told to fight to the last man. They held the Reds, and even counter-attacked, taking many prisoners. It was at the Don, I think, where Italian cavalry charged Russian artillery and tanks, and captured their guns. That will probably be the world's last cavalry charge, I imagine.'

The breeze threw a shaft of brightness across the officer's face, and with a small start, he brought himself back to the present.

'So, let's not underestimate them. Now, I'm not saying that right now, the Italians are enthusiastic soldiers. They've been on short rations for a long time, and they know their families are having it even harder than they are, especially in the towns. At least in the country the people can grow their own food, even if the government takes most of it. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the average Italian dislikes his government more than he does us, and probably the Germans most of all. But we mustn't make the mistake of underestimating them.'

The young private with the scar had been hanging on every word, and suddenly exclaimed 'Blimey, Sir! It's just like General Custer, eh!'

That threw the lieutenant, who massaged his brow before asking 'What? Custer? I'm not with you?'

'It's 'xactly like it, Sir. Only the opposite, like. Everybody thought 'e was brilliant, but it turns out 'e was hopeless, same as we thought about the Eye-talians, only the other way about. And 'e underestimated the Indians! Did you know

The sergeant interrupted 'Due respect, Sir, how do you know all that? Not about Custer, about the Eye-ties?'

'Oh, I speak Italian pretty well – I've been doing, er, intelligence work. That's why I was travelling. I'm supposed to be, well, interviewing the POWs we're rounding up in Sicily.'

He looked round, and saw the others weren't convinced. 'Look: no time to go into to that now - just don't go thinking they're going to surrender to you on sight, all right?' He smiled. 'And if they did, what would you do with them? We don't know we can support ourselves yet, never mind prisoners.'

'Right, Sir' replied in the sergeant, glad to get back on more familiar ground. 'First off, we need to find out what's around us, especially whether there's drinkable water we can get at, and if there's the chance of finding food. Corporal, we'll send four men out.' He was struck by a thought. 'That all right with you, Sir?'

The officer looked startled, as if he'd been asked a trick question, but recovered quickly. 'Very good, Sergeant.'

The sergeant continued. 'Now listen, lads, do you know what you're looking for?'

He looked, without seeing, at the little bloke, who automatically replied 'Right, Sarge.'

'Well, what?'

Dodd's Army

‘Er, don’t know, exactly, Sarge. Italians?’

The sergeant sighed. ‘First, fresh water, then anything that might be food, and after that, anything else that might be useful. Above all, keep out of the way of the locals. Now, I want four men to go out half a mile or so, in different directions. Walk for, say, about ten minutes, quarter of an hour. Try to keep in a straight line. Don’t go wandering off. If you see something worth a closer look, just remember it, and we’ll check it later, got it? When you reckon you’ve done your half mile, turn left, and go on for ten minutes, then turn left again. Another ten minutes, and another left should bring you back in this general direction. We’ll be looking out for you. Well, the officer will, and er, who’s left?’

‘Yeah, me, Sarge’ Kelly admitted.

‘Oh, good. Do I recognise an Aussie accent?’

‘Bloody oath.’

‘I’ll take that as a yes, will I? Thanks for your help last night. I was a bit wassname, bewildered.’

‘No worries, Sarge.’

‘I know, Sarge,’ blurted the lardy young private, excitedly, ‘so we can find our way back here, you could make a secret noise, sort of like the red indians! You know, like a bird or something!’

‘Yeah’ the sergeant agreed. ‘Would you recognise the sound of my boot disappearing up your arse?’

‘What if I get lost?’ asked the weasel featured man.

‘If you get disoriented, stay where you are, find some cover, and keep watch. If somebody doesn’t get back in say, two hours, the rest will fan out to find him, OK?’

‘What if we *all*?’

The sergeant interrupted, exasperated. ‘Just get on with it, all right. Anything else, Sir?’

Ready for it this time, the lieutenant shot back crisply, ‘That’s all Sergeant. Get them on their way, Corporal.’

The lieutenant watched until they were out of sight, like a mother watching her children on the first day of school, then turned and said, a little embarrassed, 'It seems odd that after what we've been through together, I don't even know your names. Mine's Dodd.'

The sergeant responded first. 'Pleased to meet you, Sir. I'm Brownlow, and our colonial friend is Corporal?'

Kelly wondered whether to take offence, then let it go, and announced in the informal Australian way 'Me name's Ted, mate - Ted Kelly.' He smiled, and added 'No relation.'

He grabbed Brownlow's hand and shook it, then reached out to shake with Dodd. For a split second, the lieutenant considered refusing – officers didn't shake hands with privates – then realised it would be churlish to upset such an open and friendly man, took the outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

'I'm delighted to meet you, Corporal. Now, what do you mean, no relation? No relation to whom?'

Kelly looked hard at the lieutenant before answering 'Edward Kelly.' Seeing no recognition, he added 'You know, Ned Kelly, the bushranger.'

Dodd glanced at Brownlow and saw he was equally baffled. Brownlow asked 'The what?' and Dodd said 'Sorry Corporal, I've not heard of this Kelly fellow, and I've no idea what a, what was it, bushranger, is.'

Kelly grinned uncertainly, then said 'Are you blokes havin' a lend of me?'

Dodd said 'I assure you I'm not.' The sergeant said nothing.

Kelly was perplexed. He looked at Dodd, then Brownlow, then pushed his slouch hat down his face and scratched the back of his head. 'Well, buggar me dead! I'm amazed! World famous, Ned Kelly is. World famous.' He

thought for a second, then added defiantly, 'In Australia, anyway.'

There was a moments silence then Dodd asked 'You Aussies don't have much respect for your officers, do you?'

The corporal took off his hat, which he'd somehow managed to keep on throughout the crash and evacuation, wiped his brow and replaced it before saying 'Oh, yes, once they've earned it, mate. It's just that we're all volunteers, see, well, mostly anyway, and often enough, you've been mates with your sergeant, and known your officers, all your life. So all that Sir-ing, and salutin' and that, well, it don't come all that natural to us.'

There was a short, awkward silence, while Dodd examined the corporal. He was tallish, maybe five foot eleven, slender but not skinny, tanned, dark hair, blue eyes, and had the sun-creased face of a country man. 'Do we know any of the others?' Dodd enquired, and Kelly answered 'I heard the young bloke call his mate Kinnell, but the others, well, they weren't very sociable back in the camp. You know these special forces blokes, Sarge. Keep to themselves.'

The officer looked up. 'Special forces? How do you know that?'

'I don't actually *know*, I just got that impression. You know, big chaps, very fit by the look of 'em, always fiddling with their equipment, didn't mix with the lads. And just quietly, did you notice their uniforms?'

Dodd thought, trying to picture them in detail. 'Can't say I noticed anything special.'

'Well, they fitted, didn't they? Sure sign, I reckon.'

Dodd regarded the corporal, wondering if he was taking the mickey out of the king's soldiers, but Kelly smiled back, his open face a picture of innocence.

'How did you Oh, look, sorry, Kelly, force of habit. I tell myself I'm a student of human nature, but if I'm

honest, I think I'm just a nosy blighter. Anyway, how did you chaps come to be on the plane?'

The sergeant answered first. 'Bumming a ride, Sir, I was. I'd been taking a convoy of empty trucks back to Alex – dunno what they were supposed to do when we got there – you know how it is. Any rate, I was supposed to get a ride back on a convoy going forward, then jump on a boat to catch up with my mob, which was going on to Sicily. Anyway, I was hanging around the transit camp, just trying to pluck up strength to find a ride in a convoy. Didn't fancy it, I can tell you. Bloody day after day in a red hot fuckin', beg pardon Sir, red hot truck. Bloody mugs game. So anyway, I got chatting to these air force types in the canteen, and it turns out they're a scratch crew, put together to ferry that Wimpey up to Sicily, and they've only got orders for three passengers, so I cadged a ride. Wonder who they were, the passengers, I mean? Must have been brass, to have the plane organised for them. Then they didn't get on, the lucky bastards. Wish I'd kept my fuckin' mouth shut, beg pardon Sir.' A thought struck him. 'If I'd kept my trap shut, I'd be able to open my eyes now. Speakin' of that, I'm feeling a bit wassname, you know, dunno where I am. Can someone say what's round us?'

Dodd understood. 'Yes, it must be pretty disorienting.'

'That's it. Disorienting.'

'Well, we're in a forest, but it's mostly not thick, you can see quite a way. Oh, sorry. Anyway, we're in a clear area in a sort of thicket of undergrowth.' He swung his head around. 'That's about it really. What about you Corporal? How did you get here?'

'Much the same. My mob's an engineering company, we specialise in clearing and rebuilding ports, getting dockside running again, that sort of thing. We'd finished a stint in Tobruk - a rare bastard that was - and I wangled some leave in Alex before catching up my mob in Tripoli. Like the

sergeant, I didn't fancy the road journey, so when I palled up with the boys in blue, I thought I'd be bound to cadge a ride from Sicily to Tripoli, and here I am. What about you, skipper? I don't reckon you would've scrounged a ride?"

'You're right there, Corporal. At least one of those important passengers did get on the plane – me. But I'm not important, as you see.' He touched the single pip on his shoulder. 'It just happened that the aircraft was needed in Sicily – there's a long range Wellington squadron there, that can reach targets way up in northern Italy or over the Alps – and as I'm supposed to be in Sicily too, somebody put two and two together. I rather wish they hadn't.'

He thought for a moment. 'I suppose the other chaps had much the same story, eh?'

'Guess so, skip. I hadn't really talked to them. Had you, Sarge?'

Brownlow shook his head slowly. 'Don't know anything about 'em Sir. I reckon we soon will, though, if the silly buggers don't get themselves lost.' A pause, then 'If you don't mind me asking, Sir, you seemed to know a lot about Italian soldiers. A lot more than me, anyway.'

Kelly joined in. 'Yeah, bit of an expert, are you?'

Dodd studied the sky for a moment, then 'Well, as I said, I'm in intelligence. I don't know why, except I happen to speak Italian fluently. And German, but I haven't seen many of them. My job is to talk to POWs, navy and air force, as well as army, but it's mostly army, of course. I suppose 'interrogate' is the proper word, but I don't go knocking them about or anything – don't have the build for it, you see, or the temperament, either, come to that. No, I just get them chatting, and, once you've got an Italian started, you have to beat him up to get him to stop.' He laughed quietly. 'Really, they're shockers for security, when you get them going. They're not really committed to this war, you see. It turns out I'm very good at getting them to open up. So, I know a lot

about what the Italian forces have been up to, and what the servicemen are thinking, as well as a good deal about things at home. In Italy, that is. Might come in useful,' he pulled a face 'if this *is* Italy, of course! For example, you probably didn't know

He was interrupted by the sound of somebody moving about nearby, and one of the big fellows appeared, the blond one, and sat down. 'Jeez, I could do with a brew up. I'm parched.' He saw he was the first back, and disappointed, 'No water yet, then?'

Brownlow replied 'Not yet. You're first back. What did you find? You couldn't have gone out as far as I said?'

'That's right, Sarge. I went through trees like round here, but mostly without this undergrowth, so it's easy going. Pretty flat, no sign of water. I'd gone only, oh, bit over a couple of hundred yards when it got lighter up ahead, and the trees stopped. I sneaked up to the edge, but I needn't have bothered, there was nobody about. Just fields, growing this.' He handed the officer a handful of greenish yellow heads of grain. 'Ah, wheat, I think.' Then, turning to Kelly, 'You'd know about wheat, wouldn't you?' and handed him the heads. 'It looks a bit different to what we grow, smaller, but yeah, I reckon that'd be wheat. Not ready yet, though. Coupla weeks away, I'd say.'

Dodd nodded thanks and turned back to the commando, distracted for a moment by the young man's pale blue eyes. In another face, they'd be icy, almost inhuman, but set in this open and friendly face, they were just striking. Dodd blinked. 'OK, good. What else?'

'Nothing, really, Sir. There was more trees the other side of the fields, but I couldn't see if they was apples or anything – too far away.'

'How far?'

'From the edge of the trees? Hard to say. I'd guess maybe three, four hundred yards.'

Dodd's Army

Within minutes, the other commando was back, flopping down with a similar story, except that the far trees were closer, he reckoned about two hundred yards, and he had also seen a column of smoke above the trees, but couldn't say what it was from.

Brownlow commented 'Well, at least we know the area's inhabited, so there must be water about somewhere.'

'Yes,' the officer replied, 'that's my biggest worry too. If we can't find water soon, I mean within a few hours, we won't have any options. I'm Dodd, by the way.'

The blond soldier said his name was Green, and, nodding to his companion, 'and that's Watson.'

Awkward introductions were made all round, and Dodd turned to Green. 'By the way, Green, you did well helping the Sergeant. I saw you were talking to him, telling him what was going on. I'm sure that was a real comfort to him, so good thinking, well done.'

Green looked embarrassed. 'I used to look after my Nan,' he explained. 'She ended up blind, but she could walk and that, so I used to guide her about. She reckoned it was too scary unless she knew what was going on, so I gave her a commentary, like. It just came back to me with the Sarge, that's all.'

They fell into a glum silence for a while, then Green said 'She might have been blind, but by Christ, she could fart! Like a horse farting, it was, like a separate one for each step! You could hear her coming from next door!'

He leapt to his feet, and was demonstrating his Nan's gait, with lurid sound effects, when the young soldier came crashing back next, as unlike an angel of salvation as it was possible to be, dancing from one foot to the other, giggling and stammering excitedly 'Guess what! You'll never guess! I've found a hut! We can make it our 'ideout! We can make spears, and ... and'

Before Brownlow could get in with a withering reply, Dodd put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and said, 'All right, lad, settle down. That's good. Could you get back there?'

The boy nodded, grinning. 'Course, Sir – I took a compass bearing as I went out, and just

Dodd blurted, astonished, 'You've got a compass?'

The lad looked at the officer as though he'd asked if he'd got a willie. 'We was told *never* to go into unknown country without taking a compass bearing, Sir. Weren't you?'

The officer pondered that for a second. He was pretty sure it had never come up in the ten days alleged 'officer training' he'd snoozed through. 'I must have missed that bit, but I'm glad you remembered it.'

'Couldn't forget it Sir. The Arkela was a right bastard.'

'The what?'

'Arkela, Sir. She used to be in charge of the Cubs, but when Mr Williams got took off with 'is legs, she looked after the Scouts an' all.' He shuddered. 'Tough as old boots, she was. Great big woman, she was. Still is, prob'ly. She used to say 'look after your compass, boys, and your compass'll look after you.' Anyway, It was on account of getting away from 'er I joined the Home Guard, and

Brownlow butted in tetchily. 'All right, all right. I thought it was just *old* blokes went on and on. Now, think carefully. Was there a well near the hut?'

The others quickly made the connection - where there was habitation, there ought to be water, and they studied the young man's face hopefully as he went over the place in his mind.

'No Sarge, I'm sure I didn't see no well.'

Audible sighs, and shoulders dropped, but then he added 'You prob'ly wouldn't need one would you, with that stream going right past the back?'

Dodd's Army

There was a few moments silence, as the enormity of what they'd just heard sunk in.

'You sure about that, son? Sure it's got water in it?' asked Brownlow.

'No danger, Sarge. I 'ad a drink from it. Tasted a bit funny, like, but all right.'

'You've made me very happy, private' Dodd beamed. 'As soon as, er, the last man gets back, we'll move off. By the way, I don't know your name.'

'Johnny, Sir. John. Burgess, Sir.'

'Well, good work, Burgess. And you called the other man Kinnell, is that right?'

'Yes, Sir, but' They were all on their feet now, calling each other by their new-found names, excitement at the possibility of staying at large pushing weariness and thirst aside for a moment, getting their kit ready to move. They didn't hear the last man approaching until he was right there with them.

'Jesus Chri sorry, Sir, but 'kin' 'ell, you lot are making enough noise, I could 'ear you from well out. I s'pose that means we're not in the village fuckin' green, does it?'

The news was quickly explained to him, and Dodd asked 'And what about you, Kinnell?' The soldier looked startled, and looked at Dodd carefully. 'What happened to you, to keep you out this long?'

'Well, Sir, I found meself back where we got through the fence last night. I could see the sea, an' at the end of the beach there was a headland thing, with rocks and shite, so I thought there might be oysters or somethin' on the rocks. So I went back to where we'd crossed the beach, you could see where we'd been easy as easy. I crossed over to the water there – thinking about the fuckin' mines, I was, but I thought there wouldn't be mines where the tide came in, then I walked up to the rocks. There was loads of shells stuck on the rocks, heaps and heaps, but I don't think they was oysters. I didn't

know if you could eat them, and I couldn't get any of the bastards off to bring back. 'Kin' 'ell, they really grip on. I tried knocking some off with a bit of rock, but the fuckin' shells just broke. So I came back. Can we get a smoke and a cuppa now Sir? I'm buggered.'

Brownlow said 'You can't have a fire Kinnell, the smoke'll be seen for miles, but it looks like its safe to have a roll-up.' Relieved smiles from several men, and they started that strange smokers ritual of patting pockets, feeling for tobacco. 'Just a minute, Kinnell' He continued 'Now think back. Did you see anything else? No boat or anything?'

'No, Sarge.' Kinnell screwed his eyes up, thinking hard. 'Well, only the raft.'

'What?' Brownlow gasped. 'The raft's still there? On the beach?' Forgetting the officer, he exploded 'Jesus fucking Christ, you left the raft on the beach last night? Jesus! Why didn't you put a fuckin' sign up to tell them we're here? We could have asked *them* where the fuckin' water was! You need to get down there right now and get it hidden.'

The men looked at the sergeant, tiredness and stress clearly written on each face. 'Give us a smoke first, eh, Sarge?' said the young bloke. 'Yeah, go on,' chipped in his mate.

Dodd broke in. 'Sorry, boys, we can't risk it being found. If anybody sees it, they'll be straight on to us. Come on, the quicker it's done, the sooner we can rest. Burgess, you stay with the Sergeant,' he said, then 'Right, off we go.' And with, that, he started herding them along.

Brownlow had a thought, and called out, 'Mr. Dodd, Sir, before you go' and Dodd turned back, irritated that his initiative had been broken. 'What?'

'Do you reckon the life raft would have rations in it, Sir? I'm thinking there might be something useful in it, and we might be able to use the fabric, as well.'

Dodd's Army

'I thought of that, Sergeant, as soon as the raft was mentioned' and it sounded like he really had. 'There's probably some sort of baling bucket we could use for carrying water, as well. I'm going to bring the whole thing back here.'

'Right, Sir, but Sir, you'll have got 'em to carry it. If the boys drag it, they'll make a hell of a trail.'

The officer turned. 'Sergeant Brownlow's right, men. Come on, let's get on with it' and with that, the group slipped off into the trees.

'And remember the mines!' Brownlow yelled after them.

'They've been a long time, Sarge' worried Burgess. 'Do you reckon I should go after 'em?'

'No, lad, we don't want to be splitting up any more than we have to. We'll wait. Tell me about this hut of yours.'

Burgess brightened up at the memory of what he'd found, the excitement coming back, the words tumbling over themselves. 'Well, it's really good, it's in a little clearing, on the edge of it really, and it's made of stone, and it's got a door, and windows - I think it's got windows, p'raps it's just got 'oles in the walls, not sure now, and.... That's it, really.' He stopped, a little deflated. There was a long pause. 'There's no roof, but we could make one.'

Brownlow thought 'Yeah, and we could make some curtains and plant roses by the front door, too' but didn't bother saying it.

Burgess studied the stripe across the sergeant's face, and asked with the open inquisitiveness of a child, 'Does it 'urt, Sarge?'

'What? Oh, yeah, it does a bit,' agreed Brownlow, his seniority stripped aside by the lad's innocent enquiry. 'I wouldn't mind that, though, if I was sure me eyes are all right. You know? How does it look to you?'

Burgess came closer, and studied the damage intently. 'Me brother got a whack in the eye once. Right fuckin' shiner

it was. Black and blue for weeks. Took a week before 'e could open 'is eye, then the thingy, the black bit in the middle, was red! Blimey, that was a surprise! 'e could still see out of it, though, after a bit. Yours is worse though. Yours is the worst I ever seen.'

He sat back, then said admiringly 'Easy.'

They heard the others returning well before they saw them, dry material crackling underfoot, branches being scraped and broken as they forced the remains of the raft through, tired voices cursing.

'Strike me bloody lucky, Sarge' said Kelly, as they wrestled the ungainly orange mass into a heap and collapsed, exhausted, on top of it. 'I hope it's worth the effort. This thing's harder to round up than a mob of chooks. It seemed too bloody small when we were out on the water, and now it's bloody enormous! You'd think it'd be easier once we'd deflated the bugger, but if anything, that made it worse.'

Brownlow replied 'It'll be worth it, eh, Sir?'

'The lieutenant's not here' said Kelly. 'He's back with the other one.'

'Other one? Other what?'

'The other raft. It was floating around up by them rocks. We had to get it Sarge, didn't we? No choice. Mr. Dodd was going to swim out for it, but whathisname, Kinnell, said he'd go. In the end, they both stripped off and went together. Just as well, they had a hell of a struggle with it. You don't realise how big these bloody things are 'til you have to move one. Time they'd got it close enough so we could wade in and help, they were about buggered. So, we got it into the trees, and they're still there, resting up. We're going back for it now. Come on lads.' And with that, they clambered wearily off the orange pile, and were gone.

Dodd's Army

The sun had begun to lose its heat before the sergeant heard the crashing and cursing again, and soon they were all back, flopped down and strewn about the area as if they'd fallen out of the sky, wet, bedraggled and bone tired. Kinnell had even forgotten about his long wished-for brew up.

After a while, the officer got up and, moving tiredly to his suitcase, half dragged it back to his place. The men began to take an interest as he rummaged around inside it, then, with a flourish like a magician, he displayed a portable spirit stove, and said 'Right, then, lads, a cup of tea. Earl Grey or Darjeeling?'

Chapter 3

While the men looked on in amazement, Dodd continued, smiling, ‘Actually, I was joking about the Earl Grey – I’ve only got the usual. But we need water. Feel up to going to get us some, Burgess?’

‘Not ‘arf, Sir, but I got nothing to carry it in.’

‘I’m hoping you’ll find a canvas bucket in one of the rafts.’

Burgess moved to the orange pile, and with enthusiastic assistance from his mate, soon located the bucket. ‘Blimey, Sir, I’m well impressed. How d’you know that’d be there?’

‘Calculated guess.’ returned the officer. ‘I thought there would be something to use to bale water out. I’m hoping we’ll find a lot more stuff, too. Now, off you go, Burgess, quick as you like.’

The young soldier made a self important display of taking out his compass, and held it reverently, as though it was a holy relic, turned slightly, and was away.

‘While we’re waiting,’ said Dodd as he fiddled with his little stove, I think we might look in the rafts. There should be survival kit, I imagine.’

The men, with renewed energy, began to tug at the unwieldy orange heap. After separating the two now flaccid rafts, and getting the first one into an approximately circular shape, two bright red metal boxes stood out from the orange material. Excited now, they unclipped the boxes, and dragged them onto the ground. Dodd noticed Green had withdrawn and was talking to Brownlow again, the pitch of his voice increasing as the latches were opened and the lids thrown back.

There was a seconds silence, and Brownlow said ‘Don’t keep me in suspense, boys. What have we got?’

Dodd's Army

Kelly called 'Shit, Sarge, there's heaps of stuff here!' They were pulling things out, like kids at Christmas, talking over each other, moving from one box to the other, grabbing things and looking at them, putting them back to be snatched by somebody else.

Dodd saw a sheet of paper, and grabbed it. 'Here's the contents list. Now let's just check this off, confirm what we've got.'

He began to read out loud, and Kelly started rummaging through the boxes.

'Twenty four food ration packs. One per man per day. One jack-knife. One puncture repair kit. One torch. Two batteries. Three signal flares. One compass.' Burgess would be disappointed. Until now, he'd been the only one with a compass, and had been picturing himself with an important role as a scout. 'One mirror. To signal with, I suppose. Two fishing hooks and lines. One box waterproof matches.' He stopped. 'Hmm. Does somebody expect survivors to light a fire in the middle of the raft? How does it look, Corporal?'

'It's all there, boss. All there,' Kelly replied, amazed. 'But do you notice anything missing from this lot? There's no water, and no container for it. That seems a bit odd.'

'I can't explain that, but luckily, we don't need it, because here comes Burgess.'

A contented silence had fallen. Dodd had finished fussing with his stove, poured fluid from a flask into the tank, and pumped a little piston on the side of it. 'Now for the tricky bit' he'd commented, and, striking a match from the survival kit, waved it cautiously round the top of the stove. Nothing happened for a second, then, with a loud *whoomp*, the stove started. 'I hate doing that' he'd said, and the smell of the singed hairs on his hand wafted away.

Kelly had produced a blackened aluminium quart pot, which he'd filled with water, and placed it carefully on the

stove. It soon started bubbling, and from a packet of tea, Kelly had thrown a handful of leaves in. When the water was boiling, Kelly scattered his audience by grabbing the handle of the pot, and standing, whirled it, straight armed, in great vertical circles, before saying 'OK chaps, tea up.'

By this time, they'd each searched through their packs and found their tin mugs, all except Dodd, who took a cardboard box from his case, and, while the men looked on in amazement, carefully removed from crumpled paper a china cup and saucer. With the habit of soldiers everywhere, they'd formed a line, mugs, and cup, thrust out. Kelly had carefully doled out the tea, two mugs for Green, who was by now accepted as Brownlow's assistant, and Dodd had produced a cocoa tin containing sugar and a teaspoon, which he'd used to add sugar to each mug.

Amid satisfied groans, Kelly had immediately started on a second round, while the smokers had found their tobacco tins, and done the rolling a cigarette ritual. Dodd, a rare cigar smoker himself, was fascinated, as always, by the sight of a soldier, brow furrowed in concentration, making a smoke.

Now, two teas, a smoke and a sample of the survival ration inside them, the soldiers had relaxed for the first time since the shell had hit them.

'Anybody know what the time is?' enquired Brownlow.

Several heads shook, grumbling about water in their watches, but Kinnell said 'I make it about ten to six, Sarge. By the way, me name's not fuckin' Kinnell, its Tullett, Stan Tullett.'

The others took a moment to take this in, and Dodd said, a little peevishly, as though a silly prank had been played, 'But I heard Burgess call you Kinnell.'

Burgess sniggered, and explained, 'That's just 'is nickname, Sir.' And went on, like a character witness, 'is real names' Tullett, all right - I've known 'im since we was kids.'

Dodd's Army

Ignoring Tullett, Dodd enquired of Burgess 'It's a strange sort of nickname - why do you call him Kinnell?'

Burgess smirked. 'Ain't you heard 'im talk, Sir? It's fuckin' this and fuckin' that, every other word. There's no 'arm in it - I don't think 'e knows 'e's doing it 'arf the time. And 'is favourite of all is 'kin' 'ell! Did you see 'im in the plane, rocking back and forth and going 'kin' ell, 'kin' 'ell, over and over?'

Kelly exploded with laughter. 'You're not Jewish, then?' speaking to Tullett, who looked surprised. 'I thought you were praying, mate, and asked you to say one for me! Shit-oh! Anyway, we've all got used to you being Kinnell now. All right?'

'Kin' 'ell, Corp, I don't mind. Everyone calls me that anyway.'

Dodd let the laughter die away, then called for attention. 'Now, we've got one more task for today, before the sun goes down. We'll move to Burgess's hut.'

He spoke through the chorus of groans and complaints. 'All right, all right, settle down. Has to be done, and we'll be more comfortable, as well as safer, inside. So, get your kit packed up and ready to move. Green, will you do the honours for the Sergeant, and the rest of us will bring the rafts. Kelly, as soon as we're clear, just try to get rid of the signs of our occupation.'

Dodd was feeling really pleased with himself: he felt he was really getting the hang of this officer business. Burgess broke into his thoughts. 'Sir, I can't 'elp with the rafts, I 'ave to hold the compass.' The officer regarded him with irritation. 'Bloody hell, boy, you don't need a compass. You've been there twice already!'

If bad language alone could have moved the rafts, they'd have had no trouble at all, but of course, if there'd been no trouble, there'd have been no swearing either, except from Tullett,

who would have abused the Easter Bunny. At any rate, twenty minutes effort brought them to the glade where the hut stood. It was as Burgess had said, the thick stone walls all that remained, just four ancient rectangles with a triangle on top of each end giving an outline of the original pitched roof. At that moment, the fading sun was slanting through the space where the roof should have been, lighting up the interior, and the glow from inside made it look snug and welcoming. The stone was grey, worn and weathered, splashed with dull brown and sludgy green lichen. About five yards wide, and four deep, a single room, all that remained of the door and windows were rectangular gaps in the walls, and if there ever had been a timber floor, there was no sign of it now. Overhead, there wasn't even anything left to say what the roof might have been made of. A fireplace and chimney had been built into one of the end walls, but much of the stonework had collapsed into a pile of smoke stained rubble.

Nevertheless, it had major advantages on a gap in the undergrowth. With a little care, it would hide them from passing eyes, it was within a few yards of a picture book little stream with a pebble bottom and sparkling water, but above all, crowded though it was with them all inside, it allowed them to feel safe, for the first time in what seemed like ages.

Having satisfied the anxious Burgess that they were happy with it, they began to settle in, each claiming their own space. Then they had to clear all their kit out again, when the sergeant said they should arrange the remains of one of the rafts as a covering for the dirt floor. After the customary moaning, they found themselves space again, and were soon getting organised, sorting out the kit from their packs, grumbling about the still damp contents. It was tight – the thick stone walls reduced the interior to about twelve foot by nine, minus the space taken by the fireplace and its debris. They only just had room to all lay down at the same time – and even then, they realised, they'd have to lay head to tail,

likes sardines in a can, but soldiers were used to dossing down where they could.

Dodd gave them time to shake down, then clapped his hands in a schoolmasterly fashion, and called for quiet. 'We'll be losing the light soon, chaps, and we need to get a bit organised. We need to see what assets we've got between us, so I want you to look through what you've got, and chuck anything useful into the middle here. I'll start off.' He sat and threw open his suitcase once more, withdrawing and flourishing items one at a time, making a game of it. The men joined in the mood, oohing and aahing with each new appearance. In addition to the magic collapsing stove and its fluid tin, he produced his steel helmet, a pair of field glasses, a sewing kit, boot polish and brushes, which produced a chorus of boos, and a Bible. Keeping the best 'til last, he then withdrew, with great show and one piece at a time, a dark grey three piece suit, and finally a crumpled navy trilby hat.

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed Kinnell, 'That'll come in 'andy if one of us gets invited out to tea! 'Kin' 'ell!' A burst of laughter all round resulted, including from Dodd, who let the outburst go, because the performance had had the effect he'd been hoping for.

One at a time, the men threw in linen bags and tobacco tins, none of which actually had tobacco in them, (tobacco was recognised as personal, like spare underwear, or shaving tackle) but contained the other vital soldiers equipment, tea leaves and sugar. Watson also threw in a small bag of salt. There were two or three pen knives, including an enormous version, which Burgess produced with quiet pride, saying 'Even Arkela didn't 'ave one like this' and wanted to demonstrate its many attachments, but the men sniggered, so he sulkily snatched it back. There were two more steel helmets, Kelly's quart pot, and a few more odds and ends.

'That's a pity.' Dodd commented, looking at the little pile, 'Apart from my cup and saucer, I don't have any mess

gear – I was hoping there might be something spare. Never mind, I'll manage. Maybe I could share'

He thought a minute, and added, uncertainly, 'I've got something else, but I don't know what use it might be. He carefully withdrew another box from his suitcase, polished wood this time, and, opening it, took out a cloth wrapped object. He unwrapped it, revealing the cloth to be an old shirt, and held up a greyish metal goblet, that gleamed dully in the half dusk.

Green sniffed, but otherwise there was no reaction.

Dodd looked at the goblet, and explained. 'It's a communion chalice, started out on the altar of a Catholic church, some time in the 17th century, possibly earlier. It's Italian, so maybe it came from not too far from here.' He held it out. 'Anybody want to see?'

Only Burgess responded. 'Ooh, yeah, give us a look, Sir!' And with a 'Carefully, please' Dodd handed it over. Burgess studied it closely, but seeing in the fading light only some elaborate patterning in the metal, handed it back.

'I thought it might 'ave jewels in it, like treasure and that.'

Dodd was a little miffed. 'Well, it *is* made of silver. And it's precious to me. It's been in my mother's family for, well, we're not quite sure, but her parents came from Italy to England in eighteen seventy odd, and they brought it with them then.' Dodd was caressing the goblet without looking at it, like a man automatically stroking the head of a favourite dog.

'My mother still has family in Rome, you know. My sister and I spent most of our school holidays there, when we were growing up, which is how I learnt my Italian, and, now I think of it, the reason I'm here now. It's not the classic textbook Italian, you see, more the language of ordinary people, so the prisoners seem to feel more comfortable, talking to me. And we travelled round Italy a fair bit, as well, which was

useful. It sometimes helps to, you know, build up a rapport with your prisoner, when you can talk about a place they know.'

He carefully re-wrapped the cup, replaced it in its box, and the box in the suitcase. 'I carry it with me as a reminder that' His voice trailed off for a moment, then 'Anyway, I don't think we'll find much of a use for it. I don't think I'll be eating my dinner out of it.'

Kelly said dryly 'You won't have to, mate. We haven't got anything to eat off it anyway.'

'Yes. You've brought up our next problem. Burgess here has solved the first two by finding us water and shelter,' the young soldier blushed and toyed with his penknife, 'but if we're going to stay out, we need food. The rations from the raft will only last a few days.'

Tullett butted in. 'That's right. I reckon we'll only go a week on that fuckin' lot' and Dodd replied 'Less, I think. That daily ration is for men doing little or nothing, and we're going to be doing a lot of moving about to recce the area properly and look for food.'

'Shit, yeah. How long do you reckon then, Sir?'

'With care, four, maybe five days.'

'Kin' *'ell.*'

He let the gloomy silence run a few seconds, while they took that in, then 'So, that's why our big priority is finding a source of food. Any thoughts, Sergeant?'

'Well, Sir, I've been thinking about that. We don't know much about what's around us, and we need to remedy that, because at the minute, we're in trouble. We do know there's shellfish, if we can get at them.' Here he was interrupted by groans and retching noises. 'All right, settle down. You'll eat the buggers if you're hungry enough. Then we've got fishing gear, and there's wheat, but I don't know what we'd do with it. I reckon our best chance is to try to find a village and nick what we need.'

The lieutenant intervened: 'Look, it's getting dark, chaps. Before we go on, how about something to eat and a brew up before we lose all the light? Will you be mother again, Corporal?'

'No worries, mate, as long as somebody else lights that bastard flame thrower of yours!'

Dodd was silent while they prepared their skimpy meal, but while they were eating, sitting with their backs to the walls, he began again.

'I'm not sure we'll have much luck trying to steal from the locals, even if we can find them. The Italians have been hard up for food for ages - Italy doesn't have much steel or many other materials it needs to go to war, you see, and to support his military efforts, Mussolini has been trading agricultural produce for materials with Germany for years. There's not much to eat in the towns, unless it's on the black market, and the Fascists keep a close eye on the farmers, to take as much of their produce as they can. That's one of the reasons the average Italian is not behind the war. I know quite a lot about that - I've heard it a hundred times from prisoners, so I think we can forget ideas about creeping into a farm kitchen and running off with some bread, a bottle of wine and half a pig without anybody noticing.'

As they finished eating, and tobacco smoke began to waft through the window spaces, like the ghosts of ancient occupants, Dodd continued. 'We need to know what's beyond those fields, and where that column of smoke was coming from. Ideally, I'd like to know enough about everything within, what, five miles from here at least, so we can draw a map of it. We've got compasses now, so we can navigate out of line of sight. We need to know if they grow anything other than wheat round here, if there's milking cows, is there a town, or a village, anything that might help us, all right? And we need to do it without being seen - we don't want anybody

searching for us –we'll have enough on our hands without that.'

The men exchanged raised eyebrows – maybe this 'Rupert' as the squaddies called junior officers, wasn't quite a waste of space after all.

'Now obviously, it'd be best to do this by moonlight, and we saw last night we'll have the moon from about midnight to four-ish, as best I can judge. So we want our first patrol to be at the edge of the trees, ready to go, by midnight. That all right with you, Watson? Green?'

The two men, who had been watching Dodd with rapt attention, like interested schoolboys, didn't react for a moment, then looked at each other.

'We'll have a crack at it, Sir' said Watson, doubtfully. 'Can you use a compass, Gilbert?' Dodd recognised the accent of a public school education that he hadn't noticed before: not the almost comically overstated inflections of the top schools, but a pleasant tone, well spoken.

Green thought. 'Dunno, Bill. I remember we did it in training, but could somebody remind me?'

Dodd and the Australian both laughed, and Kelly said 'Come on boys. You gung ho types could do it without a compass, right?'

Green and Watson looked confused. 'Gung ho, Corp? Where'd you get that from?'

Now it was Kelly's turn to be confused. 'You *are* commandos, yes? Special forces?'

'Commandos? Christ, no! Where'd you get that idea?' said Green, and Watson added 'We're special all right. It's just the forces bit you got wrong.'

'But all that *cleaning*, and ' Kelly relapsed into a baffled silence, then, 'What the fuck *are* you, then?'

The men glanced at each other again, and Green answered, 'We're not supposed to say, Corp.'

Watson said, morosely, 'I don't suppose it matters now, Gilbert. I think we can tell them. It's not as if it's an actual secret or anything.'

Green looked at him for a moment, then nodded decisively. 'You're right, Bill. We'll tell them.' and turning to Dodd, said, 'We're CPU, Sir.'

There was a long silence, while the others all racked their brains, trying to remember if, among the maze of acronyms the army was so fond of, they'd come across that one.

The last of the sun had gone now, as Dodd broke the silence. 'I'm sorry?'

Green gave a half laugh. 'Yes, not many people have heard of it. As Bill said, Sir, it's not secret, it's just not something that gets advertised.'

'Well,' pouted Dodd, 'what is it?'

'Oh, sorry, Sir, Ceremonial and Presentation Unit, Sir.'

Another silence, then Dodd spoke again, exasperated. 'And what, exactly, is that?'

'Well, Sir, you know when you see Churchill, say, or Monty, on the newsreels, and there's smart looking soldiers behind them? Well, that's us, or other chaps from CPU. Or maybe a destroyer captain opening a fete, or something? Us again. Are you with me, Sir? When they need a serviceman in the news but they can't spare somebody useful' and Watson broke in 'Or they want to have soldiers all the same size. We get that a lot, don't we, Gilbert? Or smartly turned out.'

'That's right Bill. Honestly, Sir, the way some of these hero types turn themselves out!' Green sniffed. 'Like a sack of shit tied in a knot, some of them. Beg pardon, Sir.'

The others just sat, slack jawed.

Watson took up the theme. 'Fair comment, Gilbert. Frankly, Sir, you couldn't show some of 'em to next door's cat, never mind Eisenhower, could you Gilbert? So when they

want somebody half way presentable, there we are. We've been doing mainly tank commanders in the desert lately, but before that there was lots of navy stuff, Battle of the Atlantic, that sort of thing, and we started out doing mostly fighter pilots. That's how it started, really - the real ones were always pissed, you see. I especially liked that - I always thought I did some of my best work then.'

Green looked at Watson, surprised. 'Really? Fighter pilots? I thought you liked being a submarine captain!'

'I wasn't really keen on the costume. That roll necked jumper used to give me a rash, you know. Anyway, we were on our way to Catania for a presentation job, that's why we were on the plane, weren't we, Gilbert?'

Dodd couldn't believe it. 'You had *orders* to be on the aircraft? You were being *flown* to Sicily?' He felt events spinning out of his control, and rubbed his face with his hands. 'So you're not commandos, then? You seemed to know what you were doing in the raft.'

'No, Sir, we've never done commandos, have we Bill? Not as such. We had a job doing a newsreel assaulting the beach, quite a while ago now, wasn't it Bill? That would be a bit like commandos, I imagine. Churchill came to see us rehearsing,' he said proudly, and Watson nodded enthusiastically. 'He loved it - we had to do it over and over for him, but we didn't mind, did we Bill? Just doing our duty,' he finished modestly.

Kelly broke in, trying to get the discussion back on the rails. 'That patrol, skipper, I'll be in it. I've done a bit of night work. Anybody fancy a moonlight stroll? Kinnell?'

'Lovely, Corp. Fuckin' lovely.'

Brownlow was recovering from the revelations of the last few minutes. 'What time is it now?'

'Just on nine.'

'Right. Kelly, get your head down for a bit, and you too, Kinnell. Sir, I think we should mount a guard from now

on. Now, nine to seven, that's ten hours, say, two and a half each for them that's left. We don't want to be surprised by a poacher.'

Dodd was uncertain but pleased with Brownlow's change of heart from yesterday. 'If you're sure, Sergeant.'

Brownlow picked up Dodd's tone, and understood. 'Mr. Dodd, Sir, it's one thing to give ourselves up, march in smart like. That's a lot different to being caught sound asleep.'

'You're right. Fair enough. I'll do the first stint. Kelly, I'll give you and Kinnell, er, Tullett, a shake at twenty, er, no, twenty two, is that right? Towards eleven, anyway. OK?'

Kinnell moaned to Burgess, 'Hardly fuckin' worth it for a couple o' fuckin' hours. 'Kin' 'ell.' but turned on his side, and with the facility of a seasoned soldier, was quickly asleep.

Dodd was back in his stride now. 'Right. Green, I'll give you a nudge at half eleven. You do until two, then wake Burgess, and you, Watson, take over at four thirty. It'll be getting light soon after. Burgess and Watson, don't forget the patrol will be coming back. All right?'

The men settled down, amid the customary grumbles, and Dodd went outside to begin his shift, thinking, in his English way, they'd been lucky with the weather.

Chapter 4

Burgess was waking Watson when he heard the two men come in, dishevelled and with their faces streaked with mud. Self-consciously, they all shook hands, before three of them settled down to get what sleep they could, leaving Watson to step carefully between the bodies, limbs entwined like a litter of puppies, moving quietly out of the hut to begin his sentry-go.

Kelly woke as the darkness was fading, his nerves still tingling a little from his exploration, his senses telling him something wasn't right. For a few moments, he couldn't pick out anything out of the ordinary, but then he heard a gentle rhythmic crunching, like distant boots on gravel, and faint scuffling. He lay motionless, every sense on edge, as the light slowly increased, trying to identify the sounds.

There! A movement at the side window! He could make out a shape moving from side to side! A glint of light on a gigantic eye! Christ, it was enormous, what the hell could it be? And then, with a start of relief, he recognised it!

The cow was just standing there, slowly swinging its great black head from side to side, chewing ruminatively and looking at the sleeping men, as though wondering if it was too early to wake them.

Stifling a laugh, Kelly put a hand over Tullett's mouth and woke him, then nodded to the massive head. A smile came into Tullett's eyes, and he, in turn, silently woke Green. The light was better now, and soon they were all stirring. Green, grinning, nudged and whispered to the sergeant, who chuckled, but the cow didn't move away.

Dodd said quietly 'I wonder if we could milk it? Anybody know how?'

No response.

At that point, there was a small noise outside, and Watson, the alleged sentry, crept in. ‘Oh, good, you’re awake, I could do with a’ The movement as the cow turned to examine him caught his eye. ‘Well fuck me, how did *that* get there?’

Brownlow replied, failing to keep a smile out of his voice, ‘I reckon we should be asking you that. If a *cow* can just come wandering past without you noticing, well, I dunno.’

Dodd was not ready to let a source of nourishment go without a fight, and whispered ‘Watson, get round there and see if you can catch it. The rest of you, *slowly*, move out and help’

But as soon as they started moving, the cow swayed off nonchalantly towards the trees, stopping before it got there, lifting its tail to shit prodigiously, as though, having studied them carefully, it was commenting on their military capabilities.

‘All right, lads, pantomime over, back inside.’ said Dodd. ‘Somebody get the tea on, and we’ll have breakfast while we hear what Kelly and, er, Tullett have to tell us.’

There was a flurry of activity before the men seated themselves in an expectant circle, then Dodd said ‘OK, chaps. Let’s hear your story.’ And Brownlow broke in with ‘And we need details, not just an outline, yes?’

Kelly started. ‘Well, we moved off along the side of the wheatfield as soon as we had enough moonlight to see clearly. Took me back, I can tell you – the smell of ripening wheat. Beauty! The ground was good, dry and firm, and the going was real easy. All we had to do was avoid stepping into the ditch along the edge, and we got to the end of the paddick, er, field, you’d call it, in just a couple of minutes. There was a hedgerow dividing the field from the next one, and we got

through that as well. By this time, we were well used to the moonlight and could see pretty good, couldn't we, Stan?'

Tullett nodded.

'So, then we were in another wheatfield, and we just kept going west-ish, along the edge of it again. O'course, if we'd gone through the wheat, we'd have left a trail you could see for miles, so we just kept to the sides. Any rate, we were getting a bit close to another stand of trees by then, and taking it a bit careful like, just in case. The moon was well up by then, and not much cloud, so it was pretty bright. We could've seen anybody moving about in the open way off, but they'd have seen us too, so we were just taking it slow and careful. We got right up close to the far side, there was one of them stone walls across the end. Lucky really, just as we got there, we saw lights flashing in the distance away on our right, then we heard engine noises, like trucks, you know, getting nearer. I had a quick squiz over the wall, and on the other side of it was a road, so we just sat against our side of the wall and waited for 'em to pass. Seemed like quite a few, maybe a couple of dozen or so, so I reckon it was a military convoy.'

He saw Dodd was about to ask the obvious question, and got in first. 'We didn't risk sticking our heads up for a look, did we, Stan? Didn't sound like our three tonners, but I couldn't be sure, Could have been Yanks, I s'pose, but we weren't taking any chances. Just as well we weren't in the middle of a paddick when they came past though, we'd have stood out like dogs balls.' He was just about to continue, when Brownlow interrupted. 'Was the road a dirt track, or a proper road?'

'Oh, tarmac, Sarge, quite wide, not just a country lane, but I'd say not in great condition. They were going pretty slow.'

'How long did it take you to get there?'

Kelly screwed his eyes up. 'What, from here? What do you reckon, Stan? About quarter an hour, twenty minutes?'

Tullett thought. 'Longer'n that, from 'ere, Corp. We 'ad to go through the 'kin' trees to where we started.'

'Oh, yeah, right you are. Say half an hour, then. Any rate, we decided to go over the road and have a bit of a nose round the trees on the other side, because they were all in lines, like an orchard. And, you got 'em there, Stan? This is what we found.'

The sun was well up now, throwing a hard stripe of brightness across the top of the far wall. Tullett had pulled his pack close to him, and with a theatrical gesture, tipped out into the middle of the group a cascade of apples, oranges and olives. The men grabbed for the fruit excitedly, calling to each other 'Oranges, Jesus! I haven't seen one for years!' 'And apples, I love an apple!'

Kelly cautioned 'We had a job finding ripe ones. Mostly, they're not real ripe yet.'

Tullett picked up a few olives and examined them. 'Buggered if I know what these bastards are, but the trees was all in lines, so the locals must use 'em for summing.'

Dodd explained. 'They're olives, and very useful too. You can preserve them, or crush them for their oil. You can even eat them raw if you have to.' He picked up a couple and put one in his mouth. 'Oh, lovely. Now *this* takes *me* back a bit, I can tell you.'

The men watched as he chewed contentedly, then delicately spat the pip into his hand. 'Very nice. Here, have a taste, lads' trying to give a handful to the men, who ignored them, already groaning ecstatically, orange juice trickling down their chins.

Dodd let them continue for a while - after all, it was a long time since any of them would have had fresh fruit - then asked Kelly to continue. He wiped his chin with his arm, the heavy creases by his eyes deepened as he thought for a second, then carried on.

'We still had plenty of time to look round, so we came back this side of the road then followed it south, or maybe a bit east of south. There was clouds coming over the moon now, but we still reckoned we could see all right. We went through more wheat for, ooh, best part of a mile, then potatoes – we brought some back - then the fields started to get smaller, more like vegetable patches, like those allotments you Pommies have. All sorts of stuff – we brought some back.' With this, he opened his own pack, and poured out a flurry of potatoes, onions, and carrots.

'There was other stuff, too, but some of it we didn't recognise, and some we didn't bother with, cabbage and spinach, you know, because right then, we got a hell of a fright, fair dinkum. We were right in the middle of creeping about in one of these patches when suddenly, only what, maybe a hundred yards away, but it seemed real close, a light appeared! A door'd opened in a building, somebody's home, I suppose, and we saw the outline of a bloke, he came out and walked a few paces towards us, then just stood there, like he was listening, or watching us! Bloody oath, I bloody near shat myself, didn't you, Stan?'

Tullett grinned and nodded at the memory. 'Kin' 'ell yes, Corp!'

'We just froze. We were too close even to drop, so we just stood there! Lucky for us there was heavy cloud just then and it was pretty dark. After a bit the bloke moved a bit, and I realised he was just stood there having a quiet slash! Then the light went out again, and we realised it was the door shutting again, and he was gone back inside. But I tell you what, their blackout was bloody good – we stood and stared over there for five minutes after that and couldn't see a flicker of light. After a while, we crept a bit closer, and began to pick out a few details, a roof here, a window there, then there was a break in the clouds, and bugger me, we were almost on the

edge of a town! Shit! Well, a village, anyway. So we sneaked back off before we set the bloody dogs barking!

‘We crept back behind one o’ them stone walls – the place is full of ‘em – and had a bit of a rest. Then we thought you’d be wanting to know how big the place is, so we started to see if we could get round it. But then we realised the time was getting on, and we’d better get back to ground we knew before we lost the moon, or the cloud came over solid, so we bore back about north east ‘til we got back to the forest, found our exit point, and here we are. We can tell you it’s more than just a farm, there’s definitely quite a few houses.’

‘An’ a church.’ added Tullett, in his only contribution. ‘There was a tall thing, a tower, like.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Least, I s’pose it was a ‘kin’ church.’

Dodd, who had been listening intently, relaxed. ‘That’s excellent work, chaps, quite excellent. You’ve not only filled in part of our map, you’ve brought us some most welcome food as well, though I see most of the fruit has already disappeared! Excellent work!’

Not one to let an opportunity go, Tullett suggested another brew up, but Dodd had some bad news for him. ‘Couple of problems there, Tullett. I’m getting very low on fuel for the stove, and we can’t risk wood smoke being seen, especially now we know there’s people nearby. In any case, we don’t have much tea or sugar left - it’s time to ration it to two brews a day. Even then, it won’t last long.’

This news was greeted with groans, followed by a morose silence.

‘On the bright side,’ Dodd commented, ‘we’ve added some food to the raft rations, and we now know we can get more. And that’s before we’ve finished exploring. I’m hoping we’ll find plenty of tomatoes and grapes as well – the Italians grow absolutely masses of them, so we should be able to feed ourselves for quite a while.’

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Brownlow asked the question that had been forming in all their minds. 'Hmm. I've been wondering about that, Mr. Dodd, Sir. The future, that is. How long do you think we'll be here, Sir, and what's going to happen?'

'Good question Sergeant. Excellent. To tell you the truth, chaps,' Dodd responded, addressing the group, 'I haven't had the chance to give that any thought until now, so I don't have any real answer, except to say that as far as I'm concerned, we're succeeding in our first objective, which is to avoid giving ourselves up. Beyond that, I just don't know, but let's have a look at our options.'

He raised his head and stared at the now clear blue sky for a few moments, then began putting his thoughts together, thinking out loud.

'We have to assume we're in Italy – it's the only safe way to think. We can try to escape by stealing a boat and getting back to Sicily, or even North Africa. That's a real possibility: we've got a compass to navigate, and we don't need to be expert seamen – we only have to point the boat in the general direction – and we can gather plenty of food for the trip. But there's fighting still going on in Sicily: we'd want to make sure we land in an Allied held area, and in any case, it'd be a bit dangerous landing in Sicily right now. I imagine neither side would be too happy about a stray boatload of chaps just cruising up to them. Still, we'll worry about that later. We'd have to work out how to store enough water for several days, though. Will you give that some thought, Corporal?'

Kelly chimed in. 'Right'o, but if we're not sure where we are, how would we know which way to go?'

'Well, we think we're in Italy. If we were to go south, we'd have to hit North Africa somewhere, no matter where we start from. But before we get too interested in a sea voyage, we'd need to find the boat. That seems to be the hard bit. So, we'll need to recce the coast.'

‘Next, there’s the option of trying to escape overland. Now that’s a real challenge. For a start, we don’t even know where we are, and until we do, we couldn’t say which way we’d want to go. And if we’re in Sicily, all we have to do is keep out of the way ‘til we see some Allied troops. But the more I think about it, the more I feel we’re not. As I understand it, there was still fierce fighting going on there, and we’re not seeing or hearing any evidence of that, or air activity, or even much in the way of troop movements.’

He fell into his thinking out loud tone. ‘No, there’s not much point in thinking about hiking out before we find out where we are now. Now, how can we do that? Follow that road until we find a sign post, I suppose, if they haven’t taken them all down, like they did in England, but if it doesn’t point to a town I know of, even that won’t help unless we can get hold of a map. And *if* we’re in Italy, and *if* we can figure out where we are, the only way to walk out is north, so even if we get lucky and manage to hike the whole way up Italy through enemy territory, we’ll come to the Alps, which the Germans hold, and we haven’t got the kit to get over the Alps anyway – too cold, and it’d be winter by then. Not looking good, that one, but we need to find out where we are anyway.

‘That leaves two more choices. We can stay here, make ourselves comfortable, and wait for our lot to catch up with us. Couple of problems with that, though. It might be months, or years even, before they get here. What do we know about that?’

The line of sunlight crept down the wall. Dodd was still musing aloud, considering issues as they struck him, and he had the men’s rapt attention.

‘Well, not a lot. Monty and the Americans don’t keep me up to date with their ideas. We do know there’s a huge build-up of Yanks in England, and they’ll be doing *something*, but we don’t know where, or when. There’s also a major force

sitting in North Africa, doing nothing, now they've finished there.

'We also know our lot landed in Sicily in July, and are clearing it out, but it's an almighty tussle. I understand the Canadians did very well, inexperienced troops up against crack German divisions. It's turning into a race between Monty and the Yanks, you know, but the Germans are getting pretty much all their troops and equipment off, and into Italy.

'At some point, we're obviously going to invade Europe, and my guess is the main thrust will be out of England, so that means the target will probably be France. As to when, they won't be ready this summer, I think, and the weather in the Channel will make it too dangerous before next spring, so if they come that way, we'll be waiting a long time. Through winter, too, which will be difficult. Impossible, really. I don't see how we could get by over winter. No food left in the fields, you see. And too cold. We haven't got the kit for cold weather.

'Now, if they decide to come up through Southern Europe as well, that makes it much better for us. I don't suppose though,' he said with a small grin, 'that the powers that be will be including us in their planning. But there's good reason to suppose they'll continue the pressure in the Med. Churchill has made it clear what he thinks, that we should go for what he called 'the soft underbelly' by which he meant, well, anywhere really, other than the Channel. I think he's fearful of the carnage of a failed invasion onto heavily defended Channel beaches – it's certainly a huge risk. But I'm not sure quite how much pull he's got these days, and the Yanks are all for a direct invasion. With their usual unsubtle approach, pretty much a straight line between London and Berlin would do them. I'm sure they'd like to draw major forces away from the German's Channel defences, though, and the way to do that would be an attack from the south, into France, Italy or Greece. Sicily makes a good jumping off

point for all three, though that's not the reason for clearing Sicily. No, the Italians and Germans have been doing a lot of damage with their aircraft based in Sicily, especially to our convoys, and we needed to take them out.'

Dodd stopped, embarrassed for a moment at his out loud musing, but the men just sat, enthralled. Nobody had ever discussed this sort of thing with them before: they just did what they were told, with hardly an idea of what the immediate objective was, never mind high strategy. They were absolutely entranced, and waited for Dodd to continue. Dodd realised that, and went on. 'Anyway, the Yanks are frightened of Churchill getting his way on a southern adventure, and ending up drawing too many troops away from the Channel attack. And even with the Allies just sitting there in Sicily, that's such a serious threat, the Germans would have to keep major forces in Italy, whether we attack Italy or not. Hmm. It's not an obvious decision, is it?'

'Then there's the issue of surprise. Going from Sicily up into Italy seems the obvious move, but maybe it's so obvious, they won't do it, simply because the Germans and Italians will be expecting it, and place their defences accordingly. But that would mean them taking troops from the Channel defences, which is exactly what we want. Oh, dear! I think I've just gone round in a circle! Anyway, there are other possible stepping stones, maybe through Corsica, or Sardinia. Perhaps they wouldn't go for one of those, though. That would mean two more seaborne assaults instead of one, and I believe they're tricky, but holding Sicily gives us advanced airfields, and air cover is vital for a seaborne attack. There's Greece as well, of course. There's a lot of troops in Egypt – they'd be free to attack Greece, and Churchill would love that. He's a great friend of the Greeks, and Well, it's tricky, isn't it?'

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The men sat motionless, not wanting to break the spell. Dodd scrubbed his narrow face with his hands in a gesture of frustration.

‘To tell the truth, I have no idea what’s going to happen next. All I can say is, if our lot reach us before winter sets in, that’s fine, but I don’t think we could survive over winter.’ He paused and spread his hands. ‘So, there we are.’

Brownlow broke the silence that followed. ‘You said there was another option, Sir?’

‘Oh, yes. The final option is to give ourselves up now. I’ve made my view on that clear. What do *you* say, chaps?’

Green spoke up. ‘Dunno about anybody else, but I reckon that if we can’t get away, we can be pretty comfortable here while we can feed ourselves, and we should hang about. If it gets too bad, we can still hand ourselves in then. That’s what I reckon.’

There were murmurs of agreement all round.

Dodd looked pleased, and summed up. ‘Right, then, we’ll stay as long as we can, but we’ll also look for a way to get back to our lot. That means we’ll search for a boat – it’d have to be a fair size to take seven of us plus supplies, for, um, don’t know, say a week – and we want to find out where we are, in case we have to walk out.

‘Now, we’ve had a pretty trying time, so we’ll take it easy for the rest of today, and we’ll send out two patrols tonight. One will follow the coast north, then turn west and south to check out that segment, while the other goes back the village for more supplies and a good look round, our priorities being finding a boat, getting more food, and finding out where we are. Anything else, Sergeant?’

‘I think you said there were problems with staying here, Sir?’

Dodd looked baffled for a moment as he went back over what he’d said.

‘Oh, yes. If we stay here and wait for our lot to catch up with us, we’re going to have to sit here and let the Italians retreat over us, then the Allies’ll have to push past us before we can reveal ourselves. I imagine there’ll be a fair amount of shot and shell involved, eh, and us in the middle of it!

The patrols for the night had been sorted out. Kelly and Tullett had gained by last night’s experience, and were split up, so that Kelly could lead Dodd back to the road and village for a closer look, while Tullett, who was being called by his surname by the officer and the sergeant, Stan by the corporal and Kinnell by the others, would explore the area to the north, taking Green with him. While they were out, Watson and Burgess would share sentry-go.

Long after darkness had come, and the tea ritual had been performed, dark shapes quietly left the hut.

Tullett and Green were first back, just as the moonlight was going, Green limping heavily and his right arm round Tullett’s shoulder. With a grunt of relief, Tullett eased Green down, then got them both a mug of water each before flopping down and preparing to sleep, but Green was still keyed up, amazed and excited at what he’d achieved. He nudged Watson. ‘Hey, Bill, mate, are you awake?’

‘I wasn’t, you noisy bugger.’ Then, remembering, Watson sat up, joining in his friend’s excitement. ‘What was it like? Were you scared?’

‘Yeah, I *was* a bit scared when we started, going through the trees and that - my heart was pounding, I can tell you - but Kinnell was in front, and I just crept along behind. Tell you what, though, the Sarge was well right about the forest at night. We heard quite a few rustling sort of noises all around us, and what with the trees looking really spooky, and the wind making the branches move and sort of creak, I was pretty much shitting myself. Kinnell was good, though, he

reckoned they were just creatures – rabbits and that, and after a while I wasn't so bothered any more.'

He stopped for a second, reliving the experience.

'We knew we just had to carry on 'til we got to the sea, then turn left. Then we came to the edge, and the moon was there, and you could see easy as day.' His eyes were sparkling with the memory. 'There's sort of grassy stuff between the trees and the beach. It was really easy to walk on. Kinnell said to keep quiet, but that was easy too. I was feeling pretty calm by now. We went past the headland thing he'd seen the other day, and it got harder then because the grass stopped and we were walking on rocks. You have to be careful not to make a noise on rocks' he said, with the authority of experience. 'Loose ones move about and sort of crunch. Anyway, when we got past the headland, the beach stopped, and it was just rocks and cliffs and that from then on. We kept on going, seemed like miles to me, just the same rocks and cliffs, with trees on our left. Then Kinnell said he reckoned we'd gone a couple of miles, and it was time to turn into the forest again. Well, I didn't know what to think – I didn't fancy going back in the forest, but when we got in there, it seemed better, somehow, easier. Maybe my eyes were used to the dark by then, or maybe I was just getting more used to it, but funny enough, I quite enjoyed it. Course, I had no idea where we were, or what direction to go in, but Kinnell seemed confident, so I just followed along.'

Watson was sitting now, cross legged like a child, gazing at his friend's face, spellbound.

'Anyway, we went through the forest for a while, then Kinnell signalled me to stop. I must admit, I wasn't really paying attention then, and I just about blundered into him. He was OK about it though, just signalled me to wait there and be quiet, and then he crept off. I felt a bit shaky then – I didn't know what he'd spotted – and I was glad when he came back and signalled me forward. Then we came to a road, but it was

empty. I s'pose it's the same one they found yesterday. So we moved back into the trees, and sort of went along the same way as the road for a while, then the trees stopped and we came to the wheatfield. Well, even I could have got back from there. We were walking along the edge of the field 'til we came to where they went out yesterday - I must have been getting a bit over-confident or something, because next thing, I've got too close to the ditch, my foot slipped on the edge, down I went. Kinnell wasn't best pleased, he's up there going fuck this and fuck that and telling me to be fucking quiet. I told him he was making more fucking noise than I was. That stopped him, and he saw the funny side of it then. Anyway, I clambered out of the ditch, and we came back here, but I can't put any weight on my left foot now.'

They both looked interestedly at the booted foot, but there was nothing to be seen.

'You know what? I *enjoyed* it. I was shitting myself about it all day, then I enjoyed it! Do you reckon I should leave my boot on, or what?'

'Bugged if I know: whichever's more comfortable, I suppose.'

'Yeah, that's what I reckon.' Green carefully removed the boot and sock, and they both looked at the foot, but in the darkness they couldn't see anything wrong.

Green, wrapped in the feeling that suddenly, he was a proper soldier, lay down, contented. He couldn't sleep though, and was still awake when he heard the other patrol come in. He tried to catch their eyes, to exchange nods, one seasoned professional to another, wanting to talk, to re-live his adventure again, but they were quickly settled down, and left him and Burgess, who was sentry, to watch the light come seeping back.

They were all awake now, getting into a morning routine of a quick wash, then breakfast from the rapidly diminishing store

of rations from the raft, while the tea was brewing, then a smoke for those who wanted it.

Tullett reported on his and Green's unproductive patrol. Attention turned for a moment to Green's naked foot, which had now swollen, and was taking on an interestingly mottled plum colour. Green was disappointed that nobody asked if it hurt.

Dodd consoled them. 'At least we know we can forget the north as far as our priorities are concerned, that is, no boat, no food, no signpost. Corporal Kelly and I had a bit more luck. He led us off round the edge of the wheat as soon as there was enough moonlight. I don't mind admitting I was pretty, er, keyed up – I imagine you were the same, Green – and I was keeping a very close eye on what Kelly was doing. We got close to the road - by this time our eyes were used to the dark – it was a bit of a worry how clearly we could see, as a matter of fact, especially as we got close to the houses. Our plan was to follow the edge of the buildings to the south, then go right round the outside and come back to where we'd started, and off we went, through those vegetable plots. We picked up some carrots and odds and ends, keeping the buildings on our right, say a hundred yards away. Turns out, it's a fairish sized place – I'd say it was more of a town than a village really - we were creeping along like that for quite a while, but we were taking it carefully, so it probably wasn't more than a mile or so before the houses started to thin out, and we were going right-ish to stay in touch. Then we came to the road again, so we knew where we must be.

'Bit of excitement there, wasn't there, Corporal? We were just about to cross the road, when there was a sound from off to our left! My pulse went through the roof, I can tell you! We ducked down behind the hedge beside the road, in time to keep out of the way of a woman toiling along, carrying an enormous basket on her shoulder. Farm produce, I imagine, but goodness knows what she was doing out at that time of

night. Anyway, we let her get well clear, and had a careful look before we got over the road, and got well away from it, then stopped to decide what to do next. We had planned just to go round the village and come back, but we'd made good time, and there was still plenty of moon, so we decided to go a bit further south, just for a nose around. We were going through vegetable gardens still, with the occasional stand of trees or bushes, easy going as long as you're careful, then we started to see more buildings up ahead. That was a puzzle. It couldn't be another town so close by, only a mile or so, at most. Kelly, just like you, Tullett, had me wait while he scouted ahead, then came back, signalling me forward. We crawled along the side of a vegetable plot, then another – I was getting pretty tired by then, I can tell you, I'm not at all used to this – when Kelly called a halt and pointed forward, signalling for caution. We carefully stuck our heads through the hedge and I saw we'd come back to the road, but that wasn't the interesting thing. On the other side of the road was a high barbed wire fence, and beyond that, only a few yards away, there were lines of buildings, and vehicles, lots of 'em. I was just thinking it looked a bit like an army camp, when we heard voices, and a couple of soldiers came strolling past! You would have been cross with them Sergeant, wandering along like that, chattering away while on sentry duty! Then, just opposite where we were, they stopped! I'd swear they were looking straight at us! I didn't have time to get in a flap, though, before one of them pulled out cigarettes, and they lit up, then they split up and went off in opposite directions.

'We gave them time to get clear, then moved away from the wire a bit, and followed it along, at a respectful distance, and came to the gateway into the place, which is what I was looking for. I was hoping there'd be a sign saying what and where the place was, but no such luck, just the usual little gatehouse, and another couple of disinterested sentries. We backed well off and stopped for a think, then decided we

had time to go round the outside of it, and that's what we did. Keeping the wire on our left, we kept going 'til the wire stopped, then we crossed the road again. We were careful as we approached it this time - just as well, we saw several people walking along, moving towards the village. Then we just kept following the perimeter, turning left, left, 'til we were going north and the wire turned west and we kept going north, past the village again, and on to here. From what we saw, it's clearly a military camp, and from the number of vehicles, I'd say it's definitely some sort of transport or transit camp.'

Dodd paused, thoughtful. 'I think that's about all we've got to report, isn't it Corporal? Oh, yes, one more thing. The soldiers were Italian, so unless we've taken to using enemy soldiers to patrol our camps, we're most definitely in Italy. And now, I'm going back to sleep - I'm not used to all this excitement.'

Chapter 5

Rain. Solid, streaming, cold, drenching, rain. It started a little before noon - one minute it was sunny with a warm breeze, the next minute, there was a flurry of sprinkling rain, and then suddenly it was bucketing straight down, heavy enough to sting, roaring and clattering through the trees.

It came as a shock to the soldiers, who were completely unprepared. They had no wet weather gear, no tent, half of them didn't even have a hat, lost in the Med somewhere, no shelter from the downpour of any kind, except the second life raft, which they belatedly got organised into a sort of communal covering, but it was too late, and next to useless anyway. They managed to spread the unwieldy thing out, and tried to clamber under it, like a great, glistening, orange blanket, but it was hopeless. They were already drenched to the skin, and the rain was crashing down so hard that the inside of the hut was soon awash. The walls glittered as the rain cascaded off the rough stone in a thousand tiny waterfalls. The water that the carcass of the raft deflected just poured over the edges, and the men were soon sitting in inches of water. There was nothing they could do, and they quickly gave up trying to shelter under the second raft, so they just sat there, backs against the wall, knees bent, arms across knees, heads slumped forward, not speaking, soaked, cold and miserable.

A couple of times, the skies seemed to lighten briefly, and as the rain eased, heads came up, searching hopefully for a break in the overcast, but each time, after a minute or two, it was coming down heavy as ever, and the heads dropped back, the men shivering, withdrawn into themselves, individual pictures of utter, helpless misery.

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Hour after hour went by, and still it came. As the hut, already gloomy from the weather, moved towards night, Dodd stirred himself to gather up and hand out rations from the dwindling emergency store from the rafts. At least the packs were waterproof, so the food was not spoiled. Some of the soldiers took the packs, and began to eat, others couldn't raise the effort, and sunk back to their private desolation.

Dawn was breaking, and it seemed to Kelly that all he'd ever known was this - very cold now, impossible to sleep, clothes no more than a heavy sodden weight chafing against him, every muscle tight, every joint sore, no relief, and still it rained, and rained.

Then, as swiftly as it had come, it was over.

Within a few minutes, the sky was clear, and the men began stirring, cautiously, wearily, like old men waking to check that everything was still attached, still worked, then stretching and groaning, began to come back to life, their faces blank, eyes empty, slithering away from each other's gaze.

Dodd scrambled around under the bladder of the raft and emerged with his stove and petrol tin.

'If ever we needed a brew-up, it's now,' he muttered while he went through the process of getting it ready. The men looked on disinterestedly. They couldn't believe it would work, it must be full of water, but then Dodd lit it with its customary *whoomp*, and it coughed, then spluttered, then, amazingly, settled down to its usual quiet roar, which sent the men scuttling for their mugs.

Dodd turned his head this way and that, trying to stretch the stiffness away, and addressed the men. 'Well chaps, I don't have to tell you we're in a bit of a pickle. We don't have a dry hankie between us, we can't light a fire to dry our stuff or prepare something hot to eat, and we're

getting very low on rations. What's more, the tea's almost gone, and that was the last of the sugar we've just used, not that it matters, because I'm almost out of petrol to boil the water anyway.'

The men were back in their slumped positions, most of them with downcast faces, a few heads shaking morosely.

Kelly lifted his head to grumble 'That's right, mate. You wouldn't treat a brown dog like this.'

'Yeah', broke in Tullett, who understood the sentiment, if not the reference to the brown dog. 'an' the 'kin' tobaccer's just about finished, an' all. 'Kin' 'ell.'

Dodd nodded, accepting the additional issue, and went on: 'We don't even have somewhere dry to sit, and now we've got two injured. Seems to me it's time for desperate measures. If we can't sort ourselves out in short order, we're going to have to, well, you know I don't think we can carry on like this. Sergeant?'

Brownlow did his biting his lip thing for a long moment. 'Well, Sir, I'm probably the wrong one to ask, being a useless mouth to feed right now. Strikes me, though, that if we fold up at the first crisis, we might as well have drawn stumps straight away. We do need to do a sight better than we have, though, and soon. We've *got* to find a way of having a fire, so we can get dry and cook hot food, and we need more food as well. Oranges are lovely, but just now, I'd swap a lot of oranges for a baked potato, or a nice big bowl of beef stew.'

This was greeted with grudging agreement, and the men started fantasising about roast dinners, but Dodd pulled them up. 'All right, then. I think we have to take our chances, and spread out, now, in daylight, to forage for whatever we can find, especially food, fuel, and something, I don't know what, to shield a fire. Bits of corrugated iron, maybe? Whatever we can lay our hands on. Now, we know there's not much to the north, so the five of us who can move will fan out

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from here and cover as much ground as we can. All right? Remember, we mustn't be seen, but at the same time, if we're not much better off tonight

He detailed off the areas they were to cover, himself and Burgess to move south of the military camp then turn inland, Tullett and Watson to skirt the village to the north, then go inland, and Kelly, on his own, to follow the coast south, in the hope of spotting a boat.

Dodd had a few last words. 'OK, we need to cover a lot of ground, but carefully. It's now just on eleven, and we'll lose the light about, what, eight, so we've got nine hours. All right, let's get on our way.'

The Sergeant had a last comment. 'And lads, remember that story about the donkey, eh? If he'd kept nice and quiet, he'd have saved everybody a lot o' trouble. So keep under cover as best you can.'

They moved off then, still cold and soaking wet, but determined to give it their best shot. As he left, Dodd turned back and studied the tragic scene within the hut, water still inches deep in places, mud everywhere, covering everything, spare kit and possessions strewn about carelessly, half under water, some of it, and Sergeant Brownlow still blinded.

Green, his ankle now swollen and purple, looked blankly back at Dodd. With a small shake of his head, Dodd turned and left.

Green watched them file out, then kept looking at the doorway, deep in thought, for fully five minutes, before turning to the sergeant. 'How's the eyes, then, Sarge? Any good?'

'Well, they don't hurt any more, but I still can't get 'em open. How do they look to you?'

Green moved closer. 'Still swollen, but they've gone down a lot, and the colours changed as well. Used to be black and purple, now it's more yellow.' He paused. 'I was

thinking, Sarge, when you were a kid, did you ever play three-legged races?’

Brownlow turned to face Green, as though he could see, and was checking for visible signs of madness. ‘You gone barmy, son?’

‘No, Sarge. D’you know what I mean, three-legged races?’

Brownlow sighed. ‘Where two people tie ones left leg to the others right, and have to get their timing right so they can run together?’

‘That’s it Sarge. Did you ever do it?’

‘I suppose so – I don’t remember.’

Green pulled himself closer still. ‘Well, Sarge, I’ve been thinking,’ and began talking urgently.

The colours were draining out of the day as Dodd and Burgess found their way back into the trees and by the time they plodded wearily into the clearing, their boots heavy with mud, the light was almost gone. Dodd stopped. There was something amiss, something out of place. Nerves tingling, he signalled Burgess back into the trees, and inched back to join him while he studied the shell of the hut – it looked *wrong*, somehow. Then he realised. He couldn’t see inside, the window and door spaces were just empty, black, like the eyes of long-dead fish. And there was something about the greenery round the glade, too, there were ghostly shapes festooned around the lower branches of the trees.

A flicker of light caught his eye and he turned his gaze back to the hut. Yes, there it was again, a small scatter of sparks out through the roof space! And smoke, a deeper blackness against the darkening sky!

They’d been there five minutes, silently watching, hoping for a clue to what it all meant, when they jumped at a small sound from behind, and Tullett and Watson crept up to join them.

Dodd's Army

Suddenly, a brief rectangle of flickering light appeared and a grotesque, lurching figure was silhouetted in the doorway! The men instinctively moved back, but watched, transfixed. Dodd's first thought was it was the cow come back again, but then the creature began to move round the edge of the clearing, touching those weird shapes, hardly visible now, as though harvesting, selecting some, leaving others. They could hear it mumbling to itself as it staggered along the edge of the trees, reeling closer and closer.

Then, as it was almost on top of them, it spoke aloud!

'Right, Sarge, almost done. The rest isn't properly dry, so I reckon we'll leave it out. I hope the others get back soon, it's almost full dark now.'

Almost collapsing with relief, Dodd recognised Green's voice and suddenly understood.

'Bloody hell, chaps, you gave us a devil of a fright' he called, and laughed, a little too loud, emerging from the trees. The others followed, and the whole group moved to the hut, Green and Brownlow tied together at the knee and calf, arms round each others shoulders, moving comfortably together.

Inside, an amazing transformation had taken place. Instead of the appalling mess the men had left, they found everything neat and homely, the most obvious and startling change being the comfortable wood fire in the partly reassembled fireplace, which threw a cosy glow, with Kelly's quart pot suspended over it, and a delicious soupy smell wafting round the hut. The window and door openings had been covered with rectangles of fabric cut from a raft, the black inner membrane facing outwards, while the outer orange coloured layer reflected the firelight and gave a snug and cosy air. The wet and muddy remains of the rafts, which had been left half trampled into the mud that morning, had been cleaned, dried and cut to form a waterproof cover over the floor, and to cap it off, everything had been tidied up.

The newcomers were still standing just at the door of the hut, as though unwilling to disturb the arrangements, when Kelly arrived and summed up everyone's thoughts. 'Jesus, boys, you bloody beauties! How d'you manage this?'

'It was young Green's idea.' Brownlow responded. 'He didn't want us to give up, but reckoned there was a good chance you blokes would be wanting to, the way things were this morning. So he thought that if we could do something to make it better, like, you'd be happier about staying. He reckoned we have to be able to have a fire, so maybe he and I could fix up some kind of blinds over the windows, by cutting up bits of a raft. But his best idea was he could see and I could walk, so between us, we could do it, if we joined up. So he found that jack-knife and cut some strips off the raft, and we tied his bad leg to one o' mine, as you see.'

He waved their joined legs slightly, and said 'I think we can separate now, son. Get the straps off, would you?' And as Green cut at the straps with his knife, glowing with pride at being called 'son', Brownlow continued. 'It felt bloody ridiculous at first, but we soon got the hang of it, didn't we?'

'Yep, Sarge. Turned out it was pretty easy. I'm about buggered now though. Come on, Sarge, let's have a rest.' He manoeuvred the big sergeant and got him seated, then, with a satisfied look round, and a deep sigh, flopped down himself, and continued sawing at the straps. Dodd bent to remove his mud crusted boots, and the others followed suit, before cautiously entering, like a bunch of boys invited to the Sunday school lady's best room for tea.

Brownlow settled himself, then continued. 'First thing was to cut flaps for the windows. That started off really hard - we tried to get the raft outside to work on, but we just couldn't manage it. Too heavy. Didn't help it was covered in mud and that. So we had to work on it inside, but once we got going, that turned out to be easy. We worked out how big the

window flaps needed to be – five tobacco tins wide and nine down, and cut a piece out of the, you know, blow up doughnut bit of the raft. And Green said the inside of it was black! Couldn't be better! Then we had to fix it.'

Green took up the story. 'That stumped us for a bit, didn't it, Sarge? Couldn't think what to do. Then we held it up against the window hole, and I thought maybe we could jam the end into a crack in the stones, where they joined, like. That didn't work, but we found that if we put the canvas across the crack, then forced a bit of wood in, to wedge it in, it holds all right. Prob'ly won't stand much wind though. We'll have to fix it up better tomorrow. The door turned out easy though. There's little round holes all along the top – so we just made pegs out of bits of stick, knocked 'em in, and tied the flap to it. It'll do for now, anyway, but be careful going in and out, OK?'

As though to prove the point, a small breeze sent the canvas flaps quivering and slapping gently at the old stone walls. Brownlow chipped in 'And, we haven't figured out how to move the window flaps to let the light in, either. If there'd been a roof, we'd have had to take 'em down again, 'til we were ready to light the fire!'

Green continued. 'Once we'd done all that, I looked round, and realised what a shocking state the place was in. Just as well the Sarge couldn't see it. He'd have gone fucking barmy.' He smirked. 'A right fuckin' shambles, he'd have said. So we got to tidying up. A lot of it was spare clothes, all covered in mud, so by the time we'd picked it all up, we thought we could give them a bit of a rinse off in the stream, so we did that, and hung them all round the trees to dry.'

Brownlow again: 'Yeah, we knew we were taking a chance of the stuff being spotted while it was drying, but we thought we had to take the risk. Then, when the place was pretty much empty, Green reckons the raft we were using as floor covering was in a right old state, so we cut it into

sections we could manage, pulled it out and cleaned it up a bit.'

Green interrupted. 'Yeah, I'm sick of the sight of that fucking baling bucket, and no mistake. I dunno how many trips to the stream we made. You should see it! It's gone fucking berserk, with all the rain – there's all bits of branches, and lumps of grass, and all sorts gushing along. Sort of cloudy, too, with dirt and stuff washed into it, I suppose. It's all right if you leave it a bit, though, isn't it, Sarge?'

'If you say so, son. Any rate, after we'd cleaned up the raft, we put it back, but left a space and used bits of stone to make the fireplace. And while we were taking risks, we realised you blokes would be coming back dog tired, starving, and probably still with half-wet clothes, am I right?' This was greeted with enthusiastic agreement. 'So, we decided to cook, which meant we had to light a fire as soon as it started getting dusk, and risk the smoke being seen. We did what we could to keep it down. Green dragged me all over the place looking for dry wood. Took for bloody ever, that did.'

Green broke in. 'Well, we had to try, didn't we? Course, we didn't find any, after all that rain, but we found a pile of branches somebody had made, looked like years ago, and we got the best stuff we could, and dragged it back here, then spread it out in the sun for a while. Then we sorted out the vegetables, and got the fire ready. We chopped some up, and bunged 'em in Ted's billy, and crumbled some of those oatmeal bars from the raft rations in, as well, then filled it up with water. And we found that bag of salt – it was wet, but we slung some in as well. As soon as we dared, it was just getting dusk, we lit the fire – we used the last of the petrol to get it going, Sir - sorry about that – put the soup on, and there we are.'

Green sat back with a satisfied air. 'I reckon we did all right, don't you, Sarge?'

Dodd's Army

'I dunno, son. I can't see how it is. You'd better ask Mr Dodd.'

Dodd didn't reply, much to everybody's surprise, and in the silence that followed, all eyes turned to the officer, and they saw he was unable to speak, choking back tears. Even in the cheerful firelight, he looked even more ill than usual. After a minute, he'd recovered himself sufficiently that he could trust himself to speak.

'I just don't know what to say, chaps. You were right, Green, I think most of us were about ready to turn it in, this morning. I know I was, but you've given me, us, new heart.'

Murmurs of agreement, as tears welled up in Dodd's eyes again. 'By today's efforts, you two may have saved us all from perhaps years of captivity. I'm enormously grateful.'

He then moved over and offered Green his hand. Green took it, then guided Dodd's hand to Brownlow's.

Brownlow held it briefly, then, having heard the catch in Dodd's voice, said 'All right, Mr. Dodd, Sir, that's enough o' that, you'll have us all at it. How's that soup, Gil?'

Green felt proud all over again that the sergeant had called him by his first name, and answered 'Just right, Sarge, so let's have your mugs, boys, and there's jacket potatoes in the embers, should be done by now.'

It was amazing what a hot meal could do. The men had started the day utterly miserable, and now a contented silence reigned, as they relished the tea, weak and sugarless though it was. Smoke from roll-up cigarettes, made very thin now, wafted away.

Kelly broke the silence. 'Good tucker, that soup.'

'Yeah,' enthused Burgess. 'Could 'ave done with some bread though.'

'That's right,' Kelly agreed. 'A great big chunk of nice warm bread, with lashings of butter.'

‘And a bit of bacon in it would have been nice’ added Green, before they each fell into their personal reveries about food. Dodd let the silence continue for a while, then stirred himself to ask Kelly to describe what he’d found on his coastal exploration to the south.

Kelly had gone back to the edge of the trees, where the fence ended and they’d first come in, and carried on, the beach on his left and the trees giving way to wheat on his right. It was slow going, there being no real cover, and he had to move at a wet and uncomfortable crouch, to be sure not to be seen. There was still plenty of water lying around in puddles, but after a few hundred yards, the beach gave way to rocky cliffs, not high, maybe thirty feet, but very steep and rugged, and Kelly began to realise that the coast, instead of being generally a sandy beach, was mainly rocky, with the occasional beachy cove, and realized how lucky they’d been to land on the beach. As he got closer to the end of the sand, he got excited at the sight of a couple of boats, upturned, like the empty shells of turtles, pulled up to the inland edge of the sand. But as he got up close, he discovered they were tiny, capable of taking two men at the most. He guessed the locals used them for fishing, maybe going after crabs. He lifted one and looked inside it, but finding nothing useful there, he moved on, between the cliff top and the stone wall bounding the wheat.

His clothes were drier now, but still uncomfortable, chafing and irritating his skin as he moved, but at least he was doing something, not just sitting there being rained on. That stretch seemed to go on for a long way, he guessed maybe five miles, but he pressed on, because there was no alternative, then the wheat began to give way to vegetables, and he started to move even more cautiously, assuming that if the pattern round the village was repeated, there would be people living nearby. The gap between the cliff edge and the walls was

widening now, leaving more and more coarse grass and low shrubs, twisted into tortured shapes by the wind, and the ground was rising, the cliff getting higher.

Kelly could see that the land peaked up ahead, and crept cautiously forward, keeping close to the stone wall, the only cover now. By the time he approached the top, even the wall had fallen away to his right, leaving little cover, and he was on all fours now, and finally, on his belly, but on he went, determined to at least see what was over the brow.

Suddenly, the country below came into view. There, as the ground fell away below him, sat a small river estuary, surrounded by a picturesque village that sprawled up the hillside, with a tiny harbour at its centre, protected by ancient stone sea walls and breakwaters that curved out and almost met each other. The gap between them was only a few yards. Kelly thought you could almost jump it. And yes, boats! Boats of all sizes, from tiny dinghies to maybe thirty foot seagoing fishing boats! Elated, Kelly settled down to make careful observations – he knew Dodd and Brownlow would want details – and he sidled to his right a few yards, to where some straggly wind-blown bushes gave a little better cover.

He could see little activity round the harbour or in the village, hardly anybody moving about on land, and no movement on the water at all. But then he noticed something that made his blood run cold. At the end of each breakwater was a little hut, and beside each hut, a canvas covered shape. Kelly guessed the canvas concealed guns, probably those small, wheeled artillery pieces the Italians used as anti-tank guns. Not much use against tanks, as their crews had found out the hard way, but very handily placed to defend such a narrow gap against a landing craft. Then Kelly had a deflating thought – even if Dodd's men did manage, somehow, to steal a boat from under the noses of the local fishermen, the guns would be just as good at keeping the pirates in.

And then, the prospect of getting away in a boat got even worse. Kelly saw a movement at the nearest hut, and a soldier emerged, stretching and looking idly round. Italian! Shit! Kelly shrunk back, more careful than ever now, realising that was the end of any hope of being in Allied country. After watching for a while longer, Kelly decided it was time to head back, and disappointedly started his cautious return journey, pausing only to fill his pack with vegetables along the way.

He concluded his story with a disheartened shake of his head. Brownlow mulled over what Kelly had said, chewing his bottom lip. 'So what d'you reckon, Corp? Any chance at all?'

'Sorry, Sarge. Not a prayer. Not unless we could disable the guns first, and even then, you'd have to go so close to the sea wall, they could knock you off with their rifle butts, fair dinkum. No, no chance, really. So I had a wasted trip'

Dodd was quick to reply. 'Well, that's not quite right. We now know what's to the south of us, we know we're not about to be picked up by Allied troops, and we can be pretty certain we're not going to be escaping by sea. That's useful information. And you brought back some vegetables, so thanks, Corporal, well done. Now, how about you?' He turned to Tullett. 'Any luck, Kinn... er, Tullett?'

Tullett was concentrating hard on the assembly of what Dodd thought might be the thinnest cigarette ever made, and they all watched as he finished the job and leant forward to light it from an ember, thus saving a precious match, then, after taking a deep draw that burnt a third of the roll-up, and sent its creator coughing, he began his and Watson's story.

Their aim was to go north of the village then press inland, and at first, they made good time, skirting the wheatfields, keeping low, and they soon came close to the road. They were held up for several minutes by the need to stay hidden from the desultory traffic, mostly exhausted

horses that seemed to be even more decrepit and ancient than the broken down carts they dragged, and quite a few people on foot, scattered from time to time by the horns of self-important motor vehicles, all of them military. Having finally scurried across, they moved west, at the edge of the orchard. They saw people working among the trees, but nobody was nearby, and they got past without incident, and found themselves in a vineyard, with long lines of vines in full vigour, large clusters of grapes hiding among the leaves. They tried some, but found them sharp and not pleasant to eat. Nevertheless, Watson cut a bunch and carefully stuffed them in Tullett's pack. At that point in Tullett's story, Watson rummaged in the pack and showed the small, pale green grapes. Dodd took one and examined it, then shrugged, saying he thought they might be wine grapes, and anyway, they weren't ripe.

Tullett continued, relating how they'd carried on through the vines, and come to a railway line, a single track, running across their path, about north to south. They waited there a while, thinking that if they saw a train, they could judge its speed, and estimate if jumping a ride might be possible, but no train came, so they moved on again. There were more grapevines the other side of the track, and trees in the background. Then they found themselves getting close to a down-at-heel farmhouse, with several run down outbuildings. They thought at first it was abandoned, but then there was a waft of smoke from a chimney, so they moved round it carefully, and backed off to discuss what to do next. By this time, the sun was well past its peak, and they'd found nothing useful, so they decided to risk a quick look in one of the outbuildings. Tullett related how they chose a particularly shabby timber shed because it stood a little apart from the rest, and they could get up close to it under cover of the trees. They planned that Tullett would nip in and grab anything useful, while Watson stayed among the trees to keep watch.

‘So, I checked there was nobody about, then crept to the door, nice and quiet. I gently pulled at the side of the door – there was no ‘andle, or nothing, and fuck me, the whole fuckin’ door came down on top o’ me! ‘Kin’ ‘ell! I just managed to hold the bastard up without it making too much noise, and Bill ‘ere saw what ‘ad ‘appened and came out and ‘elped me lean it against the wall. ‘Kin’ ‘ell! We dodged inside then, and waited to see if we’d alerted anyone, but nobody come, so we ‘ad a nose around. Blimey, the rubbish in there, eh Bill! Talk about shite! Old rotten bits of timber, rusty old petrol cans with ‘oles in ‘em, rusty old bits o’ metal. Just fuckin’ rubbish, mainly. Anyway, we picked up some bits and bobs, where’s that pack, Bill?’

Watson opened the pack and pulled out an ancient and very blunt axe head, a small coil of fencing wire, a screwdriver without a handle, and a badly worn file, also minus a handle. He also produced a one gallon petrol can which he’d carried back, very rusty, but it had a screw cap and appeared to be sound, and the blade of a worn out shovel.

Watson spread the items out, and in his elegant tones, said ‘That’s it. A whole shed full of absolute rubbish and that’s the only stuff that could be any fucking use at all, and we could get it back. There was some harness, but it was falling to bits, and a couple of broken cart wheels, that sort of rubbish, so we just grabbed this stuff and trotted back here. Oh, there was nobody in the orchard on the way back, so we collected some more oranges. It was getting a bit dark by then, but Stan knew where he was, and got us right back here, no trouble, ‘til we came up to you, Sir.’

Dodd was pleased. ‘That’s marvellous, just the sort of things we need. You all did much better than Burgess and me. Our route was to the south of the army camp, then turn inland. We gave the camp a very wide berth, as you can imagine - even the most disinterested sentry would have to take notice of a couple of enemy soldiers strolling past in broad daylight.

Anyway, when we were well past, we turned right and crossed the road. Fair amount of traffic on it, as you said, Tullett. As we pushed inland, the vegetable plots ended, and we found ourselves going through open grassy fields with cows and sheep grazing. We came upon the railway track as well, fenced off by wire where we were, just to stop livestock straying onto the rails, I suppose. It was really open country by then, hardly any trees, our only cover was the stone walls, but the area seemed to be deserted. I suppose the sheep look after themselves, and the cows, well, they just get milked twice a day don't they? Anyway, on we went, doubled over to keep below the top of the walls. I was finding that hard going, couldn't have gone too much further, but in any case, the walls stopped after a while, and beyond, there was just open country, getting a bit more hilly, and we could see the mountains on the horizon.

'We realised there was no point in going any further, and time was getting on, so we retraced our path back to the cow fields. I thought there must be a path from the fields to the milking shed, which would have to be near a farmhouse, or even close to the village. Sure enough, there was a path along between two walls – it was easy going too. Over the years, the cows going up and down had worn the path down below the level of the walls, so we could walk along upright without being seen. That was a relief, I can tell you. I was just about done in, going all that way half doubled up.

'We followed the path 'til we got close to some farm buildings, but there were people about and we couldn't get close, so we cut across country to the orchard behind the village, and all we got for the whole expedition was some fruit and vegetables. So we didn't do very well at all. And, I've just realised, telling this, how stupid we were, walking down that cow path. If someone had come along, there'd have been nowhere we could have hidden!'

He thought for a moment. 'I know you men have taken risks today, but at least it was for a purpose. I put us at risk for no reason at all. Stupid.'

Brownlow let him off the hook. 'Never mind, Sir, we're all back safe and sound now, we've got a fair supply of food, some useful stuff, we know more about what's around us, and we can forget escaping by boat. What with the hut getting sorted out, we've all done a good days work, I reckon.'

'Yes, you're right, Sergeant, we should be grateful. We're a lot better off than we were this morning, that's certain. Now, I've had more than enough for one day. Goodnight, chaps.' With that, Dodd settled himself down to sleep, and the others soon followed.

Chapter 6

Things got suddenly better then. It was as though the gods, having put the men through a torment, had decided that the rain had washed the slate clean, and they had a fresh start.

The next morning started with a healthy but unsatisfying breakfast of apples and oranges, no tea, due to the fuel for the stove being exhausted, and ridiculously skinny cigarettes for those who needed them. The re-appearance of the sunny sky reflected the mood in the ancient building.

Dodd called for attention, and began, 'Well, chaps, let's have a look at our position today, eh? It appears as though we can feed ourselves for quite a while, and the hut's rigged so we can have a fire to cook with little risk, at night at any rate. Just as well, because it seems a boat trip won't be on the agenda. I still think it's too risky to have the smoke of a fire during the day – yesterday was a worthwhile exception – but we can look forward to a vegetable stew or soup at night. That's all excellent. Now, what do we still need to do? Sergeant?'

'Yep, Sir, a few things. First off, I wouldn't want to sit through that bastard rain again, so we need to make some kind of roof, or shelter.'

'kin' right' agreed Tullett. Brownlow pressed on. 'And as I said last night, the window and door flaps'll fall off soon as you look at 'em. We need to fix that. And now we're out of petrol, we need to get a supply of dry wood together, and keep it dry. That reminds me, how are we off for matches?'

Burgess answered 'Not bad, Sarge. There's about a box left from the raft, and some odds and ends. There's a couple of lighters, too, between us, but they're out of petrol.'

'Right. What else do we need?'

Kelly added 'We could do with some cooking gear. My billy's too small really, to feed us all. Dunno what we could use, though.'

And Green joined in 'Yeah, and something else to cook up, too. We're soon going to get fed up with potato soup.'

Tullett added 'An' tea an' sugar. An' snout. Tobaccer.'

Brownlow took charge again. 'All right, all right, let's not get ahead of ourselves. First thing, making cover from the rain. Corp, you and Burgess have a go at that. Next, Tullett and Mr. Dodd, can you two figure out how to fix the flaps properly, and you, Watson, I'm putting you in charge of making sure there's always a supply of dry firewood. Gil, you're with me again. All right with you Mr. Dodd? Everybody? Right, we'll meet up at noon to see how we're going.'

They all nodded agreement, except Green, who said 'Just one thing, Sarge. Actually I prefer Gilbert, if it's all the same, like.'

Brownlow sighed. 'Don't push your luck, son. All right, let's get to it.'

The men formed their assigned groups, and Green crawled over to Brownlow. 'What will we be doing, Sarge?'

'Well, I was thinking about the odds and ends they brought in yesterday. I reckon an axe'll be pretty handy, so you're going to make a handle for it, and I'm going to sharpen it. Now, just pass me the axe head and the file, then you can go and look for a bit of wood to make a shaft from. Just a short one, mind, maybe a couple of foot.'

'Aw, Sarge, how am I going to get about? I got a broken foot, remember.'

'Well, first, it's only sprained, and second, crawl, or get a bit of branch and use it as a crutch. You haven't got any more pressing engagements, have you? Tea with the vicar?'

By midday, the window team had got their task well under way, interrupted from time to time by Kelly and Burgess wandering in, staring at the top of the walls, pacing out measurements, then dragging the unused remains of the rafts outside. Tullett and Dodd had used a jack-knife to cut and shape wedges of timber, and used a rock to hammer them into spaces between the stones of the wall, above and each side of the window opening. When they were satisfied the wedges were firmly fixed, they took a length of wire from the rusty coil, breaking it off by bending it first one way, then the other, until it snapped. A few small holes were punched in the flap, the wire threaded through, then wound tightly round the wedges.

As the group sat round, making the best they could of a lunch of raft rations, Dodd reported 'It's not pretty, but it works. This afternoon, we'll work on the door flap. That should be easy, there's already holes in the right places. In fact, I think maybe the original occupant had a similar idea. When that's done, we'll make some kind of.... er, don't know yet, something to stop all the flaps flying around in the wind. What about the roof, Corporal? Come up with any brilliant ideas?'

'Well, we know what we *don't* want, boss, and that's a new pitched roof where the old one was – it can't be visible from outside, see? So we were looking at a flat covering across the top of the walls, or some sort of tent arrangement inside the walls, which might be better. The killer is, we reckon there's just not enough material left over from the rafts to do the job properly. And we need some good lengths of wood, as long as the hut is wide, that's just on ten foot by our reckoning. There's plenty of saplings around that'd be just the job, we could cut them a bit too long, and bend 'em a bit so they're sort of jammed between the walls, but there's a problem. We haven't worked out how to cut them yet. We've

been hacking at one with a jack-knife, but it's a right bastard, fair dinkum. After half an hour we're nowhere close to cutting it at the base, never mind the top and the branches.

'Then there's the fire. If we have the fire under cover, what'll happen to the smoke, but if we leave a gap for the smoke to get out, the rain'll come in and put the fire out, see? So what we reckon is this. We've cut the raft so we've got the biggest squarish bit of fabric we can get, and we'll fix one end of it high up on that end wall, and stretch it out as far as it will go. It won't reach the other wall, but it won't be far away. We'll give it a bit of a downward slope, towards the doorway, to let the rain run off, and support it with saplings cut to size and sprung in, as I said. We reckon that'll leave about a two foot gap at one end, which we can just leave open, or maybe we can make a sort of flap, using left over bits of the raft, so we can have it open to let the smoke out when it's dry, or closed when it's wet. Any rate, we'll need help to bend the saplings into place and manoeuvre the canvas, but first, we've still got to sort out how to cut the buggers to size. Any ideas, boys?'

Brownlow looked pleased. 'Well, Corp, I've got a treat for you!' And with a flourish, he produced the axe, which now had a rough but serviceable handle, and a blade whose tip gleamed with bare metal. 'You won't be chopping down anything big with this, but it'll do what you want, I reckon.' He gave the blade a few extra strokes of the file, and held it out. 'Dunno what it looks like, but it feels OK. What do you think, Ted?'

Kelly took the proffered tool, and hefted it. 'You bloody beauty! That'll be a bloody ripper, Sarge. That's half our problem solved.'

Watson reminded the men 'I say, don't go using all the canvas. I need a good sized bit of that to keep my stock of firewood dry, unless you want me to put it under the main

Dodd's Army

cover, and I imagine there'll be little enough room enough for all of us, without adding a pile of timber.'

Kelly replied 'Yeah, you're right, Bill. There won't be room under the canvas for us all to lie down and spread out, let alone keeping anything else dry. I don't see an option though – we either huddle up, or get wet. I'll make sure we keep a bit aside for you. Now, then, Johnny,' addressing Burgess, 'let's go and try out this weapon on some poor unsuspectin' trees.'

By late afternoon, using a mix of teamwork and brute force, they had a makeshift roof over most of the hut, the canvas draped over the trunks of several saplings, so that the rain would run off towards the door. By general consent, it was far from perfect, but would enable them to avoid a repeat of the soaking they'd had before. In the meantime, the window flaps had been fitted with pegs to hold them open or close as required, and there was a good pile of firewood outside under its own canvas shelter, with much more spread out in the clearing to dry right off.

Dodd stood at the doorway and looked round the interior, well satisfied with progress. Kelly was taking a turn at preparing the evening vegetable stew, and had beaten the heads of wheat into a pulp and thrown them in the billy with the potatoes, onions and carrots. The fire was all ready to light, and the billy was suspended over it. Dodd looked at the sky again, turned now from pink to grey, and nodded to Kelly, who understood, and made a little performance of closing the window flaps before lighting the fire. 'Be close to an hour, I'd guess, boss.'

'Excellent.' Then louder, to get the men's attention. 'Excellent. I'm really happy with what we've done today, chaps. Now, while we wait for dinner, there's tonight's patrols to arrange. I want somebody to have a closer look at the back of the army camp ...

Tullett interrupted. 'Oh, Sir, I was thinkin' o' dipping a line in, going fishin', like.'

'Very well, good idea.'

Kelly responded 'I'd like to have a nose round the camp, boss' and Burgess added 'Can I come? I been out that way.'

'OK, thanks, Corporal. You too, Burgess.'

Burgess grinned, excited, and Dodd went on. 'I want to try to get closer to the village, see what's what. That leaves you Green, you'll share sentry-go with Watson.'

By three a.m. Kelly and Burgess were creeping along a hedgerow bordering a small stand of trees at the edge of a wheatfield. On the other side of the hedge was a farm track, rough and ill-maintained, and beyond that, a drainage ditch, then a few yards of rough grass, before the high barbed wire of the camp. They had been following the wire for some time, and seen no sign of sentries, in fact, no sign life at all. All they could see, even though the moonlight was good between the occasional clouds, was lines of army style huts, and beyond them, the dim outlines of rank after rank of vehicles, and great canvas shrouded lumps - Kelly guessed artillery, and maybe tanks on their enormous trailers. Off to the side, away from the buildings and vehicles, they'd passed a pile of steel drums, obviously fuel, thousands of them it seemed like, stacked on their sides, eight or nine high. Kelly had studied that for some time, intrigued by the thought of creeping in and nicking some petrol. The wire was a problem though: they had nothing to cut it with.

They heard a voice then, calling out, and they instinctively froze, then Kelly sunk down to the ground among the trees, pulling the immobile Burgess with him, before silently crawling forward to see through the hedge. Burgess followed. They watched as two soldiers approached each other from opposite sides, and stopped twenty yards

away, exchanged a few words, then separated again, strolling in opposite directions along the wire.

They gave the sentries plenty of time to get out of earshot, and Burgess was just getting up, when Kelly grabbed his arm and pulled him back, signalling for silence. The Australian had sensed movement close by, and, yes, there it was again! Burgess heard it too now, and they both looked off to their right, to see the dark shape of a man emerge through the hedge, from their side, before it moved silently over the track and into the ditch. After a second, another shape followed the first, and went past him to the wire fence. Then an amazing thing happened! The man jiggled the wire for a moment, where it was fixed to a fence post, then pulled the bottom strand away and as soon as he'd done that, the other man was out of the ditch and through the gap, and making for a window in the nearest hut. He fiddled with the frame for a second, then swung it open, like a door, and hauled himself silently up and through, closing it behind him. In the meantime, the first man had replaced the wire and was back in the ditch. Kelly was amazed, and deeply impressed. The whole thing had taken maybe ten or twelve seconds, and even an alert sentry could pass by now and be none the wiser!

Kelly and Burgess watched, fascinated, unaware of their uncomfortable postures, waiting for the next development. It came after a few minutes, when the window opened slightly. At this, the ditch man gave a quiet whistle and moved forward to open the wire again, while the window man climbed out silently, carrying a small but well filled sack now, carefully pushed the window closed, and was through the wire and back into the shelter of the trees within seconds. As soon as he was through, his mate closed the wire and joined him.

Kelly and Burgess stayed motionless for several minutes, giving the thieves plenty of time to get away - Kelly had no intention of tangling with such proficient outlaws -

then they caught each others eyes, and broke into wide grins. They moved down opposite to the gap in the hedge where the two thieves had got through, and studied the situation again.

‘What d’you reckon?’ whispered Kelly, and Burgess responded ‘Let’s have a go, Corp. Them blokes made it look easy. D’you want to be the wire man or the window man?’

‘You do the wire, OK?’ And, after talking each other through it, Kelly confirmed that when he opened the window on the way back, Burgess would whistle if the coast was clear, just as the others had done. ‘Right’ Kelly said firmly, stuck his head up, saw no sign of movement, patted Burgess on the back, and whispered, ‘Go!’

Burgess was through the hedge, over the track and the ditch, and on the ground by the wire in a few seconds. He examined the wire, saw what he was looking for, and unhooked the bent end of the wire from its nail. He pulled the wire clear and Kelly was immediately behind him, and through. Kelly moved to the window and studied it for half a minute, before pulling out his penknife and inserting the blade in the gap between the window and the frame. A little sideways pressure, and the window swung silently open. Burgess had refixed the wire, but was entranced by what Kelly was doing, and was still laying at the fence when Kelly disappeared into the shed. With a start, Burgess realised where he was, and slid back to the ditch to wait. He hadn’t had time to be scared until now, but now, just waiting, it suddenly came to him that they were doing something dangerous, and the few minutes before he saw the small movement of the window opening again seemed to him to be more like an hour. He was getting close to panic, and when the time came, he found his mouth was so dry he couldn’t whistle! Crawling forward, he reached the fence, and unhooked the wire. He tried to whistle again. Still no good! Shit! Kelly wouldn’t move ‘til he heard the signal, so after another dry mouthed failure, Burgess whispered ‘Come on, Corp. Hurry up.’

Nothing.

'Christ, Corp, come *on*, will you?'

Still nothing. Burgess looked round, and was horrified to see the shape of a sentry appear round the corner fifty yards away. Silently, Burgess slithered through the wire, and into the darkness at the base of a hut. As he waited he realised he'd left the wire unhooked! Jesus!

After what seemed an eternity, he heard the sentry pass without breaking his steady plod, unable to believe his luck. After waiting a couple of minutes, he crawled cautiously back to the wire, looked both ways down the now deserted track, and this time was able to produce a low whistle. Kelly appeared immediately and, closing the window carefully, was under the wire and back behind the hedge in seconds, Burgess following, after remembering to refix the wire this time.

They lay among the trees, silent at first, then Burgess started to laugh, relief as much as anything, and Kelly joined in as they rose and moved away.

'What the fuck happened?' Asked Kelly, when they were well clear. 'Did the sentries come back?'

'O'course, Corp. Why else would I leave you in there?'

By the time they got back to what they were already thinking of as 'their' bit of forest, the sky was turning from black to grey and pewter light was beginning to glint dully off the remaining puddles and pools of water. It was light when they arrived at the hut, and the peaks of the side walls glowed in the early sun, but the window flaps were not visible, so people were up.

Dodd had beaten them back, and sat watching, as amazed as the others, as Kelly, without a word, withdrew half a dozen large cans from his pack and put them in a neat line in front of Dodd.

‘What?’ complained Brownlow. ‘What’s going on?’ and Kelly picked up a can and put it in Brownlow’s hand.

‘Blimey! What is it?’

‘It’s a can of food, Sarge.’ explained Burgess.

‘Yeah, I guessed that, but what *is* it? What’s inside it, I mean?’

‘Dunno, Sarge. The labels’ in Italian, see?’

Dodd looked at the label. ‘Well, Sergeant, what you’ve got there is a nice can of chopped tomato. And we’ve also got, let’s see, some more tomato, a can of ham and,’ he laughed, ‘just what we needed! Three cans of vegetable soup!’

When Kelly and Burgess had finished describing how they’d come by the cans, Tullett, who’d crept back in while they were talking, spoke up.

‘Well, boys, you did a fuckin’ sight better’n me’ and he held up two silver fish, each about a foot long. ‘I went down the beach, where we come up, then walked along to where them rocks started. Took me all fuckin’ night to get these bastards. Mind you, I ‘kin’ wasted most of it.’ He held up one of the tackle sets from the rafts emergency pack. ‘See this shiny bit, by the ‘ook? Like a spoon? Well, that’s called a spinner. Idea is, as it goes through the water, it spins and catches the light, and fish think its food, chomp on it and, gotcha! Only trouble with that is, it’s s’posed to be moved through water, so I tied the line on one o’ them spare saplings, so I could use it as a rod and sort of waft the spinner back and forth, like. Fuckin’ hopeless! Fuckin’ hours I did that for, not a bastard bite. Nothink. In the end, just getting light, I thought fuck this, so I took the useless bastard spinner off, then knocked one o’ them limpet things off a rock and stuck it on the ‘ook. Well, wallop! Fuckin’ fish was on it as soon as it hit the water! So I pulled it in and whacked another limpet on, and fuck me, same thing ‘appened! It was only that it was getting light I come away. I reckon I’ll go back tonight and collect us a nice feed.’

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Dodd and the others didn't know who to make most fuss of, but in the end, it was Brownlow who asked Kelly the important question.

'Now Ted, tell us about the inside of that hut you got into.'

'Well, Sarge, I can tell you it was bloody big, least, it seemed big, but o'course, it was pretty dark in there. It was full, I mean chocker, with stuff, stacks of cartons, crates of stuff, on shelves right up to the roof, stacks of boxes, cans in bloody great piles, just laying about everywhere! All sizes too! Whacking great tins of stuff, you know, maybe a gallon size, didn't seem to be any order in it. You'd have gone barmy, Sarge. Getting in and out was easy, though, after we'd seen how it was done, wasn't it Johnny?' He reflected for a second. 'Piece of piss, really. You can do it, easy, boss, no worries.'

Dodd was startled. 'Me?'

'Well, I didn't know what I was grabbing, did I? We need you to be there to pick out what we need, don't we?'

Dubiously, rubbing the back of his neck, Dodd replied 'Yes, I can see that. My problem is I can't see me climbing up into a window, *and* doing it quietly. High off the ground, was it?'

Kelly thought. 'Oh, what would you say, Johnny? About four foot?'

'I'd say nearer five, Corp'

Dodd thought, then admitted 'Well, given time, I could possibly scramble through, but I'd be making a lot of noise. Now, obviously, we want to get back in there, and obviously, we need me to read the labels, so it seems to me we'll need a team of three, that's me, the wire man, and somebody,' looking pointedly at Kelly, 'to help me in and out. Would that work, Corporal?'

'My bloody oath, skipper. John does the wire, I go in, you're right behind me, John closes the wire. I open the

window, boost you in, close the window and disappear. When you've done, you open the window, just a bit, and wait for John's signal, then pass the goodies out to me, I help you down, you scarper while I shut the window, follow you out, John closes the wire, and we're away. Like I said, a piece of piss!

The men looked at Dodd expectantly. 'All right, sounds good.' He said, with more confidence than he felt. 'We'll do it tonight.'

Tullett, a little miffed that his fishing expedition had been trumped, said 'Yeah, look out for some bread, Sir. With your loaves and my fishes, we'll 'ave a right 'kin' feast tomorrer.'

Dodd spent the rest of the day restless and tetchy, the thought of his role in the forthcoming raid pressing down on him, fearing that he would fail in some way, be unable to get in the window, or make a noise and bring the sentries down on them, or panic and freeze. He'd been OK stalking round the village last night – he'd been able to keep at a good distance, and felt quite safe, though in staying out wide, he hadn't learnt anything new, just picked up some vegetables. But the more he thought about crawling into an enemy army camp and clambering in through a window five feet off the ground, the more ridiculous it seemed for him to even attempt it. He was too old, too unfit, too, well, incompetent. Stuffing up, making a fool of himself, having to be rescued by the others, began to seem inevitable. He almost cried out when it occurred to him that the sentries would have *guns*, people might get *shot*, and it was bound to be his fault. He didn't picture *himself* being shot - his image was much worse. He imagined watching while his men were killed, and it would be *his* fault! Bound to be! He just wasn't up to this!

Finally, more for the sake of something to take his mind off what was to come than any real interest, and finding himself sitting outside the hut with his back resting on the wall, Dodd glanced at Burgess, who was lounging next to him, and asked 'That business the other day about the Wild West. What was that about?'

Burgess looked interested but confused. 'Sorry Sir, I'm not with you.'

'The other day, when we were talking about the Italian army. You said something about Buffalo Bill, or some such.'

Burgess thought back, then remembered. 'Oh! You mean Custer, Sir. General George Armstrong Custer.'

'That's right. You said he was just like the Italians.'

Burgess thought again. 'Well, I s'pose I did, but that's not really what I meant. No, you was saying everyone thought the Eye-ties were shockin' poor soldiers, but it turns out they did all right. Well, everyone reckons Custer was a brilliant general, but that ain't true, either, not if you know the real story.' He pondered for a moment. 'So it's the exack opposite to the Eye-ties, really, come to think of it.'

Dodd was suddenly intrigued. 'And what *is* right?'

'Well, for a start, all that about Custer being a great Indian fighter.'

'Not true?'

'Complete rubbish, Sir. D'you want me to?'

'Oh, yes. And I want details.'

Dodd sat back, and the shadows lengthened as Burgess told him how the Treaty of Laramie gave the Indians the Black Hills of Dakota as their own land for ever, but gold was discovered, and prospectors flooded in, pushing the Indians away. They responded with raids on white men. The government repealed the treaty and confined the Indians to reservations, but they were poorly treated there and began to drift off. The army, whose job it was to round them up, was

told only a few were adrift – the whites who administered the reservations received supplies according to how many there were on the reservations, so it was in their interest to minimise the numbers who'd gone - but in fact there were thousands on the loose, and they were angry.

Dodd was unaware of the gathering darkness, or that Kelly and Brownlow had joined them, as Burgess went into a description of Custer and his history. He told them that Custer was a strange man, described by some as full of fun, a good host, had enormous stamina and enthusiasm, teetotal, never swore, courageous almost to the point of madness in the Civil War, which led to rapid promotion. His dark side was that he was vain and ambitious, and used the newspapers to promote his image, which he did very successfully.

Dodd smiled at that part of the description, and thought he could name one or two more recent generals who fitted it well.

Burgess explained that the truth, though, was that in 1868, he'd massacred a sleeping Indian village, and since then, had been involved in four small skirmishes. That was all. There had been less than a dozen white casualties in the lot, but the public *knew* the red man was a savage, and Custer vigorously massaged his own reputation as a great Indian fighter. But in the Civil War, he'd lost more men than any other cavalry commander, and even more by desertions after it. Thus, his 7th Cavalry was constantly replenished with raw recruits, but Custer wasn't interested in training them.

By this time, Watson and Green had strolled up and been hooked by a tale being told by someone who was a master of his subject.

Burgess went on to relate that Custer had been sent out to round up straying Indians. His 7th Cavalry had 12 companies, each of fifty troops, and about 40 scouts, mostly Indians, as well as his supply wagons. He'd been offered

another three companies and machine guns, but turned them all down.

The listeners were craning forward in the growing gloom now, anxious not to miss a word. Burgess recounted how one day, Custer's scouts reported a group of Indians up ahead. He split his forces and sent a quarter of his force off to the South to search there. Burgess called this his first error, emphasising his opinion by holding up one finger. Pushing forward, scouts sighted part of an Indian village. Custer decided to attack, and, splitting his forces again, sent another three companies off to approach the village from another direction, his second error, tutted Burgess, two fingers raised, and a third finger rose immediately as Burgess noted that the third and fatal error was to fail to establish the size of the enemy force. If he had, he would have discovered that there were about 2,000 warriors in the village, who, unknown to Custer, had met and defeated a force of soldiers the previous week, so were not at all afraid of the blue coats. That was his final error, according to Burgess, four fingers raised: he underestimated the fighting quality of his enemy.

When the men approaching the village saw the size of the force against them, at least half a company simply turned round and rode away. The remaining 210 men followed Custer and charged the village. The Indian warriors counter attacked and drove the soldiers back onto a hill, surrounded them, and massacred the lot. The result was the only true part of the legend. It was 25 June 1876.

Tullett had been standing outside the knot of men, who were sitting, spellbound, in the darkness. He let the silence roll for a few seconds before breaking in. 'Oh, shit, you 'aven't got 'im started, 'ave you? We'll be 'ere all fuckin' night now.'

Dodd was still staring at Burgess, amazed at the change in him. Until now, he'd seen Burgess as just another lump of a boy, not stupid, exactly, but, well, childlike, and

here, suddenly, was a bright young man, enthusiastic and completely on top of his subject. The transformation was stunning. Dodd said, in awed tones, *‘That is astonishing.’*

Burgess, misunderstanding, turned to look at him and replied, ‘Oh, no, Sir. It’s all true.’

‘No, I mean I’m amazed that you obviously know your stuff so well. It’s wonderful, and I’m deeply impressed.’

Tullett broke in again, a note of pride in his friend’s performance. ‘That’s right, Sir, ‘e knows the fuckin’ lot. ‘ He spoke to them all now. ‘Go on, ask ‘im anythin’. I bet ‘e’ll know the answer right off.’

Watson was intrigued. ‘What, about Custer, or anything about the Wild West?’

‘Oh, *shit* yes.’ Tullett said off-handedly, ‘‘e knows the fuckin’ lot, don’t you, chum?’

Green took up the challenge. ‘All right, what’s the name of Roy Rogers’ horse?’

Burgess looked at Green questioningly. ‘You serious?’

‘Yep.’

Burgess gave him a withering look. ‘Roy Rogers is a singer. Same as the rest of ‘em, Gene Autry, an’ that. They weren’t in the Old West, they’re still around now, ain’t they?’

It was Green’s turn to be amazed. All he could manage was ‘Well fuck me. I thought they were real. What about ...’

Burgess interrupted. ‘The Cisco Kid? Tex Ritter? All fakes.’

Dodd was still struggling to grasp that this obviously ill-educated young man could be so knowledgeable on any subject other than football. ‘How on earth did you learn all this?’

‘Well, Sir, it was down to me Auntie Dulcie really. You remember Auntie Dulcie, don’t you Kinnell? Her with the teeth? Well, I weren’t much of a reader at school, see, bit

slow, and that, and she reckoned it was 'cause there weren't any books I was interested in, so she give me this book about Buffalo Bill. Mostly pictures, it was, but it had some writin'. I can picture it now. More of a comic, now I think of it. Anyway, she sees I'm interested, and comes up with another one, more words this time, then another one, and before you know it, I'm readin' OK and I'm *well* interested in the Old West.'

'Well, you've got a lot to thank your Aunty Dulcie for.'

'I know that Sir. It's Trigger, by the way.'

'What is?'

'Roy Rogers 'orse.'

Long after dark, when Kelly and Burgess had finished their preparations and turned to Dodd, he was almost ready to refuse to go. The only thing that stopped him was the greater fear of the humiliation of refusing, and he got to his feet, a little shaky. Kelly said quietly 'Right, boss, just check your pockets, eh? We don't want anything rattling, or falling out.'

Dodd fumbled through his pockets, hardly able to control his hands, though he'd already done it a hundred times, and Kelly, recognising something of what Dodd was feeling, put a hand on his arm and whispered 'You'll feel better when we get moving, mate.'

He was right. As soon as they started, Kelly leading, Burgess at the rear, Dodd's near panic began to subside. When they moved out of 'their' trees and into the open, they found a beautiful clear night, the sky full of brilliant stars, and the going was easy. Well on the way, Dodd realised with a small shock that he was humming to himself, actually enjoying the walk, and by the time they'd made their way to the trees near the wire of the camp, he was back in control of himself, glad of the experience of his earlier excursions, but with apprehension returning now, aware that this time, they'd

be going into the enemy's territory, not just watching from a distance.

Kelly stopped them in the trees near the camp, and they whispered together, going through their plan one last time, then Kelly muttered, 'Right, boss, quiet and slow, like the donkey, eh?' then dropped and they followed him, bellies to the ground, to the hedgerow.

The moon wasn't up yet, but there was no cloud either, and the starlight was plenty to see what they were doing. The plan was to wait for the sentries to pass, and they lay there, every sense straining, every nerve tingling, searching for an indication the sentries were approaching. Dodd began to feel the fear welling up again, and prayed for them to be able to go soon, *now*, but there was no sound, no sight of a sentry moving, nothing, not even a breeze.

They waited for what seemed an eternity to Dodd, who could feel an eye begin to twitch. Kelly seemed to read his mind – he knew if they didn't go soon, Dodd might lose control, and there was no way they could abort this outing and have Dodd calm enough to come back tomorrow. No, it had to be now, sentry or no sentry, and he nodded to Burgess, who'd been watching for the signal, and, nodding back, moved immediately. He was across the track and working on the wire before Dodd had collected himself, and Kelly had to nudge him to move, but when he went, he did exactly what he was supposed to do, and followed Kelly silently across the track and through the wire, to the wall under the window. He waited, amazed that the panic had gone now, and watched Burgess fix the wire and scuttle away while Kelly worked on the window, swung it open, and threw in two empty packs. This was the bit Dodd had foreseen being a disaster, being unable to do it, or worse, making a noise and bringing the guards, but it was so easy that afterwards, he couldn't quite remember how he did it. One second, he was on the ground, hands on the windowsill, one foot in Kelly's hands, and the

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next, he was tumbling silently into the hut, the familiar feel of the empty packs below him a sudden comfort.

As Dodd got to his feet, feeling his heart racing and his breath coming in shallow pants, he took a second to gather himself, and looked around. It seemed for a few seconds too dark to see anything, but faint shapes soon began to emerge, and remembering to reach out and pull the window closed, a signal to Kelly that he was OK, he began to grope tentatively through the blackness, feeling for cans and peering at labels, trying to make out the words in the darkness.

Kelly began to worry. How long could it take to fill a couple of packs? He'd been laying here, in the deep shadow of the hut for what, ten, fifteen, minutes, and still no sign. What could possibly have gone wrong?

He was beginning to consider the risk of going to find Dodd without the OK from Burgess when he heard the faint sound of the window moving above him, immediately followed by the quiet whistle from outside the wire. Pulling the window open, he collected the packs as they were passed down, and placed them carefully on the ground. Dodd's feet appeared, and Kelly grabbed them and guided him down. Dodd immediately crept to the wire, which Burgess had now opened, and was just about to drop and crawl through when he remembered he was supposed to bring a pack with him, and turned to go back, bumping into Kelly, who was carrying both packs. Dodd went under the wire, turned and collected the packs as Kelly passed them through, before scuttling under himself. Burgess was there now, to fix the wire, and all three men disappeared silently into the night.

Once well into the trees, they stopped and solemnly shook hands, and shared wide grins. Dodd felt wonderful: he'd done it! Excellent! Flawless - well, if you didn't count him forgetting to grab a pack to bring out. It had been easy! He

couldn't wait to get back so he could recount and relive his part of the operation again. He felt like a real soldier!

The sun was just beginning to show as the trio of thieves came in, to find the others waiting for them. Tullett had returned just before sunrise with a pack half full of fish, the silvery glint of their skin fading already. He'd gutted them at the beach, and already had them in a couple of steel helmets full of water, to keep for the evening meal.

Kelly quickly ran through the expedition to the point where Dodd disappeared through the storehouse window, then all eyes swivelled to Dodd.

'I must admit, and I think you and Burgess realised, Corporal, that I was getting myself in a bit of a lather waiting for the sentries. I'm not sure how much longer well, anyway, let's just say I was glad when we moved, but then, it all went so smoothly, by the time I'd been inside a couple of minutes, I was fine. Well, not fine, but, you know It was darker than I imagined, much darker. I wasn't ready for that. I'd thought I'd be just sort of shopping, selecting what to bring back, but it wasn't like that, not at all. I just had to grope about, trying not to blunder into things – I could just picture myself falling over a pile of cans, making the devil of a noise, so I was very careful.

'I'd only covered a fraction of the stuff, when I realised I must have been in there a while. I had enough light to see my watch, but it hadn't occurred to me to check the time before going in, so that wasn't much help. Anyway, I grabbed a few extra tins, and got out. Let's see what we've got, Corporal.'

Kelly had already been pulling cans out, but the labels meant nothing to him, and he started passing them to Dodd, starting with a very big one that easily dwarfed Kelly's quart pot.

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‘Ah, that’s a beauty, eh. I picked this up just for it’s size really, so we’ve got a big cooking pot, but it’s got, er, tomato soup in it, so that’ll be useful too. Next, here’s a large tin of beef stew, should be another couple of those, ah, yes, there they are. By the way, Burgess, I suddenly had a thought while I was surrounded by tins – has that weapon of yours got a tin opener on it?’

With a triumphant grin, Burgess pulled out his penknife and after a couple of false moves, selected and held up the tin opener blade.

Dodd smiled back. ‘Arkela would be so proud, son. It seems you’ve got yourself a job. I’ll have to look out for a proper tin opener, won’t I? Now, what else, and before anybody asks, I’ve brought no tea, no sugar, and no tobacco. I did look, I promise. Maybe another time. I’ve got a packet of coffee though. Well, not real coffee – this is mostly some substitute, I imagine, let’s have a look at the label. Yes, chicory. Better than the German version – I understand they’re using ground up acorns! I also found some yeast, and I imagine that where there’s yeast, there’s flour, so that’s definitely on my list for next time. The other tins are all pre-cooked vegetables, you just have to warm them up. Now, chaps, I know they’re not particularly exciting, but I really had to grab what I could put my hand on. I need to have a torch next time. What do you think, Corporal?’

‘Bit bloody risky, Sir.’ Dodd noted the ‘Sir’ and understood that his efforts, and his willingness to go back, had been recognised by the tough Australian. ‘But I don’t see much value in just going in blind either. So I’m game if you are.’

Dodd nodded agreement. ‘Burgess?’

‘I’m in, Sir.’

‘Good man. Tonight, then. Now, let’s have a look at your catch, Tullett.’

Pleased to have his initiative returned to centre stage, Tullett scurried off for his fish, but by the time he got back, he'd been trumped again.

'Hey, Stan,' Kelly said, 'the Sergeant can see!'

'Well, that's a bit of a wassname, exaggeration,' Brownlow muttered, 'but I've just realised I can see the light. I can't make anything out, like, it's all blurry and pink, but *I* reckon that's good news!'

Not to be outdone, Green said his foot was feeling better, too, but nobody showed any interest. Burgess, with the unselfconsciousness of a child, got up close to Brownlow's face and studied his eyes.

'Yes! I can see a bit of your eyeball, Sarge! Wiggle it about a bit. Yes! I saw it move! Can you see me?'

'Not really, son.' Brownlow smiled at the boy's innocent enthusiasm. 'It's all just a blur, but that must be good, eh, Mr. Dodd Sir?'

'I'd say so. Very much so. Excellent! Now, the excitement's all been a bit much for me. I'm for a sleep, and a dream about a nice fish supper.'

But he found sleep hard to come by, and half dozing, listened to the men chatting. He heard Brownlow quietly ask 'How did he go?' and knew they were talking about him. He waited tensely, but he heard Kelly respond 'Yeah, he did all right. Real good.' He relaxed completely for the first time since Egypt, and slept.

That evening, the men were sprawled about the hut, having enjoyed a meal of fish, skewered through with bits of fencing wire and cooked over the fire, with boiled carrots and potatoes. Tullett had spent most of the afternoon cleaning and scraping at the old shovel blade, with the idea that he could use it as a frying pan. The idea was sound, but failed in practice because there was no fat to stop the fish becoming attached to the shovel. Amazingly, Tullett had not dissolved in

a torrent of profanity, but had simply muttered a quiet ‘Kin’ ‘ell’ then turned to Dodd and said ‘Summing else for your shoppin’ list, eh, Sir’ and gone off to break off bits of wire.

Green emitted a profound and exaggerated belch and mused ‘Very nice bit of fish, Kinnell. Very nice. A brew up and a smoke would just about do me now, though. Hey, Sarge, you got any more stories about them old buggers in the Home Guard? Like that donkey business?’

Brownlow sucked his lip. ‘Look, I don’t want you to think I was taking the piss out of those blokes. Fact is, when it looked like we were going to be invaded by an army that’d beaten everyone it came up against, there were fights outside the police stations to sort out who joined up first. Thousands of ‘em, there were, the next day after the announcement on the radio. Old men, boys, all sorts. Some of ‘em in their Great War uniforms, some with shotguns, most with nothing. I saw one old chap, he was stood there in line, holding a fishing rod! Now, what did he think he was going to do with that? You can say it was stupid, if you want, a bunch of untrained civilians queuing up to fight tanks and paratroops – I did too, at first, then I thought what a marvel it was, and I stood up a bit straighter then, I can tell you.

‘The first idea, you know, was that the LDV, that’s Local Defence Volunteers, would be there just as spotters, they would just report on sightings of enemy troops so the proper soldiers could move into defensive positions. Some funny bugger put it round that LDV meant ‘look, duck and vanish.’ They weren’t supposed to stand and fight, see. Seems nobody told *them* that, though, and soon they had all sort of mad schemes going, especially in the south east, Kent an’ that, where paratroops were expected. Home made road blocks, armoured bodies for the squires car knocked up by the local blacksmith, all sorts.

‘But mostly, at the beginning, they had hardly anything. The uniform was an armband with LDV on it. That

was it. And the organisation was a shambles, too. When it started, see, there were no ranks, no chain of command. Can you credit that? If you didn't like what was going on, you argued about it, or just went home, and lots of men did! They soon put that right.

'And a lot of outfits were organised from factories and offices an' that. Their idea was to look after their building, and bugger everything else. There were loads of civil servant platoons as well. You got mobs called the 'Board of Trade Milk and Fats Department Platoon' or something. God knows what *they* expected to do.

'Any rate, one of the platoons I was training, they decided the local school would be good as a base for training and that, and got the council's permission to use it. On the first day, the platoon commander paraded his men, and marched them round to the school, but when they got there, another lot had had the same idea, and were already there! I wasn't there then, I only heard about it afterwards, but it seems the chap in charge was shouting and screaming, waving his bit of paper that gave him permission to be there, but the other officer wouldn't budge. They ended up having a brawl in the street! An actual fight! Talk about kids! In the end, neither of them would back down, so you'd get one platoon marching about the playground doing drill, and the other lot practicing attackin' the buildings, both getting in each others way, but pretending the others weren't there! What a'

'Fuckin' shambles!' the soldiers shouted, and Brownlow grinned.

'Any rate, my lot got permission to use the church hall after that, and first thing they did was put their own locks on the doors! Even the vicar couldn't get in without asking!

'Then, when a few rifles started dribbling in, the rule was that they had to be kept locked up in the police station, for safety, and the Home Guard had to go and collect them before they could patrol or do drill. Imagine! That was too

embarrassing for the commander, and when he discovered the rifles could be kept in the church hall as long as they were in a locked rack, he got one of the men, a retired carpenter, to build a rack. This bloke had some nice timber stored away, and built this fuckin' enormous thing – it could of taken twenty rifles, and we only had four – and the wood was massive. It took three men to move the bastard, and then they couldn't get it into the hall. Had to take it to bits and reassemble it in there. Any rate, they finally get it fixed, get it checked by the police, collect the rifles, and put 'em in the rack. It's got this fuckin' huge metal bar on a hinge another bloke had knocked up, or nicked, more likely, so they put the rifles in, swing it closed and lock it with this brand new fancy padlock the officer had bought specially, out of his own money. Lovely!

'Trouble was, he lost the key to the padlock! In the end, they had had to break the hinge off the rack to get to the rifles! They'd had it inspected though, so they kept the rifles, and fixed it up so they just unscrewed the hinge to get 'em out, then screwed it up again after!

Dodd broke in. 'You've reminded me about my local platoon, talking about outfits made up from work groups. There was one, the Oxford bus depot platoon, always turned themselves out very smartly. On parades, they made the others look pretty scruffy. But they already had their bus driver's uniforms, you see, and all the others just had their ordinary clothes. That was one of the reasons I never joined. That and I couldn't see the point, not where we were. I always thought that if the Germans reached Oxford, it would all be pretty much over by then.'

'What did you do in Oxford, Sir?' Asked Watson

'I'm, was, I should say, a university lecturer. History of Italian art, my speciality. That's how I ended up here, I suppose. I got a visit one day from a couple of shady looking characters, who said they were on the lookout for fluent

Italian speakers, and did I want to serve my country? No pressure, you understand! My wife was amazed – she'd never seen me in a military light! Well, to be honest, neither had I. And my daughters thought it must be some kind of practical joke! The very idea of the old fellow in uniform! That was a bit rich, though - both of them are in uniform themselves now. Alice, she's the elder, is a WAAF, and Victoria was just sorting out her WREN uniform when I left. I must say, I'm very proud of them, but I'm sure they believe the war is the best thing that's happened to them. Life can be a little, well, routine in college, you know, especially if you're the daughter of a lecturer. Anyway, one thing led to another, and here I am. By the way, anybody else do any time in the Home Guard?

Burgess, strangely like a schoolboy, put his hand up. 'Me, Sir!'

'Oh, yes, that's right. You told us before, didn't you, you enlisted to escape the Arkela!' There was a scatter of laughter. 'Any good stories for us?'

'Not really, Sir, no. When I joined, it was all pretty good, we 'ad uniforms and everythink. I was a bit surprised, like. I expected it to be all to buggery, really, like what the Sarge says, but it was really good, creeping round in the dark, and that, and 'olding up motorists. Good fun! Mind you, me brother Len, 'e was in from the start-off. 'e was in the Post Office, telegraph boy, 'e was, and *they* got LDV platoons organised straight off. O'course, they had nothink to give 'em. Then they got an issue for self defence. You know what it was?'

He paused, and looked round at the men. 'Pepper! A packet of fuckin' pepper! That'd be bloody 'andy, wouldn't it, with fuckin' tanks rolling down the 'igh street!'

Tullett had been about to tell a tall story or two about his brief time in the Home Guard, but decided that nobody could beat *that* yarn. That idea was replaced by a sudden thought.

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'ere, Sarge, they started callin' 'em Dads'Army, didn't they?'

The sergeant nodded.

'Yea,well, I reckon we're Dodd's Army, eh?'

Dodd found the time hanging heavy again, learning the lesson that every soldier had to learn – that there's a lot of waiting in being a soldier, and it's hard. He got up and went for a stroll around the clearing. The conversation had upset him a little – it'd started him thinking about home and family, and he'd realised with a guilty start that this was the first time he'd really thought of them since this whole adventure began. Previously, they'd never been far from his thoughts, but it was, how long, a week now, since the crash? He tried to work it out – he even stopped walking to work it out, but it was tricky - the days kept merging together, and when he tried again, they came together differently. About a week, anyway. He'd been in the habit of writing to his wife, Clara, who he called Kitty, every few days since he'd been away, but he knew the letters often arrived in bunches, and she wouldn't even be aware as yet that anything was wrong. If she could see him now, would she be proud, or horrified? Perhaps some of each. She would, though, have been amazed that he could get by, and even thrive, without her there to look after him. Ever since they'd first met, she'd treated him as the archetype absent minded academic who relied on her for everything, and yet here he was, not only still alive, but about to break into a store in an enemy military camp *again* and steal food for his men!

Meanwhile, the men dozed and yarned until the trio of Kelly, Dodd and Burgess set out again, this time with the small torch from a raft firmly buttoned into Dodd's shirt pocket, while the others, Brownlow excepted, arranged their turns as sentry.

It was getting almost normal now, the men in the hut waking before daybreak to see what the patrol would bring back, and the sentry coming in with the patrol.

‘Right’ said Dodd, as soon as they all got settled, ‘let’s have that pack, Burgess.’

‘Hold up, Sir, tell us all about it first’ interrupted Brownlow.

‘Oh, yes, right. Well, we used the same routine as before, except this time, I wasn’t wetting myself. In fact, I was thrilled to be there! Anyway, as before, as soon as the Corporal got the window open,’ he snapped his fingers, ‘I was inside. I still don’t quite know how I do it – or rather, how Kelly does it – but there I was, and it was time to switch the torch on. I’d made a little tube of canvas and stuck it round the torch with the glue from the raft repair kit, so the beam would be narrow, and there wouldn’t be too much light coming from it, but it was hardly worth it – it’s a pretty weak torch. Did you see anything at all, chaps?’

Kelly shook his head, and said ‘I couldn’t see the window at all from where I was’ but Burgess added ‘Yeah, I saw a sort of faint glow for a minute, but it soon faded.’

‘Hmm. That would be me switching the torch on too close to the window. I’ll remember that. Oh, and speaking of seeing things, any improvement, Sergeant?’

Brownlow thought for a second, and replied ‘I believe there is, Sir, thanks. I can sort of see people, but it’s all too blurry to see who’s who. Looks like I’m on the mend, though, thank Chri..... goodness.’

Dodd continued. ‘Anyway, it gave me enough light so I could move about without blundering into things, and it got easier as I got used to it. The area where we get in is set up like a little shop, there’s a counter, and a bit of room for staff one side, and customers the other, but there’s stuff stacked and piled all around. I’m amazed I didn’t blunder into a stack of something and cause a deuce of a row last time. Anyway, I

decided to explore a bit, and soon found myself down at the other end of the building, but it was a dead end, a corridor between two banks of shelves. I'd thought I'd be able to get round to the next aisle, there must be at least two others, but then I decided that rather than trying to cover the whole building, I'd work my way back, having a look at everything on the way. I found myself in a dry goods area, which suited me. I got a nice bag of flour, and some more yeast, so we can make some bread.' This was greeted with a small burst of excited applause. 'There were some bigger bags there, but I wasn't happy we'd get them under the wire without bursting them. Then there's some pasta, spaghetti'

Here he was interrupted by calls of 'What's that, then?' and had to find the cardboard tube, and open it to show the thin golden rods. There was silence, until Tullett asked, 'What the fuck d'you do with that, then?'

Dodd chuckled. 'You boil it up, then eat it. It's a staple food of Italy – they eat tons of it – mostly fresh, though. I was lucky to find this.'

Kelly was sceptical. 'I reckon I wouldn't feed that to a brown dog, boss.'

Dodd laughed again. 'By the time we've finished here, chaps, you'll love it. By the way, I've got something for you, Tullett.' Rummaging around, he found a can that looked like a one gallon petrol tin, complete with a screw cap. Tullett raised an eyebrow quizzically. 'Olive oil' explained Dodd. 'You can put it on your shovel to stop your fish from sticking. Use it like lard.'

'Oh, really?' Tullett took the can with renewed interest. 'Smashing, thanks, Sir. That 'minds me. Did I mention that while I was fishin', there was three or four men out in little boats, I expect they was the boats Ted saw, just a couple of 'undred yards away, but, with the 'kin' rocks an' that right behind me, I wasn't bothered 'bout being seen.'

Dodd replied ‘That’s interesting, I wonder if they were putting out lobster pots? I like a nice lobster. Anyway, what else have I got? I picked up some more tins of stewed beef, and that’s about it. Oh, and salt. Did I mention the salt?’

Green spoke for the smokers. ‘No snout, then, Sir?’

‘Chaps, I know how happy I’d make you if I brought you some, but no, no tobacco, no tea, which I don’t expect to find anyway, no sugar. Sorry.’

Watson now took centre stage. ‘Sir, may I borrow your hat for a moment?’ There was a stunned silence until Dodd managed ‘What?’

‘Your hat, Sir. Your trilby. Can I borrow it?’

Dodd still didn’t grasp it. ‘You want to borrow my hat?’

‘That’s right, Sir. Just for a minute, if you would.’

The others looked on, equally confused, until Dodd moved to his suitcase and found the hat, which he passed to Watson, reluctantly, as though he suspected Watson was going to piss in it, or something.

Watson leant forward and took it, then got up, and, with ‘Back in a minute’ left the hut. When he came back a few seconds later, he was holding the hat upside down in front of him, with one hand inside it. With a flourish, he said ‘Abracadabra!’ and pulled from the hata rabbit! A real, dead, rabbit!

Dodd, his eyes glued to the rabbit, was the first to break the astonished silence. ‘Where the fuck did you get that?’ A couple of the men turned their attention to Dodd for a second, but he was so surprised, he was completely unaware that he’d said ‘fuck,’ and they turned back to Watson.

‘Well, I was on sentry-go, sitting on that big old stump right over at the back, when I heard a bit of a noise. I guessed it was a rabbit or something, so I thought I’d creep over and see if I could spot it. Then I saw a movement through the trees and froze, but it wasn’t a rabbit, it was a

chap! He was bending down, fiddling with something, but he had his back to me and I couldn't see what he was doing. After a bit, he moved off, and when I thought he was well clear, I went to where he'd been, and I found he'd fixed a thin wire noose to a peg, exactly outside a rabbit hole. Of course, I realised it was a trap, so I just crept off back here. Then, as soon as I woke up, I remembered! Just like Christmas morning, it was, I was so excited! So, off I went, and sure enough, there was a rabbit, strangled itself in the noose! So I pinched it!

'Excellent, excellent!' said Dodd, then 'Er, does anyone know how to, er, prepare it?'

Kelly offered 'Sure do, boss. I've done thousands of the little bastards. Leave that to me. But don't get too excited – there's not much meat on a rabbit, you know. Now, Bill, could you get back to where you found it?'

'Yes, Corporal, easily.'

'And did you leave the trap as you found it?'

'I'm not stupid, Corporal' said Watson, in an injured tone. 'I do realise we can pinch rabbits from there again.'

'Actually, I was thinking that wouldn't be the only trap the cove would set. If we could follow him and find his other traps, maybe we could get a regular feed without being too obvious about it.'

Dodd agreed. 'Excellent thinking, Corporal. We'll leave that little job to you then, eh?' He rubbed his hands together. 'This is all most satisfactory, eh, chaps? *Most* satisfactory.'

Chapter 7

Next morning, Brownlow woke to find his vision improved again. Not perfect, still a bit out of focus, but much better. He should have been happy, but what he *could* see didn't please him.

'What a fuckin' *shambles!*' he bellowed. 'Look at the fuckin' state of you lot! And the pig sty you're living in! The fuckin' state of it! Not one of you shaved for a week by the look of you, nor washed neither, prob'ly! Jesus! You're a fuckin' disgrace, the lot of you! Corporal, get these men on some sort of clean-up detail, then get 'em washed and shaved, and organise a laundry job too. Christ, I can't believe you let 'em get into this state!'

He was addressing the corporal, but everyone knew he was really talking to the officer. Dodd was shocked, the realisation that he should have seen how they were all degenerating and done something about it shaming him to silence. He'd thought they were all doing so superbly well. Maybe Clara was right after all, and he did need looking after every minute.

Finally, he found his voice. 'Sergeant, it's no good blaming Corporal Kelly. He's been too busy finding food and looking after us all, including you, to be concerned about other things. If there's fault, it's all mine, and I accept your rebuke. But the six of us,' he stressed the 'six', 'have had other priorities.'

Dodd was getting worked up now, almost shouting, the words tumbling out. 'Now we've got shelter and a cache of food, and it looks like we can continue to feed ourselves, *and* it seems we've at last got a sergeant who might be able to pull his weight, we can think about tidying ourselves up.'

He subsided, and, embarrassed by his failure, and now this outburst, stalked out. Green, the one who'd been

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Brownlows guide and eyes, watched him go, then took up the issue.

‘Yeah, Sarge, that’s right. We’ve been flat out getting sorted, what with going out to find food, *and* sharing sentry-go. And don’t forget it pissed down for best part of two days, then we took a day fixing the place up. Due respect, Sarge, if you expect us to look like the Brigade of fucking Guards after that lot, you’re fucking barmy. Due respect. And it’s no good taking it out on Mr. Dodd. If it wasn’t for him, we’d all be in a cage by now. And look at how he’s been nicking stuff from the Eyeties for us. He was in a right fucking state before he went that first time, we could all see that, but he still did it, *and* he went back, *and* he’ll do it again.’

The rest of the men rumbled agreement, and a flinty silence, cold as a tax man’s letter, enveloped the hut. Brownlow realised now he’d been too harsh, the men were with Dodd one hundred percent, and he’d got himself into a jam, but he couldn’t think of a way to repair the damage. After a while, he got to his feet and, mumbling something about a look round, blundered out of the hut.

Now that Dodd and Brownlow were both gone, Kelly admitted ‘I know we’ve had a rough trot, boys, but we should have done a bit better than this. Fair dinkum, have a squiz at the state of us.’

There was a general growl of acceptance, and Tullett added ‘I reckon Brownlow was well out of order, bangin’ on like that, but yeah, fuck me gently, we *are* a sorry fuckin’ sight. ‘kin’ ell, we are.’

Looking round, he began to grin, then titter, and soon they were all laughing, and pointing out each others filthy condition.

Watson looked at his mate and said ‘Well, what a relief! I’ll be pleased to get tidied up, won’t you, Gilbert? I don’t feel right being in this state, not right at all, but I’ve

enjoyed being a proper soldier, and I didn't want to be different to the others.'

'You do look a right old sight, Bill. I suppose I do too. What *would* Captain Murray say?'

Watson stood and struck a pose, knuckles on hips, his weight on his right foot, and his left at right angles to it. 'Oh, my God! You *boys!*' He pouted and stamped his foot. 'What *am* I to do with you?'

As the laughter subsided, Kelly got up, and ostentatiously selected his washing kit from his little pile of gear, then found his spare clothes. 'I'm going to the stream for a bit of a tidy up. Anybody wants to join me, make sure you go down stream of here, all right? We don't want to mess up where we get our water. I reckon I won't be shaving 'til I can get some hot water tonight.'

He left the hut, and after a short silence, the remaining men began to follow.

Dodd was gone until mid-afternoon, and Brownlow didn't get back until after him. Neither of them had spoken when they returned. By that time, the men were at least half-way presentable, bathed but unshaven, and uniform shorts and shirts clean, if unironed. Dodd and Brownlow stood out now, their clothes and skin streaked with dirt. It was hard to pick who looked worst, Dodd with the evidence of his several patrols on him, or Brownlow, not so dirty, but the wide stripe of bruising still painted across his face.

And the atmosphere, which had become light-hearted whilst Dodd and Brownlow were away, was stiff and unnatural now they were both back. Conversation among the men dwindled, and soon they had fallen silent, communicating by glum looks, and the occasional raised eyebrow and half-shaken head.

Eventually, the gentle summer darkness began to descend, bringing that faintly musty sweet smell of a forest at

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dusk, and as the men commenced the preparation of the evening meal, they heated water to shave with, taking turns to use the signal mirror from the raft, speaking only when they had to, and then being over-formal.

Tullett eventually broke the strained mood by muttering 'Well, this is a fuckin' shambles, an' no mistake.'

The men watched Brownlow out of the corners of their eyes, expecting another bark from him, but for a few seconds he just sat there, immobile, as if he hadn't heard, then a small grin appeared, and he agreed 'A *right* fuckin' shambles. Any hot water left there, Burgess? After you, Mr. Dodd Sir.'

Dodd, recognising that Brownlow had offered an olive branch, smiled and replied 'Thank you Sergeant. I'll be sure to leave enough for you.'

Dodd said he would be going back to the Italian camp that night, to complete his tour of the supply hut, and wanted Kelly, after boosting Dodd through the window, to have a snoop round the petrol dump, and, he hoped, to steal some fuel for Dodd's little stove. Kelly and Burgess volunteered to play their usual parts, but Brownlow, who was anxious to win back the respect he knew he'd lost over his explosion, said he needed to familiarise himself with everything, and insisted on taking Kelly's place.

The men sat around for a time after that, quietly pleased that the tension had been broken, then Burgess broke the silence. 'Ere, Sarge, I was thinkin' about what you said about the forest bein' different at night, an' that, and it reminded me of when me and my mates used to go over Wanstead Flats.'

Noticing the quizzical looks, he explained 'Not a *block* o' flats, it's more, well, a bit o' countryside, like, in among the 'ouses - lots o' grass and football fields an' that, and a couple o' places where there's a bit o' forest, what we

called the woods. Not as much as round ‘ere, might be only a ‘undred yards across, maybe a bit more. Any rate, we used to knock about there a bit, an’ one night we decided to camp out in the woods. Me and Ronnie, we was in the Scouts, so we reckoned we’d be able to make ourselves comfortable, so we was well keen.’

Interested, Brownlow broke in. ‘Hold on, lets get the picture right. How many of you, and how old were you?’

Burgess ticked off on his fingers. ‘Well, there was me, an’ Cacker Evans, and Ronnie Clarke, an’’

Kelly interrupted. ‘Cacker?’

‘Yeah, ‘e *was* a funny bugger. Anyway, there was ‘im, and Ronnie, and Big Dave. Kinnell weren’t there, were you: I think you ‘ad a bit of a job by then, so the rest of us would ha’ been, oh, I’d say, twelve, maybe thirteen, ‘cept Big Dave, ‘e was younger, but, well, big. So, off we went, ...’ He paused, and burst out laughing. ‘I just remembered! Fuckin’ Ronnie, ‘e only shows up in his Boy Scout uniform!’

Kelly and Green joined in the laughter, but not Watson - he thought that’s what he’d have done.

Burgess continued. ‘Any rate, we all ‘ad a bag with a bit o’ food and an old blanket or somethin’ to sleep on tied up wi’ string, and off we go. We got there while it was still light, and made our ‘ideout bang in the middle o’ the woods. Made a fireplace and that, then ‘ad our tea and fucked about, you know, just passin’ time. Then it got dusk, and we started creepin’ about, thinkin’ we might manage to sneak up on a couple ‘avin’ it off or somethin’ - the woods was a favourite spot for that. And sure enough, we saw a chap and a girl in a bit of a clearing, an’ watched ‘em for ages, but they was only kissin’ and that, and eventually they went off. Well, we suddenly realised it’d got dark by now, and, I tell you what, it was *well* fuckin’ creepy! What a shock! We’d ‘ave said we knew them woods by ‘eart, like, we’d been all over ‘em a million times, but in the dark, well, it was miles different!

Miles! Real dark, but still with even darker bits, and you'd be creepin' along and suddenly a branch or somethin'd catch your face, or your leg.'

He shivered. 'Shit, I can still see it now! Scary noises, tree trunks lookin' like fuckin' monsters, all sorts! Fuck, I was frightened!'

He thought for a moment, expecting to be jeered at, or laughed at, but the others imagined how it was, and knew, and were silent. 'I reckon that would be the scarest I've ever been, no shit. We finally found our way back to our camp, and lit a whackin' big fire, but that only made it ten times worse – the flames made 'orrible big movin' shadows in the trees, an' made the trees look like they was movin', an' we *knew* it was just leaves reflectin' the flames, but it looked for all the world like 'undreds of eyes starin' at us behind the trees!' He shuddered again. 'So we packed up and went 'ome! Run most o' the way, too!'

Tullett confirmed the story. 'I remember you tellin' me about it.'

'Yeah, you said I was a prat for bein' scared, an' I dared you to spend a night there, but you never did, did you?'

Kelly saw the makings of an argument, and changed the subject. 'What about this Cacker bloke? Was that his real name?'

Burgess and Tullett both looked at him as though he was a bit simple. Tullett responded 'Cacker? His real name? His real name's, er, I don't remember, do you Johnny?'

'Well, I'm buggered! I don't even remember if I ever knew it! *Everybody* called him Cacker, since we were little kids!'

Kelly grinned. 'He'd be in strife in Sydney! In Australia, cack is another word for shit!'

Burgess and Tullett nodded. 'Same here. Well, in England, anyway. Cacker 'ad a bit of a problem, see? Bit of a late developer. Know what I mean?'

Dodd said he didn't.

Tullett explained. 'He kept shittin' hisself, Sir, due respect. Couldn't seem to grow out of it, could 'e, John?'

Burgess nodded solemnly.

Tullett continued. 'There'd be no warnin, like, just suddenly, there'd be an almighty smell, and we'd all go '*Jesus*, Cacker.' Sorry, Sir, but that's what we said, and Cacker'd just sort o' grin an' go off 'ome for 'is Mum to clean 'im up.'

Kelly had never heard anything like it. 'Strike me bloody pink. How old was he when this was going on?'

Tullett looked at Burgess, who said 'Gee, 'e only got hisself sorted out not that long before we went to big school, that would ha' been when 'e was, what, ten?'

'Fair dinkum? He'd shit himself in the middle of lessons?'

'Yep, anywhere, in the playground, down the shops, wherever he got the urge.'

'Bloody hell! Didn't people complain?'

'Sometimes. Before they knew 'e couldn't 'elp it. Then everybody all around kinda got used to it. They 'ad spare clothes for 'im at school, and everything. Only place they couldn't stand 'im was Sunday School, funny enough. You'd think they'd be a bit tolerant, wouldn't you? Used to be a joke about 'em showin' the other cheek, but they never saw the funny side.'

Dodd did see the funny side, and added 'I must say, young Burgess, you and your friends have a wonderful way with nicknames. First, there's Kinnell, now there's Cacker! I can't recall anyone in my circle with a nickname at all. We used to think we were getting pretty pally if we used a chaps first name, never mind a nickname! What did they call you?'

Burgess looked embarrassed. 'I don't recall me havin' one, do you Stan?'

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Tullett thought too, and replied 'No, mate, I can't think of one. Not back then, anyway.'

Dodd turned to Tullett. 'So, he's had one since?'

Burgess moved uncomfortably, but Tullett was enjoying the moment. 'Oh, yes, Sir. Oh, yes. Back in Africa, we used to call 'im Butcher. Short for the Butcher of Tobruk.'

Everybody looked at Burgess. Some saw him in a new light, but Kelly just nodded to himself – he'd picked him as a cove who'd seen some action, first time he saw him.

'You bastard, Stan. You promised you wouldn't tell.' He turned to the others, and said, pleadingly 'It's nothing, boys, all right? Just Kinnell fuckin' about.'

Green leaned forward and asked 'Tell us about it, John. What happened?'

Burgess squirmed again, and said 'There's nothing to tell. It was just some o' the lads getting' things out of proportion, like. I'll tell you a story about Kinnell 'ere at Tobruk, though. You know it was a right bastard there, we was 'emmed in all round, and the Germans, they *really* wanted us out of it. Rommel wanted the place for the 'arbour, see? They was pushin', pushin', all the time. Our lot was on the perimeter one time, if you can call it that, just a line of outposts really, 'oles in the sand with a few lads and a machine gun or two. Forward observation, they called it.'

Tullett broke in. 'Forward fuckin' suicide, more like.'

Burgess nodded, and continued. 'Like I said, the Germans was pushin' forward – they could easy sneak a few through between us when it was dark, and 'ave a go at us from all sides. One time, me and Kinnell was in this gun pit way out in front – seemed like we was 'arf way to bloody Tripoli, and there's bullets an' shit comin' at us from all directions, so we're just sendin' out a spray from the Bren from time to time, to keep their 'eads down, like. So, this goes on for hours, it seemed like. Musta been pretty bad for them an' all, you know. All they 'ad for cover was a few rocks an' that, nothin'

more than a few inches high, no shade or anythin'. They musta been as sick of it as we were, 'cause this kraut suddenly shouts 'English! English! You are surrounded! Surrender!' And Kinnell shouts back 'Fuck off, Herman!'

'There's a bit of a silence, then this jerry goes 'What is fuck off? Do you surrender?' So Kinnell yells 'Bollocks we do! *You* surrender!'

As the laughter subsided, among playful punches at Tullett, Brownlow remembered something from a few days ago, and asked Kelly, 'You know the other day, you said something about another Ted Kelly, you said he was a famous brush hanger, or something? What was that all about then?'

Kelly looked blank.

'You know, a bush dangler?'

Kelly cottoned on that the mickey was being quietly taken, and replied, in a grotesque parody of Dodd's cultured accent, 'Really, Sergeant, I've never heard of Ted Kelly, and I've certainly never heard of a blush waggon!'

There was a seconds silence while the men watched Dodd for his reaction, but he just chuckled, and then the men joined in. And so began one of those small traditions that bind groups together, that appear unremarkable, or even stupid, to outsiders, but say clearly, 'This is our special business, and you aren't one of us.' From then on, when there was time for a yarn, often as not someone would say to Kelly, 'What about them duck shaggers (or some such silly words) of yours,' and each time, Kelly would reply with a progressively more monstrous accent, until, in the end, it was nothing more than a series of snorts, high pitched titters and yelps, which invariably resulted in the men shouting with laughter.

On this first occasion, Kelly waited for the laughter to die down, and began 'Well, I reckon 'bush ranger' is the words you're after, Sarge. Now, there was heaps of bloody bushrangers, bloody hundreds of 'em, but ol' Ned Kelly, he was the most famous of 'em all. He was a bit of a lad, just

quietly. Got hisself killed in the end, but I'll tell you how he got started.'

'Sorry to break it up, chaps,' Dodd broke in 'but it's time to get fed and organised for tonight. You'll have to keep old Ned for another day.'

A cool breeze had begun to get up before they set off. There was no moon yet, but good starlight, and Burgess led them along a now familiar path easily and confidently, Dodd in the rear, the sergeant between them less fluid and less certain, seeing for the first time the gently rolling landscape lying calm but colourless under the starlight, the wind nudging the occasional cloud and gently rippling the wheat.

They'd been moving along well, out in the wheat by now, when Burgess stopped and turned, and pointing at Brownlow with his left hand, held up his right palm towards the sergeant, then still pointing, turned his right palm down and slowly dropped his arm. Brownlow understood, and, feeling his heart lurch, stopped and went into a crouch, wondering what Burgess had spotted that he hadn't. Brownlow felt Dodd sidle up behind him, as he watched Burgess go into a pantomime of signals, involving pointing, vigorous waving of hands and fierce jerks of his head, this way and that. Brownlow turned to Dodd with raised eyebrows, and Dodd whispered 'What do you make of that?'

Bewildered, Brownlow shook his head.

Dodd continued, 'Yes, it's got the rest of us beat, as well. He does it every time he leads. It doesn't do any harm, and he seems to enjoy it, so we just let him get on with it. He'll stop in a second and, ah, here we go.' He nodded forward, and watched Burgess turn and set off again.

As soon as he moved, there was a tremendous clatter and movement all round them as a cloud of birds, spooked by their passing, all took wing together. Brownlow and Dodd both instinctively threw themselves to the ground, but, when

they looked up, they saw that Burgess had continued as though the episode had not occurred. In fact, he hadn't even turned round, and they were in danger of losing touch with him. Swapping embarrassed grins, they got up and hurried after him.

As they got closer to the camp, the wind had stiffened and was sending clouds brawling and tumbling across the sky, a low moon showing bright then cloaked again. For Brownlows benefit, they had skirted round the camp so as to enable him to get a good look at the great mound of fuel drums before approaching the usual entry point, and in the trees close to the wire, they went through the plan one more time, mainly to give Brownlow time to settle – Dodd remembered how he'd felt the first time, and was slightly surprised to recognise a shadow of the same emotion in the sergeant. The plan was just a slight variation of the usual. After Burgess had let them both through the wire and closed it up, Brownlow would boost Dodd through the window before moving off to the fuel dump. They agreed that twenty minutes should be plenty of time for both Brownlow and Dodd to complete their tasks and be ready to exit. Dodd would open the window slightly, wait for Burgess's signal, pass out the packs to Brownlow, who would be waiting under the window, then they'd do the usual exit under the wire.

They moved to the hedge, Dodd the leader, and waited while they checked that there were no sentries in sight, then Burgess moved forward, across the ditch, unhooked the wire and pulled it back. Brownlow had a screw topped can, which had once held five litres of olive oil, and followed Dodd, who carried two empty packs, through the wire, and by the time Dodd had got the window open, Burgess had closed the wire up and retreated to the ditch. Brownlow helped Dodd through the window, then threw the packs in after him, picked up his can and was away. Dodd closed the window and Burgess,

who now had a lonely wait, moved back behind the hedge. Easy. Twenty seconds, tops.

Brownlow moved off towards the fuel dump, grateful for the wind noise drowning any small sounds, but not so happy with the rapidly changing light, as silver edged clouds draped themselves across the low moon, throwing shadows then darkness. He was glad when he saw the pile of fuel drums looming up and began to move even more cautiously, reckoning that if he was in charge of the guard detail, he'd have put an extra man on the fuel supply. He needn't have worried: if there was a special sentry, he'd crept off somewhere to take refuge out of the wind. After waiting several minutes, Brownlow had heard and seen no movement, but had spotted what he'd hoped for, a fuel drum up on end, next to a fixed hand operated pump, with a long handle sticking out the side, like those pumps that used to serve the village well. Moving to it, Brownlow unscrewed the top of the drum and smelt the contents. Petrol, good. He didn't want diesel – it burnt with too much smoke. He quietly dropped the suction hose into the drum, uncapped his can and held the output hose nozzle in the can mouth, then came to the tricky part. He knew from experience that these pumps always screeched when you started working them, and he held his breath and screwed up his face as he slowly began to work the pump handle, but, to his surprise, it worked almost silently. After a few strokes of the handle, the can was full, and within seconds, the cap was screwed on, the hose removed from the drum, its cap replaced as well, and Brownlow was back in the shadows, sucking in air, realising that he'd been holding his breath. Looking at his watch, he saw he had plenty of time, and decided to make a small detour on the way back, to get a closer look at the transport parked at a respectful distance from the fuel.

Meanwhile, Dodd had moved away from the window before switching on his torch with the shaded beam, and made for the last gangway, the only one he hadn't been down yet. The narrow beam led him to it, and he found himself surrounded by all manner of kitchen equipment, from potato peelers to enormous saucepans, he guessed capable of holding ten gallons. He whispered 'Excellent, excellent' and wandered up and down, picking up a couple of can openers here, a cooks knife and a spatula there, and, carefully wrapping them in some cloths he'd also picked up, he put them in a pack, along with a frying pan and several enamel plates and dishes.

He then returned to another corridor, and filled the other pack with a bag of flour, then some yeast, and topped it off with a selection of cans. By now, it was just about time to get out, and he made his way back towards the window, switching off the torch as he approached.

While Brownlow and Dodd were occupied, Burgess had nothing to do but wait for twenty minutes to pass, and be ready to signal the all clear when he saw the window move. The wind was gusting strongly now, coldish, with a hint of rain in the air, and he had no chance of hearing a sentry approach, so after ten minutes or so, he pushed his head forward into the hedge so he could see the whole length of the wire.

For a few minutes, the only movement was the trees bending and shaking in the wind, and the clouds, now racing urgently home to the far horizon. But suddenly, to Burgess's amazement and horror, a dark shape emerged from the hedge only ten yards away and made for the wire! Burgess realised immediately what was happening, and, sure enough, the shape stopped at the entry point and pulled back the loose wire as another shape appeared and dived through! Oh, Christ, oh, shit! The locals were back, doing exactly the same as they were! Burgess lay stunned. There was nothing he could do –

he realised, all too late, that their arrangements, which had worked so well so far, had a fault. They only had a signal that the coast was clear: there was no signal that it wasn't!

And to add to the drama, at that moment a sentry appeared round the corner of the wire, lurching a little in the blustery wind.

Burgess watched helplessly, knowing now what would happen, and sure enough, just as the new intruder reached the hut, the window opened and Dodd held out the first pack. Burgess could see the man on the ground turn as if to run, but then he had second thoughts and took the proffered pack. By the time he'd put it down, the other one had appeared, followed by Dodd's feet. Burgess was lost in admiration for the local man, who had immediately sized up the situation and assisted Dodd to the ground. The two stood and studied each other for vital seconds, then, with a nod and a 'Scuse' the Italian clambered in. Dodd, bewildered and shaken, said 'Merci, Monsieur. Bon soir' and after staring at the now closed window, was about to pick up the packs when he felt a large hand clamp onto his mouth, and was dragged to the ground. His mind was still reeling when he heard Brownlow's voice in his ear: 'Sentry! Keep still!'

The two of them lay there, motionless, for several minutes, before they heard Burgess call, just above the wind, 'All right, come on!' They looked up to see he had the wire open, and it was the work of a few seconds to pick up the packs, Brownlow collecting the fuel can he'd put aside to tackle Dodd, pass the packs through then wriggle under the wire and get back to the ditch, then the hedge, and finally the safety of the trees.

Dodd and Brownlow slowed down and stopped, waiting for Burgess to catch up, which he soon did, and they looked at each other in a long silence until Dodd said 'Right, I'll lead. I'm not sure I'm up to coping with your signals right now, Burgess.'

Burgess protested. ‘Dunno what you mean about that, Sir, but it weren’t my fault back there, was it?’

Dodd said nothing, and they set off for the hut, nerves still jangling.

There were flurries of stinging rain as they got out into the open, which caused them to instinctively walk hunched over, one shoulder down, lurching in the eddies. It seemed to take an age to get back and as they approached their base, they were glad of the protection of the trees, and even more pleased to be in the hut, as a rainy and dismal smudge of dawn showed.

They shared the story of what had happened, like children, gabbling and talking over each other to get their own perspective on the adventure across, having to raise their voices over the sound of the rain on the canvas above their heads.

Burgess recounted how astonished he’d been to see the new addition to the cast appear, explaining that Dodd shouldn’t have opened the window more than a crack until he heard Burgess’s signal, and that when the sentry appeared, the only thing he could think of was to rush from cover and try to overpower the sentry, or at least distract him, and was on the verge of making a charge when Brownlow appeared.

Dodd was saying he realised he wouldn’t hear Burgess’s signal above the wind, but he’d seen movement outside the window, and naturally believed it was Brownlow waiting for him. He didn’t realise anything was wrong until he’d been helped out of the window, and laughed as he remembered that he’d replied to the Italian in French.

Brownlow was telling them how he’d gone for a look at the parked vehicles, noting it was mostly trucks, with some field guns and one or two tanks on transporters, and was on his way back to the rendezvous when he heard the sentry

cough, and kept a wary eye on his progress along the wire. He soon realised the sentry would be arriving at the critical point just at the wrong time, but the plan seemed to cope – Dodd wouldn't move until he got the all clear signal from Burgess, who would have the sentry in plain sight. Brownlow said he was shocked to see somebody outside the window, and was wondering what to do about it when Dodd opened the window and started passing things out. He had a moment's relief when he saw the man go through the window, then remembered the sentry, and had to knock Dodd down and out of the way.

They all finished their stories more or less together, and there was a long silence as they went over it again in their minds, and the others imagined the action. Tullett broke the silence with an awe-struck 'Kin' 'ell!'

'Couldn't have put it better meself' added Kelly, and went on 'Would that can have petrol in it, Sarge, 'cause if it is, we can have some coffee and maybe a bit o' soup.'

Brownlow passed it over. 'Yep, its petrol, so from now on, we can have a hot drink and a cook up during the day. Pity there's no tea, though – I could murder a brew.'

This brought calls of agreement, and hopeful glances at Dodd, who said 'Sorry chaps, there is no tea in that hut, I'm sure of that, but I did find a little sugar, much to my surprise, and a few things to make life easier too.' He opened his pack, and displayed the utensils he'd brought back. Catching Burgess's look, he said 'I got the can openers to give your knife a bit of a rest. It's taking a lot of wear, and we'll probably be wanting it for other jobs before we're done.'

Burgess nodded. He'd been oddly disappointed when he saw the can openers, which made his knife less useful, and he was grateful for Dodd's words.

Tullett grabbed the frying pan, saying, 'Oh, lovely, fuckin' lovely! I can bin that fuckin' spade! I'll get us some fish tonight if the rain lets up, and this'll give us a nice little feed tomorrow.'

Kelly had been sorting through their cache of cans, and collected some with labels saying ‘minestra’ and ‘brodo.’ He wasn’t sure what the words meant, but he knew they indicated there was soup inside, and he used the new opener to take the lids clean off three cans. ‘You beaut, you little ripper’ he said, pouring the contents into a large can and showing the smooth edge on the smaller ones.

‘Look at these, boys. A bit of a tidy up, they’ll be good as gold for mugs, and all sorts. I reckon we’ll have a pretty comfortable time from now on.’

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

Chapter 8

The rain continued to come in squally showers all day, on and off. The wind was coming from the north east, and had a reminder of winter in it, but things were quite different this time. Before, they'd been thoroughly wet and miserable, with no useful shelter, no hot food, and no real prospect of being able to survive on their own. This time, they had shelter, at least enough to keep themselves dry, and, with petrol for the stove, and dry wood for the fire, they could make themselves a hot drink and hot food.

The first time, they'd each been cocooned in their personal misery. This time, though, they were alert enough to be aware of each other, which made it worse, in a way, and as the day drew on with the sky brightening from time to time, bringing hope that the rain had finished, followed by another cloudburst, tempers became frayed and the men started snapping at each other.

Night came on and still the rain came. Dodd thought once or twice about setting sentries, but couldn't bring himself to do anything about it. They sorted out some cans to make a kind of stew, mixing the contents of several cans together, hardly caring what was in them, but even a hot meal was not enough to cheer them. They stayed there well into the night, mostly sitting, or lying curled up, hardly able to move in the confined area under the canvas, dozing on and off, but there was not room under the shelter for everybody to lie down and sleep properly. Any involuntary movement by a drowsing man brought a snarl and a push from somebody.

In the rainless intervals, they stood and stretched, moved outside to stretch and attend to calls of nature, but each new shower brought them scampering back, with renewed grumbles, tempers ever shorter.

It wasn't until dawn when a watery light began to creep into the hut, letting them know the sky was clearing, and by then, they were all tired, shiveringly cold, stiff, a little damp here and there, and thoroughly cranky.

Dodd tried to lift spirits by starting a brew of coffee, and began to talk of breakfast. The men began to move around then, still grumbling, trying to get warm, waiting for the sun, and the coffee.

By the time the sun was up enough to warm them, Brownlow had them all outside, hanging out their rain damp clothes, and taking turns to wash and shave, then getting the inside of the hut back in order, and by late morning, they found themselves lolling about inside the hut, or strolling about outside, taking in the sun, all tasks completed.

They'd only been there ten days or so, but already they'd fallen into a routine, as people will do in the most unusual circumstances, and the rain hadn't really disturbed their afternoon custom. Each day, by lunchtime they were all washed and shaved, and any tasks long done. The afternoons were spent lazing about and yarning, but these sessions increasingly ended in argument and bickering.

And now the rain was gone, the sun was warming their backs and drying their kit but somehow, the mood of discontent still hung about them.

Dodd felt it, too, and tried to find something for them all to talk about. After a couple of attempts that sunk without trace, he asked "I say, Corporal, d'you remember the mention of nicknames the other day? I was wondering if nicknames were popular in Australia?"

Kelly, who replied with an enthusiasm that had the other men half-interestedly turned to look at him, said 'I'll say, skipper! I'd reckon most Aussies have a nickname – blokes, that is – even if it's only "digger."'

‘Digger?’ said Dodd, eager to keep the conversation going. ‘That’s popular, is it? What’s it about then?’

Kelly thought for a minute, doing his scratch the back of the head business, before replying. ‘Well bugger me boss, I dunno if I really know! It’s just, sometimes you might call a bloke “mate” you know, and sometimes you might call him “digger.” It’s prob’ly not a proper nickname, now I think of it, more just how you call someone you maybe don’t even know. Just friendly, like. Some people say it came from the rushes’ He saw perplexed faces, and explained ‘The gold rushes, started back in the eighteen fifties. You know?’

Several shakes of the head encouraged him to explain, much to Dodd’s satisfaction. The men had drawn themselves into a sprawling circle, and were at least sharing a little while without snapping at each other.

Kelly sighed a sigh that said ‘Geez. You blokes, don’t you know *anything*?’ and explained.

‘Way back in the fifties, soon after the Californian gold rush – you heard about that, I suppose? Any rate, gold was found in New South, and soon after, there were big finds in Victoria. I mean, *big*. There was coves just picking bloody great nuggets off the ground! Not even panning for it, or digging. Well, you can imagine, soon as the news got out, there was thousands of blokes just walked off their job to try their luck. Soon, all the surface stuff had been taken, and they started digging, and the government got in on it and started getting it organised. Had to, didn’t they? There was thousands of blokes walking in from all over, Thousands of ‘em, just showed up and started digging. More and more coming all the time. They reckoned in Melbourne, they couldn’t load the ships, all the dockers had gone to the rushes, but it didn’t matter, because the crews’d gone too, so the ships couldn’t leave. Same all over. There’d be bakers, tailors, all sorts, with a few tools in a wheelbarrow, or just over their shoulder, plodding along, watching out for the latest rumour about the

latest finds, some going one way, some going another. Half the time, by the time these blokes'd got to one place, a new find'd been made somewhere else, and the first blokes'd gone! So soon, there was a system of recording claims, and licensing the prospectors, and o'course, the police was soon getting a bad reputation for being heavy handed. These licences the chaps had to have, they often only lasted a week, and if the cops found you digging when your licence'd run out, they'd drag you off your claim. Some places, they didn't have lockups, jails, so they chained the poor blighters to a big log! Well, you can imagine, all this, plus the hard conditions for the prospectors, terrible food, hardly any water, hot as hell, all that, all the chaps started looking out for each other, like they were all mates, and they began to call each other "digger."

Kelly paused, then continued "Other chaps reckon it started in the Great War, what with all the trenches they had to be digging all the time. But I don't like that idea. I mean, they was all digging trenches back then, weren't they, and it was only the Aussies called each other "digger."

He nodded emphatically, to demonstrate that that was the final word on the subject.

After a minute, Dodd said "That was extremely interesting, Corporal. Very. What about other nicknames, though? Any spring to mind?"

Kelly grinned, remembering the original question. "Yair, Boss, I got meself a bit bushed there, eh? Well, red headed blokes, they often get called "Blue," stuffed if I know why. It's like they call blond blokes "Snow" or "Snowy." And bald chaps, well, they sometimes get "Curly."

Tullett snorted. "Curly!" What sort of a nickname's that! Fuckin' Curly!"

The usually imperturbable Kelly bristled. 'All right *Kinnell* – what have *you* got?"

Dodd's Army

Tullett looked at Burgess for help, but Burgess glanced away – he didn't want to know. A stony silence returned to replace the short lived easier mood.

Brownlow surveyed the scene, and turning to Dodd with a raised eyebrow, 'Fancy a bit of a stroll, Sir?' Dodd picked up on the signal and agreed.

They rose and walked across the glade in silence. Once they were in the trees and well out of earshot, Brownlow stopped and turned to Dodd. 'I think we've got a problem, Sir.'

'What, with the men being ill-tempered? It'll pass, surely. Just a reaction to what they've been through.'

'I'm not so sure about that.'

'What? Look, they've got a regular meal, hot, often as not, no serious work, except a bit of foraging every other night, and that gives them a bit of an interest. There's water nearby, no fighting, no real danger even. Looks like we'll maybe even get a bit of fresh rabbit fairly regularly. Seems to me, they're better off than a lot of soldiers. A lot better. And I dare say they're better fed than they ever were at home, some of them. I can't believe a bit of rain'll knock the stuffing out of them.'

'That's just the problem, Sir, due respect. They're getting bored. And they've got none of the usual comforts, like. Mostly, when your squaddy's resting, out of the line, he's got his snout, his tobacco that is, and his tea, and with a bit o' luck, a beer and women too. There's none of that here. And things are too easy, there's no challenge, if you get me. Even the fishing's just a case of putting the line in, and the fish commit suicide, according to Kinnell. I've been half expecting this, and the rain's just brought it to a head. Remember how they all worked together after the other downpour? They had a reason to team up. Well, this time, there's nothing to get their attention.'

Dodd walked on for a moment, then responded ‘Well, perhaps you’re right. What do you suggest?’

‘Bugged if I know, Sir. If we were back in barracks somewhere, I’d be looking to invent work for ‘em, just to keep ‘em busy, like, but I don’t see that working here, do you? We’ll have to think of something, though, or there’ll be fights breaking out soon.’

There was another pause, longer this time, before Dodd responded ‘Well, there *was* something I’ve been thinking about for a day or two. I’m just not sure’ He looked embarrassed.

‘Come on, Mr. Dodd, Sir, I’m happy to consider anything to keep ‘em active. What did you have in mind?’

‘Well, I haven’t got it clear in my own mind yet, not the details, at least. I’ll give it some more thought overnight, and we’ll talk about it again tomorrow.’

But the next morning, Dodd was gone, and so was his suitcase.

The men waited anxiously as the light got stronger, and Brownlow organised a search of the immediate area, but there was no sign of Dodd.

They sat round, discussing what could possibly have happened. If Dodd had just gone out for a piss, or to check the rabbit traps, and maybe tripped and was injured, why would he have taken his case? And why wouldn’t he have called out when they searched the area? But what other explanation could there be? He couldn’t possibly have done a runner, could he? Brownlow copped a few accusing glances, the men remembering their spat, but put their doubts into words. ‘I just don’t believe that after all this, he’d just walk away. What would he do? Where would he go? It’s just not in him to bugger off, I reckon. And why would he go now?’

Everybody found something to study intently. 'No. He wouldn't. All right, I know I was over the top the other day, but you saw him, he was OK by bedtime.'

Kelly nodded doubtfully. 'Yeah, but where's he gone then, and taken his kit with him? He had a civilian suit in that case, remember. He said he'd got relatives in Rome - perhaps he's gone to them.'

Dodd had been dithering over it for a couple of days now, but in the middle of the night he'd finally made up his mind. Things were getting bad, you could cut the atmosphere with a knife – just a wrong glance from one of the privates to another would be enough to set them off. He'd go. An hour before dawn, he waited until he heard the sentry moving about at the back of the hut, then, suitcase in hand, he picked his way among the sleeping bodies, and was gone.

He was on the edge of the forest, just by the wheat, when the darkness began to fade, and he had just enough light to change into his civilian shirt and suit. He had no tie, but that didn't matter, because the shirt had no collar. He put on the trilby and threw his uniform shirt and shorts into the case, then, checking for the fifteenth time that everything he needed was there, he set off for the road.

By the time he got to the wall by the road it was almost full light, another cloudless day coming up, and he had to almost crawl the last hundred yards in case he was seen by somebody on the road – he thought it might look a bit odd, a man in a suit with a suitcase wandering across a wheatfield. He sat against the wall for a while, getting his breath, unable to work out how to get from here onto the road without being seen. Strangely, he wasn't anywhere near panic, not like he'd been at the army camp. This time, it was very different. He was on his own, and if things went wrong, he wouldn't be putting somebody else in danger. But he was confident he could carry this off. Deciding there was nothing else for it, he

stood, and clambered over the wall. The road was empty for the moment, which Dodd accepted as a good sign, and he turned and began to walk towards the village, rehearsing his story as he went.

He began to catch up with people on the road, drifting along in ones and twos, some pushing carts, but most carrying sacks or baskets. Dodd realised he would be out of place, marching along like this, and slowed down, so he wasn't catching up any more, but happy that his supposition a week ago that the pedestrian traffic on the road meant this must be market day seemed to be correct.

His excitement increased as the buildings came into sight. He glanced behind him, and saw he was part of a thin trickle of people on the road. No turning back now, he thought, but no need, either. He was still confident, and as he followed the road round the final bend before the first houses, he had to keep himself from moving too eagerly.

It was exactly as he'd expected – he'd been in many small country towns in Italy just like this – a main road running in, forming one side of the central square, then out the other side, a few narrow side streets crammed with ancient two and three storey houses, and the cobbled *piazza del mercato*, the market square, was the centre of the town in every way. On one face, opposite the main road, there was the church - Catholic of course, massively built of the same grey stone as the hut. It was easily the biggest building in town, its wide doorway and broad flight of steps dominating the piazza, taking up, with the priest's home, the whole of one side, maybe fifty yards or more. It gave the impression that the whole square was merely a forecourt to the church, which, hundreds of years ago, was the builder's intention.

On the other sides were the lesser buildings, all in the same grey stone, the government and post offices, a bank, a scatter of shops, a trattoria and a bistro, their tables spilling

onto the square, their umbrellas donating the only splash of sun-dulled colour to an otherwise drab palette. The paint on all the woodwork was long since baked by the sun to a dull memory of its original colours, and, cracked and peeling, gave testimony that prosperity was an ancient remembrance for this place.

Scattered round the square were perhaps twenty market stalls, being stocked now by the more important traders, and between the stalls, people with less to sell were claiming a space to lay out their produce on the ground. The only thing missing was the sense of bustle that Dodd remembered – everything seemed much slower. As he walked through the square, Dodd searched the faces for the small smiles and gentle banter that he'd found so attractive in Italian small towns, but found none. Everybody seemed, well, tired.

He'd heard the stories countless times from captured soldiers, of course, but it was still a shock to see what war and Mussolini's rule had done to these people. Pinched faces and worn out clothes told of their hardships more eloquently than any prisoner of war's report.

Dodd made his way straight to the church and saw the massive doors were wide open, even at this early hour. He stopped for a moment at the foot of the steps and said a silent prayer at this final moment of decision, then strode up the steps to study a signboard outside the door. Excellent, just what he needed – the church of Santa Chiara, the town was Casagrigio, which he'd never heard of, and the priest was Father Guisepppe Verdi. Dodd smiled. It was a good sign - his favourite composer. With fresh confidence now, he moved back down the steps and walked to the house next door, certain this would be the priest's home, and at this time he'd be there. With a final deep breath, he pulled the handle at the side of the door, and heard a bell jangle faintly from deep within.

The door was soon opened by a small, thin woman, aged but still raven haired, her face a mask of lines etched into sun beaten skin. She regarded Dodd silently.

‘Good morning,’ he said, in Italian, ‘I need to speak with Father Verdi.’

The old lady folded her arms and sniffed. ‘He’s busy. Everybody knows the Father has his breakfast at this time. You’ll have to come back.’ She began to shut the door.

Dodd was nonplussed: he hadn’t expected this. ‘It’s urgent.’

‘I can’t disturb him now.’

His mind raced. He didn’t want make himself conspicuous, wandering around for half an hour – and he had no money to buy a coffee in the trattoria. ‘Wait, *signora*,’ Dodd pleaded, and, opening his suitcase, withdrew the wooden box containing the chalice. ‘Show him this. Please.’

The old lady looked at it suspiciously, as if wondering whether to refuse, then sniffed, took the box and pointedly closed the door. Dodd only had to wait a few seconds before the door was thrown open again and the priest stood there, the chalice in hand. He was tallish and straight, quite young, maybe forty, gave the impression of robust good health, and his garb was worn but spotlessly clean. The old lady obviously looked after him well.

‘Good morning, my son. Will you come in?’

‘Thank you Father, I will.’

The priest led Dodd down a narrow and dimly lit passageway to a small dining room, crowded with dark and heavy furniture and the aroma of fresh bread, where he turned and studied Dodd carefully before holding up the chalice and asking ‘Do you know what this is?’

‘I do, Father, and I assure you it is not stolen. At least, not for a long time. It has been in my family for well over a hundred years, though I confess I don’t know how we came to have it.’

Dodd's Army

The priest placed it lovingly on the table, where his half eaten breakfast lay forgotten, and they both stared at it, both unwilling to open the inevitable discussion as to the reason for Dodd's visit.

Dodd racked his brain for something to say, and finally broke the silence. 'You have a famous namesake, Father.' He realised for the first time, as he said it, that Guiseppe Verdi, translated into English, was simply Joseph Green. He smiled – it sounded so much better in Italian.

Verdi, who had been engrossed in the chalice, was startled. 'What? Oh, yes, yes. I'm not really an enthusiast though. I prefer Rossini. But the chalice...? Do you hope to sell it? If so, I must disappoint you. It's a sin to be proud, I know, but if this graced our church, we would be the envy of every town and village for a hundred kilometres. But as you can see, ours is not a wealthy community. We have little enough to pay for our needs, and nothing for non-essentials, much as I would dearly love to have this magnificent thing.'

'It is not for sale Father. It is a gift to the people of Casagrigio.'

The priest was stunned, and said nothing for a long time. Dodd saw tears forming as the priest finally managed, 'I accept, and I thank God, and you, my son, for bringing this treasure to us. May God bless you. I do not even know your name.' He looked enquiringly at Dodd, who studied a massive old sideboard against the far wall, and said nothing. 'But there must be something?'

'Yes, Father, there is. I need certain things, but I have no money.'

'Then tell me what it is that you want.'

'I need soap, to wash myself, and to wash my clothes. I need razor blades, and coffee, or better still, tea, and milk, sugar, tobacco, and'

The priest studied Dodd closely, then held up his hand. 'Wait, wait, I must speak with the Mayor.' He called for

his servant, and the old lady appeared suspiciously quickly. 'My son, will you have some breakfast?'

Dodd nodded. The priest asked the old woman to prepare something for him, and, indicating a chair at the table for Dodd, he gathered up the chalice and left the room.

The old servant returned after a while, with a tray laden with crusty bread, fresh, but the hard bake of the Italian peasant, a shallow dish of olive oil, a length of sausage, heady with garlic, a small pot of coffee, and a glass of red wine. Dodd sat and began to attack the meal with gusto, tearing bits of bread and dipping them into the oil before slowly chewing, savouring each moment, adding a bite of sausage, a sip of wine, a sip of coffee, the smells and tastes taking him back to a sunlit balcony overlooking the roofs of Rome, the river glittering in the distance.

The old lady stood and watched distrustfully, as if this whole thing was an elaborate ruse to trick the priest into giving this stranger a free breakfast.

Dodd was wondering if he'd ever see that Roman vista again, when the priest returned. 'My son, I have spoken with the Mayor and the elders of Casagrigio. You are welcome to whatever we have, though perhaps some of the things you want are not possible. There has been no toilet soap for a long time, and razor blades, well...' He stroked his chin and shrugged. 'But come and see for yourself, if you've finished eating.'

As they walked around the shops and market, they were preceded by news of the gift. The housekeeper obviously had a very efficient network, and among the old ladies of the town, who took a close interest in these matters, there were few secrets about the priest's affairs. An ever growing crowd attentively watched Dodd's every move, smiling for him now, but still cautious. He began to realise how hard life must have become for these people. In the few shops, the shelves were

more empty than not, and the pathetic little collections of second hand household goods on offer from the people between the stalls spoke eloquently about the poverty that lay over the country. Only the shops and stalls selling local farm produce had anything Dodd might be able to use.

As they walked, Dodd turned to the priest, on the edge of tears, realising his mission had failed. 'I can't take anything from these people. They have little enough already.'

Father Verdi stopped and faced Dodd squarely. 'Then we cannot accept the chalice. We may not have much, but we still have our pride, and an important gift such as you have offered demands a gift in return. Now, tell me again what you are looking for, and I will find out if we can help. Be assured, my son, whoever gives something for you will be compensated.' He scrabbled around under his cassock and found a scrap of paper and the stub of an old pencil. 'Now, tell me again.'

But they were interrupted by a call from a middle aged woman who stood behind a cloth on which sat her entire stock, about ten eggs. 'Hey, mister, take these eggs. They're fresh. Look, there's still bits of feathers on them.'

The woman was a genius - it had occurred to her that she'd be better off giving all her goods to the stranger and getting paid by the town, rather than hanging about half the day, and maybe not selling any.

As the two men moved towards her, others began to realise what she was thinking, and to their surprise, the two men were soon surrounded three deep by traders trying to press their stock on Dodd. Most of it was utterly useless to him: what could he do with a dusty bolt of suiting cloth, or a gramophone?

Dodd had accepted several gifts of local produce, and was beginning to find it hard to move among the press of people around him, but suddenly, like the parting of the seas, the crowd fell away, and Dodd found himself almost face to

face with a grizzled and unkempt old man, whose stock in trade was a small pile of rabbits. The old man silently studied Dodd's face, one eyebrow lifted. Dodd managed what he'd hoped was an expression of pleased surprise, and made a show of selecting a pair.

When they had been right round the shops and the market, Father Verdi asked again what Dodd wanted that they hadn't found, and was given a list including soap, toothpaste, razor blades, sugar and, against all likelihood, tea. Verdi said that the townspeople would do what they could to find what he wanted, and it was agreed that Dodd would call on him at the same time the next week. As he turned to go, the lieutenant faced the priest and offered his hand, which Verdi took and held. Dodd, his voice a little cracked, said 'I can't tell you how grateful I am.' And Verdi, still firmly clasping Dodd's hand replied 'No, it is we who are grateful to you, for the magnificent gift. Among all the hardships of life, sometimes something happens to renew one's faith in men. Will I hear your confession before you go?'

Dodd hesitated. Admitting he wasn't a Roman Catholic was almost an admission that he was a foreigner, but he found he couldn't deceive this man. 'I am a believer, Father, but not of your faith.'

Verdi looked at him long and hard before saying: 'Go with God, my son. And I'll have your breakfast waiting for you next week.'

Soon, Dodd found himself walking back along the almost deserted road, his suitcase, now heavy, in one hand, a sack half full of bread in the other, and the rabbits, tied together with a string, round his neck, like a stole.

It was almost noon now, and the mood at the hut was of deep depression. The men had fallen restlessly silent long ago, unable to understand what had happened, or what to do. The

sergeant, incapable of sitting still, had spent the morning going to the edge of the trees, scanning the landscape in the hope of seeing the familiar figure coming back through the wheat, then hurrying back in case he'd somehow missed him.

Each time he came back, Brownlow imagined he could see mounting accusation in the eyes of the men who studied his face for news, but he could see hope had almost faded now.

'Look,' he barked, 'he'll be back, all right? I dunno what the silly daft bastard's up to, but I *do* know he wouldn't just go wandering off and leave us. There'll be a good reason for him going – I just wish he'd told us before he went.'

With that, he strode off again across the clearing.

This time, when he got to the edge of the trees, he saw movement at the edge of the wheat way off to his right, and for a moment, thought it must be Dodd, but when he looked more closely, he saw it was just a local peasant, an old man, judging by the way he was trudging, bent under the weight of a sack over his shoulders, and anyway, he was heading away from Brownlow. There was something wrong about the old fellow though, and Brownlow kept watching him, as he plodded towards the trees half a mile north of where the sergeant stood.

Suddenly, Brownlow twigged! He was carrying a suitcase as well as his sack! What were the chances of somebody else walking about round here with a suitcase? Either it was Dodd, or he'd stolen it from him! But if it was Dodd, why was he going way up there?

Brownlow kept the old man in sight while he moved along the edge of the trees to intersect his path, steadily closing in on him, and as soon as he got into the trees, Brownlow was on him from behind, grabbing him and spinning him round, but the speed of the attack set the man off balance, throwing him and his burdens to the ground.

‘Thank heavens you’re here, Sergeant. I’m about done in.’ Dodd smiled up at the big man.

Brownlow laughed. ‘Bloody hell, Sir. I don’t know whether to give you a kiss or a kick up the arse! The boys’ll be relieved you’re back, but blimey, you’ve given us a right old wassname. Where’ve you been? Why didn’t you tell us where you were going?’ He laughed again. ‘I sound like a little kids mum, don’t I?’

Dodd smiled back. ‘I really didn’t want to be a worry to you, but I thought if I told you what I was going to do, you’d try to argue. Let’s get back to the hut before I explain, so I don’t have to go through it all again for the chaps, so if you don’t mind taking the case?’

Brownlow reached for the case and grunted as he hefted it. ‘Blimey, Sir, what you got in ‘ere? No wonder you were staggerin’. But why were you coming up here? You were goin’ well out of your way, you know.’

‘Yes, I know. But as soon as I got off the road, I had a problem. I couldn’t just stand by the side of the road and change into uniform, could I, and this suit would stand out a mile in the wheat if anyone was about. So the only thing I could think of was to make it seem I was going somewhere else, if I was being watched. My plan was to double back when I got to the trees, but you came along before I turned. Now, lead on, Sergeant. I’m ready for my lunch.’

As they appeared at the far edge of the clearing, there was a shout from the men sitting outside the hut, and all five of them tore across and surrounded Dodd, treating him like a returning hero, taking his sack, slapping him on the back, laughing like children, demanding to know where he’d been, what he had in the sack and the case.

Brownlow took charge, ‘Come on, boys, make way. Give him a bit of room, and somebody start a bit of food going.’

The stuff Dodd had brought back was all carefully stowed away, ready for a feast that evening, all except the coarse tobacco, which the smokers, Tullett, Green and Watson, had pounced on greedily, and sampled straight away.

There was a small pile of bacon, the sackful of hard bread, the two rabbits, a packet of salt and another of brown sugar. Most of the men hadn't seen brown sugar before, but were very happy to give it a try. It was different with the small mound of local sausages, shiny, hard and almost black. They were regarded with deep suspicion by the men, who reckoned they knew about sausages – they were pale pink and flabby, and you fried them up. There was a wine bottle full of milk and the eggs that had started the cascade were given a place of special reverence: the men hadn't seen real eggs for a long time.

Dodd was coming to the end of his description of his adventure, after having to describe every detail.

‘...and the next thing I knew, some oaf grabbed me from behind and threw me to the ground! I don't know – I go off on a dangerous mission into enemy territory just to get you chaps a bit of something nice to eat, and that's all the thanks I get!

‘But I've brought something more valuable than bacon, or even eggs. News! Sicily has been cleared, but apparently we couldn't stop thousands of Germans escaping into Italy, and taking most of their equipment with them. On the other hand, it seems the people of Sicily were quite happy with the Allies being there, gave them fruit and wine, which bears out what I'd heard – a lot of the locals prefer our lot to the Fascists and the Germans. So the news is a bit mixed, but if our lot are going to attack Italy, maybe it won't be too long.

‘Now, what else? Oh, yes, big news! Mussolini's gone! Been sacked! Apparently, the populace loved that, celebrated even, but then they got the news that Rome's being

bombed, so that brought them back to earth. I think they feel they can see the beginning of the end, but they've realised that there's going to be a lot more trouble before it's all over.

'Speaking of which, if you'd seen the stuff on offer at the market, you'd feel really sorry for these people. You know, the ordinary folk didn't want to be in this war, there's been nothing in it for them except hardship. And almost all the soldiers are conscripts, who don't want to be there either. Did I mention that when we attacked Pantelleria, that's an Italian held island South of Sicily, the garrison, over twelve thousand of them, gave up without a shot being fired? Anyway, no more of that, today. We'll have a nice afternoon, and the Sergeant and I will cook dinner, won't we, Sergeant?'

Brownlow nodded. 'Lovely. Just one thing, Sir. Did you find out where we are?'

'Well, yes, of course. That was one of the main reasons for going. The town, it's too big to be a village, is called Casagrigio.'

'Right. Where's that, then? Are we far from Sicily?'

Dodd looked away, and smiled sheepishly. 'I've never heard of the place, so I have no idea!'

Chapter 9

Late afternoon the next day, the lieutenant and the sergeant were sitting with their backs to the wall of the hut, watching the others playing football, now the heat had gone from the sun, using a piece of canvas bound into an approximate sphere.

Dodd turned to Brownlow: 'There we are, Sergeant. You saw how the men enjoyed their fry-up last night, and now look at them. They're happy as can be.'

Brownlow bit his lip. 'For the moment, Sir, I'll grant you. We shouldn't even be lettin' 'em fool about like this, by rights - they might be seen, or heard. Any rate, if I've learnt anything about your average squaddie in all my time, there's trouble brewing, so lettin' 'em burn off a bit of energy'll put it off, for a while, at any rate.'

'Had those stripes a long time, have you?'

'Yes, Sir. Proud of 'em too, I am. Joined up in 1919 as a boy soldier - God, makes me seem old don't it - and worked my way up. Getting a promotion was hard between the wars, when they were makin' the army smaller and smaller. Bloody madness, o' course. It was obvious there was another war brewing - Churchill was right about that wasn't he? Any rate, I've been a sergeant for six years now. I was hoping to get to CSM or even RSM before I turned it in, but I dunno now. Not much chance of that if we get captured, is there?'

'What made you sign up? Family tradition, or something?'

'No, nothing like that. There weren't much work about when I left school, what with the soldiers coming home after the Great War, and o' course, there was a lot of women working in the war, and liked it, and wanted to stay on. So the only work a lot of us kids could get was 'orrible work, for

shocking bad pay. A couple of my mates went in the merchant, that's on the ships, like, but I didn't fancy that at all, and I put me name down for a soldier. When we heard I'd got in, it was like I'd won the Grand National! Regular pay, all found, steady employment – my mum was the envy of the neighbourhood!'

Brownlow went quiet for half a minute, and Dodd, his interrogation skills coming into play, let the silence hang.

'Times were hard for a long time, as you'd know, Sir, through the Depression and that, but not for me, meself - we soldiers always knew we would get a feed. And clothes, and a bed. Anyway, I got me first stripe by and by, and I could help out a bit at home, with a bit of cash, like. A few bob could make a big difference in them days.'

He paused again. 'I've enjoyed it too, mostly. Bit of action here and there, but mostly just, you know Moved about quite a bit too. I've seen places my old Dad would have never heard of.'

'Did you take Mrs. Brownlow on your travels?'

'My mum? Christ no! Oh, you mean my wife? There isn't a Mrs Brownlow. Didn't get round to it, somehow, and it's no life, being a regular soldiers wife. What about you, Sir? You married? Oh yes, that's right, and two daughters too.'

'Yes, I miss them terribly, you know.'

Dodd looked away for a moment, recognising the white lie – he'd been so immersed in this astounding escapade, so utterly different to his previous years, he'd been finding it hard to believe how his life used to be. But having started, and wanting somehow to stay connected with Brownlow, he pressed on.

'I often imagine them all, back in Oxford, just going about their daily routines, you know, my wife shopping, doing the housework, what the girls are up to in their new military roles, wondering if they think of me. I can picture them so clearly'

Dodd's Army

It was Dodd's turn to pause, and Brownlow began to feel uneasy, wondering if Dodd was going to get all teary, but Dodd was reflecting on the fact that he'd hardly given his family a thought for several days.

Jerking himself away from these thoughts, he nodded over to where the home made ball was being steadily kicked to ribbons, suddenly conscious that really, the chaps were nothing more than boys – just boys fooling around.

'Have a look at young Burgess there. Everything about being here's a tremendous game to him. This is the most exciting time of his life, and do you know, I know exactly how he feels, because if I'm honest, I feel the same way. I love my family, and my civilian life, but I wouldn't be anywhere else but right here, right now. I was just thinking last night, that I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life. And I feel I'm doing something useful for the chaps. Seems disloyal to my family, somehow, but there it is. And speaking of last night, I thought I heard aircraft overhead. Did you hear anything?'

It was Brownlow's turn to ponder. 'Now you mention it, I *have* been hearing planes, and not just last night, either. What do you make of it, Sir?'

'Well, I'm not sure we can say anything for sure. The aircraft might be ours bombing them or theirs bombing us, and look, lets discuss it with the men. It might at least give them something to occupy their minds.'

'All right, Sir, but let 'em finish their game first, eh?'

After a while, the game broke down into argument and shirt pulling. Brownlow had expected the moment and, with a knowing look at Dodd, called the game off before punches were thrown. He called the men together and got them sitting in a half circle round Dodd, who addressed them.

'We were just talking about having heard air activity last night. Anybody else heard anything?'

Burgess put his hand up like a schoolboy and said, 'Yeah, Sir, while I was waitin' for you the other night, there was definitely planes goin' over, and one time I thought I heard that sort of clanking noise from a train, as well. Couldn't swear to it though, it was getting' windy then.'

Green nudged him. 'Yeah, I bet you were as well, eh?'

Burgess looked at Green for a moment before he understood, and replied. 'I ain't noticed you volunteering to go to the camp, mate.'

It looked for a second as if this sniping might turn into something nasty, and Brownlow looked at Dodd and raised his eyebrows slightly, but Tullett had been thinking, and broke in 'I been hearing planes an' all, when I been fishin', like. More often 'n not, I'd say. Didn't really, you know, think about it 'til now though.'

Dodd was interested in Tullett's news. 'Now listen Tullett, this could be important. Can you remember which way they were going?'

'Oh, yeah, that's pretty easy. There's always one lot comin' from towards the army camp, that would be, what, about south, then later on, another lot goin' the other way. Far off though, usually.'

Dodd was leaning forward, really taking notice now. 'What? You're sure about that?'

'Yeah, well, pretty sure – I weren't really takin' that much notice, was I? Does it matter, Sir?'

'Don't know. Let's see if we can figure anything out. If we assume that the second lot you heard was actually the first lot going home, they would have to be ours, attacking targets to our north, wouldn't it? Which means what? The news from the town was that Rome has been bombed, so we shouldn't be surprised, but if they're flying from fields in Sicily to bomb Rome, they'd be well out of range of us, wouldn't they?'

Dodd thought for a moment, while the others waited quietly, hoping for another performance like he'd put on before, thinking out loud, but including them in his thoughts.

'So, you might say it's good news for us, that the bombing, assuming it *is* bombing, is the RAF attacking enemy targets in preparation for an assault. Now, what targets do bombers go for? Sometimes it's what they call strategic targets, like munitions factories or power stations, but the results of that sort of action take a long time to flow through. Take bombing Rome: the idea will be to weaken the Italians resolve to continue the war, but it won't help us at all. If they're only going for that sort of target, it might be very bad for us - it might mean they're not looking at invading soon. Where are we now, towards the end of August? Winter's not too far away, and we're in no condition to get by in cold weather. We're pretty uncomfortable in the rain, never mind ice and snow. And by then, there'll be nothing in the fields for us to eat. We couldn't possibly store enough to see us through. No, I don't see how we could survive through winter.'

Dodd moved his back, trying to find a more comfortable bit of wall to rest it on. 'But on the bright side, they might also be going for tactical targets – apart from enemy troops and equipment, that would be roads, railways, bridges, that sort of thing – to make it harder to move reinforcements up, and stop enemy formations from escaping. That would be much better for us, because it would suggest they're looking at a landing. Trouble is, everything's open to interpretation. Even if they are bombing bridges, it may be a cover plan to convince Jerry that we're going to assault, so he keeps lots of troops here, while we attack somewhere else entirely.

'You know, I'd like to know if there's much railway traffic using that line we found, and what's being moved on it. And the same for the road. What's moving, how much of it, in what direction? And the camp – is traffic in and out on the

increase? Does everything stop there, or does it mainly go straight through?’

There was a short silence, broken by Watson, who asked ‘How would knowing that help, Sir?’

‘To be honest, I’m not sure, but you can never have too much information, and it may turn out to be vital for us. Remember, if they do invade, we’re going to have to decide whether to dig in and hide or scarper. So I think we’ll have to do some more patrols, check the road and rail traffic, eh?’

Brownlow nodded appreciatively at Dodd and thought ‘Yes, and it’ll give you buggers something to do, as well’ but said ‘Right then, Mr Dodd, Sir. We’ll get onto that tonight, eh? A couple of men can go out to the railway and spend a bit of time seeing what’s what, and pick up some fruit on the way back, and another pair can do the same at the road, and get spuds and that as well. Who’s been to the railway? You, Watson? All right, you’re with me. Corporal, take Green and monitor the road. Kinnell, you’re going fishing, right? That leaves Mr. Dodd and Burgess to look after the hut, OK Sir?’

Dodd was well used to this by now, and simply replied ‘Very well, Sergeant. Now, Watson, it’s our turn to get supper ready, eh?’

Dodd and Watson fiddled about, preparing the evening meal, which, confusingly, Dodd called supper, Brownlow and Watson called dinner, and the rest called tea.

There wasn’t usually much skill involved – mostly opening cans and heating the contents or boiling vegetables or pasta – but there was often fish to fry or bake, though the occasional rabbit was left strictly to Kelly. But there was the fire to tend, and pots to stir, and the men on cooking duty knew they’d get a rollicking if the food was badly prepared, so they needed to stay by the fire.

Dodd's Army

Dodd and Watson had the hut to themselves, as they crouched, fussing over the pots of heating food, stirring here, adding a little wood to the fire there.

Dodd broke the companionable silence. 'So, young Watson, I'm pretty sure your accent didn't come from the local government school?'

'No, Sir, that's right. I went to Burnetts. I don't suppose you've heard of it?'

'Indeed I have. Well regarded public school in, let's see, Ipswich, isn't it?'

'I'm most impressed, Sir, but Norwich, actually.'

'Oh, yes, Norwich, so it is. Yes, I've had a good number of students from Burnetts over the years.' Dodd paused, a little awkward, and stirred his can of minced beef. 'So, tell me, how is it that you're a private soldier? You'd have been a' He searched for an expression he'd heard Burgess use the other day, 'a racing certainty for a place at an Officer Training Unit.'

Watson rose, saying nothing, and walked to the doorway, where he stood, staring out for quite some time before, with a minute nod to himself, he turned back to Dodd.

'I've never spoken to anyone about this before, but I'll tell you, Sir, if you'll agree that it's our little secret.'

Dodd nodded. 'As you wish. But don't feel you have to tell me.'

'No, actually, Sir, I'd rather, now I've got the opportunity. It's been haunting me a long time. Maybe talking about it will help.'

He returned to the cooking, bent down and added a few sticks to the fire before starting.

'My dad was in the Great War, like most of his generation. They all joined up in their thousands, you know, anxious not to miss the great adventure, but of course, it was no great adventure in the mud and the trenches, they soon learned that.'

‘Well, so my mother told me, he was so proud to be serving King and Country, as the expression was, especially when he was commissioned a lieutenant, and quite soon found himself promoted a captain, with his own infantry company. Mother thought he was promoted because he was such a good soldier, but of course, looking back, one can see the terrible losses among junior officers meant any young subaltern who was lucky enough to stay alive would get rapid promotion.

‘I dare say you know about the Somme?’

Dodd, gazing into the flames, nodded without speaking.

‘Well, It seems – I say it seems, because Dad never spoke of it to me, so I got the story at second hand, as it were, from Mother – it seems his company found itself in the trenches on the Somme, along with seven hundred and fifty thousand other soldiers of the BEF. Haig had ordered the greatest artillery bombardment ever known, to prepare the way for the infantry attack. Eight days of shelling! Can you imagine it? Eight days! The idea was that after that, the Germans would be in no state to put up any defence at all, but as we now know, the bombardment was pretty much useless. Didn’t even destroy the barbed wire, let alone the gun emplacements, and the jerries just sat in their hidey holes ‘til it stopped.

‘Well, in Dad’s bit of the front, the artillery stopped at the right time, and at first light, first of July 1916, that was, the captain of the lead company blew his whistle, and his men clambered over the parapet to charge the enemy trenches, expecting to encounter little or no opposition, but the Germans were ready and waiting with their machine guns. The whole company was cut down before they’d got twenty yards.

‘Now, according to the plan, the next company was due to follow in three minutes, and sure enough, even though they’d seen what had just happened to the first lot, at the tick

of the three minutes, their captain led them over the top. Well, the inevitable happened, the machine guns swept through them again, and again, they were cut down to a man.

'There was supposed to be a lull on their bit of the front until it was Dad's company's turn, and as they waited, the captain from the next company along came to Dad and said it was just a ridiculous waste to send more men to their deaths, and he was sending a message to the major explaining it was impossible, and asking for new orders. The major sent back that there was to be no change in the plan, and they were to attack at the set time. The other captain asked Dad to join him in refusing. He said that if they stuck together, the major would see sense.

'Dad was shocked, apparently. It had never, ever, crossed his mind that it was even possible to refuse an order, and he told the other captain that he'd be sticking to the plan. That put the other chap in an impossible position: if the whole formation stayed put, it would be one thing, but if only he refused to go, well that would be quite another. At any rate, when the appointed time came, Dad jumped up and led his chaps out, and the other company went too.

'Result was inevitable, of course. Just like their predecessors, they were decimated before they'd got half way to the enemy trenches. Of the whole lot, three companies in Dad's sector, and another three next door, over seven hundred men, less than fifty survived, all of them with terrible wounds.'

A stray flurry of wind flared the fire and sent sparks dancing, but both men were too engrossed to notice.

'Dad, obviously, was a survivor, just barely. He'd been hit several times, and was in hospital for the next two years, more or less, and never fit for active service again, or anything else, really. He never made anything of his wounds, of course. Never complained, though apparently he was in constant pain.

‘It wasn’t until well after the war, that, well, I suppose going over the memory of the Somme again and again began to get too much for him, and, well, not to put too fine a point on it, he took to the bottle. Not all the time, it seems – I don’t remember this, of course, I was just a little chap – but sometimes, he’d come home drunk, and keep drinking. Mother told me how he kept having nightmares about that time in the trenches, and drank to help him forget. Mother was terribly loyal, you know. She wouldn’t hear a word against him, but it must have been torment for her.

‘Gradually, over the years, the episodes got worse, and as I grew up a bit, I can recall being really, really scared of him sometimes, when he was having one of his turns. Most of the time he was all right, almost normal, but when he got into one of these turns, he was in a shocking state. Mother was marvellous. She’d usually be able to comfort him, calm him down enough so he’d at least sleep it off. But when she couldn’t, it was frightening, I don’t mind telling you. He’d start an argument with himself, the same one over and over again. First, he’d be himself, arguing that he’d been right to follow orders, he’d had no option, that sort of thing. Then, he’d argue against that, be the other officer, I suppose, saying what a waste of fine young men it was, not just Dad’s men, but his own as well, blaming Dad for the deaths of the other company too, because if Dad sent his men, the others would have to go as well.

‘I was old enough to realise what was going on by then, about 12, I suppose, and Mother couldn’t always shield me. God, it was awful to see him, tearing himself apart like that. His health, what was left of it, was gone by then, of course. I can still see the poor old devil, slumped in his armchair, grey, a bag of bones by then, his eyes staring around, yelling and shouting first about how he’d done the honourable thing, the only thing, then cackling, yelling about what was honour compared with all the lives he’d thrown

away, that he could have saved by simply refusing to blow his whistle.'

Watson stopped for a while then, staring into his pot of stew, as though it was some sort of crystal ball, showing him the images he was seeing in his mind's eye. Then, with a small shudder, he gave the heating food a violent stirring, and continued.

'As time went on, and it became obvious that another war was inevitable, he became more and more agitated, not making sense half the time, and it was clear we couldn't keep him at home much longer. One day, he was out of control by lunchtime, the yelling and shouting going on and on, and Mother couldn't do anything with him. She called the doctor, who gave him a sedative, got him settled, and Mother finally agreed he'd have to go into care. The doctor said he'd arrange it.

'Next morning, Dad woke right as rain for once, and calling for me. I went and sat by his bed, and we chatted for a while. Then he said he knew there was another war coming, and he knew I'd be going. He said he had only one thing to say about that, and that was, whatever else I did, I should avoid being an officer. He had hold of my hand, I don't know where he found the strength to grip it that hard, and pulled himself up, and put his other hand on my shoulder. 'Promise me, Monty,' he said, 'promise me you won't end up in the position I was in. It's impossible. So promise me, you won't be an officer.'

Watson stood then, and looked down at Dodd through haunted eyes. 'What could I say, Mr. Dodd? What else could I do? I made that promise, and I'll keep it.'

Dodd rose too, looked squarely into Watson's face, and nodded. The moment hung for several seconds as the two men stood motionless, looking at each other, before, as though at a signal, they both remembered the food and returned to their stirring and prodding.

After a while, Dodd, the seasoned interrogator, used to spotting small things, looked up and asked, ‘You said your father called you Monty?’

Watson stirred uneasily and kept his eyes on his cooking, but answered, ‘Yes, well, can you imagine a private called Montague Watson-Wyatt? That’s my full surname, Watson-Wyatt. Especially with my accent? No, Bill Watson will do me. As a squaddie, I mean. All a bit too lah-di-dah, otherwise. Much less piss-taking all round, I’d think, wouldn’t you?’

He looked up then, and said ‘Ready, I think. I’ll get the boys, eh?’

But Dodd replied ‘No. Just a minute. I’m glad you shared your story with me, and now there’s something I’d like to tell you, if that’s all right?’

‘Of course, Sir, by all means.’

‘It’s not something I’m particularly proud of, having known you chaps.’

He paused, as though wondering where to begin. ‘You remember the chalice? The goblet?’

‘Of course.’

‘Did you stop to wonder what on earth I was doing lugging it around with me?’

‘Not really Sir. After you showing us your bone china cup and saucer, and your civilian suit, I don’t think anything else came as a surprise. But, now you mention it?’

‘When I was, well, *invited* to join up, I did so out of a sense of duty, a sense that my skills would be a help, but I hated the idea of actually going away. I suppose I imagined at first that I’d somehow be able to stay at home, and they’d bring the people to me to interrogate, and when they pointed out it was the other way round, that I’d be going to where the prisoners were, I was horrified!’

‘You have to remember I’d always lived a very sheltered life, mostly in a university, among educated people,

the intelligentsia, if you like, in what I suppose you'd have to say were very comfortable surroundings, and now, suddenly, North Africa! The dark continent! The heat, the flies, insects, away from my family, having to live in primitive conditions, with a lot of uncouth soldiers! I couldn't imagine anything worse! Kitty, Clara, my wife, you know, realised how I felt, and she suggested I take something with me to remind me of my real existence, give me a sense of connection with it. Brilliant idea, of course. Exceptional. I chose the chalice, because it had pride of place in our drawing room, and I thought that whenever I was feeling particularly badly off, having to dwell among the hoi polloi, I could look at it, and picture one of our afternoon teas. They were considered pretty racy, you know! All sorts were invited – well, all sorts from the university, and you could be sure of an entertaining afternoon's argument!

It was Dodd's turn to stand now, and he smiled, embarrassed. 'Listen to me, will you! I sound so pretentious, don't I? But that's the way I was then. Not two years ago!'

He shook his head in amazement.

'If anybody had suggested then that in less than two years, I'd be squatting in an abandoned hut in rural Italy, cooking stolen vegetables for a group of soldiers, well, I can't think what I'd have replied. And what's more, if that person had suggested I'd come to admire those men, and hope that they had regard for me, I'd have said they were barking mad!

'So, there it is. I carried the chalice as a sort of talisman, to keep me safe against the awful people I'd be mixing with. What a terrible misjudgement, based on nothing more than ignorance and prejudice. As I said, I'm not proud of it, but I feel better for having told you.'

Watson looked away for a few seconds, then said 'Well, Sir, I can put your mind at rest about one thing – the boys and I, well, we think very highly of you, too. We're all very proud to be with you.'

Once again, the two men stood for long seconds, looking at each other and saying nothing, until, unable to speak, Dodd nodded, the spell broke and embarrassed, they both moved towards the door to call the others for their meal.

It was early to go out, only just on dark, but this was different to their previous missions, and they wanted to be out as long as they could to observe, and the two pairs slid off into the trees soon after eight.

The next thing Dodd knew after he'd finished his turn as sentry was being roughly shaken awake by Burgess, shouting 'Sir, Sir, wake up, for Christs sake. Wake *up*, will you?'

Dodd had not learned the soldiers knack of being instantly awake, and was still silent and a bit groggy when Burgess said 'Sir, there was an explosion! Like a bomb or somethin'!'

That got Dodd's attention. 'What? Where?'

Burgess pointed 'Towards the sea-side, Sir.'

'What, just one explosion?'

'Yes, just the one.'

Dodd thought for a second. 'Well, I don't think it'll be a bomb, then. More likely a, oh, my Lord, it'll be a mine! Tullett was going fishing! Oh God, he's stepped on a mine! Come on.'

It seemed to take an eternity crashing madly through the timber to the end of the fence – it was really dark under the canopy of leaves - but eventually, the trees began to thin and the light got better. By the time they'd blundered their way to the crossing point, fifteen agonizing minutes had gone by.

The sky was clear – there was only a sliver of moon, but they had their night vision now, and they had that eerie but adequate light you get on a beach at night. Dodd scanned the

beach carefully, from the headland to their left, right round to the far headland. Nothing. The landscape lay silent and indifferent, the only movement the small and sleepy waves, fifty yards away, giving no clue to what had happened, and where Tullett was.

They stood there, unspeaking, for some time, looking for some sign. Finally, Dodd pulled himself together and said 'Right. You search down that way, and I'll go towards the cliffs. No, wait, get back in the trees' and he pointed back over the fields, where distant lights were flashing, now disappearing, now sending beams into the sky.

They crept back to concealment and watched as the lights came closer, and they realised they were the headlights of vehicles moving towards the beach. Within a few minutes, two trucks had reached the edge of the sand, and a dozen or more soldiers spilled out. They were close enough to hear orders being shouted and Dodd translated for Burgess.

'They're searching for whoever who set off the mine. The officer's saying whoever did it must be badly injured and can't have gone far. They're to spread out and search the scrub and the trees. He says they're not to shoot without warning: he wants the man captured if possible. He's saying to remember he'll be a local and he doesn't want an uprising just for a *contrabbandiere*. Oh, he thinks they're searching for a smuggler!'

The soldiers were spreading out now, getting closer. 'There's nothing we can do now, we'd better get out quick, and hope they don't search as far in as the hut. Come on, we'd better get back and warn the others. Oh, Lord, our people're spread out all over the place. We can't even warn them to keep out of the way.'

Badly shaken, they set off back to the hut, carefully this time, and went past it into the far trees, where they spent the rest of the night waiting hopefully for the return of their patrols, and fearfully for the Italians.

They were all back now, all but Tullett. As soon as he took in the situation, Brownlow said they had to know what was going on, and slipped away towards the fence line. He was gone a long time, and it was daylight when he returned. 'All right, they've packed up. I saw them getting back in the trucks. Didn't see 'em with a stretcher or anything, though.'

Burgess, hopping with anxiety for his friend from boyhood, blurted 'So let's go. What do you reckon, Sir?'

'Go? Go where? What do you mean?'

'To look for 'im, Sir. If the Eye-ties didn't find 'im, 'e must still be out there, mustn't 'e? 'e'll be hidin' somewhere, waitin' for us. Prob'ly injured, too, so we should 'urry up.'

Dodd reflected, then replied 'I really don't know what to make of it. If Tullett was able to move, surely he'd have made for the hut. But if he'd only just got into the trees, the Italians would have found him, wouldn't they? It was dark, though, so maybe he did manage to hide. The only thing I'm sure of is that we had enough light to see he wasn't on the beach. It seems to me the only possibilities are the Italians *have* got him, but whether he's alive, we don't know, or he's hidden somewhere, so yes, we should make a search of the area from here to the beach, now – he might be badly injured, but alive.'

Watson voiced the question in several minds. 'Sir, if he stepped on a land mine, he'd be dead, wouldn't he? Blown to bits, I'd have thought.'

Brownlow responded 'Not likely, no. There's all sorts of land mines. The big bastards, the anti-vehicle or anti-tank mines, well, they make a hell of a mess, but a man stepping on one prob'ly wouldn't set it off. That's the way they're designed, see, you don't want to waste a big mine on a soldier. The small ones, what they call anti-personnel, there's all sorts of them. That's the worst thing about mines. Some of 'em are a right bastard, designed to have the main blast go outwards,

so if one bloke stands on it, the blast'll knock over the men around him. They'll still do plenty of damage to the chap on top of it though, but like smashing a foot, or takin' it off, even, but not blowin' a man to tiny bits. But it's hard to mine a beach effectively. You really want to put your mines in solid ground, so the blast has nowhere to go but up, but in sand or mud, say, a lot of the blast gets wasted throwing the ground about, without necessarily doing a lot of damage. Mind, I still reckon they're the most horrible weapons there are.'

Brownlow saw the men were looking sceptical.

'What other weapon is there specially designed to injure people, rather than kill 'em? What twisted bastard thought that up? D'you know why? Because if you kill an enemy soldier, well, that's one less you have to fight, but if you injure him, they have to look after him, transport, and hospital, and that. It uses up much more of the other sides resources, to look after him, see? Bastard things. And think about this: if you're a soldier going through a minefield, you might see other soldiers getting blown up and killed. Very frightening, but you've been trained for it. Now, suppose your mates have not been killed, but are rolling around, bits blown off 'em, screaming and yelling. It'd take a bloody hard man to keep going then, wouldn't it? And by the way, there's millions of the bastards'll still be sitting there in fifty years, just waitin' for some kid to step on 'em. Bastards.'

He remembered where he was. 'Look, just believe me. If Tullett's stood on a mine, he's more'n likely alive, all right, but p'raps in a hell of a mess. Now, we've wasted enough time, let's get on with it. Grab a bit of fruit or something, and we'll go.'

By midday, they had to accept defeat, that the Italian soldiers must have found Tullett after all. They'd systematically criss-crossed the whole area that Tullett might conceivably have been in, carefully checking every possible hiding place,

including the rocks of the headland, without a sign of him, or his having been there. It was a mystery, the only answer being that he was in custody.

Burgess was distraught. Dodd attempted to console him. 'Well, we were thorough. He's not here, so the Italians must have him, and if he's alive but injured, that's the best place for him, isn't it?'

Burgess brightened a little. 'Yeah, I s'pose you're right. 'e'll be alive all right – 'e's the toughest little bastard I ever seen. When we was kids, 'e got 'imself in all sorts of scrapes, there was always bandages on 'im somewhere, so it'd take more than a shitty fuckin' Eyetie fuckin' mine to finish the little bastard.'

Kelly had a thought. 'D'you reckon we ought to move, boss?'

Dodd replied 'Yes, I know what you're thinking, Corporal, that Tullett might let on that we're here. They'll obviously be wanting to know what he was doing here, but, from what I've seen of him, he won't be letting on about us.'

Burgess sprang to his mate's defence. 'Bloody right. He'll tell them fuck all, and if he did, it'd be bollocks.'

Brownlow chipped in. 'In any case, where would we go? We know there's nothing much for miles outside the forest. At least we know that here, we can get by, but we'd be taking a hell of a risk just wandering off anywhere, especially if the Italians 've got 'im. They'll be put on alert to look out for stray enemy soldiers. What do you say, Mr. Dodd, Sir?'

Dodd rubbed his hands through his sparse grey hair, and looked at each man in turn. 'Well, I'll tell you what I think. Our search was thorough, and I'd be willing to bet that Tullett is not laying dead or injured somewhere. We have to assume that the Italians do have him, but I agree with Burgess - he won't be pointing at us. On the other hand, they may put two and two together, and make a search for us. I think we ought to get some survival kit ready for a quick exit, then post

sentries where we can see if there's any unusual activity. If nothing happens for, say forty eight hours, I think we can say they're not on to us.'

By late afternoon the next day, after there had been no sign of a sweep of the area by the Italians, Dodd called off the lookouts. By the time they were all in the hut, there was a meal and a coffee ready for them, and while they were eating, Dodd spoke.

'I don't know about you chaps, but the more I think about Tullett getting mined, the angrier I get.' There was something in his tone, quiet but steely, that got their attention immediately. 'It's reminded me that this is not some game of hide and seek we're playing here. We're at war with these people, and we ought to be doing something more than just keeping out of their way.'

Brownlow was all ears. 'Is this what you were thinking about the other day, Sir?'

'Yes, it is, and the Tullett business has simply made it clear to me that we should be more active than we have been.'

'Did you have something in mind?'

'I was thinking of a little, well, sabotage.'

Chapter 10

There was a stunned silence. The men had trouble taking it in. Here was this mild mannered fellow, a university lecturer, never fired a shot, probably never *heard* a shot fired, miles behind enemy lines with no weapons or equipment, and just about bugger-all soldiers as well. A few days ago, they were talking about whether to give themselves up, and now he wanted to take the action to the enemy! Sabotage!

Burgess was first. ‘Count me in, Sir. I’d like to get back at the bastards what laid them mines.’

Brownlow, ever practical, pressed ‘Anything specific in mind, Sir?’

‘Right now, I don’t have the first idea. I just know that Tullett was my responsibility, and I’m determined to hit back. Is everybody with me?’

There were yelps of approval.

‘Nobody disagree? Right. Now, I haven’t got very far with my thinking, only that there’s not much point in going after the civilians. They’re an easy target, of course, but what would be the point in setting fire to a barn or a couple of houses? How would that affect the enemy war effort? Or burning their crops? The military would still just take whatever’s left and leave the civilians to starve. No, I think we’ve got a harder job than that. We’ve got to target the transit camp, or the road, or something like that, maybe the railway. The only thing I can think of right now is that we get into the camp, and somehow, I’ve no idea how, we disable the transport. Any ideas?’

Brownlow sucked his lip for a while, then said ‘O’course, we’ve got no explosives, but it seems to me there’s still a few things you could do, like you say, Mr. Dodd, Sir. Break in to the camp, then bugger up some vehicles, the bigger the better. Hmmm.’ Brownlow’s bottom lip gat a

serious chewing. 'You could drain the oil out of a few engines or gearboxes, but they'd probably be checking oil levels before moving, 'specially with the big stuff, the tank transporters and that. I'd be thinking of loosening the steering, or the braking system. But come to think of it, we've got no tools for that. Or somehow, blow the fuel dump.' He smiled at the thought. 'That'd make a nice fuckin' mess, that would. Yeah, that's what I'd be lookin' at – blow the fuel. You'd only need to get in there, open up a couple of drums so there's petrol everywhere, then work out how to set fire to it without getting toasted yourself.'

Green suggested 'We've still got the flares from the raft, Sarge. Could we fire one of them into it?'

Brownlow stared at Green while he thought. 'You could have the answer there, son. I wonder how far away you'd have to be, and if you could get an accurate shot with a flare? Anybody know?'

Silence.

'Thing is, you'd only get one go at it. If you missed, the flare'd be sure to attract a lot of attention – that's what they're for. But we've got several flares. Maybe we could all have one and fire 'em all at once? Hold on though, we're assuming the flares are maroons, like rockets. Come to think of it, they're more'n likely just the sort you hold and they burn brightly. Dig one out, *Gilbert*, and see if it says.'

Green scrabbled around and found them. He studied one for a while then said 'I reckon you're right, Sarge. These aren't rockets, you light 'em up and wave 'em about.'

Brownlow shrugged. 'OK, so that won't work.'

Green hefted the flare. 'There's a fair weight to 'em, Sarge. I reckon you could chuck 'em quite a way. Hold on, I'll give it a try.' He left the hut, followed by an audience of Watson and Burgess, and backing off a few paces, took a small run and threw the flare as hard as he could.

Watson gave a small clap, and Burgess called ‘Good throw, chum’ while they watched Green pace out the throw, and they all trooped back in.

‘Just on nineteen yards’ announced Green, and his two witnesses nodded solemnly.

Brownlow thought. ‘Yeah, not bad, but I tell you what – I wouldn’t want to be standing nineteen yards from that fuel dump when it goes up. Then there’s the wire. You can’t throw it through the wire, can you?’

Dodd broke in. ‘I think we’re all missing an important point. We know there’s Germans about, and if we do something like damaging vehicles or setting fire to the fuel, there’s every chance they’ll assume it’s been done by Italians, and you know what they’ve done before. Chances are they’ll drag a couple of dozen townspeople out and shoot them. I for one don’t want that on my conscience.’

This was greeted by murmurs of agreement. Dodd continued. ‘So what that leaves is something that’s obviously military action. Now, I’m not against burning the fuel, except we’ll have to think up a way of convincing them that it was done by a commando raid, or something.’

‘Now, we’ve got two teams going out again tonight to have a dekko at the traffic on the road and railway, and I suggest we do the same tomorrow, so we get a fair idea of the usual traffic. While we wait for the results of those patrols, we must all give the issue some more thought. The last thing we want is to go off on some hare-brained scheme without considering all the options. And I’ll be going back to the town in a couple of days: maybe I’ll pick up some information there that might give us inspiration, OK?’

He studied each man’s face in turn. ‘All right, Burgess? I know you’re keen to hit back, but we need to be sure it’s the right punch, don’t we?’

Burgess nodded and looked away.

As Dodd walked back along the road away from Casagrigio, he had trouble stopping himself from skipping, he was so pleased with the way it had gone. A line of military trucks appeared from the north, and Dodd had to get off the road to let them past. The trucks were covered, so he had no idea what they might contain, and as he waited for them to pass, automatically counting, he replayed his latest visit in his mind, smiling at the memories.

When he'd walked through the market square, he'd noticed a subtle change from a week ago. This time, he got nods and smiles of recognition, and when he knocked on the priest's door, it was opened almost immediately by Verdi himself.

He'd seemed genuinely pleased that Dodd was back, and ushered him through into the same small room where they'd spoken before. He called 'Maria!' and in a matter of moments, the old woman appeared, staggering under the weight of a tray, laden with what was evidently a double supply of Verdi's usual breakfast, the hard bread and oil, highly spiced sausage, this time accompanied by a wedge of pale cream cheese and a bowl of black olives, as well as the coffee and wine.

Only small talk had passed between them as Verdi watched Dodd eat. He was aware the priest was gently pumping him, but his experience as an interrogator gave him the edge, and he soon found that the town was 'not far' from Baria, thought he wasn't able to pump the priest for how far 'not far' meant. In return, Dodd had let it be known that he knew Rome quite well, but gave little else away.

When Dodd had finished eating, Verdi took a deep breath and announced 'Now, I have important news for you: yesterday, the English landed on the Italian mainland.'

The priest had watched Dodd's face carefully, but he'd telegraphed to Dodd's trained eye that he was about to say something important, and the lieutenant had been able to keep his face impassive.

‘It seems they’ve established themselves with strong forces. Of course, the Germans are there to assist us, but’ He left the sentence uncompleted.

Dodd remained deadpan. ‘Yes, the Allies do seem to be able to push us backwards, if Sicily is any guide.’

Verdi nodded. ‘Of course, I understand the Sicilians themselves didn’t hinder the Allies. In fact, I did hear that in some places, the locals actually assisted, acting as guides, pointing out minefields, and so on.’

This time, Dodd had allowed his surprise to show. ‘What? Well, what do you make of that?’

Verdi had thought hard before answering. ‘You know, my friend, I would not be too surprised if the same thing happened here. You know the people have suffered badly under this regime, and most people are heartily sick of the war. If they weren’t so afraid of the Fascists, and every village has their fanatics who would not think twice about reporting anti-government behaviour, it might be different, but in the end,’ he swept his arm round, to indicate the whole area, ‘what could they do? They are peasants - all they want to do is work their farms in peace – they know nothing of wars, and care less.’

Dodd reflected on that as he moved back along the quiet road, making a mental note to report the twenty six trucks scurrying south. Was Verdi asking for help? He shrugged. He and his men could do nothing to assist the Allies. Or could they? He switched the heavy suitcase into his right hand, took a firmer grip on the sack over his shoulder and quickened his step as he remembered the talk they were going to have when he got back. He’d been thinking about little else for two days, but still had no idea how they might damage the Italian war machine without bringing down retribution on the civilians. Maybe somebody had come up with a plan, or at least an idea they could work on.

Back at the hut, Dodd sat outside and produced the days bounty, bread, eggs and oil again, and this time, ham instead of bacon, and a great wedge of cheese. The men sat and made a circle round the food, which Dodd had spread out, admiring the display, when Kelly asked 'Sir, how did you pay for all this, don't mind me askin'?'

'Never mind that,' Dodd growled, 'none of your business.'

But the men exchanged glances, and knew.

Dodd suddenly jumped up, excited. 'Oh my goodness, I haven't told you my news!'

He told them about discovering that they weren't far from Baria, which gave him a good idea where they were, and putting that together with the presence of the transport camp, and the amount of traffic on the road, along with a few sly questions to the priest, Dodd had concluded that the road, narrow and ramshackle as it was, was the main north/south artery to the east of the mountainous Italian spine. But the best news he saved until last, and said quietly, 'Oh, yes, one more thing. I'm told the Allies have made a landing on the toe of Italy.'

He looked at the men's faces as they processed what he'd said. His matter-of-fact tone had bewildered them for a moment, and Brownlow queried 'Sorry, Sir, did you say our lot have invaded?'

'That's right!' Dodd laughed, and suddenly, it sunk in and they were all on their feet, shaking hands, laughing and chattering like school kids. 'Isn't it wonderful! Sorry if I confused you, chaps.'

Kelly, ever the laconic Aussie, was first to calm down. 'Does that mean we won't be doin' any sabotage, then? I s'pose we'll just be sittin' tight 'til our mob get here?'

The men looked first at Kelly, then, comprehending, turned anxiously back to Dodd.

‘We *could* sit tight, as you say, Corporal, but for myself, I don’t see it changes a thing. You know, Italy’s shaped a bit like a leg and foot with a high heeled shoe. We’re round about the heel, and the landings are on the end of the toe. I’d guess that’s more than two hundred miles from here. Tough miles, too. You’re not seeing it round here, but Italy is mainly a hilly country, with a mountain range running pretty much all down it – that means there are rivers, dozens of ‘em, running across, and our forces will have to cross them all. Some of you might know a defended river crossing is supposed to be very difficult, and the Germans will expect the Italians to oppose us crossing of all of them. So, for a start, it might be months before they get here. In any case, as I see it, now we know there’s going to be fighting here, it’s even more important that we do what we can to assist.’

Kelly grinned. ‘You bloody ripper! I’ve been getting’ browned off sittin’ about! I’m itching for a bit o’ biff!’

Burgess, his old mate’s uncertain fate still fresh in his mind, joined in. ‘Yeah, that’s right, Corp! Let’s give the bastards a good bloody shake, eh!’

Brownlow looked pleased as well. ‘I’m in, boys. What do you say, Green, Watson?’

Green glanced at his mate and answered with a grin and a nod. Watson laughed. ‘Look at you chaps! Like a bunch of bloody kids! I suppose I’d better come along to make sure you don’t shoot your own bollocks off!’

Dodd gave them a couple of minutes of excited chatter to get used to the changed situation, then called them to order.

‘All right, then. Essentially, nothing’s changed, except instead of doing a bit of sabotage just for the sake of it, whatever we do should be to make it that bit more difficult for the enemy to move reinforcements down, or, God willing, to

retreat back up. So, that means hitting their transport if we can. Now, about the road and rail traffic. What do we know?’

Brownlow nodded at Watson, who was pleased and surprised at being given the honour of reporting. He fussed with a scrap of paper taken from the label of a can of soup, on which he'd written notes. ‘Well, we saw two trains going south the first night, both well loaded. There were flat trucks that were loaded but all covered with canvas– the Sergeant reckons they're artillery and tanks, don't you Sergeant? And they had wagons as well, but we didn't see inside any of them. Didn't have any troops though, unless they were in the trucks, and we didn't think they would be.’

He saw a couple of raised eyebrows. ‘Well, we thought if there were troops inside, at least some of 'em would have pulled the doors open for air. That night there was nothing coming the other way.’

He paused, enjoying the moment, and reviewed his note. ‘Now, last night was much the same except that early on, two trains came north, with nothing on the flat trucks. The Sergeant reckons they won't risk moving them during the day in case they attract bombers, so we're thinking they're the same trains as the night before, going back empty. After that, there was another two full ones, just like before.’

Dodd thought. ‘What time did the trains going south come past you?’

With a hint of pride in a job well done, Watson examined his bit of paper.

‘The first night, ten past midnight and then quarter to two. And the second night, the empty ones came at just on eleven and twenty to twelve, then the full ones going south at, er, almost the same as before, a quarter past midnight and twenty to two.’

He relaxed and sat back.

Kelly queried ‘What sort of speed? Any ideas?’

Watson glance at Brownlow, who came to his rescue. 'It's really hard to say, Ted. It seems harder to judge than a truck or a car. Not used to it, I suppose. Any rate, they were going much too fast to try to jump on. You couldn't run near as fast, would you say, Bill?'

Watson picked up the use of his first name and recognised it as a sign of favour. Brownlow rarely used first names, except for Kelly, who he accepted as a seasoned soldier, and almost an equal.

'Maybe for a few yards, sprinting, perhaps, on the flat, but on that rocky ground, there'd be no chance. And the ones going north were a good bit faster, too.'

'That's very interesting, chaps. How fast can you run? Lets see, the top athletes do a hundred in about eleven seconds, so maybe you, Watson, could do the same speed for just a few seconds. That's, what, er, about three minutes a mile, that's twenty miles an hour, or thereabouts. Sunrise is about five, so the first train would have been about, oh, a hundred miles from here when the sun came up, and the second one, say maybe seventy. Does that sound right?'

The men sat silent, amazed that Dodd could guess so much from so little, and absolutely astonished that he could do such sums in his head.

Watson, who felt a proprietorial interest in the information, asked 'Yes, but what does that tell us, Sir?'

'I was wondering if we could figure out where they were going, but all we can tell is that if they only travel at night, they won't get down to where the fighting is overnight. They'll have to hide in a siding, or maybe a tunnel somewhere around, er, seventy miles from here. Might as well be seven hundred, as far as we're concerned, so I don't see we could disable them when they're holed up. Anyway, at least we can be pretty sure the trains are carrying military equipment, so they're a legitimate target. The main question is, is there any

way we could damage a moving train? What do you think, Sergeant?’

After the customary lip-sucking, Brownlow shook his head. ‘Buggered if I know how we could do it, Sir, beg pardon. Without explosives or tools, the only thing we could do would be to somehow knock a tree down on the line, but that likely wouldn’t derail it. Any case, it’d be obvious what we’d done.’

‘All right, maybe we’ll come back to that. What about the road traffic? Oh, by the way, a convoy of trucks went south as I came back this morning. Corporal, you and Green have studied the road. What information have you got for us?’

‘Well, boss, we went down almost on top of the main gate to the camp so we could see everything going in or out, but the first night was a complete waste of time. Absolute fizzer. There was just about nothing goin’ on at all, all night.

‘Last night, though, it was like someone’d kicked the shit out of an anthill, fair dinkum. Rush and scurry all night, wasn’t it Gilbert?’

Green, in a passable Aussie accent, said ‘Bloody oath, Corp. No worries.’

Kelly continued. ‘Yeah, a lot of vehicles were getting fuelled up and moved out south, big bastards, some of em’, tank transporters and that. Then a convoy came right through, trucks with canvas tops mostly. A few had the back canvas open, and we could see there was soldiers in ‘em. Must ha’ been more than fifty trucks in that one convoy, I lost count around forty.’

Dodd intervened ‘Italian or German?’

‘Hard to say, skipper. The uniforms look the same colour in the dark, but from what we saw, I’d say Italian. Any rate, then another convoy came down and pulled into the camp. Must ha’ been supplies, ‘cause as soon as they got there, blokes arrived from everywhere to unload. They were getting fuel drums off the trucks and puttin’ the empties back

on, and pulling boxes and stuff off other trucks. Oh, and there were a couple of tankers as well, but they just waited. And there was motor bikes goin' in and out all the time as well. I'll tell you what, I know what you'd have called it Sarge.'

That brought a chuckle from the men.

'Mind you, it wasn't long before they'd done all they needed to, and the trucks moved out again, but this time, some carried on south – that's where the tankers went – and the rest, we reckoned the empty ones, went back the way they'd come. To be fair, it was pretty slick, eh, Gilbert?'

'Yeah, it was. What, less than an hour from start to finish. *And* one o' those big bastards broke down right at the gate. Half way on the road it was, and we thought, if we could make one o' them transporters break down right there, it'd fuck 'em up good an' proper. But bugger me, they had it out of the way in ten minutes flat.'

Kelly summed up. 'From what we saw, I reckon that camp must be a pretty important transport staging post. A lot of the trucks that was in there have gone, but the fact they're restocking the fuel dump says they're expecting a lot more activity there. Anyway, after that there was just the odd few vehicles, ones and twos, up and down the road. That's about it, Sir.'

The men turned to Dodd, as they wondered what marvels of intelligence he could draw from the report.

'So, the upshot is there was a lot of equipment and artillery going south, and troops too, and nothing coming back so far. And unless anybody has any bright ideas, I don't see how we might attack a line of moving trucks, any more than we can hit a moving train. Any thoughts?'

Silence.

'So, what we have left is doing a bit of mischief at the camp, either disabling the transport, or going for the fuel. What do you say, Sergeant?'

Dodd's Army

Brownlow had already been thinking on those lines. 'I'm sure you're right, Sir. We just don't have the capability to go for a moving train or convoy, so that takes us back to where we were the other day, that's finding a way of burning the fuel dump without them thinking it might be partisans. I was thinking, what if we left a bit of kit laying about?'

Dodd thought. 'Maybe, but it'd be a big risk. I keep getting this picture in my mind of a couple of dozen people being lined up and shot, on account of what we do. I'm not sure I could live with that'

A glum silence fell again, before Brownlow spoke once more. 'Well, looks like it's down to Plan B, then.'

Hope rose again, and Kelly did the honours. 'All right, I'll be the sucker. What's Plan B?'

Brownlow smiled. 'Tell 'em Bill. It was your idea.'

'That's the one where we blow the dump up, Corporal.'

That got everybody's undivided attention, as Kelly pointed out 'Great! There's just one tiny flaw in that, though. We don't have any explosives.'

Watson grinned back. 'I know where there's absolutely loads of it. Stacks and stacks.' He paused for effect. 'On the beach!'

Brownlow broke the stunned silence.

'The mines! Hundreds of the bastards, probably thousands! And we only need a few!'

Kelly continued to act as spokesman. 'Oh, right, we just go down to the beach and dig 'em up?'

Watson replied. 'That's right, Corporal. Sergeant Brownlow's done hundreds of 'em, apparently. Isn't that right, Sergeant?'

'I've done a few, yeah. It's not hard, as long as you take your time. And we'd only want a handful.'

The audience of three looked gape-jawed at Brownlow, then Watson, then at Dodd, who said 'All right,

suppose, just suppose, you did get hold of some mines and somehow used them to blow up the fuel dump. You've still got the problem of persuading the Italians it wasn't partisan activity.'

Brownlow answered 'That's the beauty of Watson's scheme, Sir. Tell the officer, Bill.'

Watson was on his feet now, excited. 'Well, Sir, we've been hearing lots of planes at night, haven't we? And they'd be bombers, most likely. So what we do is, we set a line of mines, maybe four or six, in a line pointing at the dump, with the last one right in among the fuel drums, right? Then, we wait 'til some planes are going over, and set the mines off one after the other, like a line of bombs going off! They'll think they've been bombed, and won't suspect anything else.'

The men stared at Watson, struck dumb and motionless by the scheme, until, eventually, Dodd clambered to his feet, and holding out his hand to Watson, croaked 'That's absolutely brilliant! It could work! Exceptional! How on earth did you come up with the idea, Watson?'

'Well, Sir, when Sergeant Brownlow and I were on railway lookout, there wasn't a hell of a lot to see, so we got chatting. You know he was going on about mines the other day? Well, I asked him how he knew about them. Turns out, he did a lot of minefield clearing at Alemein, didn't you, Sergeant?'

'Yeah. There's fuckin' millions of the bastards all over the desert – Italian, German, ours, half of *our* minefields aren't even marked on *our* maps, they were laid out in such a bloody panic to try to slow Rommel down. Absolute fuckin' ...' and everybody joined in, shouting 'Shambles!'

Brownlow grinned. 'Any rate, they wanted volunteers to help clear paths, so I put me hand up. Ten minutes instruction, and we were off! Easy!'

Dodd's Army

Watson continued 'If those chaps could do it in a hurry, under fire, bullets and shells flying everywhere, I imagine finding a few on the beach there, with plenty of time, nobody shooting at you, it'd be what we used to call a piece of cake, back in our Battle of Britain days, eh, Gilbert?'

The men looked at Dodd, who returned Brownlow's gaze. 'Could it be done, Sergeant?'

All heads swivelled. 'Unless the mines out there are completely different, which I doubt, I don't see any problem pulling a few out. I'd need to see what type they are before figuring out how to detonate 'em though, but unless anybody has a better idea, I think we should give it a try.'

Kelly was enthusiastic. 'I'm in Sarge. Just show me what to do, and I'll lend a hand.'

But Brownlow shook his head. 'Sorry, Ted, I've already got my apprentice for this job.' He looked at Watson, who nodded. 'If that's all right with you, Mr. Dodd Sir?'

'Excellent. When will you do it?'

'Tonight.'

'What can the rest of us do to help?'

'Well, we don't want to be having to keep an eye out for locals, so we want lookouts placed to warn us if anybody comes close. Other than that, all we need is a couple of nice bits of twig to probe with, I'll find them, and something to mark where we've been, so we can keep inside the swept area on the way out. We used white tape in the desert, but here, I think we'll have to mark the edges with sticks. And we'll want some short lengths of wire as well. With any luck, we'll be able to make the mines safe before we bring 'em out. So, there's work for all of us tonight. We want somebody behind us to mark the swept area and take the mines off us, and the others to keep lookout, OK?'

Kelly was about to speak, but Green beat him to it. 'It'd better be me behind you, Sarge, so I can keep me eye on Bill, make sure he doesn't shit himself or that. Any case, if he

does this and I'm standin' about on sentry go, I'll never hear the last of it. All right?'

The time began to drag that afternoon, and more to pass the time than any real interest, Watson asked Kelly 'So, what about your rush bangers, Corporal?' and Kelly did his monstrous upper class impression, which, liberally larded with snorts and brays, was barely recognisable as 'Well, I'm sure I've not heard of Ned Kelly, and I certainly don't know anything about fish hampers!' which brought his audience to the customary tears of laughter.

But then Kelly moved over to the fire place, and squatted down in that uniquely uncomfortable looking Australian stance, his backside resting on one heel, and the other leg out in front, almost straight. He always took up this pose before starting one of his yarns, as he called them. For a few moments, he was away back in the scrub, the smell of eucalypt and a million years of dust rich in his nose, the gentle breeze bringing the night coolness, the occasional quiet jangle of harness as the horses moved around, and the distant shuffling of the cattle. Out of habit, he picked up a stick and prodded the dead remains of last night's fire, as he collected his thoughts. It felt wrong, somehow: Kelly had never before told one of his stories in daylight – he reckoned the only time to relate bush yarns was round a dying fire, when it was good and dark. But today, he realised that anything to pass the time until this latest adventure started would be gratefully accepted.

He'd already related how young Edward 'Ned' Kelly had begun his career as a fifteen year old, accused of assault on a Chinese merchant with the unfortunate name of Ah Fook. He was found not guilty, but soon after, he got six months hard labour for assault, and less than a month after his release, he was arrested again, this time for receiving a stolen horse, and was given another three years hard labour, though he swore he didn't know the horse was stolen. Ironically, when

Ned returned home on his release, he'd found that all his horses had been stolen, and the local constabulary was *strongly* suspected! For a while he kept on the right side of the law, but it wasn't long before Ned, in partnership with relatives and mates, began 'duffing' horses and cattle, in reprisal against those they believed were persecuting them.

Corporal Kelly had learned the art of yarning at the feet of some of the best, lazing around a hundred camp fires, out in the bush, where shearers, fencers, shepherds and cattle men, 'bullockies' with their wagons and teams of bullocks, the cargo ships of the bush, crossed paths and joined each others fire at the end of the day, as they tramped the outback, looking for work, and a feed. Humping the bluey, they called it, or on the wallaby track. Hearing and listening, then telling and retelling, he'd become an accomplished story teller, slick and sure, like a well oiled rifle bolt, and had learned the truth of the old saying 'Leave 'em wanting more,' so he'd left the story at that point, and a few days later, as he took it up again, he had an enthusiastic audience.

He recounted how a Constable Fitzpatrick went to the Kelly home, supposedly to arrest Ned's brother Dan, but in fact he was more interested in his sister, young Kate Kelly. Following an incident in which, or so the story went, he assaulted her, which required the family's 'intervention,' Fitzpatrick swore an attempted murder charge against them all. From then on, Ned's life spiralled out of control. Three policemen were sent to arrest the Kelly brothers, who resisted with firearms, and the policemen were shot dead. Now they were wanted outlaws, they seemed to take to this role with gusto, making themselves famous by beating crude body armour out of metal, worn by the gang when they graduated to robbing banks.

Kelly had told the story well, describing the bank robberies in great detail, but once again, left the rest for another time.

Now, the Corporal remembered the point in the yarn he'd arrived at last time, and thought about the final chapter in Ned's story.

The end came swiftly when the Kelly gang 'bailed up' the township of Glenrowan, and more took than sixty hostages. Following a tip-off from the local school teacher, the police laid siege to the hotel where the gang was, and a nine hour gun battle took place, in which the hotel was burnt to the ground, three of the gang members were killed, and Ned, badly wounded, was arrested, patched up, and quickly tried and hanged.

With a start, Corporal Kelly remembered where he was, and realised that the final part of the Ned Kelly story was not really appropriate for telling just before tonight's foray to the beach.

Giving the ashes one final prod, Kelly turned to the men, who were used to this wait while he gathered his thoughts, and said 'I reckon we'll give ol' Ned a bit of a rest for today, and I'll tell you about some of the others, eh?'

And before anyone could object, he went on.

'Well, most of these blokes, like I told you before, they were fair dinkum nasty bastards. The first ones were escaped convicts, they had to rob or starve, or give themselves up, and they'd die rather than go back to those conditions, most of 'em. Then, when the gold rushes started, well, you can imagine, some blokes thought it was easier to take the gold off the blokes that'd dug it, instead of diggin' it themselves. And they all ended up being called bushrangers.

'Got quite famous, some of 'em, but not as famous as ol' Ned, of course.'

He glared round for a moment, waiting for any argument about how famous Kelly was, but, receiving no challenge, continued.

He began a yarn about the last bushranger in New South Wales, a man called Fred Ward, much better known as

Thunderbolt. The men sat, engrossed, tonight forgotten for the moment, as Kelly settled into his story.

'Now, ol' Thunderbolt,' - they'd become accustomed to Kelly referring to all bushrangers as 'ol'' this or 'ol'' that: it seemed to be a sort of title he conferred on them - 'Ol' Thunderbolt, he was a peculiar sort of feller. Everyone he robbed said he was handsome and well mannered, always neatly turned out. Well, that made him unusual, o'course, but as well as that, they reckon he never used violence, and as he rode away after 'bailing up' the coach, he would sing at the top of his voice! What do you make of that!'

He looked round for signs of approval, which he was given.

'Now,' he continued, 'there's heaps o' stories about ol' Thunderbolt. There's the one that he held up a brass band down Goonoo Goonoo way, by all accounts. Germans, they were, as it happened. Any rate, their boss complained ol' Thunderbolt'd be leaving them with no money to get to their next job, and he said he was sorry, but he needed a stake to bet on a 'dead cert' at the local races the next day. He promised that if the nag came in, he'd see the money was returned. O'course, the horse won, and the jerries got their money back!'

Again, he waited for nods of appreciation before going on.

'My favourite yarn about ol' Thunderbolt is about when he was up on the Clarence.'

Kelly usually included the detail of where the adventure took place: of course, the men had no idea where all these places were, of course, but they loved to hear the sometimes strange names, which somehow lent an added authenticity to the yarn. In any case, they wouldn't dream of criticising Kelly's story telling skills - it was recognised that he was an accomplished yarn-spinner with an abundant repertoire, who rarely fluffed a line, and often got into

character, changing voice for the different inhabitants of his stories.

‘He rode up to this homestead and politely asked the woman who answered the door for a drink of water. He got chatting to her, and she told him she was alone in the house at the time. Stupid, really, but like I said, he was a real charmer. ‘Righto’ says ol’ Thunderbolt, ‘I’ll have that locket you’re wearing, then you can show me where the other valuables are.’ The woman got all upset, and said he could have whatever else he liked, but the locket was her only keepsake of her mother. So ol’ Thunderbolt, he lets her keep the locket, and she’s leading him round the place when they come to a closed door. The woman says her sister is lying very ill in there and mustn’t on any account be disturbed, and sure enough, ol’ Thunderbolt goes creeping past on tiptoe to the next bedroom!

‘Turns out she had the last laugh on him, too! It turns out the husband had taken all the valuables into town that very day, and ol’ Thunderbolt went away with nothing!’

Seeing he had an appreciative audience, Kelly asked, ‘You want another one?’ to which Brownlow responded, ‘Long as it’s a quick one, Corp. We’ve got things to be doing soon.’

‘Righto, Sarge. I was just going to mention a similar story to that one, about ol’ Captain Melville. Dunno if he was a real captain, or what he was a captain of, but ...’

Brownlow caught his eye, and raised an eyebrow, and the Australian hurried on.

‘Now ol’ Captain Melville, they reckoned he was the smartest turned out of all of ‘em, so maybe he *was* a sailor, or in the military. Any rate, he surprised this wealthy squatter, a cove by the name of McKinnon, right as McKinnon and his two daughters were leaving the homestead for a ball. He pointed his pistol at ‘em, and ordered ‘em back into their drawing room. He explained he was a music lover – can you

believe it – and he'd heard the daughters were good musicians! So there they were: the daughters singing and playing duets on the piano, while ol' Captain Melville waved his gun in time with the music! They say that Melville himself joined in, sang some solos, and played the piano, too! Bugger me dead, eh?

'Turns out, a servant had run for help, and suddenly, mounted police arrived, but the ol' Captain, he was too quick for 'em, he jumped out a window and disappeared!

'Now, boys, the Sergeant's rollin' his eyes, so I reckon it's time to stop for now. But remind me to tell you some more about ol' Captain Moonlight some time.'

By nine that night, Dodd had set himself, Kelly and Burgess as lookouts to cover the approaches, while Brownlow went through the drill one last time. There was a little cloud and no moon, but they'd got their night vision, and there was enough light to see to the ends of the beach, marked by the half-hearted little Mediterranean waves collapsing onto the rocks.

'Right, once more. I move onto the sand, on my belly, probing in front of me, gently running my stick in every couple of inches across my path. I only have to probe down about four inches – if there's a mine there and it's deeper than that, I don't need to worry about it. And I don't need to worry about setting it off with my probe either. Chances are there won't be any with magnetic triggers, but we're using wood probes, just in case. That's why we're not using knives. And it takes at least four pounds of pressure to set a mine off, so as long as I don't go jabbing my probe in hard, I'm safe as houses.

'If the first strip is clear, I'll go forward four inches and start again.

'When I find a mine, I let you know to stop, and you wait while I uncover it. If I can, I make it safe then. Either way, I pass it back to you, Green, to take back to the grass. If I

haven't disabled it, just be bloody careful to keep out of the way of the trigger, OK?'

Green couldn't speak – his mouth was too dry – so he just gulped, and nodded.

'Now, Watson. You wait 'til I'm a body length clear, then you make a start. You make sure you keep close up to my left marker, and probe right across your path, just like we practiced this afternoon. When you find a mine, don't touch it, just let me know, and stay still 'til I come. All right? And don't forget your twigs to mark your left side, so you know how to get back.

'Now, all ready? Remember, we've got all the time we need, so just think and check before you move. And keep alert. Chances are we won't find mines real close to the grass, but don't get complacent – this job's about being careful all the time.'

The two young men nodded again, and Brownlow immediately held up his probe stick and got down on his belly on the edge of the grass. He was very calm and methodical, sticking twigs in the sand either side of his path, and carefully probing between them, before moving forward. It took less than a minute to probe each strip, and in a quarter of an hour or so, his boots were on the sand.

Watson turned to his mate and silently shook his hand. Green nodded, and Watson got down on his belly, remembered to put a stick in the left side of his path, and gingerly began to probe in front of him.

He was twenty minutes into the sand, in a little cocoon of sweat and concentration, when Brownlow said quietly 'Got one.' Watson froze. He could see Brownlow gently pushing sand out of the way, but then he hunched forward, obscuring Watson's view. After a while, Brownlow said 'Got you, you little bastard! Come on Green, come and collect it.' And with that, he turned and sat up, being careful to stay within the path he'd swept.

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Green crawled to him between the lines of sticks in the sand, and reluctantly accepted the proffered object. It looked for all the world like a grey painted largish can of beans, except that a dull metal rod, sticking out less than an inch, protruded through the disc of the top. The rod had a small hole in it, just where it emerged from the canister, and Brownlow had pushed a bit of wire through the hole and twisted the ends so it wouldn't drop out.

Brownlow pointed to the rod. 'That's the trigger. Push that in and bang! But it's safe now. That bit o' wire makes a safety clip so it can't be triggered accidentally. So just take it back to the grass and put it out of the road, there's a good lad. Oh, show it to your mate on the way – it'll be easier if he knows exactly what he's looking for.'

He smiled tightly at Watson, then turned and started again.

In a few minutes, Brownlow halted again, and said 'Now we're getting on – here's another one' and at almost the same moment, Watson, his voice a little shrill, replied 'I think I've found one too, Sergeant.'

Brownlow was calm. 'All right, son, just settle down while I sort this one out.' Watson didn't need any urging to stay quite still, holding his probe as steady as he could but feeling it grate against something below the surface. After what seemed to Watson to be a very long time, Brownlow ponderously turned and called for Green again, who crawled quickly up to the sergeant, who passed him another mine. Green checked that the trigger had been secured with wire, turned and crawled back, winking at Watson as he passed. Watson replied with an attempt at a small grin, but it came out more of a grimace.

Brownlow then carefully made his way back to Watson.

'OK, son, now you need to carefully clear the sand, so we can see what you've got.'

‘What, me? I thought you’d be doing this bit, Sergeant.’

‘What am I, your fuckin’ mum? Just like you did this afternoon, now, start scooping the sand away. Leave your probe in, so you know where you’re going.’

Watson gave the sergeant a pleading look, which was ignored, then took a deep breath and cautiously began to move the covering sand aside. He knew it was there, of course, but the first time his hand caught the mine, it was still a shock. Soon he could see the whole top – to his relief, it was the same as the ones he’d already seen, and he could see the little hole in the trigger. Brownlow handed him a length of wire, which he managed to pass through the hole with a trembling hand, and twist the ends to secure it.

He tried to call Green to collect it, but found he’d stopped breathing some time ago, and was unable to speak. Eventually, he managed to croak ‘One for you, Gilbert’ and managed a grin for Brownlow, who smiled back and nodded ‘Just a couple more, son, and we’re done’ before turning back to his path.

After a short time, they’d each found another mine, and gone through the same procedure before crawling back between the sticks they’d used to mark the cleared path. Once back on the grass, Brownlow stood, and he and Green silently helped Watson to his feet. Watson stood for a moment, grinning widely and shaking both their hands before being violently and noisily sick.

Brownlow sent Green to call in the sentries, and soon the whole group was back in the hut, making an enormous and quite unfair fuss over Watson, Brownlow having done most of the work.

The whole operation had taken under three hours, and they should have gone to bed, but Watson and Green were still buzzing with adrenaline, and so, truth be told, was

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Brownlow, though he managed to hide it. The others were caught up in the excitement too, laughing, chattering, getting up, sitting down, thrilled by the realisation of the groups sudden change of status. This morning, they were fugitives, frightened of being seen, but now they were warriors, with the ability to inflict damage on the enemy.

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Chapter 11

Dodd let the mood run on for a while, then called the men to order.

‘Right, chaps, settle down. Let’s remember that, er, shall we say, liberating the mines was just the first stage of this operation. So far, we’ve only got a general idea of the rest. Now, I don’t think anybody will be sleeping for a while, so let’s have a bit of supper and think about stage two.’

Kelly rose, the flames from the little fire throwing enough light for him to put some bread, cheese and olives together, as he mimicked Dodd’s ‘Excellent, excellent.’ He smiled to show there was no bad feeling, and Dodd smiled back, while he started to prepare his little stove. As he pottered, Dodd thought how well they’d all taken to the Italian food, and several of them had come to thoroughly enjoy this sort of meal – bits of bread ripped off the loaf and dipped in olive oil, accompanied by the fierce local cabanossi, a bit of cheese, and a handful of olives. Or pasta, spaghetti for preference, with their favourite, putanesca sauce, rich with tomatoes, olives, capers and anchovies. They didn’t get that often though, only when Dodd found the capers and anchovies in the store hut. One day, Dodd mused, he’d let them know the Italians called it ‘prostitutes pasta’, because it was quick to make from ready-to-hand ingredients, which could be made between clients.

When they all had a share of the food and their mug of coffee, which they’d got used to now, even though they mostly had to take it black with no sugar, Dodd asked Brownlow what he thought about the task ahead.

Brownlow chewed for a moment before answering. ‘Dunno if I’m the right person to talk about it, Sir. I’ve only pulled the little bastards out – never laid ‘em before. Ted, you

would've been involved with laying explosives, doing harbour clearance work?

'Yeah, Sarge, I've seen a fair bit of demolition work being done, but with proper explosives and stuff. You know me, Sarge, I'm happy to have a go, but I dunno anything about land mines.'

Something about what Kelly had said put Brownlow on guard. 'You said you'd *seen* it done? Not actually *done* any explosives work yourself, then?'

Kelly looked embarrassed. 'Not as such, no. Missed out on the training, see? But I've seen a lot being planted.'

'What did you actually do, then?'

'Well, being dockside when there's clearing going on can be pretty bloody dangerous. You can't just have people wanderin' about. My job was to keep tabs on everybody, where they were, like, so we didn't blow one of our own up by accident.'

'Blimey, Ted, I must say, for a fuckin' clerk, you've handled yourself bloody well here!' Brownlow laughed. 'I just realised, this group's got an interrogator, a couple o' models, and a clerk, and we're off to sabotage the Italian army! It's Dodd's Army, all right! As Tullett would say, 'kin' 'ell! Come to think of it that way though, I reckon we've done bloody well so far. Just as well there's a couple of fighting soldiers here though, eh, John?'

Burgess squirmed a little. 'If you say so, Sarge.'

Dodd got the conversation back on the rails. 'Point is, Sergeant, could we do it?'

'Oh, I imagine we'll manage, Sir. The trick will be to fix 'em so we can set 'em off when we want. We'll need to work that out, so we can do it without blowing ourselves up. Now, my first thought is to bury the mines, then cover each one with a big stone, heavy enough to trigger the plunger. Then we straighten out one end of the wire and tie a string on the other end. When we get planes going over, we just pull the

string and the wire comes out, the stone presses the trigger, and, bang!’

Brownlow looked round at five faces all trying to picture that idea working. Kelly got there first. ‘There’d be a fair old pressure on the wire, so it’d take quite a pull to get it out. So we’d need to make sure the mine was securely bedded, otherwise you might just pull it out sideways.’

To Dodd’s surprise, Burgess joined in. ‘Right, and you’ll need some strong string an’ all. How far away d’you reckon we’d need to be, Sarge?’

‘Oh, a good forty, maybe fifty foot. How much fishin’ line have we got?’

Burgess answered. ‘We started with two from each raft, but one got lost when Stan’ His voice quavered for a second, before he got a grip. ‘I dunno, but I’d say they were fifty foot, easy.’

‘We need to know exactly’ Dodd said. ‘We’ll measure them in the morning. But I think you said the trigger needs at least four pounds weight on it?’

Brownlow nodded.

‘So we need, what, six pounds to be sure?’

‘I’d say so, yes, Sir.’

‘How big is a six pound stone? And how will we know it’s six pounds? And how strong’s the fishing line? Will it take the strain? It’s all getting a bit, you know, too many ‘ifs’ isn’t it? We’ll need to do some tests. Any other ideas?’

Dodd scanned the faces, but they reflected blank stares.

‘All right, we’ll sleep on it. Goodnight, chaps, and cheer up – we’ll find the answer.’

Next morning, Kelly was up early, and by full daylight, was out in the clearing, muttering to himself and fiddling with bits of stick and some odds and ends of string, surrounded by the wreckage of several experiments.

After a while, he stood, nodded to himself, and called 'Any coffee there yet?' as he stretched, and strolled to the hut.

He collected a mug of coffee before looking at Brownlow and said 'Come and have a dekko, Sarge. See what you think.'

The two men went back to where Kelly had been pottering, and stood, mugs in hand, looking at the contraption in front of them. There were two sticks jammed fast into the ground, about six inches showing above ground, a couple of inches apart. Tied between them, laying on the ground and pointing away from the men, there was a stick about two feet long, with a can of tomatoes lashed to the far end. A fishing line was attached next to the can, and in front of the whole affair lay a broad flat stone.

Without a word, Kelly picked up the fishing line and moved so that the two pegs in the ground were directly between him and the can. He pulled slowly on the line, and the stick rose up, swivelling on the pegs, taking the can with it. When the stick was almost vertical, he stopped pulling for a moment, then gave a sharp tug, and the stick continued its swivel, bringing the can down sharply onto the stone with a satisfying thunk.

Kelly turned to Brownlow, with eyebrows raised quizzically.

'Blimey, Ted, you might just have it there! D'you reckon it hit the stone hard enough?'

Kelly unlashed the can and handed it to the sergeant, who looked at the base of it for a long moment, and smiled. He saw that Kelly had put a pebble on the rock, and where the can had struck the pebble, there was a shallow dent.

Kelly grinned. 'I'd say that'd be getting close to six pounds worth, wouldn't you Sarge?'

Brownlow grinned back. 'Lemme have a go' and they reset the gear.

After a few more tries, they got into a deep discussion, involving arms waving to demonstrate the path of the can, pointing, tugging motions, fists thudding into palms. The rest of the men, observing from inside the hut, half expected a fight to break out any second, and were relieved and surprised to see the discussion close with back slapping and hand shaking, before the two separated and walked off into the trees.

Brownlow leant in through the hut window like a friendly neighbour and called ‘Come and have a look at this, Mr. Dodd, Sir.’

Dodd strolled over to where Kelly and Brownlow stood, and the others straggled along. Kelly opened the lecture.

‘We’ve got two strong pointed sticks about two foot long, with bit of a branch sticking out about nine inches up. We call ‘em the pegs, and we stick ‘em in the ground about two inches apart, like this ...’ Brownlow demonstrated, using his foot on the side branches, as if he was using a spade, to drive them into the ground.

‘Using the side branch saves making a noise having to whack ‘em in. We tie a bit of string to the top of each one, leaving a sort of loop about six inches long between them.’

Brownlow followed instructions.

‘Then we take what we call the arm, with a mine attached to it ...’ Brownlow held up the two foot stick with a fresh can lashed to it, being careful to show the unmarked end of the can, like a magician preparing his audience, ‘...and attach the other end of it between the pegs, a couple of inches up, as the Sergeant’s doing now. When that’s done, we place the stone ... the Sergeant’s just putting the pebble on it now for the demonstration, raise the arm ‘til its right up, just the other side of the vertical, and laying against the string loop. Then, as you see, we tie the fishing line about half way up the

arm – we've found that much better than attaching it at the top - and finally, take the safety wire out of the mine trigger, then scarper, paying out the line as we go. When we're ready, we give the line a good tug, and ...'

Brownlow took up the slack then pulled sharply on the line, and the arm swung down, driving the can hard onto the stone.

Kelly unlashed the can and anxiously studied the top of it, before holding it out to Dodd, to show where the pebble had made a deep indentation.

Dodd stared at it, blinked twice, and smiled. 'If that doesn't set the damned things off, I'll go and jump on them myself! Excellent! Well done indeed, chaps! That's the second problem solved! Now, the next problem is there's not really enough of us to do this job. And we have to remember that if it comes off, we won't be able to get into the store any more, so I want to take every opportunity to collect supplies while we can. That means we want the usual three to get into the camp, and one to stay to set the final, er, do you have a name for your invention, Kelly?'

'Not really, Sir – we've just been calling it the anvil.'

'Right, good, that'll do. So, one will have to stay to set the anvil, plus me for the hut and one to do the wire. How long do you think it will take to set each anvil up, chaps?'

Brownlow and Kelly looked at each other, and Kelly offered 'We have to make sure it's all spot on, the arm's on the right way round, and that. I'd guess, one man, close to ten minutes.' Brownlow gnawed at his bottom lip for a while, then nodded slowly.

Dodd thought. 'And you need someone to look after the line. I don't think you could just leave it on the ground, could you? So when you've set one up, you need somebody to look after the other end of the line. And you can't have one person to look after them all – we don't have enough line for that – they'll be too spaced out for that.'

He paused, working things through in his mind. ‘And we really need two to watch for sentries – we can’t have a couple of chaps setting up an anvil in the middle of a field when a sentry comes strolling round the corner of the fence. Remember, each one’ll take ten minutes to set up, and there’s four of them, so say fifty minutes in all. There’s bound to be a sentry come past in that time, even if we wait until one’s just gone, so we want someone at each corner, looking down each side. Oh, lord, then we need someone

He looked down, and ran his hands through his thinning hair. ‘This is going to take some working out. Somebody get some breakfast organised, and put a coffee on, a strong one. Sergeant, walk with me, and Corporal, will you and Watson practice putting your anvil together, and check your time.’

Burgess and Green soon had some food organised and water boiling, and watched the activities in the clearing with interest. Kelly and Watson soon joined them, having established the safe time for assembly was six minutes, and they all watched interestedly as the lieutenant and the sergeant strode about the glade.

By the time they’d finished, they had cans and odds and ends scattered all around, and, deep in discussion, paced from one marker to another, then stopped, argued again, went back to where they’d started, and did the whole performance again, but via a different order of markers.

Finally, though, after one last discussion, involving pointing by Dodd and Brownlow ticking items off on his fingers, they marched back to the hut, Dodd rubbing his hands and saying ‘Right, where’s this coffee? I’m gasping.’

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Burgess answered 'Blimey, Sir, it'll be stone cold by now. There's still some hot water, though – I'll make you a fresh one. Did you sort it, Sir?'

'Well, yes, but it's complicated. One problem is communication. We're going to have one man hidden inside the camp, waiting to set up the fuel dump anvil and ready to let petrol out of a couple of drums. Can't do it before we're ready, you see – a passing sentry might spot the anvil, or worse still, trip on the fishing line and set it off too soon. And you can't let the petrol out too soon, either. It'd just sink into the ground, or the sentry'd be bound to smell it and raise the alarm. And the man assembling the anvils outside can't be watching for signals all the time – he'll have enough to do putting them together, so he'll need an observer. Upshot is, everyone's got several tasks, and everyone's to do their bit exactly right. What's more, we'll only get one go at this, so we're going to spend the rest of today practicing – after we've made the other anvils, that is, and we're going to do a rehearsal tonight, at the camp, at the actual places where we'll set the anvils. All right? Now, Sergeant Brownlow will give you details of the plan, but as I say, it's complicated, so expect changes as we go along.'

It was just as well they had time to sort it out: the first attempt was hopeless, and they abandoned it after a few minutes. Men were out of place, too slow, or racing in the wrong direction, or standing about waiting to be told what to do next.

Kelly summed up. 'Geez, boys, we're going to need more arse than a working bullock to pull this one off, fair dinkum we are.'

Brownlow called them together. 'You know what that was, don't you. What was it, Green?'

'Fuckin' shambles, Sarge!'

'Right, now you know how tricky this is going to be. And, there's not going to be the time or the opportunity for

anyone to tell you what you do next, or when. Now, a couple of changes, then we'll try again.'

The second attempt wasn't much better, Brownlow himself being out of place at one point, to the huge enjoyment of the others, including Dodd. A few more adjustments followed, and at the third try, they actually completed the whole thing, then stopped for a meal, and went through their individual tasks as they ate.

By the fifth run through, it was coming together well, but still taking too long, and they stopped practicing to sort out the issues. The main problem was with assembling the anvils, and they decided to reduce the line of 'bombs' outside the camp to three.

And Brownlow was having trouble with his workload, as well. He had to go through the wire, help Dodd climb in the window, go to the fuel dump and loosen the caps on a couple of drums, fill the gallon can with petrol, settle on where to place his anvil, then go back and get Dodd out of the hut, go to the wire and exchange the petrol can for his anvil, and go back to the dump and hide, to wait until everybody else was ready, then assemble his anvil and go to the perimeter wire, where Green would be waiting with the fishing line. Brownlow would then go back to his anvil, attach the line, remove the safety wire, and get out. Phew!

Green said quietly 'I think I've solved one of your problems, Sarge. How about this?' And he held out an anvil, ready assembled, with two stiff wires holding the two uprights apart, the top one also acting as the pivot on which the throwing arm turned. 'I was thinkin' you'd prob'ly be havin' trouble, so I passed the time today makin' this.'

Brownlow was amazed. 'Well, thanks very much, Gilbert, that's just the job, but how did you find time to do this?'

'Well, Sarge, my job on this raid is to go to the left corner of the wire to look out for sentries, then come along the

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wire to lay out the line from my hidey hole to the wire, pass it to you, then go back and get ready to pull it, yes?’

Brownlow nodded.

‘Not much to that, is there? So, while the rest of you were rushin’ about, practicin’, I was makin’ this while I passed the time.’

‘That’s wonderful!’ enthused Dodd. ‘Absolutely first rate. Could you make some more?’

‘Sorry Sir. I used the last of the heavy wire on this one. I tried the lighter wire, but it wouldn’t keep together. So this is one of a kind.’

Dodd nodded. ‘All right, Green, thanks. I’m sure we’re all grateful for it. Now, we have to allow for it being dark, assuming cloud cover. We need to work out our signals, first, for the lookouts to alert the others when a sentry’s coming, and to let Sergeant Brownlow know we’re ready to start the explosions, so he can set his anvil and get out. While we sort that out, Sergeant, would you have a practice setting up your anvil, so we know exactly how long you need.’

Watson asked ‘Is it that important Sir?’

‘Oh, yes. Picture it, Green is outside the wire, waiting to pass the line to Sergeant Brownlow, who’s at the dump, waiting for the signal to go, and Burgess is at the gap in the wire, waiting to let the Sergeant out. The rest of us are all ready to set off our mines, but we can’t do it until we hear planes approaching and can be sure they’ll be going roughly overhead. When we decide it’s time, the Sergeant has to set up the anvil, then get the line from Green, remove the safety wire from his mine, and get out. All right, Sergeant. Off you go. You too Green.’

Watson looked at Burgess, grimaced and shook his head. It was beginning to dawn on him, and the other privates, that this job was getting pretty hard to organise, and maybe there was more to this officer business than swigging gin and tonic.

After a while, Brownlow and Green came back, and Brownlow said, with a grim smile, 'It's much better, Sir. I reckon, from getting' the ready signal, I can do the lot and be out in two or three minutes.'

The men turned to Dodd, who threw his head back and stared blindly upwards, picturing the scene in his mind. He stayed immobile for a full two minutes, then the head came down and he smiled. 'It'll be very tight. We'll have to make the decision to go earlier than I'd like, but we can't have everything. All right, one more run through then we'll get some rest before the final rehearsal tonight.'

Predictably, the men groaned, but they knew it had to be done.

'Ere, Sir' asked Burgess, 'If we can get this practice right, why don't we 'ave a go at the real thing tonight like?'

'Because it's not a case of, as you say, having a go at it. No, we'll do a dry run tonight, but not here, at the camp, on the ground where the real thing's going to happen. We'll only get one chance at this, and we've discovered today there's lots of things can go wrong.'

And that night, outside the camp, they did go wrong. The men all knew where they were supposed to be, and when, and what to do while there, but they took a long time settling on the line the explosions were to take, exactly how far apart they should be, and where the men who were to pull the line for each one were to be.

The major shortcoming was revealed when Brownlow ran out the line to Green, who was waiting outside the wire. It was only fifty feet long, adequate to be clear of the blast from the little mine, but far too close to what they hoped would be the exploding petrol dump. They had to adjust the line of 'bombs' so it ran about twenty feet from a handy low stone wall. This enabled them to take some line from each of the outside anvils, because the men on the lines would be able to

shelter behind the wall, though they'd be much closer to the exploding mines than they'd planned. The extra line gave another thirty feet to Green – still dicey, but at least he could be in the ditch when he set off the mine, which would give him protection from the blast, if not from an immediate major explosion of drums, which would throw blazing fuel everywhere. They also found it was much slower putting the anvils together in the dark, and discovered that in all their practicing, they hadn't included extracting the safety wires from the mines. Worse still, nobody had thought to bring the large flat stones that would be needed for the mines to impact on.

It was a chastened group that plodded wearily back to the hut in the last of the night. The only good thing about the whole episode had been that Dodd had collected a good haul from the hut, and Brownlow had come back with a full can of petrol.

Dodd suggested that maybe they were being too ambitious, attempting a raid on the store as well as blowing the fuel, but it was Brownlow, surprisingly, because he had the heaviest workload, who argued for leaving breaking into the hut in the plan, saying that this would be their last chance to gather the supplies they needed to keep themselves, while they waited for the Allies. Dodd, though he lacked confidence himself, tried to cheer them. 'Don't be too disheartened, boys. The whole point of tonight was to iron out these problems, wasn't it? We'll do better tomorrow.'

But the men found it hard to sleep. They each knew how close they individually had come to stuffing the whole thing up.

They spent the next day in a state of tense excitement, each of them wishing for the darkness, so they could be getting on with it, get it over. Dodd had insisted on two more run

throughs, but by this time, they all knew exactly what to do, and they went into each rehearsal as much for something to do as to hone their parts.

As evening fell, the soldiers were spending most of their time silently watching Dodd and Brownlow, and were relieved when finally, Brownlow looked at Dodd, and received a curt nod in reply. By the time Brownlow had growled 'OK, boys, its time.' they were all on their feet. 'Now, those carrying anvils, check you've got all the bits, and your mine has a safety wire in.'

There was a murmur of confirmation.

'Show me your lines.'

Four hands, holding makeshift reels of line, came up.

'Got the stones, Green?'

'Certainly have, Sarge. Bloody heavy, too. Dunno why I couldn't just find some when we get

He tailed off in the face of Brownlows glare.

'Lookouts, got your torches?'

Two torches, their lenses shielded, were shown.

'Mr. Dodd, Sir, got your packs?'

'I have.'

'You sure you want to get in the hut Sir?' You won't have a torch, remember.'

'I'm sure. I have nothing else to do while they're setting up the anvils, and I can find my way about without a torch by now. Might as well grab what I can. So, are we ready, Sergeant?'

Brownlow nodded. 'As we'll ever be Sir.'

'All right. Excellent. One final word chaps. I know we've practiced this over and over, but we must still be ready for something, everything, to go wrong. If it does, don't look round for someone to tell you what to do – just do what you think is the right thing for the mission, which is to burn the petrol. Now, good luck, chaps, and

He stopped, and began shaking hands with each man in turn. They had a

moment of relief – they'd half expected Dodd to make them pray or something – and Kelly doused the remains of the fire as they began to file out into the darkness.

When they arrived at the jump-off point, conditions were perfect, clear skies, no moon but little cloud and a cool and gentle breeze, and the attack began remarkably smoothly. Dodd sent them away with a whispered 'Remember the donkey, chaps, and good luck.'

The first field they moved through had already been stripped of its wheat, and as they moved, the dusty, grainy smell made Kelly think briefly of home, and Watson, boots crunching and squeaking through the stubble, thought of tramping through deep snow.

The camp party, Dodd, Brownlow and Burgess, together with Green, who was the left corner lookout, disappeared into the darkness, leaving Kelly and Watson squatting in the deeper shadow beside the wall, waiting for the flash of the all clear signals before starting to set up their three anvils.

Burgess opened the wire and let Dodd and Brownlow in before closing up and moving to the right corner of the compound. Checking that the side of the camp was clear of sentries, he pointed his torch outwards, and gave a quick flash. Green had already done the same on the left side, and the two anvil men started their task, Watson calmly assembling the first one in the knowledge that Kelly was looking out and would warn him when to stop work.

They had one ready, with it's stone in place, and the second almost done when Kelly saw a brief flash from the edge of the wire. He whispered to Watson, and they both dropped silently to the earth. After a few minutes, there was a double flash from the other end, and they started again. As he worked, Watson whispered 'That lieutenants a pretty smart sort of a

chap, eh, Corporal? Who'd have guessed, eh? Planning all this, signals and everything. I wouldn't have thought of half of it, would you?'

'Maybe not, Bill, but he didn't think of these little buggers, did he? Or gettin' the mines. You done there yet?'

'Yep. That's it. One to go.'

They weren't interrupted by sentries again until they'd got all three anvils set up, and were preparing to set the fishing lines.

While this was going on, the scheme was entering a dangerous phase. Burgess had to move back to the gap in the wire, to signal the all clear to Brownlow and Dodd, but this meant the right side of the perimeter was not being watched. If a sentry wandered round the corner now, Watson and Kelly would be totally exposed. They'd had to accept the risk, and minimised it by working away from the wire, so that at this point, they were as far from the wire as they could get, but even so, it was a crucial time.

The window opened slightly, and Burgess whistled quietly. Brownlow appeared as the window swung wide and two well filled packs were thrust out. He put them on the ground and guided Dodd out, then closed the window again. The two men grinned briefly and Dodd moved to the wire, while Brownlow disappeared back into the darkness, towards the fuel dump, where he'd already loosened the caps of two drums, and had his anvil ready to go and hidden away.

When Dodd was back through the wire, Burgess cautiously crossed the track and crawled through the hedge before making his way back to the corner - he could do without bumping into a sentry suddenly appearing from the side, but all went well, and he was soon back in place guarding the right flank.

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After a short time, he heard the low whistle that signalled that Kelly and Watson had finished setting up their anvils, and moved back to his usual place behind the hedge, to wait until it was time to let Brownlow out for the last time.

Back in the field, Watson was now waiting in the lee of the stone wall. Kelly handed him the end of a length of line tied to the anvil nearest the camp. 'It's ready' Kelly whispered.

Watson knew what to do. 'Got the wire, Corporal?' he whispered. Kelly held up the safety wire he'd removed from the contraption for him to see, whispered back 'Good luck, mate' and left Watson alone, the line now tied to his finger.

Kelly moved on to the furthest anvil, took the safety wire out, and paid out the line. By this time, Dodd was there, as planned, and took the end of the line. Kelly held up the bit of wire without being asked, and said 'So far, so good, eh, boss? Bloody ripper!'

'Yes,' Dodd replied, 'frankly, I'm amazed! All we're waiting for is the Sergeant's signal.'

'Already seen it, skipper. We're all set. What we need now is a bit of assistance from the RAF. Fair's fair, they got us into this, didn't they? Least they can do is co-operate, eh?'

Dodd thought how calm Kelly was, making light hearted conversation even in this situation, then realised with a start that he was perfectly composed himself.

Kelly then moved back to the middle anvil, tied a line to it, removed the safety wire and carefully paid out the line to his assigned spot behind the wall, where he sank down, well pleased with the way his tasks had gone, and made himself comfortable.

Green wasn't feeling so tranquil. As soon as he'd seen the signal telling him the others were ready, he'd moved along to where the camp's boundary wire passed close to the fuel dump and crept out until he found the bit of ditch he'd

selected last night as his hidey hole. He tied the end of the line to the stick he'd jammed into the soil, then, doubled over, slunk to the wire, paying out the line as he went. As he arrived there, he clicked his fingers twice. Brownlow appeared out of the gloom and gave him a brief thumbs up and a quick smile before disappearing again. Green retreated to his place in the ditch, thinking that bloody great pile of petrol seemed a lot closer than he'd expected. His only consolation was that Brownlow was a bloody sight closer still.

The scene, to Brownlow's surprise, was now set. Now for the hardest bit – the waiting. He wondered what Dodd would do if there were no bombers overhead tonight. He remembered how they'd talked about it briefly, but hadn't come to a conclusion – didn't even have an 'abort' signal. Dodd obviously hadn't wanted to even think about it. Brownlow snorted silently. Difference between a professional and an amateur, he thought. A regular soldier would have planned for a no go. Bloody amateurs. But hang on, he mused, that wasn't quite fair. A professional wouldn't even have attempted this lark. He'd have laughed at the very idea! No equipment, no explosives or experts in handling it, no weapons, no proper soldiers even, 'cept a couple. No, a professional officer wouldn't have given it a second thought. But old Doddy, would you Adam an' Eve it, he might even pull this off! Make a good yarn for the sergeant's mess, anyway.

Brownlow thought of the men, all spread out and in position now, each knowing the others were nearby, but each in his own lonely cocoon, waiting. He wondered how Dodd was getting on. He didn't envy him being the bloke who had to make the decision. They were still in a position where they *could* pull out, but he knew they'd been lucky to get this far. He didn't fancy their chances of doing it again tomorrow.

Dodd was thinking exactly the same thing. He knew that all he had to do to set the final part of the operation in progress was to call quietly to Kelly, and the message would be passed to Brownlow, who would knock the caps off the fuel drums. When he did that, there would be no going back. If they didn't blow it up, the pool of fuel would soon be discovered by the sentries, and that would be the end. And timing was crucial too. If he heard the aircraft engines, and called too soon, it might turn out that the planes were not coming towards them, and the 'bombing' would be shown as a ruse, but if he left it until he was sure the planes were coming his way, they might have gone by the time Brownlow had finished his preparations. Dodd sat against the wall, fishing line in one hand, rubbing the back of his head with the other.

About an hour had crept by, the men moving and squirming from time to time, trying as best they could to get comfortable, when they first heard the distant droning. Heads went up, eyes searching without seeing as they put all their concentration into the sound, trying to place where it was coming from, and the direction it was going in.

Dodd had decided: if the aircraft were in anything like the right area, he'd give the word, and as the sounds got louder, he called 'All right, Kelly. We're on.'

'OK, boss. Beauty.'

Dodd heard him pass the warning on, and knew that Watson would now be quietly alerting Green, who would tell Brownlow and Burgess. Dodd counted the minutes off – he knew Brownlow needed time to open the petrol drums, set up his anvil, go to the wire where Green already had the line laid out, collect the end of the line from Green and tie it to the anvil, and finally remove the safety wire, before getting out. Dodd tried to picture that happening, with Burgess moving forward to open the wire, then getting away – no point in worrying about the gap being found now – then Green

scampering back to his hiding place in the ditch while Brownlow got through the wire and got away and Green flashed his signal to Dodd.

Nothing. Come on, *come on!* It'll be too late – the damned planes would be past. Where was the damned signal? Something must have gone wrong! They must have..... No! There was the double pinprick of light! Without hesitation, Dodd pulled firmly on his line, the arm swung down and *Boom!*

It worked! A seconds pause, then *Boom!* again as Kelly triggered his mine, and a second later, *Boom!* from Watsons! Time stood still for Dodd as he waited for the last one, the only one that mattered, imagining Green scampering for his cover, picking up his end of the line, then *Boom!* Yes! There it was! Bloody hell, they'd done it!

Kelly joined him and they shook hands, and Watson and Burgess appeared a few seconds later, running, crouching, grinning widely.

They couldn't resist looking - at first, they cautiously put their heads up, but as soon as they saw what they had done, they forgot where they were, and stood, transfixed by the great writhing column of flame, still spreading as the petrol from the drums continued to pour out less than eighty yards away from where they were.

Dodd had some anxious moments, scanning the area for signs of Brownlow and Green, but soon Brownlow appeared, complaining that they were visible a mile away, silly daft bastards, stood there like that, but he immediately turned and became entranced himself, but after a few moments, said 'Disappointing, though, isn't it?'

Dodd was amazed. 'What? Disappointing? Just look at it! *We* did that!'

'Yeah, I know, but I was hoping the whole dump would go up. All we've got there is a couple of drums worth

of petrol burning off. We'd have got the same result if we'd just taken the caps off the drums and let it pour away.'

'No, that can't be right! Look at the blaze, man! There must be a lot more than two drums worth of petrol there.'

But as they watched, they could see for themselves the ferocity of flames was beginning to waver and fall away.

'Oh my lord, you're right, Sergeant. All that effort, the danger I exposed you chaps to, for nothing, really. And Green's not back either. I was always worried he was too near the petrol. If he's injured, and all we've done is this, I'll never forgive myself. Never.'

But Green showed up then, full of glee and relief. He instantly read the sombre mood in the faces and thought somebody must have been killed, but no, everybody was there.

'What's up chaps? We did it, didn't we?'

Watson answered. 'Yes, Gilbert, it all went perfectly, except the dump didn't explode, did it? I just assumed the whole damned thing would go, didn't you?'

Green turned and regarded the flames, still burning gaily, lighting up the area for fifty yards around, but clearly beginning to pall now, and as he watched, a fire truck arrived, quickly followed by another, and their crews prepared to start work.

'Oh, shit. I thought so too, Bill. Good fun though, weren't it?' He tried a grin, but it didn't really work.

'Well, chaps,' said Dodd 'we'd better get going before we're seen' and he turned and started drudging away, defeat written broad in his words and his manner. The men fell in behind him, morose and deflated now after the excitement and joy.

They'd only gone a few yards when there was a series of loud explosions behind them, and they turned again, to see fires breaking out through the camp. They were still wondering

what was going on when another series of blasts, nearer this time, sent them staggering.

Brownlow laughed and clapped, yelling 'Yes! Send it down lads!'

Dodd was still bewildered. 'What? What's going on?'

Brownlow slapped Dodd on the back, and grabbed his hand. 'Bombs, Sir! The boys up there must've seen the fire and thought it was a marker flare, so now they're bombing the bastards!'

As more and more bombs rained down, the mood of elation returned, and the men danced and skipped like children, hugging, shaking hands and backslapping, yelling and screaming into the night, watching more explosions until a trail of errant bombs, landing nearby, sent them scurrying for home.

Chapter 12

They took a couple of days off after that, letting the excitement work its way out of their bodies. They'd kept away from the camp since the raid, assuming that security would have been tightened, so they couldn't be sure what the damage was, but thinking back, and remembering the lines of explosions running through the whole area, they assumed the destruction was severe. They couldn't have done much anyway – they'd be sitting about, or eating, or sleeping, even, when somebody would think back, and find the urge to chuckle irresistible. This would start somebody else off, and soon they'd all be at it, laughing uncontrollably, helplessly rolling on the ground, slapping and punching until, breathless, they got back under control.

Nobody had put it into words, at least, not out loud, but on looking back, each of them realised how unlikely it was that they should have succeeded, and in fact, would have failed but for the mistaken but welcome intervention of the RAF. But they *had* done it, and knew that this was the great adventure of their lives.

Market day came round, and Dodd, dressed in his civilian suit, set off for his now regular weekly visit to the town. He found it difficult to maintain the steady plod of the other people on the road – he was still exhilarated about the raid and its result, and felt like skipping and whistling along the road as he looked forward to getting the latest news over a good breakfast with his new friend the priest. And he couldn't help wondering what the townspeople thought about the bombing of the camp.

He should have been alerted that something was wrong – a long convoy of army trucks, many of them towing field guns, clattered and ground its way past him, going south,

but at the time, he was just too pleased with himself to realise that daytime movement of a military convoy was unusual. He did notice that the trucks were Italian, but not that the stone faced troops in the back wore German uniform, and it didn't break through his mood of self satisfaction.

He managed to keep the spring out of his step as he walked in among the ancient buildings and approached the market square, but as he got closer, he began to get a sense of something not being quite right, and slowed down, a small knot of anxiety forming in his stomach. The square was quite crowded, more than he'd seen it before, but he suddenly realised that instead of the usual subdued bustle, nobody seemed to be moving about, and it was eerily quiet too.

Dodd had begun to ease through the people, making towards the priest's home, before it really dawned on him that something was badly wrong. Nobody had a word of greeting for him, not even a smile: just surly looks and disgruntled muttering. And then he saw them - German soldiers! He felt his guts lurch, and his first thought was that they'd worked out that the bombing of the camp had been assisted from the ground, and they were here to take reprisals. As he watched, he saw they had formed a line, and were systematically working their way across the square, coming towards where he stood, checking people's papers, searching their clothes and property. Dodd knew that he could pass for Italian if questioned, but not having identity papers would be fatal - he'd be an immediate suspect as a deserter or black marketeer.

He turned to get back out of the square the way he'd come in, but now saw the road was being guarded by a couple of German soldiers, and felt his insides churn again. Trapped! How could he not have seen them as he came in? He'd got too confident, too lazy! He was in the middle of the thin crowd now, looking round for somewhere to hide, when he saw several townsmen easing their way through the people,

coming towards him from several directions. He guessed they were the local Fascists, coming to grab this stranger who'd been hanging around, to hand him over to the Germans as a sign of good will! Dodd stood still, stunned, his mind frozen, and the men were suddenly on top of him, all round him now. Somebody caught Dodd from behind and started pulling him, whispering in Italian 'This way. Quick. And be quiet.'

Dodd felt himself being drawn along, shielded by the bodies of the men, and soon they were all huddled in a doorway, which opened immediately to a knock, and Dodd was bundled inside. An old woman, he thought she was the one from the priest's house, but she gave no sign of recognition, was there, pulling at his arm, saying in Italian 'Come on, come on! There's no time!' She quickly closed the door, and the men outside dispersed.

The old lady pulled him down a dark corridor, into a large room set up as some kind of waiting room, an assortment of aged and mismatched chairs lining the walls. She pushed a small table from the middle of the room, and, with a stoop and a practiced flick, moved a rug to reveal a trap door set into the floor. She looked from Dodd to the trap and hissed 'Pronto, pronto.'

Still bewildered by the suddenness of the change of events, Dodd lifted the trap and clambered down the ladder that was revealed. The old woman began to close the door, and as she did so, muttered 'Now, quiet. If they find you we'll all be dead. Someone will come for you later.'

With that, the trap door closed over him, and Dodd was left in the darkness, surrounded by the damp, musty smell of a cellar. In a second, he heard the dull thump of the table being replaced. He stood there, frozen, still holding on to the ladder, trying to absorb his change of fortune. In less than five minutes, he'd been happy as Larry, anticipating a pleasant breakfast, followed by shock, fear and the very edge of panic, replaced in turn by confused relief at an unexpected rescue.

And his feeling that he was losing touch with reality wasn't helped when a quiet voice piped up from behind him 'Well fuck me gently, Sir, I never expected to see you 'ere, 'kin' 'ell, I never.'

Dodd turned. 'Kinnell? I mean, Tullett, is that you?'

'kin' right, Sir! What you doin' 'ere? But keep your voice down, eh?'

Dodd was probing in the darkness, trying to place where Tullett was. 'Never mind how I got here, how are you? We thought you must be dead! And *where* are you? I can't see a blessed thing.'

'Over 'ere, Sir. Yer eyes'll get used to it in a minute, there's a bit o' light comin' in from a gratin'. I can't come an' get yer – me foots a bit bugged.'

As he became accustomed to the dimness, Dodd began to pick out the ghostly shapes of a table and chair, and, against the far wall, a bed with a reclining form on it.

He stumbled his way towards the body and gripped an outstretched hand. 'My word, Tullett, it's good to see you' Then, suddenly remembering his circumstances, Dodd whispered 'What happened to you? We heard the mine go off, of course, but by the time we'd got to the beach, there was nothing! Not a sign! We searched and searched, but you'd disappeared off the face of the earth!'

'Well, as best as I can put it together, like, I remember walkin' across the beach, as usual, on me way to me fishing spot. I must ha' gone off me reg'lar route and set off a fuckin' mine, but I remember fuck all about that 'til I come round bein' carted off the beach by three or four blokes. Turned out it was the blokes from them little boats, I found out after. Fuckin' lucky they was there, eh? If the fuckin' army'd found me, they'd have started askin' questions, wouldn't they? I still don't know why the locals took me in, but any rate, I'm fuckin' glad they did. They've been seein' after me ever since – even got a doctor comes in to look after me foot. They don't

hardly speak any English though, daft buggers, so I'm stuffed if I know whats goin' on, or how long I been 'ere, even.'

Tullett thought for a second, before adding 'That's about it, really, but blimey, it's good to talk to somebody what understands. So, what's your story, then?'

Dodd told him about his visits to town, and how he'd come close to disaster, being saved only by the quick thinking of the townsmen, then went back to tell the story of how Tullett's disappearance had led to their change of thinking, culminating in the raid on the camp.

Tullett was half sitting now, propped on one arm, visibly impressed. 'Was that *you* did that? 'Kin' 'ell! We 'eard the explosions and I knew straight off it was an air raid, but fuck me, it didn't strike me you lot was involved! How d'you do it, Sir?'

Dodd was just beginning to describe the recovery of the mines, when a noise from overhead indicated that the table was being moved, and the two men froze. Had their hiding place been discovered, or given away? The trapdoor opened, and a youngish man, mid-twenties maybe, swung himself down into the cellar and somebody above immediately closed the trap behind him. He fumbled for a second before a match flared and the newcomer, hunched over the table, lit an oil lamp which produced a meagre and eerie light.

There was the sound of the furniture overhead being moved back, and the young man, still bent, put a finger to his lips in the unmistakable signal for silence. They all froze. Nothing happened for several minutes, then there was the sound of several pairs of boots entering the room above and moving around before going away.

The young man relaxed and stood upright, smiling. Tullett smiled back and said 'Ah, Sir, this is Angelo. I call 'im Angel, don't I, mate?' as he held out his hand and exchanged friendly grins with the newcomer. Dodd took in the young man as best he could in the dingy light. Quite short, but well

built, brown as leather, like most of the locals, black haired, and looked well fed. Several days' growth of beard blackened his chin, his clothes looked worn but clean and cared for, he'd easily pass for just another local man in the crowd, but for his age. All the other men of the town Dodd had seen were at least middle aged, but this one, well, he couldn't be more than twenty five, which made him of military age, so he was either a deserter or had escaped being called up into the army somehow, probably hiding out in the mountains to the west. Dodd, with all his experience, took this in at a glance, and knew immediately that this was a man who could be trusted.

He moved towards the young man and held out his hand, who took it, and, to Dodd's utter astonishment, smiled again, looked Dodd in the eye and said 'Bollocks!'

Bewildered, Dodd turned to Tullett, who was wearing a wide smirk. 'I been teachin' Angel a bit of English, Sir, to pass the time like. 'E ain't quite got the 'ang of it yet. 'E means 'ello''

Dodd looked hard at Tullett, and quickly grasping the situation, said in Italian, 'Thank you for rescuing me. Without your help, I was bound to be captured. And thanks for helping Tullett here, as well. We're both most grateful.'

Angelo smiled and shrugged in such a way that his meaning was clear – it was nothing, and asked 'You are the one in charge? The officer?'

Dodd replied uneasily 'I'm a lieutenant: I don't know about in charge. Half the time I have no idea what's going on.'

Angelo mulled that over. 'We will wait until the Germans have finished their search. They are being thorough, it might take some time. Then I must take you to speak with some people. Maybe we can help each other.'

It was Dodd's turn to be thoughtful. 'I really don't know how we can help you. What did you have in mind?'

Dodd's Army

The young man shrugged again in that expressive Italian way, and replied 'We must be quiet now. Then you can talk to the others.'

The Italian turned out the lamp then, and they lapsed into silence.

Almost an hour passed before they were shaken from their thoughts by more noises from above. When the trapdoor was thrown open, the men cringed away from the light for a few moments, then Angelo spoke to Tullett in Italian. Tullett looked at Angelo as though he was a simpleton. 'Kin' 'ell, Angel! What *are* you on about? Any idea, Sir?'

'He's saying I must go with him, but you'll have to stay down here until they know it's safe to get you up. He says you'll get something to eat soon. I'll get back and let you know what's going on as soon as I can.'

Dodd turned, and Angelo led the way up into the room full of chairs, and from there, waved Dodd into another, smaller room. A quick glance round showed it was a doctors consulting room, with an ancient examination table and a decrepit wooden cabinet, from which one door was missing, revealing a tangle of bandages and bottles, but the room was overwhelmed by a huge desk, ornate but in the last stages of it's journey from the showroom to the dump. The old man who sat behind it matched it exactly – grossly overweight and ostentatiously dressed, a red and gold striped waistcoat over a high stiff collared shirt with a broad scarlet tie, the whole ensemble covered by a black frock coat, liberally spattered with food scraps and dusted by the ash from a long, thin and evil smelling cigar. This apparition was topped by a veritable explosion of pure white hair. Dodd wondered if the man had dressed like this deliberately in an attempt to intimidate him, or if this was his normal appearance. He guessed it was normal for him.

He stared back at Dodd, examining him carefully, but said nothing. Dodd realised they were waiting for somebody, and looked back steadily at the seated man, determined not to be cowed. After a minute, Dodd heard the door behind him open, and the priest came past him and stood behind the seated man. Dodd looked at him and smiled, but he avoided Dodd's gaze. Dodd caught a waft of garlic and tobacco behind him and turned to see two townsmen standing in front of the door, watching him closely. He recognised one of them somehow, but got no sign that the man knew him. He smiled to himself, recognising the intended intimidation.

The room was crowded now, hardly room for everyone, and they all now turned to the seated man, waiting for him to begin. He continued to look at Dodd for another minute, then glanced at the priest, and nodded, before returning to regard Dodd through half closed eyes.

'We don't know what to make of you.' Verdi began, stone faced. 'You've been in hiding for many days, stealing our vegetables, ...'

One of the men at the door broke in. 'And our rabbits.'

Dodd now remembered where he'd seen the man before.

Verdi agreed 'Yes, and our rabbits, but doing no real harm, and you gave us the chalice, but then you signalled the bombers to bring destruction to our town. Why should we not hand you over to the Germans?'

'If the bombs did damage to your town, I am truly sorry. It was not our intention to signal the bombers, but only to blow up the fuel dump. We tried to make it look like a bombing raid, though, so the authorities would not think it was the work of partisans, and take reprisals.'

As he said this, Dodd realised he'd fallen into a simple trap, and had admitted that he was not alone. In the silence that followed, though, he also realised that the

question meant that they knew he'd been there some time, and if they knew that, they certainly knew there were others with him.

'Why did you wait so long before attacking the camp?'

'Our first thought was simply to avoid capture, and survive. But when one of us was injured in the minefield, we decided to do something more, well, active.'

There was a long pause while they all digested this, then the seated man broke the silence. 'Do you mean to say you did not come here to attack the camp?'

'That is correct – we are survivors from a crashed aeroplane.'

'We know nothing of a crashed plane.'

'It fell into the sea. We were lucky to get to land.'

The big man continued 'But you have explosives and the knowledge to use them.'

Dodd described how his men had got hold of the mines, and how they'd managed to set them off, and by the time he'd finished, his audience was engrossed. After absorbing Dodd's story, the Italians were all looking at him with new interest.

The seated man studied Dodd again before demanding 'What is a Frenchman doing in Italy?'

'I'm English.'

'I don't think so.'

They looked at each other in silence for a while. Dodd was determined not to fall into the trap of filling the silence. Finally the other man said: 'I don't believe an Englishman could speak Italian as well as you. In any case, you were heard to speak French.'

That caught Dodd out. 'Oh? When was this?'

'Inside the army camp, when you were stealing Italian property.'

Dodd remembered, and smiled. ‘That’s right. I did speak French, but only because I was confused. And the other man was stealing, too.’

‘That’s different. He’s an Italian: his taxes had already paid for what he took.’ He made a great show of selecting a new cigar and lighting it before continuing. ‘So, we know you are a thief and a man prepared to cause serious damage, and now it seems you are a liar too.’

‘No, I am English, but as I have already told Father Verdi, I spent a lot of my youth in Italy, Rome mostly, and learnt most of my Italian there.’

The fat man then grilled Dodd about the layout of Rome, which he responded to easily. The hooded eyes regarded him for a while, before he said ‘So, prove to me you are English.’

Dodd had nothing on him that would help him – he’d been careful to remove anything that might betray where he was from in case he was caught – he’d never imagined he’d be trying to prove he *was* English. In desperation, he said ‘The soldier with the injured foot – he only speaks English, doesn’t he?’

‘He *says* he only speaks English. Nobody here speaks English, so how can we know? How do we know you are not spies, sent by the Fascists to find people who want them and the Germans out?’

‘But the chalice....?’

‘An obvious trick, to ease your way into our confidence. There are Germans in Rome and Naples who could easily have stolen it.’

Dodd suddenly realised the man was right to be suspicious -his story did seem improbable. He thought hard before replying: ‘You have watched us and I imagine you’ve searched our kit, such as it is. We have no radio, little to write notes with, no binoculars. We brought no food or cooking gear with us, no sleeping bags, no weapons. If we were

Fascist spies, wouldn't we have all that, and wouldn't we have tried to get to know the people of the town?' He had a sudden inspiration. 'And wouldn't we at least *all* be wearing civilian clothes?

The seated man turned to Verdi with raised eyebrows, and Verdi said to Dodd 'Wait outside the door. These men will attend you.'

After a few minutes, the door was opened again, and Verdi, all smiles now, beckoned them back, saying 'Please, my friend, sit down' and indicated the chair in front of the desk. 'This is Doctor Cianetti, who is also the mayor of Casagrigio. And you, we don't know your name?'

Dodd pondered, then told him, and gave his rank.

Verdi explained that they had to be careful of Fascist infiltrators, and went on to tell Dodd that they'd known about his group hiding out in the woodcutters hut for weeks, and there had been much speculation about what they were doing there, especially after Dodd had come to Verdi with the chalice. There had been numerous theories put forward, but none of them had made much sense, especially after the hut had been carefully searched while the men were all away, and no weapons or equipment was found. The personal papers and unit badges on the clothing they'd found didn't help – nobody could understand them. The truth, that the men were there by chance, had not been thought of.

Dodd asked about the damage to the town. Dr. Cianetti smiled for the first time and replied 'A line of bombs dropped on some farm buildings on the edge of the town. Nobody was injured, but a fine barn and other outbuildings were completely destroyed. As it happens, the farm belongs to old Facci, the chief Fascist in the town. Naturally, the townspeople all turned out to help put out the fire, and in the end, shall we say, confusion, all his fine pigs disappeared. We can only assume they all escaped.'

A badly suppressed guffaw from behind Dodd confirmed his suspicion that in fact, the pigs had all found new, if temporary, homes.

There was a knock on the door, and the elderly woman who had first admitted Dodd appeared with a tray of food, coffee and wine. Dodd studied her carefully, and Verdi noticed, asking with a smile 'Does she remind you of someone?'

Dodd replied 'She is your housekeeper, isn't she?'

'The resemblance is remarkable, is it not, but no, she is in fact Maria's twin sister Sophia. Maria lives next door, with me, and Sophia lives here. The odd thing is that they haven't spoken to each other for forty years. Nobody knows why. I doubt if they do now. The only explanation?' he gave that expressive shrug, 'They are Italian, and Italians are as good at holding grudges as they are at looking after guests. Now eat, while I tell you some news, and in return, perhaps you and your men can help us.'

There it was again, Dodd noted, the suggestion that he could help these people, but didn't press for details. He'd decided to wait for them to tell him what they wanted.

Verdi continued. 'Now, the news of the war is that the Allies have consolidated down south, but also, the rumour is that the British have landed a force at Tantara, that's only, oh, under a hundred kilometres from here, and the Americans have landed over in Salerno. But even more important, General Eisenhower announced on the radio only two days ago that Italy has surrendered! Yes! You have to admire the Germans, in a way. Within twenty four hours of the announcement, they were swarming all over the transport camp, taking over the whole operation. Impressive, eh? And now, they've started checking up on us civilians, which is where you came in this morning. I think things will be more difficult for you and your men from now on. I don't think you will find it so easy to steal from the camp, ...'

Dodd's Army

Dodd was shaken. 'You knew about that?'

'Of course, and your raids on our produce.'

The voice from behind muttered 'And about the rabbits'

It was Dodd's turn to be puzzled now. 'And yet you didn't turn us in.'

'We didn't want a fuss made. If our soldiers had known about you, they might have realised their security wasn't so good, and would have done something about it, which might have been, er, inconvenient to us. In any case, you weren't doing much harm,' he glared past Dodd at the rabbit man, who wisely kept quiet, 'and some of us thought it might be useful to have you nearby when the Allies come. And speaking of that, what are your plans now?'

'Yes, excellent question. When I get back to my men we must sort that out. I think the only sensible course for us is to stay in hiding and wait for the Allies. Personally, I'm not too keen on that. Sitting in the middle of a battlefield, bombs and shells everywhere, is not my idea of fun, especially now the Germans have arrived - I'm sure they'll resist every inch of the way. In any case, I imagine they'll soon have patrols out looking for stray Italian soldiers and partisans.'

He looked hopefully at Verdi. 'Without help, I really don't think we can last very long on our own, but I don't see an option.'

'What do you think will happen to our town? Do you think we will be bombed?'

Dodd thought for a minute, then shook his head. 'I just don't know, Father. I don't think the Allies will bomb every town and village in their way. I imagine it will depend on the Germans, whether they decide to defend it.'

'Is that likely?'

'My friend, I don't know what my army will do, never mind the Germans.' Dodd went into one of his reveries. 'Let's have a guess, though. I'd guess that the only strategic

value Casagrigio has is that it sits astride the main north/south road on this side of the country. So yes, that could well make it a place the Germans will defend to allow their troops to fall back up the road. Which means, of course, that the Allies will have the same idea and try to bomb the town to close the road to the Germans retreat.

‘Just as bad, as far as you’re concerned, as they pull out, the Germans will probably blow up buildings in the town so as to block the road and deny it to the Allies. You know, the more I think of it, the more I believe that your town, with the main road running through it, will be fought over.’

The doctor, who had been leaning back in his chair and watching Dodd through half closed eyes, now suddenly sat forward, and leaned across the desk.

‘That’s exactly what we’re concerned about. It’s the road. The road has always been central to our history. In the past, it has brought us a little prosperity - without it, our town would be just another farming village, and now, it will bring death and destruction to Casagrigio.’

He paused, and leaning as far forward as his girth would allow, fixed Dodd with his gaze and added, quietly, ‘Unless, of course, we can stop it.’

Dodd was speechless for several seconds, before he managed ‘How could you do that?’

‘You’re the soldier - what would *you* do?’

‘Well, I can’t see you mounting a defence against the Germans, and you certainly couldn’t stop the Allies bombing the place. So, what *could* you do?’

Dodd suspected they already had an idea in mind, and found himself on his feet, pacing up and down the tiny space left in the room while he thought about it. *If they couldn’t defend the place, couldn’t stop it being bombed, what else was there? Go back to the beginning. The town’s value lay in the road – if the road wasn’t there, the town wouldn’t be worth defending, or bombing. So, how could they reduce the*

strategic value of the road? Make it impassable? But how? Even if they got hold of some more mines and blew up a bit of road, the military could repair the holes in five minutes flat. But wait! Hold on! Kelly had mentioned a river to the South when he'd patrolled out that way, so there must be a bridge! No bridge, no traffic on the road! No strategic value! Excellent!

Dodd came back to earth to find the doctor and the priest watching his face. 'There is a bridge on the river?'

The doctor agreed there was a road bridge, just a few kilometres south, and a railway bridge, further inland.

'If we could find a way to destroy the road bridge, so the road is useless to the Germans retreat, they'd have to use the railway bridge to get their people across, and that would take them well wide of the town! So there'd be no point in either side attacking or defending the town.'

The doctor turned the priest and smiled. 'You said he was a clever one, Father.'

Verdi grinned back at Dodd, who was still thinking. 'Yes, but hold on. The bridge is made of stone, I imagine?'

Both Italians nodded.

'I'm no expert, but I would say it'd take a lot of explosive to damage it, never mind make it collapse. I'm not at all sure the mines from the beach would be any use.'

The priest did not reply, but moved to the door, and, opening it, called 'Angelo.'

The man Angelo must have been right there, because he entered immediately, and went with the priest to stand with the doctor. He smiled at Dodd and offered 'Bollocks' before proudly explaining to the other Italians that this was an English form of greeting. Dodd could see the priest was impressed, and watched his lips move minutely as he silently practised the word. He was thinking he might impress the bishop, who had a soft spot for the English.

The doctor, who was still watching Dodd, said ‘This officer thinks we should destroy the bridge.’

Angelo looked pleased. ‘Which one?’

‘The road. But he says we will need a lot of explosives.’

Angelo looked even more happy. ‘We have lots of explosives.’

Dodd was amazed. ‘You have explosives? How did you get hold of them?’

Angelo smiled again. ‘Best you don’t ask questions like that.’

‘Then I don’t understand why you’re involving me? Don’t you have fuses?’

The smile disappeared, and Angelo looked at the floor. ‘We don’t know how to use it. We are farmers, most of us. What would we know? When we stole the explosives, we also took the stuff that was with it, we think it’s the detonating machine, but we don’t really understand it. We also have some guns’ and here he mimed shooting with a machine gun, with accompanying noises, ‘but we don’t know how to fire them either. Old Luigi nearly took his own hand off trying to make one work.’

Then the priest put into words what Dodd had begun to suspect. ‘We need help from somebody who knows about these things.’

There was a long silence while the Italians waited for Dodd to reply. ‘Let me get this straight. You wish to blow up the road bridge, and you have the material to do it, but you want us to instruct you *how* to do it?’

The doctor was leaning forward again. ‘Not exactly. We want you and your men to come with us, and we’ll do it together.’

Another long pause, then Dodd replied ‘I will talk with my men. If they are prepared to help, then so am I. And now, I must be getting back.’

Dodd's Army

There was a loud cheer in the hut after Dodd had told the men he'd spoken to Tullett - Burgess especially, had been overjoyed at the news, even more than the news about the new Allied landings.

Dodd then told them that the locals had known about them pretty much all along, and that quietened them down a lot. They'd pictured themselves creeping about the fields and vegetable gardens, stealing produce and thinking they were putting one over on the country bumpkins, when they were being watched all the while, and allowed to carry on!

The news about the Italian surrender had caused confusion: their first reaction, naturally enough, was that it meant their exile was over, until Dodd emphasised the speed of the German reaction, and explained that the Germans must have been ready for this eventuality. He'd really taken the smiles off their faces when he said 'The surrender works against us, you know. The Italian soldiers, well, we know how disinterested they are, but the Germans will be very different. We can certainly forget about pinching any more stores, it'll be much too hard now. But, listen, it gets worse. I suggest that as soon as they're organised, they'll be doing patrols all over the area, and frankly, I'd be surprised if this place doesn't get found in a week.'

Brownlow saw the point immediately. 'You're right, Sir. O'course they will. But, shit, that makes it bloody hard for us, don't it? I mean, the idea was to sit tight and wait for our lot to come up to us, but I doubt we'll be able to do that by staying here. Oh, shit.'

The men had all grasped the enormity of their changed situation now, and were looking worried. Kelly groaned, and said 'Jeez, boss, if we stay out, we'll be back to livin' rough, won't we? No proper shelter, no fire, have to be ready to move all the time. Bugger it! I was just getting' used to a nice easy life, with a bit of excitement from time to time.'

Dodd took the cue Kelly had offered him. ‘Well, Corporal, as it happens, I can offer you some more excitement, if you’re interested. But it’s a bit dangerous, and I think we all have to agree to it. Now listen carefully.’

And he told them about the townspeople’s concern for their town, their thinking about the road, and the bridge, and that they’d got a good supply of explosives. He let them digest all that for a moment, then asked ‘Well, chaps, what do you think? Should we do it? *Can* we do it?’

Green quickly made a valid point. ‘Is it the right thing to do as far as our forces are concerned, Sir? I mean, I’m all for helping the people who helped Kinnell, but not if it’s going to make life harder for English soldiers.’

Dodd smiled and replied ‘Excellent point, Green. But I don’t think there’s any problem there. The Germans are still pouring reinforcements south along the road, and if we disrupt that traffic, well, that can only be good. And, as our troops move north, the Germans won’t be able to escape over the river and defend the north bank, so that’s good too. No, the only problem with demolishing the bridge will be that it won’t be available for our troops to cross, but the Germans would certainly blow it themselves once they were all back this side of it, so I’m sure we won’t be doing our side any damage.’

He looked at Green, who nodded, satisfied, and then turned his attention to Kelly. ‘What do you think, Corporal? You’re the nearest thing we’ve got to an explosives expert. Do you think you could blow up a bridge?’

Kelly thought for a moment, before replying. ‘Oh, sure, boss. Blowing things up is easy, as long as you don’t care about damaging nearby stuff as well. That way, you can use plenty of dynamite, or whatever. So as long as they’ve got enough, and the detonators and what have you, yes, we could knock it over, no worries.’

Dodd nodded thanks, and addressed the group. ‘All right, chaps, there’s no military reason against it, and it seems

we've probably got the tools to do it. So the question is, *should* we have a go?

Somehow, Dodd knew Burgess would be first in. 'Count me in, Sir!' He was quickly followed by Kelly, who smiled and said 'Bloody oath.'

Dodd asked 'Would that be a yes?' and Kelly nodded.

Green and Watson eyed each other, grinned broadly, and Green said enthusiastically 'I like this soldier lark, don't you, Bill? Blowing stuff up and that!'

'Absolutely, Gilbert, great fun, isn't it? And stealing stuff. I like stealing stuff!'

Brownlow was more thoughtful. 'Hold on a minute boys. We were lucky before, we come close to a real fuckin' shambles. You know that. And this time it'll be proper soldiers we're up against, not a bunch of blokes who couldn't care less. *And* they're on the defensive, which will make 'em edgy. They'll think nothing of shootin' the whole fuckin' lot of us if we're caught, you know. We need to think hard about getting' involved. Any rate, that's what I think. What do you reckon, Sir?'

They were all on their feet now, and stood silently as Dodd revealed 'Well, I have to say there is another problem - the Italians *want* to be involved, and they're not going to just hand over the materials and let us get on with it. Most of them didn't want to be in this war, but now they've surrendered, they're pretty disgusted with themselves. It's a matter of pride now, as much as anything. They need to do something to show

He found himself giving that expressive shrug, and smiled. 'For myself, I think we should do it, but to be honest, I *want* to do it.'

Suddenly, they were all as excited as schoolboys, laughing and slapping each others backs. All, that is, except the ever-practical Brownlow, who chewed his lip for a while, then said 'All right, settle down. There's another question we

need to ask, and that's *how* could we do it? None of us have ever seen the bloody thing, and for all we know, it might be impossible to knock over. Or more likely, if it's that important, the Germans'll have a heavy guard on it by now. And we haven't actually seen the explosives either – for all we know, it might be useless, or they haven't got the right detonators. So let's not get over-excited. We need to do some sorting out before we commit ourselves.'

Burgess wasn't convinced. 'Oh, come on Sarge, we've done it once, we can do it again. We blew up an army camp with a few nicked land mines, for chrissake. Doin' a bridge with proper explosives'd have to be a fuckin' doddle, wouldn't it!'

Dodd accepted Brownlow's caution, though. 'The Sergeant's quite right, chaps. We'd need to do this job even more carefully than the petrol dump business. So, I've arranged to meet the leader of the local, er, well, partisans, I suppose you'd have to call them, even though I don't believe they've actually done much in the way of action. If you don't include stealing supplies from the camp, that is. But after all, they did get the explosives and some weapons from *somewhere*, so maybe they have struck a blow before. At any rate, I want you to come along, Corporal. If you see what they've got, can you tell if it's the right stuff?'

Kelly hesitated, then said 'I imagine their explosive looks much like ours, Sir, and the detonating material too. And I'll need a good close up look at the bridge too. I never saw any bridge that time when I was down south at the harbour.'

'Of course. We'll do a recce next. You'll come too, Sergeant - I'd welcome your thoughts. And after that, we'll decide whether to have a crack at it. Happy, Sergeant?'

Brownlow looked more comfortable then, even though the conversation had quieted the others down – the realisation of what they were thinking of attempting was

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beginning to sink in. 'Happy, Sir. So, when do we go to meet the wassname, king of the partisans, and have a look at his kit?'

'I've agreed to meet him at first light tomorrow, over at that track that leads past the cow pasture you and I came across that time, Burgess. Remember? It seems there's the remains of an old building there, and that's where we'll meet.'

Chapter 13

By first light the next day, Dodd, Brownlow and Kelly had only just found the meeting point. The hike across to the pasture was no problem, but they'd spent a long time wandering about in a misty half moonlight looking for the building, scaring themselves more than once by almost blundering into dozing cattle, and had finally settled on a corner where a few stones and a handful of rotten timbers suggested that there might once have been some kind of structure.

Brownlow was concerned that there was little cover nearby, except the half tumbled stone wall of the pasture, and his fears seemed to have been justified when they heard the whining of a vehicle in low gear approaching. All they could do was crouch in the lee of the wall and wait for the vehicle to pass, but as it drew near, with a protesting squeal of brakes, it ground to a halt and the engine juddered and rattled into silence.

All of a sudden, Brownlow realised this couldn't be a German army vehicle – it sounded too obviously ramshackle and badly maintained for that, and he was still wondering what to make of it, when he heard a door open with small shriek, and made out the sound of first one man getting out, then another.

The hidden men stayed motionless as they heard the scratch of a match and the small sounds of the men lighting cigarettes, then silence fell again for a moment, before, to Brownlow and Kelly's utter amazement, a voice called softly, 'Bollocks! Bollocks, signor Dodd!'

Brownlow and Kelly were still frozen with surprise when Dodd grinned broadly, stood and said 'Come on chaps – come and meet Angelo.'

They looked at each other, then Brownlow shook his head slightly, and they both appeared over the wall together and stood examining the two men before them. Both of them were as Dodd had described Angelo - short, stocky, swarthy with open, friendly looking faces, who gazed frankly and interestedly back at the soldiers before Angelo identified himself by holding out his hand to Brownlow, and repeating 'Bollocks!'

Brownlow grinned and turned to Dodd. 'It sounds for all the world like he's saying bollocks, Sir. What does it mean, in English, like?'

'It *is* English, Sergeant, as taught by Tullett. Angelo thinks it means welcome, or hello.'

Brownlow suddenly caught on. 'Oh, right.' He took Angelo's outstretched hand. 'Bollocks to you too, son!'

Angelo looked pleased. Kelly joined in, laughing, and took Angelo's hand in turn, saying 'Dogs bollocks, mate.'

Angelo was more pleased than ever, but wisely reverted to Italian when he said to Dodd, 'This is Dino, my cousin. He doesn't speak any English.' He shrugged, indicating that not everybody was as cosmopolitan and well educated as himself, and they all went through the handshake routine again. Dodd said quietly to his men 'If we're going to work with these people, you'll have to get used to all this. The Italians are the biggest hand-shakers in the world.'

He then turned to Angelo and spoke in Italian. 'And now, my friend, Corporal Kelly here knows about explosives, and Sergeant Brownlow is a weapons expert.' Brownlow heard his name mentioned, and nodded knowingly. Dodd continued. 'So, let's see what you've got for us.'

The sun was showing mistily now, as the soldiers' attention turned to the truck. It looked to Dodd as if it might have been assembled as an early experiment in the manufacture of vehicles, using parts from many other machines, not necessarily vehicles, then left to rust for many

years before being pressed into service. The two Italians moved to the back of the truck, and pulled the patched and discoloured canvas cover away. The soldiers followed them and looked in. There seemed to be nothing but a jumble of hay, some in bales, some loose, a couple of crates, one containing a handful of irritable chickens, a wheel of rusty barbed wire, a filthy milk churn, and other odds and ends of dilapidated farm produce and equipment.

Dino clambered in and forced his way with some difficulty towards the front of the truck, then rummaged about before retrieving an unpainted wooden box, about two feet long and a foot square. He passed it to Angelo, who had got in behind him, before continuing his search. Angelo passed the box to Kelly, who pulled off the lid and examined the contents carefully, before nodding at Dodd, saying ‘Bloody ripper, boss! This here’s a complete kit – must be a dozen sticks of dynamite. That’s good, that TNT’s a right bastard if it’s not been stored properly. And look, there’s detonators, and a spool of cable too. All we need’s the plunger box, and we’re set. Beauty! Boss, can you ask him how much more of this he’s got?’

Dodd turned to Angelo, who had found what he’d been searching for, and was now sitting on the back of the truck, his feet dangling, as he proudly cradled a gun.

Brownlow held his hands out, saying ‘Let me see that, son.’ Angelo didn’t need to speak English to understand, and passed him the weapon.

Brownlow gave it a quick but professional once over. ‘What you’ve got here, Mr. Dodd, Sir, is a Beretta 38, 9mm sub-machine gun. Italian, of course. Brand new, too, I’d say. Not the best ever, but a very respectable weapon in the right hands. Sir, can you ask ...’

Dodd broke in. ‘I know, Sergeant’ and had a short discussion with Angelo, before addressing his men again. ‘Well chaps, they’ve got another six boxes of explosives and

they came with some sort of device that sounds as though it might be the detonating equipment. And they've got three of the guns, and, he says, a lot of ammunition.'

Brownlow was impressed. 'Blimey, Sir, they've got a right little armoury here, ain't they? Ask him where they got it, Sir.'

'I did – he said it was better not to know, but we can take a good guess, can't we? You don't find this sort of stuff in the corner shop. I'd imagine they nicked it from the camp, don't you?'

'Any rate, we've answered one question. Next, we need to recce the bridge, check it over for sentries and that. Can you fix that up, Sir?'

Kelly joined in. 'Yeah, and I need to get up pretty close, to work out how to fix the explosives.'

Dodd and Angelo went into an animated discussion for a few minutes, before Dodd turned to his men and said 'OK, we'll scout the bridge and approaches tonight. I've told Angelo I want the other chaps to be there as well as us, and he's agreed to collect us at the edge of the woods at seven o'clock. He'll get us as close as he can in the truck, so we'll have time to get a good look at any sentries and their paths before it gets dark. Then you, Corporal, can move forward for a close up look. All right?'

Brownlow was shocked. 'Do I understand right, Sir? We're all just goin' to sit in the back of this, this ... ' Words failed him, and he waved at the truck, 'and just go drivin' down the road, through a town full o' jerry soldiers, then past a jerry transit camp, to check out an important bridge?'

Dodd chuckled. 'Not exactly, no. There are farm tracks criss-crossing the whole area, and Angelo will be using them. He's confident we won't get caught, and that's enough for me. Remember, at least we're in uniform. It'll be a lot worse for him than it will for us if we get taken.'

That hadn't struck Brownlow before, and he subsided, still muttering beneath his breath.

Dodd scowled at him and said 'All right, Sergeant. Angelo has offered to give us a ride back to the woods, and I'm certainly going to accept. I don't fancy going all the way back on my hands and knees, now its daylight. You coming, Corporal?'

'If you reckon it's all right, I'll be in it, skipper.'

Dodd raised an eyebrow at Brownlow, who shrugged and climbed into the back of the truck. He turned and gave his hand to Dodd to pull him up, grumbling 'If we all get shot to buggery, I'll be reminding you blokes I wasn't happy.'

But he needn't have worried – Angelo took them on a roundabout route, and the only danger they faced on the journey back was the risk of being injured by the assorted rubbish being tossed about with them in the back of the truck.

Back at the hut, Burgess, Green and Watson had been waiting anxiously – not that they were unduly worried about the others, but they had been getting even more enthusiastic about the prospect of blowing up something really big, and they were afraid the news about the explosives would be bad. They were overjoyed when Dodd not only told them that Kelly was happy with the material, but they were to scout out the bridge that very day, *and* there was a chance of using sub-machine guns.

The hours dragged past, the initial excitement giving way to apprehension as they sat about. Brownlow in particular was getting quietly fretful – he was happy to do the survey, but because they had no knowledge at all about the bridge and its surroundings, he couldn't plan the mission, and he liked to have a plan.

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As much to take his mind off it as anything else, Brownlow swirled his coffee round his mug and spoke to Dodd. 'Fancy a stroll, Mr. Dodd, Sir?'

'I do, Sergeant, I do. Anything to pass a bit of time, eh?'

When they'd got outside and out of earshot of the men, Dodd asked Brownlow if there was something on his mind, and Brownlow replied 'The boys and me, we was wonderin' what we'll do after blowin' the bridge.'

'Yes, I'd been thinking about that as well. What's your opinion?'

'Well, Sir, I'm assuming we'll leave blowin' the bridge as late as we can, so they don't have time to repair it?'

'That makes sense to me.'

'Which means there'll be plenty of Germans about, and they won't take kindly to havin' their escape route buggered up, so they'll most likely search the area for us?'

'I agree.'

'Not to mention all the bombs and shells and shite flyin' about.'

'Absolutely.'

'So, if we do this job, and get away with it, well, hangin' around here after, waitin' for our lot to catch up, it's not really an option, is it?'

'That's what I was thinking, too. No, I suppose we'll have to hide up somewhere out of the way for a few days – maybe at Angelo's hidey-hole in the mountains, then come back down here when our lot have pushed the Germans back, eh?'

"Yeah, that was what I was thinking" agreed Brownlow unenthusiastically.

By early evening Dodd's men were glad to be getting out of the truck, having made their uncomfortable way by a very

circuitous and bumpy route to a position deep in a stand of trees about a mile up-river from the bridge.

They'd had a bad scare on the approach to the main road, which they'd had to cross. As they approached it, a convoy of German military vehicles had ground its way into view, and Angelo had calmly stopped his ancient truck at the edge of the road, got out and rolled himself a cigarette, waving occasionally to the convoy drivers. Some drivers, a little confused by this friendly gesture, waved back, and one even threw Angelo a pack of cigarettes.

Dodd, his army of five, plus Angelo and Dino, stood, stretching and grumbling. After a while, Dodd realised they were all waiting for him to issue orders, which came as a small shock to him – he'd been expecting Angelo to take charge, being the local man and the chief of the partisans. He soon pulled himself together, though, and, by now being an experienced leader of men, did what all sensible officers learned to do – he handed responsibility down the line. 'All right, Sergeant, let's get on with it.'

Brownlow was ready. 'Right, Sir. The Corporal will be wanting to get as close to the bridge as he can before it gets full dark. I'll go with him, and take Watson and Burgess, so they'll know what they're at. Can you ask one of the Italians to guide us in, Sir? And you take Green and the other local and have a dekho round the area, OK?'

Dodd nodded and spoke to the Italians, who both grinned – they'd been half-expecting to be left with the truck while the soldiers did the reconnaissance. The whole party agreed to be back at the truck by midnight, then, after a final flurry of handshakes, split into their assigned groups and slunk off among the lengthening shadows.

Brownlow's people were already back at the truck by the time Dodd and his men got there. The men at the truck had been

staring at the southern horizon, and they all turned silently to watch the dull reddish glow, interspersed with occasional bright yellow-white pinpricks, accompanied by the far distant rumble of artillery.

‘All, right, let’s get back and discuss it over a brew up’ said Dodd, and the soldiers climbed wearily into back of the truck, far from happy. Angelo and Dino, though, were both elated at having been on the mission, and chatted excitedly among themselves, all wide grins and extravagant hand gestures as they got into the cabin, their chatter hardly concealed by the clatter of the truck.

After an uncomfortable but uneventful journey back to the hut, Burgess and Watson busied themselves preparing coffee and food, while the two Italians looked round interestedly in the flickering light of a small fire and Dodd’s stove. Dodd asked Brownlow how his group had gone.

‘Well, Sir, we got up pretty close to the bridge. I’d say around fifty yards, eh, Ted? It was an easy approach, coming ...’

Dodd interrupted. ‘Just a minute, Sergeant, sorry. I want us all to have a clear picture in our minds. Now, imagine a clock face, everyone, with the bridge at the centre. So, the road runs about north-south, that’s from twelve to six, and the river runs west to east, or rather, from nine to three. OK?’

Nods from the soldiers, incomprehension from the Italians. Dodd quickly translated, then told Brownlow to continue.

‘Right. So we started about a mile up stream, but there were deep banks with loads of undergrowth on ‘em, so concealment wasn’t a problem. Fact, in places, we had trouble getting’ through, there was so much cover, and there were some really steep bits as well. It’d be easy’s easy to slip and end up in the water, wouldn’t it, Bill?’

Watson waved a leg, covered up to mid-shin in now dry mud.

‘Bloody lucky he didn’t make much of a splash. Any rate, we got up close enough so Ted could get a good look at it in daylight. What’s more, the undergrowth kept going all the way along, so I reckon at night, you could get right up to it without bein’ seen. So, Ted, tell us what you saw.’

Dodd was muttering translation as Kelly said ‘Like the Sarge says, getting’ up close isn’t the problem – it’s what to do when you get there. I’d sort of imagined a little bridge like you might get over an English country stream, but this thing’s much bigger than I expected. The river would be about, oh, twenty five yards wide there, and the bridge has, er, I dunno what the right description is, but it’s made of two stone arches, with a stone support column in the middle of the river, Get me? There’s one arch with one end on the bank and the other end on the support, then another arch just the same, but goin’ to the other side. Yes?’

The soldiers all nodded, Dodd quietly translating for the Italians, but of course, they had known the bridge intimately since they were children, as a place to fish from, and, if egged on enough by their mates, to jump off.

‘OK. Now, the way to blow an arch is to put your explosives right in the middle of it, where the key stones are. Knock them out, and the whole lot’ll collapse. But with this bridge, I can’t see how we could get to the middle of the arches – we can’t just go walkin’ onto the bastard, can we? You prob’ly saw the sentries better than we did. We could get to the underneath at one bank and set the explosives there, but that’s just where the most stone is, see? Unless you know exactly what you’re going, which I don’t, and set the explosives just right, you might just make a hell of a noise but not even damage the bastard, never mind blow it. So I reckon our only chance, really, would be to go for the central pillar. If we knocked that over the whole bridge’d come down after it.’

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Dodd asked 'Do you think we could do it?'

'I'm not sure, Sir, to be honest. I'd want to use plenty of explosive – an expert could work out exactly how much you'd need, but I don't know about that – I'd say we'd want to use three or four of those boxes, so we have enough dynamite. Problem is, how do we get the stuff out to the pillar, and how do we fix it once it's there? Now, dynamite doesn't mind getting' wet. Matter o' fact, it's better under water, so that's not an issue, but we'd have to make some sort of, well, cage, or strap, or something, to keep all the charges in place against the stone. I'll have to think about that.'

'All right: any thoughts about getting it all to the column?'

'Well, Sir, I thought maybe four of us could get in the river upstream,' he remembered Dodd's clock image, and added 'at nine o'clock, and sort of float down to the bridge, like. I'd go first and fix up the supports for the charges, and when that's done, the others could come down one at a time to deliver the explosives. Then I set it up, fix the detonators, attach the wires, and swim back to the bank, bringing the wires with me. From there on, I just creep down stream, er, to three o'clock, where someone's waitin' with the detonatin' kit, I attach the wires, and boom!'

There was silence among the soldiers while Dodd finished translating. Kelly looked round at the blank faces and said 'I never said it was a real flash plan, did I?'

Brownlow exploded. 'Fuckin' 'ell, Ted, where'd you get *that* idea from? A whole line of blokes with boxes of fuckin' dynamite, just floatin' down the river! Jesus!'

The usually imperturbable Kelly bristled. 'Yeah, it's easy to take the piss, ain't it, but I don't hear *you* comin' up with something.'

Dodd broke in. 'All right, settle down, you two. We'll put that aside while I tell you about the other problem. Now, my group was to recce the surrounding area. Of course, we

didn't go south of the river, but Angelo tells me the country is just like this side, fairly flat, almost entirely fields of wheat divided by the stone walls we're all familiar with. He says that as of yesterday, there were no German troops camped nearby on that side. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for the north side.

'Now, remember, the road goes from twelve o'clock down to the bridge, and the river runs from nine to three. Well, that whole area is wheat fields but they've been harvested, so the only cover is the stone walls. So far, so good, but now we come to the problems. At about ten o'clock and two o'clock, they've set up anti-aircraft guns, to defend the bridge, I suppose. The guns are maybe a hundred yards from the bridge, and they've set up a central camp beside the road. Now, one of those guns has a crew of maybe six or eight, and there'd be support troops with them, so there might be more than twenty all told. And that doesn't include the sentries at the bridge – I'd guess they're from the camp, which Angelo says is about two kilometres, that's a bit over a mile, up the road.'

'Towards twelve o'clock' interspersed Green.

Dodd looked at him carefully, but his face remained expressionless, those pale blue eyes looking steadily at him. Dodd wasn't sure if he was taking the mickey, so gave him the benefit of the doubt, and nodded.

'Now, there were four sentries, two at each end of the bridge, and they stopped all traffic before letting it through, but they didn't always stay on the approaches – we often saw them go wandering onto the bridge, and a couple of times they all met in the middle – just to pass the time, I suppose. By the way, we didn't see a change of sentries, and one or another of us had them in sight from a bit after eight to almost midnight.'

Dodd paused for a moment, then said 'So, the fact is, approaching from anywhere other than the river bank seems just about impossible. And even approaching along the river

would be very tricky. There'd have to be maybe four of us, each carrying a fairly big box of explosives, along a steep bank, which a man with no baggage can easily slip down, through heavy undergrowth, right up to where a sentry might well be looking down on us.'

His shoulders slumped. 'Doesn't seem very likely, does it? And whatever we decide, we have to act soon. You all saw the signs of fighting on the horizon: I don't know how far away that was, or how long it'll take before the action reaches us, but we have to assume it won't be long.'

He then quickly went through the discussion again with the Italians. Angelo stood and moved towards the door, beckoning Dino to join him, and they both went outside.

While they were gone, Brownlow spoke to Kelly. 'Shit, Ted, I hate to say it, but your idea of swimming out is beginning to look pretty good, eh?'

'Yeah, I still reckon it's the only way, but I can't say I fancy it much. You'd only have to make a bit of a splash and have a sentry come to investigate, or even have one just look over the parapet at the wrong moment, and fair dinkum, you'd be well bugged, wouldn't you? And thinkin' about it more, gettin' back from the middle of the river, payin' out the detonating wires, well, how would you do that without the sentries seein'? I dunno if this job's a goer, boss. What d'you reckon, Sarge?'

The flames from the little fire flared and made the shadows dance when the Italians threw back the door flap as they came back in. Angelo spoke quietly to Dodd, who jumped to his feet and a discussion followed, in which Dodd was obviously asking questions, with Angelo giving replies that got more and more heated. Then Dodd turned to his men and said 'They say they will take care of the Germans.'

The soldiers all studied the Italians, who stood, nodding solemnly back at them.

Dodd continued. 'They say they will 'deal with', to use Angelo's expression, the sentries and replace them with their own men, so the guns crews don't get suspicious, and, they say they will also have men with sub-machine guns covering the guns, in case anybody gets too interested. It seems they've got a collection of German uniforms, so replacing the sentries with their own chaps'd be pretty quick. What do you think, Sergeant?'

'Blimey, Sir, that does put a different wassname on it, don't it?' Brownlow was on his feet now, and the other men were following, sensing a change in the atmosphere. 'I mean, if we can get up close without worrying about the sentries, that makes it a much more likely operation. Stands to reason. And your problem about getting' out with the detonatin' wire, that's solved, too, ain't it Ted?'

'Not an issue, Sarge, *if* they can do it. If they can't, well, I reckon it'd be stupid for us to try.'

Dodd agreed. 'So, taking out the sentries is crucial. All agreed?'

His men all mumbled assent.

'All right, then. I suggest we plan the raid on the basis that we get into position at our starting point, but don't move in until Angelo's boys signal that they're in control of the bridge. How does that sound?'

Watson spoke up then. 'D'you reckon we can trust 'em, Sir?'

'I don't see why not. They're going to put themselves at greater risk than us in the part they're offering to play, and don't forget, if we're caught, we're in uniform, so we'll just be prisoners of war. If they're caught, well, I don't like to think about that. And, we don't go until we're given the signal.'

Watson wasn't convinced, and grumbled 'It might be a trap.'

‘Why would they go to all the trouble? They’ve known about us for weeks, they could have handed Tullett over long ago, and, come to that, they could have had us surrounded by jerry right now. No, I think you can be pretty sure they’re not going to hand us over now.’

Watson straightened, and smiled for the first time that night. ‘Well, all right, you’ve convinced me. Let’s have a go then! You in, Gilbert?’

‘Bloody hell, Bill! Few weeks ago, back in Alex, you were grizzling about the cut of your shorts, and all you care about now is blowing things up! I suppose I’ll have to come, make sure you don’t get too dirty!’

‘Shit scared of being left on your own, more like.’

The usually enthusiastic Burgess broke in then. ‘But Sir, we’d be relyin’ on the Eye-ties to do their bit. D’you think they’re up to it?’

Dodd nodded, said ‘Fair question’ and went back into an animated discussion with the Italians, then turned back to Burgess. ‘They say they’re pretty confident about taking the sentries out, but of course, if traffic came along, a convoy, or even a single German vehicle, they wouldn’t stand scrutiny.’

Green had a thought. ‘Why don’t they just knock the sentries over, and not replace them? That’d be simplest.’

‘Any traffic on that road will be expecting to be checked.’ Dodd responded, ‘Somebody would be bound to stop to ask questions, if not at the bridge, then at the gunner’s camp. And anyway, if the gunners noticed there were no sentries, well And if there’s shooting, the camp’s only a mile up the road. So, it’s down to this: if they can replace the sentries, we can go in. If there’s an alarm, we can escape along the river, but we’d have to leave the Italians to it – we’d have no weapons, so we couldn’t help them anyway.’

A thought struck Dodd. ‘Corporal, how long do you think it’d take to do the job, from the minute we get the go ahead, to being ready to blow it?’

They watched Kelly as he went through the whole operation in his mind. 'If it all goes well, half an hour. I'm thinkin' ten minutes for me to get out and fix up the harness for the explosives, ten for the boxes to be delivered – no point in anybody else comin' until I've fixed the harness – and puttin' the sticks in place, and another ten to set the detonators, wire them up, and get away. Then I've got to connect the wires at the other end, so half an hour's minimum, really. Better say three quarters.'

He looked worried. 'It's a lot, isn't it?'

Brownlow agreed. 'It's a hell of a long time, Ted, when you think we'll be reliant on there bein' no traffic the whole time. Does that seem likely to you, Mr. Dodd, Sir?'

'To be honest, it seems very unlikely. While we were watching, I doubt there was ten minutes at a time without at least one vehicle going over the bridge. This is all looking very tricky. Very tricky indeed'

Dodd muttered an interpretation for the Italians. Angelo and Dino exchanged a few words, after which Angelo made a short but emotional speech to them all. He had everybody's attention, though of the soldiers, only Dodd knew what he was saying. And when he'd finished, all eyes swivelled to Dodd, who spoke quietly to the soldiers.

'They say they're going to have a crack at it anyway. They believe the town will be destroyed if the bridge isn't blown, and I must say, I think they're right. They ask for our help in showing them how to fire the weapons, and if Kelly is not willing to set the explosives, they want him to tell them what to do.'

There was a long and uncomfortable silence.

Eventually, Dodd said 'Look, as I see it, there are two obvious dangers. The first is during the time the Italians are disabling the sentries and putting their own men on the bridge. It'd only take a minute, though, and if it went wrong, we

could still get away back up river. But then, of course, they'll be found out as soon as a vehicle comes along.'

The men nodded glumly.

'Well, what if I was on the bridge? I speak pretty good German, you know.'

The men were amazed and stared, gap mouthed, at Dodd. Kelly spoke first. 'You sure you want to do that, boss? It's pretty risky.'

'The way I see it, we all agreed to join Angelo's outfit to do a bit of sabotage behind the German lines, didn't we? Whatever we do will involve risks, and if we're not prepared for that, our only option is to keep in hiding. I don't like that idea, and I'm offering to have a shot at this job.'

Kelly straightened up and pulled back his shoulders. 'Well all right then, skipper, if you're game, so am I - I'll set the explosives for 'em'

The other soldiers quickly volunteered, and Dodd turned to the Italians and told them the decision. Angelo stepped forward and held out his hand, but as Dodd reached to take it, emotion got the better of Angelo, and with a tear in his eye, he grabbed Dodd and hugged him. Angelo remembered another bit of Tullett's English, and said 'That's fuckin' nice.' Then it was Dino's turn, and the pair moved to each soldier in turn, hugging them and repeating 'That's fuckin' nice' to each one. It was spoken from the heart.

Chapter 14

It was a strange moment: the Italian's common sense was overcome by their anxiety to save their town from destruction and their gratitude that the soldiers were willing to help. It didn't seem to have struck them that what they had agreed to do was extremely dangerous. The soldiers, on the other hand, knew how lucky they'd been to get away with the camp raid, and at this moment, the prospect of success at the bridge seemed bleak. One or two were already quietly beginning to regret volunteering, having been carried away with the moment before thinking calmly about the risks.

Dodd called them all to order, and they began to discuss the details of the plan of attack, such as it was. Angelo spoke earnestly to the group, and the soldiers all listened intently, watching his face, as though they all understood what he was saying. When he stopped speaking, Dodd translated.

'Angelo said his idea is that he and one of his men, in German uniform, would wait until the road is clear of traffic and, er, replace the sentries on our side of the bridge, that is, the ones nearest the anti-aircraft crews, and at the same time, two more Italians, who will have crossed over earlier, will do the same on the other side, except they'll have to get the sentries uniforms off them. Dino and another local will deploy with the sub-machine guns to cover the anti-aircraft gun crews. Sergeant Brownlow will look after them, and I'll be close to the bridge, ready to pop up in my German uniform as soon as I get the all clear.

'It seems to me replacing the sentries is the trickiest part of the whole operation. The biggest risk is that traffic suddenly appears while they're the middle of changing places, but I can't see we can do anything to control that, so in that respect, we're in the lap of the gods. If the Italians are seen replacing the sentries, we'll soon know about it – I imagine

there'll be a lot of shooting. In that case, we will all move back up river, covered by Sergeant Brownlow and the other men with guns.'

Dodd gave them a minute to digest this, then said 'But, if the sentries get replaced without being noticed, we'll continue.' The men were calmed by the matter-of-fact manner he'd used to deliver this part of the plan, and began to talk more positively about what would happen next. Kelly, Green, Watson and Burgess would be upstream with the explosives kit. When the sentries had been replaced, Kelly would swim down first and prepare the harness. Watson and Green would be ready to float down and deliver the boxes of explosives when Kelly signalled he was ready. They would then give Kelly what assistance they could, and when their part was done, they would simply float on downstream. When they judged it safe to get out, they would keep going along the bank until they came to the truck, which, when the sentries were successfully replaced, would be driven in a great half circle, from nine o'clock on Dodd's imaginary clock, right round to three o'clock.

Burgess, with the detonating box and all the 'wet' men's boots, would clamber right under the bridge and onto the bank fifty yards downstream. When Kelly had finished under the bridge, he would float down to Burgess, paying out the detonating cable as he went, and connect it to the detonating device. When he signalled he was ready, all the remaining participants would clear out, along the river or in it, to find the truck. Kelly would blow the bridge and follow them.

As they discussed it, and the details came together, they could feel the mood changing from wary irresolution to confidence and excitement. What had at first seemed a hare brained idea of Kelly's, to float downstream with the explosives, now appeared perfectly reasonable. Even Brownlow was happy because, unlike the attack plan for the

camp, this time, they had an agreed and workable escape plan if something went wrong.

Finally, it was arranged that Angelo would collect the soldiers in the truck the next day at eight in the evening, when they would leave their hut for the last time, and be driven to the stand of trees about a mile up river from the bridge. They would do the job, get out, then move to Angelo's camp in the mountains, and from there, well, the future was too hazy to be worried about.

Angelo and Dino appeared well satisfied, even though they and their compatriots had the most dangerous roles in the plan, and left to hide up and rest before returning in the evening with their fellow partisans.

Dodd and his five man army exchanged excited grins and friendly punches, and chatted over the plan again before turning in.

They all rose late after the late night, and uneasy sleep, all except Burgess, who had slept soundly, untroubled by thoughts of what the coming night might bring. Even he, though, began to sense the excitement being joined by tension and anxiety among the others, that grew as the day went on.

They were leaving the hut for good that evening, and had decided to spend the afternoon sorting through the gear they had accumulated over the weeks of their occupation, but when it came to it, the job didn't take long. Their personal kit, clothes and toiletries, was sparse and in any case, they'd all packed that stuff many times before. They were left with a small pile of cans and packets of food, the few pans and cooking utensils Dodd had stolen from the store, some odds and ends left over from the rafts, and the empty tins they'd grown used to using.

'Blimey,' Brownlow said, speaking for them all, 'is that the lot? Not much to show for it all, is there?'

Dodd's Army

‘Yeah,’ agreed Kelly, ‘a bit scanty, ain’t it? Any rate, we won’t have too much to cart about, eh?’

Kelly then divided the cans and utensils into five smaller piles and the men each took one and stowed it in his pack. Dodd protested that he should carry his share, but Brownlow refused to allow it.

When it was done, the only things left were the makings of an evening meal, and a small heap of rubbish. The rubberised canvas, which had once been the rafts, they left where it was, knowing that the locals would find a use for it.

Time hung heavy then, as they sat in their accustomed positions in the hut, staring vacantly at the little pile of empty cans. There were still hours before they needed to get their meal ready, and they were all increasingly anxious about the raid. Brownlow tried to regenerate last night’s enthusiasm for the task ahead.

‘You know what, Mr. Dodd, Sir? I keep thinkin’ about the camp job. We never had any proper explosives, and no weapons to give us a sportin’ chance if somethin’ went wrong. And as for the plan, well, it was so complicated, we was really lucky it didn’t go completely bloody shambolic, there was so many things could’ve gone pear-shaped. This job tonight, well, different kettle of wassname, innit? Long as the Eye-ties do their bit, should be a doddle, eh?’

Dodd understood, and replied ‘Oh, absolutely, Sergeant. Absolutely. Tonight, once the sentries are changed, hard to see what could go wrong, really.’

There was a cascade of noisy agreement, but in the long silence that followed, they’d all begun to see plenty of things that could easily go wrong, though nobody spoke of them.

Dodd said to Brownlow ‘Still, let’s have a stroll and go over things again’ and the two of them wandered off.

After a while, Watson said ‘Er, Corporal?’

‘Yes, Bill?’

‘How far away do you think we’ll be, when you, well, do the business?’

‘Blow it? Don’t worry, mate, I won’t knock it over ‘til you’re well out of the way.’

‘That’s just it, you see. I’m really looking forward to seeing it go up! I don’t want to be too far away! Can I stay with you? Exploding those mines at the camp, and seeing the petrol burning, that was’ He tailed off, lost for words, then added, earnestly, ‘That was the best thing I’ve done since, well, ever, really.’

He looked around, suddenly aware he might have made a fool of himself, but Burgess and Green were nodding agreement, and the Australian didn’t argue.

Green reminisced. ‘Yeah, it reminded me of what happened once. Near where I used to live, there was a cutting through the side of a hill for the railway line, so there was the railway sort of at the bottom of a little valley, with really steep sides, what we called The Banks. All covered in long grass and sort of bushy stuff you could hide in. Me and my mates, we used to get over the fence and play games and hang about there.’ He smiled, those pale eyes twinkling, ‘We used to think it was a big secret, and nobody’d find us there, but now I think of it, there was sort of tracks all around, so plenty of other people’d been there before. Anyway, we were fuckin’ about there one day, and we decided to make a fire, no reason, you know, just for the sake of it.’

Burgess nodded knowingly.

‘O’course, in five minutes, the bloody fire’d got out of control and started on the grass. Well,’ he chuckled ‘we’re all dancing about, trying to put the bastard out with bits of branches off the bushes. We’re all pissing ourselves with laughter, ‘til the flames got in amongst the bushes and we couldn’t get at them, and suddenly the bushes are alight, and there’s whacking great flames, and smoke everywhere, you

could hardly see ten foot! One of the lads suddenly says fuck this and scarpers, and next thing you know, we're all off and away, going as fast as we can, still laughing, but a bit panicky as well, you know? I didn't stop 'til I got almost home, must ha' been nearly two miles away! I turned round, and there was this bloody huge column of black smoke, seemed to cover half the bloody sky! You could hear the bells on the fire engines, and everything, so I just crept in and kept my head well down for a while.

'Anyway, I thought of that when we were doing the camp job – it brought it all back – you know, scary, but exciting and fun as well. But back then, if we'd been caught, we'd have got a hell of a hiding off our Dads, but with the camp, I reckon my Dad would've been proud of me. And now, I'm off to blow up a bridge, for goodness sake, and there's nobody going to tell me off!'

Burgess grinned, and nodded again. 'That's it exactly! Bloody good, innit?'

Watson looked at Green and Burgess with undisguised admiration. 'Is that true, Gilbert? The fire story, I mean?'

Green grinned and nodded, but Burgess was surprised at the question. 'Course its true! Why wouldn't it be true?'

Watson was embarrassed. 'Well, it's just I never did anything like that in my whole life. I'm racking my brains to think of anything half as exciting.'

Burgess offered encouragement. 'Come on Bill, there must have been *something*. A bit of shopliftin', like?'

'Shoplifting! Good God, No!'

'Oh, come on, mate. We've all'

Watson interrupted. 'Well, I haven't.'

'All right, somethin' else then. No nickin' and no settin' fire to stuff. Blimey – that narrows it down a bit, eh? Hmmm. I know – how about chuckin' a stone through somebody's window?'

Relieved, Watson almost shouted 'Yes! I did knock a cricket ball through our neighbour's window once.' He paused, before admitting 'By accident, though.'

'There you go, that's a start. Did you get a beltin'?'

Watson squirmed. 'To be honest, I went straight round and owned up! Turned out all right, though. The old fellow, my dad, that is, he squared up with the neighbour for the cost, and I got a penknife for owning up!'

Addressing Burgess, he added, 'Not as good as yours, though.'

There was an embarrassed silence. Watson frantically tried to think of something, anything, in his past that might be considered bad, but there was nothing. He shook his head and explained 'This whole business of living rough, stealing, and blowing things up, setting fire to things, it's completely ' he struggled for words, '.... wonderful! I've never had so much fun, never imagined I would!'

Dodd and Brownlow had come back in at that moment, and had heard the last few words. Watson felt a bit sheepish, but Dodd enthusiastically agreed. 'I know exactly how you feel, Watson. It's marvellous, isn't it! So, let's make sure we do it right, and get away, so we can get up to some more mischief, eh? Now, time for a meal before Angelo arrives.'

The old truck appeared at almost exactly eight, grinding over the network of farm tracks, and Angelo coaxed it into the edge of the trees, where Dodd and his men were waiting. Angelo and Dino jumped out of the cabin, grinning excitedly, and Dino smacked the canvas side of the truck, before the pair of them began the hand shaking ritual.

There was movement from within, and, with a twitch of the rear flap, a young man, the very image of a desperado, emerged. He was short but stocky, olive skinned, with long, unkempt black hair and dark eyes under hooded brows. He

sported a gigantic moustache and straggly stubble, and wore the usual grey collarless shirt under the usual shabby black three piece suit. He destroyed the hard man image, though, by smiling broadly as he was introduced as Giovanni, his whole face lighting up, revealing the teenager behind the mask. Dodd smiled back, guessing he was no more than eighteen, and the moustache and stubble must have taken a long time to cultivate.

As Giovanni started shaking hands all round, there was movement inside the truck, and the biggest Italian Dodd had seen stepped down carefully, almost daintily, and adjusted his clothes, before turning to meet the others.

‘This’ said Angelo proudly, ‘is my cousin, who is also Angelo, but everybody calls him Bimbo.’

Dodd translated, saying Bimbo was not a derogatory expression, but simply meant baby, or babe. As the soldiers examined him, they realised he was not exceptionally tall, maybe six foot, but, relative to the other Italians, who were squat and stocky, appeared a giant, a scaled up version of Giovanni, with the notable exception that he was recently shaved and his clothes, though straining to cover him, were obviously cared for. His boots showed the same care, old but clean and brushed.

These two moved among the soldiers, shaking hands and smiling, while Angelo proudly produced a bundle from the cabin and handed it to Dodd. He smiled, and said ‘Be careful with it – it’s the only officers uniform we’ve got. We don’t want you getting blood all over it.’

Dodd smiled back uncertainly, until he noticed the shoulder insignia, and the smile widened. He told his men what Angelo had said, and added ‘This is a major’s uniform, so I’ll be more senior in the German army than the British one!’

The men chuckled, and Brownlow said ‘All right, lads, time to go.’

Angelo and Dino took their accustomed places in the cab, and the others scrambled into the back. All the clutter and rubbish had been removed, and as the soldiers threw their few possessions aboard, Dodd suddenly realised that all that junk had been deliberately put there, in case the truck was stopped. There would then be a good chance that any searchers would take one look inside and lose interest. For this job, though, there would be no possibility of getting away with it if they were stopped en route - a cargo of four locals, six Allied soldiers, automatic weapons and several boxes of explosives would be impossible to conceal. Their only chance would be to shoot their way out, and Brownlow, realising this, made sure the automatic weapons were properly loaded and ready before handing one each to Kelly and Burgess, and kept one for himself. He waited for a reaction from the Italians, but they understood: these were trained soldiers - had they not blown up the petrol? - and would know what to do.

While they were away from the road, they were inconspicuous, but they had to get across the road to get up stream of the bridge, and they couldn't afford to be challenged. Angelo steered without lights through the deepening dusk along the maze of farm tracks, until he stopped, well back from the road, to study the traffic. He called back to the men in the back that there was a lot of traffic going north, and soldiers on foot as well, and to be ready for action when he started moving. The men holding the guns found holes in the ragged canvas to peer through, and checked their weapons.

It seemed like an eternity before Angelo saw a gap in the stream of traffic and, yelling a last warning, he sent the old truck lurching and complaining towards a gap in the wall alongside the road. A few plodding soldiers turned disinterestedly towards the sudden noise, but they were too

busy just putting one foot in front of the other to be bothered about the ancient vehicle.

Then suddenly, they were across and into the darkness on the other side, and kept going, fast and without lights in the darkening gloom, until they were well clear of the road.

After a few more minutes of being thrown about in darkness, the men in the back tensed as the truck groaned to a stop and they heard someone clamber down from the cabin. Then the canvas at the back twitched as Dino's head appeared and he called out that they were through and safe. Dodd translated, though there was no need, Dino's expression and tone was enough. enough. He did add, though, that Dino had said they'd be halted for a little while to let the truck cool down and wait for full darkness before the final part of the journey. They all got out and Bimbo passed round cigarettes, the pack looking tiny in his hand, and they stood around quietly for fifteen minutes, until the sharp smell of burning oil and tortured metal had dissipated.

Then Angelo nodded to the knot of men, they resumed their places, and the rest of the journey passed without incident.

It was full dark, but the broken clouds allowed them some starlight as they emerged cautiously from the truck, which Angelo had manoeuvred into the depths of a stand of trees less than a mile upstream from the bridge.

It was cool now, though not really cold enough to explain the shivers from several of the men.

After standing in silence for a few moments, they heard the snap of twigs in the undergrowth, and Brownlow and Kelly brought their weapons to bear on the sound. Tension mounted as the small sounds got nearer, then a leafy branch was pushed aside and a German soldier emerged from the trees!

Brownlow was about to fire when Angelo moved forward to greet the newcomer, who was followed by two

more men in civilian clothes. The leader acknowledged Angelo's greeting, then, stone faced, spoke a few words to him. Angelo responded in a few words and received an equally short reply.

Dodd was already telling his men 'He says there's a problem. Angelo asked what, and he said we'd better see for ourselves. It's only a few hundred yards to where we can see the bridge, so I think it's best we all go and find out what's wrong, then we can decide if we need to change the plan.'

They collected their gear from the truck, and, the new man leading, followed him in single file towards the bridge.

They knew something was much different well before they could see the bridge – the distant rumble of heavy motors told them that.

As they approached a low crest, the lead man signalled for them to stop, then he dropped to hands and knees as he approached the top. After a moment to look round, he signalled the rest to come up.

The sight that lay before them was astonishing. They were relying on starlight, but that was more than enough to reveal the intense activity half a mile away. There was a steady stream of vehicles flowing north over the bridge, supplied by what seemed to be a sea of trucks, tanks, and the German equivalent of the jeep that the Germans called a Kubelwagen, all awash in a sea of soldiers and civilians on foot, and all, it seemed, trying to get across the bridge at once. An occasional light shone for a second, and was gone. On the north side, the road was a solid column of escaping vehicles and soldiers, intermingled with refugees, moving through a line tanks and guns set in defensive positions facing south.

As they watched, the night was lit for a moment and the sound followed half a second later, as a line of guns, there must have been eight or more, fired a salvo south to harry the

unseen columns of Allied troops, who must be chasing the German rearguard.

Dodd called the men back down the slope, and looked round at the crestfallen faces. 'Well, chaps, it looks as if we're too late. We'll not get anywhere near the bloody bridge now.' This was the first time anybody had heard Dodd use bad language since he'd blurted 'fuck' when Burgess did his trick with the rabbit. Dodd was still unaware he'd said that.

Kelly wasn't convinced. 'I dunno, boss. I wouldn't mind getting a bit closer look before I give up. They're pretty busy, you know. Maybe we could still get there.'

Dodd reflected. 'Maybe you're right, Kelly. There'd be no need for the rest of us, of course, only the demolition team, and they'd be pretty hard to spot, floating down the river. And the people on the bridge, well, it seems they've got other things on their minds than keeping an eye out for us. Maybe there *is* a chance.' He spoke to the Italians, and they brightened, except the leader of the new men, who shrugged, and muttered a few words.

'He says he can get us within a hundred yards under good cover. I suggest that you and I, Kelly, go and have a closer look before we decide, eh?'

Wordlessly, Kelly stood, and the three of them moved off towards the river, the Italian leading.

The men who were left had plenty of time to wonder whether they were more worried about being able to continue the raid than not being able to. It seemed like an age before the trio returned, and as they appeared, the expressions on their faces telegraphed what they'd seen.

Brownlow snarled 'Fuck. Fuck it. Fuckin' fuck it.'

The Italian spoke to his comrades as Dodd addressed his men.

'Sorry, boys, this job's impossible. It's not only the traffic on the bridge, you see. They've got engineers

swarming all over it, underneath, I mean, getting ready to blow it themselves as soon as they've got all their troops across.'

There was a long, miserable silence as everybody studied their boots, anxious not to meet another man's eye. The Italians were close to tears. Brownlow was the first to move. 'Well, all right, there's no point in hanging around here, At least we're on the right side of the road to get away to Angelo's camp. Come on boys, cheer up. There'll be other ways we can use the explosives, before we're done.'

With a few sideways glances, shrugs, and half-shaken heads, the group returned dejectedly to the truck and clambered in.

They'd only been jolting along the rough track for a few minutes when the truck creaked to a noisy halt and the engine stopped. Angelo pulled back the canvas flap and told his men to get out. Dodd stood and told his men to do the same.

Outside, a slice of moon was beginning to throw a silver light over the interminable checkerboard of rolling wheatfields and small clumps of trees, making them glisten like a living thing as the small breeze nudged the wheat.

Angelo spoke and Dodd murmured a translation. 'About half a mile ahead, past that little mound with the trees you see up ahead, there's the rail bridge. There's usually been a handful of German soldiers guarding it, and they've got used to seeing the truck going back and forth. But in the last day or two, there's been more, maybe a dozen, maybe more, with a couple of vehicles, and yesterday, they stopped the truck and had a poke around it. Angelo says there's no way round for the truck, except the track we're on, so we must get all the gear out and carry it - Dino will guide us - and meet up at the other side. What do you think, Sergeant?'

'Sounds like the only sensible thing to me, Sir.' Brownlow paused and sucked his lip. 'But, to tell the truth,

I'm not feelin' all that sensible just now. I'm thinking we might try to do *something* useful tonight, as we're here, like.'

His men all looked at him, intrigued, and Dodd raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

'Well, there's us, we got weapons, we got explosives, then there's the enemy just up the road, guarding a railway bridge. What does that suggest?'

Kelly chimed in, 'Mate, I'm ready to blow up a bridge, and just now, I don't mind which one it is.' He looked round for support. The Italians as yet had no idea what the conversation was about, but were beginning to sense a change in mood.

Watson added, 'I'm with you, Corporal. I'm really keen on the idea of blowing up something big, and one bridge is as good as another.'

Green agreed and added, 'Oooh, I've just thought, maybe we could do it when there's a train on it, eh.'

Watson groaned with pleasure at the thought, and Burgess, who, like the Italians, had been on the edge of tears, was speechless.

Dodd held up his hands to calm them down, and told the Italians about the new idea. The soldiers watched their faces lift into grins as Dodd spoke, and a new wave of enthusiastic hugging and hand shaking broke out.

'All right,' said Dodd, 'let's go and have a look at it.'

He tried to select just the Sergeant and Kelly to go with Angelo and himself, but the others all refused to stay behind, so in the end, the whole crowd of them, soldiers and Italians, fell in behind the local guide, and moved off towards the stand of trees.

They got to within a hundred yards of the bridge, safely in the cover of the trees. The ground they were on was a little elevated, and they were able to take in the whole area around the bridge. The moon was well up now, throwing glinting

silver highlights onto the single railway track and the metal of the bridge, and the river gleamed and writhed like molten pewter. Near the bridge, just before the railway line, stood three big bell tents and two smaller, box shaped tents, all ghostly pale in the moonlight, and beyond them, two covered trucks and a Kubelwagen. A few soldiers moved about, a couple on the bridge itself, a couple on the other side, a few near the boxy tents, talking and smoking. They all looked relaxed.

Dodd turned to Kelly and whispered, ‘Well, Corporal, what do you think?’

‘Easy, Sir. Real easy, an iron bridge like that. Get me onto it and give me five, maybe ten minutes, and I’ll do the job for you. You could put a few sticks just about anywhere on that thing, and it’ll go nicely. It’s all metal girders, see, and they all support each other. Only problem is whether the boys’ll be happy with the bang! P’raps I’ll bung a few extras on, just for fun, eh?’

‘Good, good, Excellent.’ He turned to Brownlow. ‘So, Sergeant, can we give the Corporal his ten minutes?’

‘Hmm. I see, er, seven, no, eight soldiers hanging about, and there’s bound to be at least the same in those tents. I’d guess the square one where those blokes are standing about is a field kitchen, the far one’s prob’ly the officer’s tent, and the bell tents are for sleeping. They’ll have prepared this bridge for demolition when they’re ready, just like the other one, and these guards are there just to keep the locals from interfering.’

Dodd nodded. ‘Yes, that makes sense. The detonating, er, thing,’ he made a plunging motion with his hands, ‘where would you expect it to be?’

‘The officer’s tent, definitely. He’ll have a radio set with him in there too, most likely, waiting for the order.’

Brownlow continued. ‘I’d reckon there’s p’raps a couple of dozen of ‘em, all told. We’ve got three sub-machine

guns, and we've got surprise on our side. By the look of those chaps down there, they're not expecting trouble, and we can reckon they're not good quality troops, either. If they were, they'd be in the thick of the fightin', somewhere.'

Dodd nodded again 'That would be correct, from what I've learned. The Germans are finding their experienced fighting soldiers are spread very thin, and they've taken to using lesser quality troops for guard duties. 'Stomach battalions,' they call them, after they put together a formation from a bunch of invalids with stomach complaints!'

Brownlow looked at Dodd sceptically, but continued. 'Any rate, I reckon three of us with automatic weapons'd have a good chance of beating that lot down there. Trouble is, '

He paused, and Dodd broke in. 'Yes, I know. We'd have to spray the tents with gunfire. I don't much fancy shooting sleeping men. Do you?'

Without waiting for a reply, Dodd then asked Brownlow 'What else, then? Any thoughts about rounding them up?'

Brownlow was silent for some time, giving his lower lip a severe gnawing, then moved a little away from the group, and Dodd followed. 'Well, I did have one idea, Sir, if you're game' he said quietly. 'The other problem is, they're spread out a bit, and if we fire on the main group, at least some of 'em will likely survive and go to ground, and then stop us moving about, right? So, what I thought was, er,' He paused, embarrassed.

Dodd and Brownlow looked at each other in a long silence, until a small smile appeared on Dodd's face. 'You don't mean..... ?'

Brownlow, still meeting Dodd's gaze, bit his lip and said nothing.

The men watched from a distance, not understanding, but aware of the tension.

‘You want me to just go walking down there and tell them to surrender?’

‘Of *course* not, Sir! It’d be better if Angelo drove you.’

He started ticking off points on his fingers. ‘First, can’t have a major wandering about in the middle of the night, can we? Second, it’ll be more of a surprise with the truck. Third, if the lights are on, it’ll stuff their night vision, and fourth, ...’ He stopped, looking blank.

Dodd waited for a moment, then, still grinning, said ‘Got a bit over-confident, did you, going for number four?’

Brownlow was still thinking hard, and was about to speak but Dodd held up his hand for silence while he thought the idea over, then the smile widened as he said ‘Well, all right then.’

Brownlow filled in the rest of his plan, which was for Dodd, in his German officer’s uniform, to be driven into the little camp after Brownlow and the others had moved into positions surrounding the area as best they could. Dodd would call all the German soldiers together, and at his signal, taking his hat off, the men with the guns would reveal themselves, and Dodd would explain they were surrounded and must surrender immediately or be shot.

The rest of the men were still bewildered, until Dodd and Brownlow moved back to the group, and Dodd explained, first in English, then Italian, what he had in mind.

Chapter 15

Dodd, dry mouthed now, sat alone in the passenger seat of the ancient truck, wondering if his watch was broken –the hands seemed to have stopped moving. He was fully dressed in the German major's uniform.

Away towards the road bridge, he could hear the faint rumble of traffic, and saw, from the corner of his eye, occasional flashes of light in the sky. Outside, Angelo and Dino stood silently, smoking one coarse smelling cigarette after another, fidgeting, unable to stand still, and anxiously watched Dodd's face.

At last, as his watch indicated two o'clock, Dodd turned to the men and croaked, 'It's time.' He leaned from the window and they all shook hands and wished each other luck, before Angelo got into the driver's seat. Dodd almost panicked at the noise the engine made as it started, but somehow, he was comforted when he felt the truck move as Dino clambered into the back with his sub-machine gun, and they juddered into movement along the rough track.

After what seemed an age, they clattered round the last bend, lights full on, and could see, it seemed shockingly close now, the German soldiers turning to face them. The men in the cab studied the soldiers, but there were no sudden movements, and as they got nearer, the faces lit by the lights of the truck showed interest or relief, and there were one or two grins, but no fear. The soldiers who had been on the bridge began to stroll over inquisitively, and a small knot of perhaps ten men started to form. Dodd studied them and thought of Brownlow, for they were a sergeant's worst nightmare. Not one of them was wearing his helmet, only a few had a rifle, and even those who did had them slung over their shoulders, except for one, who carried his rifle in the manner of a walking stick, the stock scraping the dust. Angelo

stopped the truck ten yards in front of them, and cut the engine, but left the lights full on.

As he looked down from the truck in the sudden silence and saw the soldiers squinting and holding up their hands to shield their eyes, Dodd suddenly knew this was going to work, and took his time climbing to the ground. Neither Angelo nor Dino moved.

As Dodd emerged into the light, his uniform caused a stir, but the soldiers still just stood there, more interested now, until an unteroffizier, a corporal, suddenly realising, threw away a cigarette and called them to a dishevelled attention.

Dodd stood for a moment, hands behind his back, treating them to the withering glare he usually reserved for his most slovenly students, and almost laughed when a rifle slipped from a soldier's shoulder and fell noisily on the stony path. Addressing the corporal, Dodd shouted in German 'Fetch your officer!'

He then pointed at the man who'd dropped his rifle. 'You! Get the rest of this rabble out here! I want everyone here *now*!'

The soldier turned to go, stopped, turned back and gave an untidy salute, then turned again and ran off.

Dodd didn't move closer, but continued to study the remaining soldiers, some of whom were trying to surreptitiously do up their uniform buttons, while others just stood and stared blankly back at him.

After a minute, the flap of the square tent was thrown back and a tall figure emerged, adjusted his uniform hat, and walked quickly towards Dodd. As he did so, men began to tumble from the other tents, in various stages of undress, and moved towards the standing group.

The officer, Dodd could now see he was a captain, reached Dodd and stood to attention, throwing a smart salute, the traditional hand to the hat salute, not the nazi extended arm. Dodd returned the salute, studying the captain. He took

in the impressive array of decorations, and began to wonder what had brought a seasoned veteran to this backwater, before he noticed the empty left sleeve of the uniform jacket pinned neatly to the shoulder.

Remembering his role, Dodd spoke. 'So, Captain, quite a circus you have here, eh?' He indicated the straggle of soldiers. 'Is this the lot, or do you have some more who don't like to be disturbed?'

Stone faced, the captain turned to the corporal, who nodded, and the captain told Dodd 'They're all here, Major.'

'Good.' Dodd beckoned the officer closer and lowered his voice. 'Now, Captain, I see you're an experienced soldier, so you'll know when to stand and fight, and when to be, well, sensible. Is that so?'

Surprised by this, the captain studied Dodd's face carefully before responding with a wary 'Yes, Major.'

'Well, this is one of those times when you need to be sensible. I think you'll agree that at this stage of the fighting, it would be, er, unfortunate if any of your men were to be killed unnecessarily?'

Perplexed, the captain agreed.

'You see, I am a British officer, and my men have you completely surrounded. I think you'll have to agree the only thing to do is to surrender, don't you?'

The captain looked blank for a second, before fully grasping what he'd heard, then replied 'Major, ...' He stopped himself, then continued, 'If you *are* a major, you look to me like one man with a broken down old truck.'

Dodd couldn't help being impressed, and smiled. He took off his hat, the signal the others had been waiting for, and Dino threw back the canvas canopy to reveal himself and his sub-machine gun, while the others with guns emerged into the light, leaving the unarmed men as mere shapes on the edge of the darkness outside the headlight beams.

The German soldiers still hadn't understood what was happening, but the Captain, after looking around carefully, only took a moment to accept that his position was impossible.

He smiled briefly, and said to Dodd 'I only see three automatic weapons, and you'll permit me to comment that your men are poorly positioned. They're all around my troops, and in the event of shooting, they'd be firing at each other. But in the circumstances, I accept your proposition, Major ...'

'Lieutenant, actually.'

'Oh, Lieutenant, is it? That's awkward.'

Dodd was taken aback. 'Captain, in your position, 'awkward' is not the word I'd be using.'

The German studied Dodd for a moment, before responding 'No, you probably wouldn't. But as you see, I outrank you, and it would be difficult for me to surrender to a junior officer. It's a question of honour, you understand.'

Dodd was impressed again by this man. 'I see, yes. As you say, Captain, it's awkward for you. But I really don't see you have a choice.'

The Captain searched the shadows at the edge of the light. 'There's not a more senior officer with you?'

'No, sorry.' Dodd recognised this man's discomfort, and sympathised. He'd never before encountered anyone to whom personal honour was such an issue, and he respected him for it. But it occurred to Dodd that the German could be trouble – at least, more trouble than he needed just now. He had a sudden vision of the officer somehow escaping and bringing reinforcements, or stirring up his presently bovine soldiers so they'd need careful guarding. In a flash of inspiration, he had the first of two brainwaves in the space of a few hours, which in later years, looking back, were a continuing source of pride and amazement to him – he often thought, afterwards, that he didn't know he had it in him, and

he never could decide which decision he was proudest of. He turned to the shadows and called 'Sergeant Brownlow!'

A shape detached itself from the blackness, and Brownlow stood in front of Dodd.

'Sergeant, I want you to witness that I'm promoting myself to local, temporary, acting, major.' He turned to the German. 'Would a major be acceptable to you, Captain?'

The captain smiled, and replied 'I suppose a colonel?'

Again, Dodd was amazed at the man's coolness. 'I think that'd be a bit too much. So, a major, then?'

The German smiled again. 'I'm most grateful, Major.'

Dodd turned back to Brownlow, and repeated 'So, I'm promoting myself to local, temporary, acting, major. Make a note of that, would you, and make sure the men know.'

This was all a bit much for Brownlow – in all his service, he'd never heard of a soldier promoting himself before, and he looked at Dodd a long time before asking: 'Can you *do* that, Sir?'

Dodd shrugged, and Brownlow moved off without another word.

Dodd turned to face the German again, and said 'So, Captain, shall we continue?'

'Very well. I, Captain Bock, formally surrender to you, Major ...?'

'Dodd.'

'So. If you'll permit me, Major Dodd, I'll explain the situation to my men, and have them surrender their weapons quietly. Otherwise, some of them might do something silly – you have noticed they're not experienced soldiers – and as you say, it would be regrettable for anybody to get killed in these circumstances.'

Dodd glanced at the dishevelled clump of soldiers, who still didn't grasp what was happening. 'Do you think they might try to resist?'

The captain smiled again. 'Good lord no! Look at them! I'm more concerned they'll try to run away!'

'All right, Captain, you tell them. And tell them I want every weapon in the camp brought out and put in my truck. Please tell your men that we're in a hurry, and we won't stand for any messing about.'

The captain nodded and walked to his men, who still stood, each at his own grotesque interpretation of attention. The captain spoke to them quietly for a few minutes, during which they darted looks into the darkness all round them in between studying the captain's words.

Dodd watched their faces carefully, and, as the situation dawned on them, the German soldiers began to relax, and a few began to grin and nudge each other. At a command from the officer, the men began to trot towards their tents, all except the few who had their rifles with them, who self-consciously held their weapons out in front of them, as if they might suddenly explode, as they moved towards the back of the truck.

The two officers stood together and watched as, within a couple of minutes, the men were all back, having put their rifles in the truck, and returned to the places where they'd stood before, but this time, there was no pretence of standing at attention. They milled about a little, shaking hands and grinning, peering into the night, and now and again one or another would exclaim and point as he saw one of Dodd's men in the gloom. One of them actually waved when he picked out a shadowy figure, and looked hurt when he didn't get a wave back.

'They don't seem particularly upset' remarked Dodd to the captain.

'No. They'll be thrilled.'

Dodd looked at the officer quizzically.

‘Look at them, Lieutenant, er, Major. Not exactly elite troops, are they? My sergeant has done his best with them, but he has trouble with his teeth, you know, and he’s spent a lot of time in hospital. That’s why he’s not here now.’

He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘Just as well, really. He’d probably have tried to resist. A good man, you understand, but, well, set in his ways.’

Dodd nodded understanding.

The German officer continued. ‘These men will be very pleased to be prisoners of war. Their worst fear was that they’d find themselves in the thick of the fighting. They just wouldn’t be up to it, you see. No, actually, their worst fear was being withdrawn from here and moved to the Russian front.’

He shivered. ‘Mine too, as it happens.’ He paused again, then ‘So, Major, what now?’

It was Dodd’s turn to ponder. ‘First, we’re going to blow the bridge up, then we’ll see about getting your chaps ready for when my lot catches up with us. Excuse me, Captain.’

Peering round into the darkness, he called ‘Sergeant Brownlow! Corporal Kelly!’

Within seconds, both men had appeared out of the darkness, both armed with sub-machine guns.

‘Right, Sergeant, I want you to organise guards for the Germans, not that I think they’re any danger to us, but we don’t want any of them wandering off, and they might panic when you, Corporal, blow the bridge.’

Kelly rubbed his hands together and said ‘Ripper! I’ll just check their connections.’ He held out his weapon. ‘I won’t be needing this. Five minutes all right for you, Sarge?’

Brownlow took the gun and replied ‘Yep. I’ll get our blokes out of the way as well. All right, Sir?’ And without waiting for a reply, he moved off, calling for Green and

Watson to assist. Dodd and Burgess, with nothing better to do, began to wander over to the officer's tent, and the German captain, also at a loose end, trailed along.

Within a few minutes, Brownlow was back, with Green and Watson in tow, explaining that the Italians had already taken charge of the prisoners and herded them into their own trucks, where they seemed happy enough.

As they all trooped into the tent, Kelly joined them and began to fuss with the connectors to the detonating equipment. Burgess spoke up then. 'Sir, can you explain somethin' to me?'

Dodd turned to the young man, and raised his eyebrows.

'I don't really get it, Sir.'

'What don't you understand?'

'Well, we wanted to blow the other bridge, and so did the Germans. Now we want to knock this one over, and so did the Germans. Why didn't we just let 'em do it?'

Dodd thought for a minute. 'Yes, I see your problem. Let's go through it. First, the road bridge. *We* wanted to blow it to stop the Germans retreating over it, so our forces could destroy or capture them on the other side. *They* want to get their troops and equipment across, then blow it, to make it harder for *our* chaps to chase them. Just a matter of timing, really. The Italians don't care much either way, except that they don't want the Germans to destroy their town to block the road after they've gone. All right so far?'

Burgess nodded, and Dodd noticed the other men were following the conversation and nodding too. Angelo appeared, pushing his way into the tent, which was getting crowded now, asking what was going on, and Dodd asked him to be patient, before reverting to English.

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‘OK. Now, here we are at the railway bridge. The Germans want to knock it down so our forces can’t get across it, and we want to’

His voice tailed off as he thought about it. He took off the German officer’s hat he’d been wearing, and furiously ran a hand through his sparse hair, as though his scalp itched. After a moment, he broke into a sheepish grin and, glancing round at them all, said, ‘Actually, you’re right, Burgess. Jolly well done indeed. We don’t want to knock it down at all, do we?’

Most of the men looked a bit confused, except Watson, who looked disappointed.

‘Look, these chaps’ he flicked his head towards the German trucks, ‘are there to blow the bridge up, to deny it to our troops as a crossing point. Yes?’

Nods all round.

‘So why didn’t they just get on with it?’

Silence, until Burgess cottoned on. ‘Yeah, that’s right. They must be waitin’ for somethin’.’

Green sniggered, but Dodd said ‘Good, Burgess, very good. You’re really going well tonight. What d’you think they’re waiting for?’

A cloud slid across the moon just then and plunged the interior of the tent into darkness. Strangely, they all stood in silence, as though waiting for it to pass, as if it were a noisy vehicle, and as the moon emerged again, Burgess asked cautiously, ‘A train?’ glancing at Green, who by now was making a careful study of his boots.

Kelly laughed. ‘A train! O’course! Talk about the bloody obvious! They were waiting ‘til it’s through, then, boom! Well done Johnny!’

Dodd took the lead again. ‘So, what should we be doing?’

Burgess was excited by now, and blurted ‘Blow the bastard before the train gets ‘ere!’

Watson cheered up at that, but Green had been thinking hard and now exclaimed 'No! We want to *save* the bridge for our chaps to use, but we want to *stop* the train. So we blow up the railway line on the other side!'

Watson stared at Green for a long moment, wondering if he was joking, then, when he saw Dodd was taking the suggestion seriously, almost hopped about with excitement. 'Oh yes! Please, Sir, can we do that? Please?'

Dodd had been telling Angelo about the new thinking, and he, without understanding the words, clearly understood what Watson was asking, and studied Dodd's face. But Dodd turned to Kelly, who, before Dodd had spoken, said 'Boss, blowing railway lines is the easiest job in the world. I can even do it when the train's goin' over the exact spot, if you like.'

There was a second's hush while everybody looked at Dodd, and when he said 'All right, Corporal. Get on with it. And hurry – the train might be here any second.'

There were whoops of joy from the young soldiers, and Kelly left the tent immediately, calling for Burgess and Green to follow. Within seconds, they had grabbed the materials Kelly would need from the old truck and were jogging towards the bridge.

Watson began to look anxious, and turned to Dodd. 'Sir, can I go too? I'd like to see the explosion.'

Brownlow joined in. 'Yeah, me too, Sir.'

Dodd grinned and agreed. 'Yes, it would be nice to be a bit closer, wouldn't it?' He turned to Angelo and explained that he and his men were going forward. Angelo said he'd tell his men what was going on, and Dodd, Brownlow and Watson started for the bridge.

They were well over the bridge and when they heard the sound of first one, then the other German truck being started up. Spinning round, they saw both vehicles moving.

Brownlow was stunned. Forgetting himself, he tore off his cap and threw it to the ground, shouting 'Jesus Christ, how the fuck could that happen? There was three fuckin' Italians with three fuckin' great sub-machine guns! How could that fuckin' rabble have got the better of 'em?'

But then he noticed the trucks were turning away from the track and moving towards the bridge, and soon the vehicles drew level with them. Angelo waved gaily as he leaped out of the cab of the first truck, and laughing, spoke to Dodd. For a moment, Dodd seemed shocked, then began to smile, and explained to his men 'When Angelo told his chaps we were going to watch the display, they all wanted to come too, and they all refused to stay behind to guard the prisoners.'

He began to chuckle. 'So, with Italian logic, they've all come, and brought the Germans with them!'

Even Brownlow had to laugh, and the Englishmen gleefully jumped onto the sides of the trucks to hitch a ride.

'Just as well I saw you blokes hangin' off the sides o' them trucks,' Burgess grumbled. 'I bloody near shat meself when I saw jerry lorries comin' at us. For a minute, I thought'

Dodd interrupted. 'What's happening, Private?'

Still miffed, Burgess replied 'The corp's just finishin', Sir. They're'

This time, he was interrupted by the arrival of Kelly and Green, Green carrying the detonating box while Kelly paid out the wire. Kelly stopped and studied the vehicles for a moment. 'Shit, Gilbert, I knew we should've sold tickets - we could've cleaned up. Are we waitin' for anybody else d'you reckon?' He gazed at Dodd, who looked embarrassed for a moment before saying 'Yes, yes, all very funny. I'll tell you about it later. Are you ready to go?'

Kelly nodded. 'Pretty much. Just a couple of connections.'

'Good. Are we safe here?'

Kelly looked back up the track and nodded again. 'Yeah, boss. I didn't use too much stuff. Just enough to break the track and make a bit of a hole. We should be all right here, I reckon.'

'All right, then. Get ready, then let me know.'

Kelly signalled Green to put the box down, and squatting beside it, began to make the final connections, and Dodd told Angelo what was happening. Angelo went back to tell his men.

Within a minute, Kelly had finished, and, looking up, said quietly 'OK, skipper, it's ready.'

Dodd looked round, and was amazed to see the Italians helping the Germans roll up the canvas sides of the trucks, so they could all get a good view! For a moment, the sheer bizarreness of the situation made his head spin – he was beginning to feel like a scrap of paper being buffeted this way and that by a flukey wind - and he scrubbed his forehead with his hand, pushing his hat to the back of his head.

Kelly looked at him, worried. 'You all right, boss?'

Dodd didn't acknowledge him for a moment, then said 'This is all getting too strange for me, Kelly.'

'I'm not with you, Sir.'

'Not long ago, there I was, just quietly getting on with being a university lecturer. Now, here I am, a British army Lieutenant, in rural Italy, dressed in a German major's uniform, about to tell an Australian to blow up an Italian railway line to stop a German train, with a group of German soldiers who pretty much gave themselves up, guarded by a bunch of farmers turned desperado who've removed the walls around their captives to give them a better view of the very train they were there to save being blown up!' He gasped for breath. 'Doesn't that seem a little odd to you?'

Kelly considered for a second, then said 'Not really, skipper. This *is* the army, isn't it?'

Shaking his head, Dodd gazed at Kelly for a moment, then said quietly: 'All right. Do the job, and let's get out of here before I

The end of his sentence was drowned by the flash and roar of the explosion. The blast sent Dodd staggering backwards, but he managed to stay upright and stood, shoulders hunched, as a rain of gravel fell all around him.

As his ears stopped ringing, Dodd became aware of noise from behind, and turned to see all the men, Germans, Italians and British, applauding and cheering excitedly, shouting, pointing, shaking hands and clapping each other on the back. Turning back to Kelly, he grinned and said 'As I was saying, Corporal, before I lose my grip on reality.' He straightened up, and brushed his uniform. 'Now, I think we might all get back across the bridge before the train arrives, because I think the people in it are going to be cross.'

Green and Brownlow stood looking south. Green turned to the sergeant, and said 'Must be pretty important, eh, Sarge, whatever's on that train?'

Brownlow agreed, and asked Green what he thought might be on it.

Green thought for a while, not noticing Burgess had joined them, and ventured 'I reckon it must be wounded. See, they've left it so late so they could get all their wounded on it. Get 'em to hospital smartish. That's what I'd do.' He nodded to himself, still gazing south, then added 'Maybe it would've been better to let 'em through, eh?'

Brownlow turned to Burgess. 'All right, young Burgess, you're the dog's wassnames tonight. What do *you* reckon's on the train?'

Burgess had no doubt. 'Oh, wounded, definitely, Sarge. Or prisoners. No, they'd make prisoners walk, wouldn't they? So it's wounded. Definitely.'

Brownlow looked at them both and smiled gently. 'You see, boys, that's why the officers are officers, and you're not. Think about the German's situation: they're retreating, and we saw they were keeping on going when they got over the road bridge, so they're not going to defend the river. Not seriously, at any rate. That means they're moving back further, and I'll bet they're getting a defence line prepared further north. So they'll be needing all the troops and especially, all the tanks and artillery they can get. The last thing they need is to be saddled with a train load of wounded to look after. No, I'd say there's tanks and guns on that train.'

Burgess was horrified. 'No! Bastards! Pack of rotten bastards! Fancy leavin' your wounded!'

Speech failed Green for a while, until he took up the refrain. 'Yeah, that's right, Johnny. Pack of bastards!' He glared at their prisoners, then took a kick at a bit of rock, and sent it flying towards them, shouting 'Bastards!'

Brownlow broke in then. 'Settle down boys, settle down. I don't *know* what's on the train – I'm just telling you what I think the jerries'll do. And why do I think that? Because it's what I'd do, too.'

The young soldiers stared at him, aghast. He continued: 'Put yourself in the German commander's position. You're falling back, you can get your troops, supplies and vehicles out along the road, but you need to move your tanks and heavy guns by rail – too slow by road. You've only got time to get one train out, so you can choose between your guns and your wounded. If you leave your guns behind, you'll most likely not be able to stop the Allies, so your entire force'll be lost, and you won't be able to treat your wounded anyway. No, better to leave them for the Allies to look after, and save your guns.'

Green was still staring at the knot of German privates. 'Still, Sarge, I mean ... '

Burgess nodded agreement. 'Yeah, Sarge. It ain't fuckin' right, is it?'

Brownlow put his hand gently on Burgess's shoulder. 'Son, this is war - it don't have to be right, does it? Those old buggers with gold braid all over 'em have to make some pretty horrible decisions, sometimes. You know, at Dunkirk, when it looked like we was going to be driven into the sea, ...'

He broke off for a second, lost in thought. 'You know what a fuckin' shambles *that* was. We'd lost most of our armour, all our transport, we had no artillery or anti-tank guns, and we're completely surrounded, and *we* was all that was left to defend England when Hitler invaded! Jesus Christ!'

He looked round quickly, in case Dodd had heard. 'Imagine that! All the heavy equipment gone, and England's only trained troops cornered! You know what happened? I'll tell you. They moved us experienced soldiers back to the beaches and organised thousands of boats to take us off, and they sent the new raw recruits forward to defend the perimeter while we got away! See, what choice did they have? If we'd stayed, we'd all have been killed, or taken prisoner. The way it ended up, we lost all them new boys, but more'n three hundred thousand veterans got back. I did hear them new blokes was given ten rounds each and told to fight to the last man. Dunno for sure about that bit though.'

Brownlow moved off to talk to Dodd, while Burgess and Green silently watched him go.

At the edge of the bridge, Dodd too was wondering what was on the train. Brownlow stood with him, their eyes straining to pick out any sign of the train, the distant rumbling and flashing over the horizon forgotten for the moment.

'Be handy to know what's on it, eh, Sir?'

'Certainly would, Sergeant. I'm wondering what's for the best if it turns out to be full of angry SS stormtroopers.'

I'm not at all sure what to do if they put an attack together. Maybe it would be sensible to surrender?'

'I reckon we're a long way from that, Mr. Dodd, Sir. After all, our lads don't have to attack anybody – all they have to do is keep any enemy troops at a distance until our lot come up. D'you reckon the officer knows what's on the train?'

Dodd shivered, suddenly aware that he was cold. 'Well, I did ask him.'

'And?'

'He told me his name, rank and number.'

'Yeah. Well, it was worth askin'. Any rate, we're not too badly off. We've got Angelo's three automatic weapons, and now we've got enough German rifles to give everyone something to fire, and the boys know where to go. Ten yard intervals either side of the bridge, we can put down a useful weight of fire. Plus, we've got good cover on the river bank, and they'll have to come what, two hundred yards across flat ground with no cover.'

'Even so,' Dodd muttered, still staring to the south, and left the sentence unfinished. He decided to wait and see - if the train was carrying equipment, it wouldn't matter, but if it was soldiers and they mounted a serious attack, he might surrender rather than risk his men.

At the bridge, the men stood in an apprehensive knot. Green dragged his gaze from the darkness to acknowledge Watson, who had just wandered up, and said 'Fuck this for a game of soldiers, eh, Bill? I don't like this at all.'

Without looking at Green, Watson nodded understanding. 'Yes, it's all a bit damned scary, isn't it?'

Burgess was surprised. 'Jesus, boys, I don't understand you. After what we've been through, the attack on the camp, an' all, I'd have thought you'd be well used to it by now.'

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Green responded. 'Yeah, well, that was different, wasn't it? It was us doing the business then, more of a game, really, and we were not waiting about to be shot at.'

Watson agreed. 'That's right. And these'll be proper soldiers, too. It's definitely not a game any more. I don't mind telling you, I'm getting jumpier by the minute. It's not as if we're even used to firing these things, never mind having some fellow fire them at us!'

Kelly broke in then. 'All right, girls, settle down. Let's not get ourselves in a state. You'll be all right as soon as the action starts. And that won't be long, I reckon. Have a squiz

He pointed, and there was a distant moving flash of light, which had to be from the train. Dodd had seen it too, and called the men, first in English, then Italian. They all hurried over the bridge and took their assigned positions, all except Bimbo, who was to stay back and look after the prisoners. He was a good choice for this job: his mere size was enough to keep the soldiers subdued, and he didn't really need the rifle he had slung over his shoulder as he herded them away from the bridge area. Dodd had allowed the officer, Captain Bock, to stay with him, rather than be rounded up with the others.

On the river bank, tension mounted as the train slowly approached.

When it happened, it was disappointing at first. The heavily loaded train was straining along, not doing more than 15 miles an hour, and seemed to be taking forever to reach the break in the line. Then, just as several of the watchers were beginning to think it was getting too close, it had somehow ridden over the break, the locomotive lurched to one side. In slow motion, the truck behind it followed. No explosions, no fire, hardly any noise even, at this distance, and that might have been all, if the following trucks had been empty. But they carried

hundreds of tons of material, and they kept going, their momentum forcing them on into the derailed truck and locomotive, which was pushed almost to one side before it slowly toppled over. The noise came now, that unique hollow clanking of one railway truck on another almost drowned by the scream of tortured steel, as truck after truck was derailed. Then, silence.

Watson was feeling a stab of disappointment through his anxiety – he'd been hoping for something much more spectacular, imagining flames slashing through billowing steam, and a lot more noise. There *was* steam, and smoke, but not much, and no now noise, at this distance. He could clearly make out the outline of the wreck, and, glancing to his left, realised the sky was lightening, streaked with pink and yellow.

The men lay tense, watching the train over the sights of their weapons. A minute passed, then another. They began to fidget, and Brownlow called 'All right, boys, keep calm, now. And stay down.'

As he said that, there was movement at the wreck, and in the gathering light, they could make out the shape of a man scramble up from the side of the toppled locomotive. The men watched, their fear forgotten for a moment, as the man turned back and helped another man from the cabin. They both clambered down to the ground, and after peering back along the wrecked trucks, scurried off into the still dark countryside.

The soldiers stayed down, watching the returning light begin to add colour to the scene. Nothing more happened for another two minutes, until, from their left, the east, a flash that lit up the sky announced that the road bridge had been destroyed. It was followed a second later by a rumbling roar, felt as much as heard.

Watson called 'See, Corporal, now *that's* what I call an explosion!'

Seeing more movement at the train, Brownlow admonished 'Shut up. And watch.'

The door of one of the upright trucks slid open, and a man emerged, then another. The soldiers at the river bank tensed, but no more passengers appeared. They moved to the next truck, opened the sliding door and climbed inside. After a moment, a ramp appeared at the doorway, and seconds later, a horse, then another, followed by several more, picked their way down the ramp.

Dodd was shocked. He turned to Bock, who was laying beside him. 'Horses! We've been risking life and limb for the sake of a, a, a, ...' The word escaped him. '.... a bunch of horses?'

'Of course, Major. I don't suppose it matters now if I tell you the train was taking four artillery batteries back to help form a defensive line further north. That's sixteen big guns, and their ammunition. And what good would they be if they couldn't be moved?'

'Well, I see that. I'm just surprised you're still using horses.'

'Just as well we are, as it happens. Our main fuel dump for the whole area was bombed a while ago, and, well, I shouldn't be telling you this, but let's say we're having to be careful with fuel. In any case, the German army still uses many horses. Did you know that when Hitler invaded Russia, he took more horses than Napoleon did all those years ago? Well, it's true. And even if we had the heavy vehicles to pull the guns, they'd block the road and stop everything else. So, the horses travel by train, while the soldiers walk.'

'So, no soldiers, then?'

'Not fighting soldiers, no. There'll be a handful of men to look after the horses, but I imagine they'll be much more concerned about calming their animals down, and seeing to the injured ones, than they will about you.'

Dodd sighed a long sigh, and his head dropped for a few moments. 'I wish you'd told me that earlier, Captain.'

The German smiled, and replied 'It is not my place to give you free intelligence, Major. A matter of honour, you understand.'

Dodd looked hard at Bock. 'Frankly, Captain, I'm beginning to find your honour a little tiresome.' He stood and called, in English, then Italian, that it was all over, and they should return to the other bank.

Chapter 16

Bock and Dodd stood silently watching the German prisoners, who, Dodd could see even in the dawn light, were standing in gloomy clumps, hardly speaking, shoulders slumped.

Dodd broke the silence. 'They seemed pretty happy not long ago, when we blew the railway, but look at them now, Captain. What do you make of it?'

'Now they're afraid you're going to take your men away, and either I'll make them fall back to our lines, or they'll have to try to surrender again without getting shot.'

Dodd was interested. 'What would you do if we did leave?'

Bock winced. 'I'm tired, Major. My war started beautifully, but look what it's come to.' He waved his one hand around to indicate his fallen circumstances. 'Yet my duty ' He shook his head, and remained silent.

Dodd let him off the hook. 'Well, you won't have to make the decision. We're going to stay here and guard the bridge until our troops come up, and that'll be the end of it for you.'

Bock visibly relaxed. 'For you too, I think. A successful mission, behind enemy lines, to save an important bridge – there'll be a commendation in this for you, Major.' Bock paused and smiled. 'Perhaps even a real promotion!'

The shock of what Bock had said hit Dodd like a fist. It hadn't really struck him until now that when the Allied troops arrived, this adventure would be over. Before today, he'd imagined that they'd just carry on until they were starved or frozen into surrender, or were captured. Then, when they realised they couldn't destroy the road bridge, he'd privately hoped they'd fall back with Angelo's gang, and find some other mischief to get up to. But now, suddenly, it was just going to fizzle out. It was obvious what would happen now:

all they had to do was just sit here and wait, and he and his men would be enveloped back into the gigantic military machine.

Bock looked hard at Dodd, then, understanding the deflation that comes at the end of excitement, and, sensing at least part of what Dodd was feeling, he asked quietly, 'So, we simply wait for your forces to arrive?'

Dodd gazed bleakly towards the horizon. 'I don't imagine it will be long. They wouldn't have blown the other bridge until the last minute, so our troops won't be far away. I expect we'll be seeing a spotter aircraft coming to have a look any time now.'

Bock nodded agreement, said 'I'll let my men know,' and left Dodd to his thoughts.

The German soldiers had cheered up again, once they had been assured they wouldn't be left, and now it was just a matter of waiting for the Allied front line to engulf them. It was full daylight now, warming up to another fine day, and the German corporal was bustling about, organising a hot breakfast and ersatz coffee for everyone.

While they waited, there was that seemingly universal ritual among erstwhile enemies, that indicated to all concerned that there was nothing personal in their recent attempts to kill each other, the exchange of cigarettes. Dodd's men, of course, only had the coarse Italian tobacco they'd been given by Angelo, but that didn't matter, and the trade between the three nationalities was evenly spread, everybody politely ignoring the fact that the Italians and the English had the exact same brand of tobacco.

It struck Angelo with a small shock that a couple of hours ago, he'd been quite willing to shoot the whole platoon of Germans, but now, up close, he could see they were just young men like himself, some still confused, some still

frightened, but comforted by the gift of a cigarette from a stranger. Now he was glad he hadn't had to fire.

Dodd and Bock sat on the trunk of a fallen tree, watching interestedly, when they were interrupted by Brownlow bustling up. 'Aircraft approaching, Sir.' He pointed south-east, and Dodd raised his hand against the low sun.

'Yes, got it.' Dodd pointed, and Bock saw it too. 'It'll be coming to check the bridge, make sure it's destroyed. It'll be a nice surprise for him, to see it's still up. I imagine they'll go crazy at HQ when they hear!'

As the plane approached, Brownlow said 'Remember not to wave, Sir, you're in German uniform. Wouldn't look right, would it?'

Dodd nodded, but even so, as the small aircraft began circling low overhead, he found it hard not to join in the waving and shouting. After a couple of circuits, the plane buzzed down very low, low enough so they could see the pilot wave, and, with a cheerful waggle of wings, turned back to its base.

The two officers turned back to the German soldiers.

'They've cheered up a lot, considering they're going to be prisoners for the foreseeable future' Dodd remarked.

'Yes, that's it exactly,' replied Bock. 'You see, until a few hours ago, they didn't have a foreseeable future at all. Or at least, if they could see their future, they wouldn't like what they saw. There's no dishonour in giving up, for them - they've no real pride in the uniform, you know. They're just shopkeepers and clerks dressed up as soldiers. As far as they're concerned, there's no shame in being defeated, only relief. There's no military feeling in any of them, you see. They just want to stay alive long enough to go home.'

'Do you blame them?'

Bock thought before replying: 'No, I don't suppose I do. These men - they were conscripted too late to have had a

taste of victory, so defeat means little to them. I imagine they were happy to read all about our campaigns, as long as they didn't have to do anything themselves, but their only experience of being a soldier is being far from home, uncomfortable, and being shot at or bombed.'

'And you? Your experience is different?'

This time, the silence was longer. Dodd, the old hand inquisitor, said nothing, until eventually, with a sigh, Bock began.

'Oh yes, completely different. I was in it from the beginning, you see. Before the beginning. I studied engineering at university, and after graduating, there was so much going on, so many opportunities! Hitler was rebuilding Germany completely – it was simply amazing – there was new construction everywhere! New roads, railways, factories, ships, everything! You didn't have to be a Nazi – I never was – I always thought they were nothing but a bunch of thugs and hooligans - to see the transformation. We, most of us at university anyway, could see a clear difference between Hitler and most of his hangers on. But the biggest growth, the most astonishing renewal, was in the military, and there were always military officers at every university, all charming, all beautifully turned out, plenty of cash to buy drinks, telling us about wonderful opportunities as soldiers, or airmen, or in the navy. Well, I was entranced by it all, and, as luck would have it, I'd done pretty well in my exams, so I could choose what to do, and I selected tanks. Armour was the new cavalry, you know. Wearing a Panzer officer's uniform was a passport to the front of the queue, the best table in the restaurant, and the women, well ...!'

Bock stopped and smiled, remembering. 'When I finished my training, I was posted to the 7th Panzer Division. Rommel's division! You wouldn't have heard of Rommel before the North Africa campaign, but ...'

Dodd interrupted. 'As a matter of fact, I'm well aware that Rommel was famous in Germany long before that.'

'Really?' Bock was sceptical. 'What do you know of him?'

'Well, I know he was in charge of Hitler's personal escort battalion, chosen by Hitler himself, when you invaded Poland. I know Hitler was very impressed with him, so when his tour of duty was up, Hitler asked him what he'd like to do next. And he asked for a Panzer division.'

Bock was impressed, and said so. He paused, before continuing. 'It was 10th May when we crashed into Belgium, and began the race for the Channel. It was exhilarating, wonderful!'

He was on his feet now, excited by the memory. 'We just kept going. On, on, on, day and night! We didn't let anything stop us! We charged through everything – just pushed all resistance aside. The infantry couldn't keep up with us, and any tank that broke down was shoved out of the way and abandoned. Our flanks were completely open, but Rommel didn't care. We were always short of fuel and ammunition – the supplies had trouble keeping up with us, and your troops and the French were threatening our flanks, but the order was always 'Advance!' It was magnificent! We were Gods! In six days we were across Belgium and into France, and still we kept going. Theoretically, it was madness – but we had few casualties and took thousands of prisoners – half of them thought they were safely in rear areas, they weren't prepared, and were so astonished to see us, they didn't put up any resistance!'

'We got almost to Lille before we were pulled out to rest after two weeks right at the front. Rommel took a couple of cars full of officers to have a look at Lille – I was lucky to be included – but when we got there, we found the place was full of French and British soldiers! They seemed even more surprised than we were, and we managed to turn and get out

before they recovered enough to shoot us! That was just one of Rommel's escapes – he's had more than his share – but it all adds to the legend, you know.

'In a few days, my Division was back in action, racing to St Valery to stop your soldiers being evacuated from there. They fought hard, those men! They contested every metre of ground, but in the end, we simply overwhelmed them. No sooner had we accepted their surrender, than we were off again, moving up to attack Cherbourg. At first, there was strong resistance, a heavy artillery battle, noise, smoke, explosions everywhere, it stunned the senses! Then suddenly, there was no fight left in the garrison, and they surrendered. Thirty thousand men in a strong fortress, just gave up! That was on 19 June.'

Bock stopped his pacing, turned to Dodd, raised his one arm, palm upward, then let it drop, in a gesture of disbelief, of resignation. 'All at once, it was over - the French surrendered, the British gone, there was nobody left to fight! In 40 days my Division alone took the best part of a hundred thousand prisoners, hundreds of guns and tanks, thousands of other vehicles.' Bock smiled briefly and added: 'You might be interested to know, Major, we also captured two thousand French horse drawn wagons.'

He stopped, suddenly deflated. Dodd gave him a moment then asked 'And your arm? How did that happen?'

'Bad luck. As I said, outside Cherbourg there was an artillery battle. My battalion was not even in the danger area, we'd pulled back to refuel. A stray shot from somewhere exploded close to my tank. It just happened that I was getting out at that exact moment – a few seconds earlier, I'd have been safe inside. Ironic, don't you think? All that way, right up at the front, not a scratch, then torn to pieces at the tail end.'

Bock returned to his seat on the tree trunk and sat, slumped, head slowly shaking, before continuing. 'That's it,

really. I was a mess, broken ribs, a punctured lung, both legs broken, shell fragments everywhere, and this.' He glanced at his empty sleeve. 'It was touch and go for me, but we had wonderful medical services then, nothing but the best for us. I spent a year in hospital, then went home for a time, still recuperating. I thought it was all over for me, then, well, you know how much territory we've taken, we were getting short of troops to garrison it all, and I, along with many other invalids, found myself back in uniform, and here I am.'

Dodd asked 'And where is home?'

'Munich. A lovely city. I was born there, grew up there, studied there. Hardly knew anywhere else until I became a soldier. Even then, I often got home on leave.'

'How odd' mused Dodd.

'Odd? Why?'

'Munich. That was where Hitler signed the 'Peace in our Time' Agreement in 1938?'

'That's right.'

'The first city to officially take anti-Jewish action in 1933?'

Bock looked at his shoes. 'Yes.'

'The city where the Jews were stripped of their citizenship in 1935?'

Bock nodded glumly.

'Where the people were instructed to see the anti-Jewish *The Eternal Jew* exhibition? Where the Great Synagogue was demolished by order of the city, and the Jews were forced to pay? Where Jewish property was burned, and from where a thousand Jews were sent to Dachau in 1938?'

Bock didn't acknowledge that he'd heard.

Dodd stood, then looked steadily down at Bock before adding 'Makes your concern with your personal honour look a bit misplaced, doesn't it?'

He walked away to find Brownlow. He wanted to discuss what to do when the Allied soldiers arrived, but Angelo got to him first.

Angelo put his arm round Dodd's shoulder, and flashed a tight smile. 'Well, my friend, what now?'

Dodd smiled back, and replied 'Nothing, really. We just wait until our troops arrive, then

Angelo interrupted. 'I was thinking about after that.'

Dodd looked blankly at the Italian. 'After?'

'Yes. After we hand the prisoners over. After your soldiers take responsibility for the bridge. After this area is liberated.'

Dodd was still having trouble focussing clearly on what would happen then. 'Oh. After that. Well, ...' He grimaced. 'What about you?'

'We'll go on to our camp, as we said before.' He swivelled his head to the west, towards the mountains, gleaming now in the early sun. 'Then we're going over the mountains, to Naples. The Germans are giving the Americans a tough fight at Salerno. We thought we'd stay behind the German lines and make a nuisance of ourselves. What do you think?'

Dodd looked at Angelo enviously, and for a moment, Dodd's entire future, everything, hung suspended, as though by a hinge. Then the hinge swung, and he made the second of his two memorable decisions. 'Excellent! Brilliant! I'm coming too!'

Angelo was unsurprised. 'Of course! What else? And your boys?'

'Are they welcome?'

'Of course!'

'Superb! I suppose we'd better go and ask them, but I'm pretty sure they've enjoyed the last few weeks as much as I have, and I know what they'll say.'

Angelo tactfully stayed back as Dodd called his men together, and made a little speech.

‘Well, boys, it’s time to decide what to do next. You’ve all done an exceptional job, absolutely exceptional. Who’d have guessed, when we all sat in that plane, a few weeks ago, that we’d have had this adventure, eh? But that’s the point, really. None of us expected to be here, to have done what we’re done, and now there’s the opportunity to draw a line across, as it were, and go back to our units. You can be very proud of what you’ve done, very proud. But you might decide that enough’s enough.’

The men were glancing at each other as Dodd spoke, and shifting uncomfortably. Brownlow sucked his lip.

‘Personally,’ Dodd continued, ‘I’m having the time of my life – I don’t want this jaunt to end, at least not yet, and I’m going to team up with Angelo and his lads – see what misbehaviour we can get up to.’

The men stood motionless, examining Dodd’s face.

Kelly was first to find his voice. ‘Are you saying we’ve got a choice, boss?’

‘That’s right, Corporal. You’ve all done heroic things, and if you want to call it a day now, you can do so proudly. On the other hand, I’m staying out, and if you feel like another innings, Angelo will’

He was drowned out by shouts and laughter.

The men were still talking excitedly, laughing, telling each other how they’d known this would happen: how, even if old Doddy hadn’t made it official, they’d intended to stay with the Italians anyway, and bugger the officers. Angelo’s men had joined in, shaking hands, hugging, shouting their own versions, laughing too.

Dodd and Angelo watched, both as pleased and excited as the men. Angelo took Dodd’s arm and said

‘Perhaps we’ll do more in Naples, but at least we managed something here, eh?’

Dodd was surprised. ‘Something? Oh, much more than that, I think. For a start, I couldn’t guess how many lives we’ve saved by stopping this bridge being destroyed.’

Angelo shrugged. ‘Maybe yes, maybe no. But have we stopped the Germans destroying my town, which is what we set out to do? I don’t think so.’

‘I don’t know about that, to be honest. Perhaps you’re right. But from what we’ve seen, I’d say they weren’t planning to seriously defend this area. If they were, I think there’d have been a lot more work going on round the road bridge, trenches and so on, and look at this bridge, guarded by a handful of third rate troops. My guess would be that they’re just looking to delay the Allied advance so as to give them more time to construct a strong defensive line further north. You know, better than me, how hard it is to move about this country in winter – what with swollen rivers, and roads knee deep in mud. If the Germans can hold a line for a few more weeks, the Allies will be bogged until the spring. So, I may be wrong, but I don’t think they’ll defend Casagrigio very strongly. They’ll be wanting all the troops they can spare further up.’

Angelo brightened a little and asked, hopefully, ‘So, they’ll just go away?’

Dodd thought, then said quietly ‘No, not quite. My guess is they’ll demolish a few buildings to block the road, and leave a small force to put up some sort of delaying action, but once they’ve done that, why do anything more? They want to buy time, remember, so they want to slow the Allies down by forcing them to go off the road and round the town. If they block the road and leave a few men with anti-tank guns, they’ll achieve that just as well as if they fought for every building.’

He stopped, and became thoughtful once more, before, animated now, going on. 'Now, if our lot can get some useful forces over this bridge and bypass the town, perhaps we can reduce the odds of damage even more. What would be the point of staying to fight if we have a way around the town?'

Angelo wasn't convinced. 'Maybe.' He shrugged. 'But how will your soldiers find their way round? There's only the farm tracks, and they're not even on the map, most of them.'

'You could guide them. You'd only have to lead one vehicle, and all the others could follow.'

Angelo muttered 'Maybe' again, but Dodd could see he was interested.

'Look, think about it. If the Germans see there's a usable way round the town, there'd be no point in staying to fight, would there?'

The Italian considered it a while longer, visibly brightening. 'All right, my friend. I'll guide them through, then I'll come back, pick you up, and we'll disappear! I've got a few bottles at the camp I've been saving for a special celebration – I think we might open them tonight!'

He slapped Dodd on the back so hard he nearly fell over, and went off to tell his gang about the new plan.

A few minutes later, Dodd stood with his men staring along the river bank, when the sight he'd been expecting came into view – a small cloud of dust on the opposite bank being pulled along by vehicles. He couldn't make out what they were at first, but Kelly said 'Armoured cars, skipper. Two of 'em, I think. Yes, two.'

They waited in silence, watching the vehicles racing closer, until, with a start, Brownlow said: 'Blimey, Sir, I've just thought. Be better if you kept out of the way at first, bein' in German uniform, like. Don't want you getting' shot by mistake, do we? Just when we're ready to start again! I'll go

over the bridge and explain, then you can appear and take over. All right?’

‘Good idea, Sergeant. Off you go then. I’ll give you a minute, then come over.’

As Brownlow moved off through the crowd of Italians and German prisoners, who had all gathered on the river bank, Dodd trotted to the officer’s tent and disappeared inside.

Dodd watched through the tent flap as Brownlow stood, legs astride, knuckles on waist, facing the oncoming vehicles. He could see the commander of each car, as was their habit, standing inside, but exposed from the waist up. They hardly slackened speed until the last second, until it was obvious the sergeant wasn’t going to move, then the commander of the leader shouted something, and the vehicle braked violently, sliding and jinking, half out of control, just managing to stop, three inches away from Brownlow. The commander lazed against the edge of his turret in a pose of studied nonchalance, but the second vehicle wasn’t quite so quick to react, and nudged the first one, not hard, just enough to jerk the young commander off balance, and he nearly fell into the turret of his vehicle. Brownlow thought he heard a guffaw from inside the second car. The commander, recovering his poise, turned and glared at the man whose body poked out of the second vehicle. The other young man shrugged.

Dodd saw Brownlow come to attention and throw a parade ground salute, which the officer in the leading car returned lazily, and watched as Brownlow spoke, pointing back at the bridge, then the tent where Dodd was concealed. Dodd could see a brief exchange between the two, then the officer turned and looked at the tent, and Dodd took this as his cue. As he emerged and approached the bridge, the knot of

men drew aside to let him through, and, as though he was a winning athlete, there was a scatter of clapping as he passed.

Brownlow waited until Dodd had started across the bridge, then turned and walked to meet him. Brownlow was grinning broadly, and as they met, said 'OK, Sir, over to you. By the way, you know how you gave yourself a promotion? Well, that captain on the front car, he's a bit up himself, so I gave you another one, told him you're a colonel. All right?'

'Lovely, Sergeant, thanks for that. If I carry on at this rate, I'll outrank Monty before long.'

The armoured car commander was again leaning casually on the side of his turret and studied Dodd interestedly as he approached and stopped at the front of the vehicle.

'Don't you salute a senior officer in the cavalry, Captain?' Dodd barked, and the officer, remembering himself, stood up and saluted.

'My apologies, Colonel, it's just you're a bit of a surprise. We weren't expecting this bridge to be standing, let alone captured, and we certainly didn't expect to see one of our officers dressed as a German major! Nobody told us you were going to be here.'

'No, well, we're a bit of a secret operation.'

Peeved, the captain replied 'Right, Sir, but we should have been told. After all, we might'

Dodd sighed. 'It wouldn't be a secret then, would it?'

Uncertainly, the captain said 'I suppose not.'

Dodd was glad Brownlow had made him a colonel. If this chap had known he was a mere lieutenant, he'd have wanted to know chapter and verse. He decided to keep the initiative. 'Right, Captain, the important thing now is to get your people moving over the bridge, pronto. I assume you have radio contact with someone senior?' He was pleased with that, 'someone senior,' and, without waiting for a reply, continued 'So, I want armour through here immediately. And

I want anti-tank guns, and infantry with vehicles. Get them started straight away, and I'll have one of my chaps guide them up, so they can threaten the Germans retreat. Got all that?'

'Yes, Sir. But Sir, my orders are to report back in person.'

Dodd shook his head, exasperated. 'For goodness sake, Captain, use your initiative. By the time you get back the Germans'll be away. In any case, I haven't finished with you yet. So get on the radio and get things moving. Now.'

'Right away, Sir. What unit shall I tell them you're with, Sir?'

Dodd glared. 'Never mind all that now. Just tell them it's Colonel Dodd.' He decided to take a chance. 'Any problems, tell them to clear it with the General'

The captain was shocked. 'What, you mean?'

Dodd sighed and looked away for a moment, giving a passable expression of exasperation. 'And as soon as you've got confirmation, come and find me. Understood?'

The captain nodded, and Dodd, thoroughly enjoying himself by now, added 'All right, get on with it' and with a lazy salute, smartly returned this time, he turned and strolled back over the bridge.

Within a few minutes, the armoured cars came juddering uncomfortably over the sleepers of the bridge. The captain dismounted and approached Dodd, who was standing with his soldiers, who smirked at the newcomer, Dodd having recounted their conversation.

'Sir,' the captain began, with new respect, not noticing the grins of Dodd's men, 'your message really put the cat among the pigeons! They're diverting a whole regiment of tanks, with artillery, motorised infantry, the lot! They'll be here in a few minutes.'

Dodd nodded, attempting to give the air of a man used to having his commands obeyed, replied 'Good. Now, Angelo here will take the Kubelwagen and lead them through the back tracks, out of sight of the road, to a point where the column commander can take over, but I need him back in a hurry, we've got other work to do, so he can't be hanging about.

'Oh, and I want my prisoners properly looked after, so send up some transport to evacuate them. In the meantime, I'll be staying behind the German lines, and I need some supplies. I want you to get on to your HQ and tell them to bring up the items on this list.' He handed the captain a scrap of paper. 'We'll be moving off as soon as Angelo gets back, so I need it all here within an hour. All right?'

The captain glanced down the list. 'Seems OK, Sir, but they might have trouble with the time. The track's going to be chockers with the troops coming through.'

Dodd was really getting into his part now; he was beginning to feel much more comfortable as a colonel than he ever had as a lieutenant. He gave the captain a withering look. 'What's your name, Captain?'

'Chamberlain, Sir.'

'Well, Captain Chamberlain, I'm relying on you to get it done.' He smiled, and Chamberlain, boyishly relieved at the smile, replied 'I'll do my very best, Sir.'

'Thank you, Captain.' The smile disappeared. 'I just hope your best is good enough. I'm not a pretty sight when I don't get what I want.'

He glanced at Brownlow, who was at his side. 'Remember the last time, Sergeant? Was I pretty?'

Brownlow winced. 'You were not pretty Sir, due respect. Not pretty at all.'

Dodd threw a long look at the captain, then turned back to his men.

Soon, a cloud of dust announced the approach of a long column of vehicles, with, well in front, a jeep which stopped on the far approach to the bridge. Several officers emerged from the jeep and stood, studying the bridge structure, pointing and commenting.

Dodd marched quickly over to them and, seeing the senior officer was an engineer major, addressed him and asked what the delay was. The officer told him they had to make sure the bridge was up to supporting tanks, before they allowed them across.

Dodd exploded. 'What sort of traffic does this bridge normally carry, Major?'

'Er, trains, Sir.'

'And which would you estimate would be heavier, a tank, or a train carrying tanks? So, stop fussing about like an old hen, and get this convoy moving. Where's the column commander?'

By this time, the rest of the column was arriving, with another jeep in the lead. Before it stopped, a rumpled colonel was jumping from the back, and jogged up to Dodd, his right hand extended. Dodd took it, and knew the town was in good hands – he could feel the energy in this man.

'Colonel Dodd? I'm Pickering. The General's compliments, Colonel. He's very pleased with your success. He asks me to tell you your supplies are on their way. Should be here by the time this lot gets across, and if there's anything else you need, I'm to let him know.'

Dodd nodded thanks, concealing his relief that his guess had been right, that the senior officer would not admit he didn't know about Dodd's group. The colonel continued: 'The plan is for us to race up to cut the road north of the town, Casa something, and cut off any enemy forces left to defend the town and the river crossing.'

'Excellent.'

Dodd's Army

The Colonel examined Dodd closely for a moment. 'I got the impression from the General that this little jaunt of yours was his idea? Funny, he's never mentioned you until now.'

Dodd smiled, but said nothing.

After a moment, Pickering went on: 'Bit of luck, we'll have this job tidied up pronto, and then the major here can build us another bridge at the road, so we can get on with chasing jerry.'

He turned to the engineers. 'Now, any problem, here, Major? No? Right, let's get on, and we're in a hurry, remember,' and turning back to Dodd, 'I gather you have a guide for us?'

Dodd pointed over the bridge. 'Tell them to follow the Kubelwagen.' Angelo saw him pointing and waved enthusiastically from the driver's seat.

The Colonel shook hands with Dodd again, they saluted each other, and Dodd stood aside as the convoy began moving over the bridge.

Dodd's party stood to one side of the track, English, Italian and German intermingled, waving and grinning at the seemingly endless column of vehicles.

Eventually, bringing up the rear, two trucks stopped as soon as they were over the bridge, and their drivers got out. Brownlow went forward to talk to them, then reported to Dodd that one contained their supplies, and their orders were that having delivered the load, both trucks were to be used to take the prisoners back.

Dodd motioned the drivers, a corporal and a private, to come to him, then said 'Small change of plan, lads. I need these trucks. You'll have walk the prisoners back, but they're pretty docile, so you'll have no problem with them. Unless you'd like to join us?'

The corporal gaped at being given orders by a bloke dressed in German officer's uniform. When he'd got over his surprise, he gulped, and shook his head.

All the new gear was closely examined, amid surprised and gleeful shouts. Along with complete sets of uniform and underwear, there was shaving gear and soap, but what pleased the men most was the large supply of tea and sugar. The smokers were also well catered for, and Brownlow was particularly pleased with the three Bren guns and ammunition.

A brew of tea and a smoke had been enthusiastically voted in, and the men had nothing more to do now, but wait for Angelo's return.

Burgess, who'd been fantasising about a proper brew up and smoke for weeks, by which he meant tea, rather than coffee, and English style cigarettes, ideally Players or Senior Service, was surprised to find he was a little disappointed, and half wished he'd got a mug of the black coffee and pungent hand rolling tobacco donated by the locals, that he'd now got used to.

His thoughts were interrupted by Watson, who had seen Angelo and the Kubelwagen returning, and stood to wave.

Within a couple of minutes, Angelo slewed the jeep-like vehicle to a halt, and jumped out, grinning, and shouting to his men.

Dodd, back in his British lieutenant's uniform now, explained to his men that it looked as though their plan was working, that the tail end of the Germans seemed to be racing north to avoid getting entangled with the column of Allied armour, rather than getting settled in to positions in the town. This news, of course, brought an enthusiastic round of handshakes and hugs among the Italians, which spread to the soldiers.

Dodd's Army

When they'd all calmed down, Dodd told Angelo that he'd commandeered the army trucks, and they'd moved all the gear out of Angelo's old vehicle, which they could now abandon. Angelo didn't grasp what Dodd was suggesting for a second, but when he did, he tore his cap from his head and threw it onto the ground.

'Are you mad, you, you, soldier?!' he managed to blurt, forgetting Dodd's name for the moment. 'That's my private property! You want me to just leave it by the side of the road?'

He jumped on his cap, and gave it a ferocious kick. He then walked to the decrepit old lorry, picking up his bedraggled cap on the way, and used it to wipe an imaginary smear from the dirt encrusted and rusty mudguard, shaking his head in disbelief. He turned to face Dodd, and pulled back his shoulders.

'No, Dodd, no. This truck goes where I go.' With great dignity, he placed the cap back on his head, thrust out his chin and glared at Dodd, the very image of determination.

This earned him a scatter of applause from his countrymen, and bafflement from the others, and they all looked at Dodd, who held up both hands in a gesture of submission, and said to Angelo 'All right, my friend, whatever you say. I just thought you might want to swap for one of these....?'

Suddenly, Angelo's aggressive posture collapsed, and he smiled. 'Signore Dodd, we have some very difficult country to travel before we get to Naples. You know we have to get over the mountains, and there are no real roads up there, just tracks really, and sometimes not even that. The Italian army doesn't even try to take motor vehicles over where we're going, and neither do the Germans. Now, I know this old thing doesn't look much, but she's taken me over the top several times, and I'm sure she'll do it again. Can you say be so sure about your trucks?'

Dodd moved towards Angelo, his hands held out in a gesture of peace, and returned Angelo's smile. 'I apologise, my friend. I should have talked to you before acting. Of course you must take your truck, if you want to. But the army truck has benches in the back, so perhaps we should put all the gear in yours, and the men in mine?'

Angelo replied 'That will be satisfactory, Signore Dodd,' then grinned wider, and added, 'Until yours breaks down, of course!'

The transfer of the gear back to Angelo's old truck was completed quickly, and the corporal driver was relieved that at least one of the vehicles in his charge would be going back. Then it struck him that the German vehicles would be abandoned, and he suggested to Dodd that it would be best if he was to commandeer them. Dodd agreed, and added that they should take the Kubelwagen too. Dodd then spoke to Bock, who gave his word that he would stay with his men, in exchange for which he would be allowed to travel in the Kubelwagen, driven by his usual driver.

So all of a sudden, the corporal driver's day changed completely: at one moment, he was worried at the ribbing he'd get from his mates at the loss of the trucks, and the next, he was to take back of a line of four vehicles, three of them 'captured,' as well as a couple of dozen prisoners, including a highly decorated officer!

Soon, the German soldiers had packed all their gear into the two trucks that were to take them back. Their body language was expressive: Bock excepted, they were happy and excited, and Brownlow, watching them, thought they looked just like a kids Sunday School outing.

At a word from Dodd, British, Italians and Germans boarded their respective vehicles and the engines were started. Dodd leant from his cabin window and self-consciously waved the 'forward' signal, and all six vehicles followed each

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other in a circle, like some ponderous circus act, before the British corporal driver peeled off over the bridge, followed by the Kubelwagen and the German trucks, and Angelo led his miniature convoy on its journey west, towards the mountains, Angelo's base, and a new adventure. But that's another story.

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