

THREE TIMES LUCKY!

A Tale of Escapes and Captures In Italy

IN Italy this time last year I was helping to make wine in exactly the same locality as that where the Kiwis are now fighting. And as our boys capture village after village they will no doubt be celebrating with some of that same *vino* which the thrifty Ities have hidden underground.

Jim Stone and I reached this province after a fortnight's weary travelling on our flat feet. We had walked nearly 300 miles since jumping a train near the German border: a train which was taking 1000 Springbok and New Zealand officers from Campo 47, Modena, to Germany. Our escape had been a lucky one. We had worked all night to break open the door of our truck, and every minute was taking us nearer a German jail. Dawn was nearly upon us; we had been crouching on swaying buffers for what seemed like hours before the right combination of circumstances gave us an even chance of getting away without serious hurt. A slight slowing down of the train, a bordering hedge, a burst of machine-gun fire, and we hesitated no longer, but closed our eyes, took a deep breath and jumped to liberty.

Up to this time, and in fact for the nine months of my wanderings behind the lines, we found the peasant people not only sympathetic with our plight, but also willing to help us when the risk wasn't too great. They gave us food, they washed our clothes (sometimes), they let us sleep in their barns and even with their precious animals, and I can safely say that every escaped P.O.W. owes his liberty to their generosity. We did what little we could to repay them, and that is how Jim and I came to be crushing grapes with our bare feet in six-foot high vats somewhere just north of Rimini.

The new season's *vino* not being mature, we did not linger unduly, but resumed our trek to the south, where our troops, then at Foggia, were pushing forward. It took us some 10 days to slog our way to the top of the Appenines, on which was based the once famous and now recently-breached Gothic Line. Even then we could see German preparations for a defence line—gun pits here, strong points there, bridges mined, and road blocks in the course of preparation. We had several unnerving experiences, mainly dodging German patrols, which were on the lookout for escaped P.O.W.'s, before we were safely through. But by this time we were used to wearing civvy clothes (for which we had swapped our battle dress with Italians most keen to acquire real "materiale inglese"), could speak the language fairly fluently, and were fairly accustomed to our roles as Pietra Giacomina and Massone Giovanni, Italian labourers from Ferrara.

Optimistic Rumours

So we trudged on our journey southwards, avoiding like the plague such German-infested cities as Arezzo, Perugia, Assisi, Foligno and Spoleto. Gradually our sturdy British issue boots succumbed to the stony mountain tracks, our ersatz clothing began to disintegrate,

(Written for "The Listener")



★ CAPTAIN MALCOLM JOHN MASON, the writer of this article, left New Zealand as Intelligence Officer with the 25th Battalion of the Third Echelon. He fought in Greece and was captured at Sidi Rezegh, Libya, in 1941. Subsequently, he was a prisoner-of-war in Italy at Camps 41, 38 and 47. On September 14, 1943, he escaped from a train near Belluno. What happened between that date and June 17, 1944, when he rejoined the Allies, he describes in these pages.

but we ourselves became fitter and hardier.

Every peasant was so full of the most optimistic rumours that from day to day we expected to hear the sound of British guns, and to see the Wehrmacht in full retreat. Little did we know, however, that the front was quiet and that our troops had not even crossed the Sangro. And so, in early December, 1943, we reached the province of Abruzzo, which was to become, over the next six months, as well known to me as my native Wellington. Here Jim and I parted company, he leaving in an attempt to meet the Kiwis of Montgomery's advancing Crusaders, and I resolving to go where the fighting was less fierce. This was the last I saw of Jim, the game and tenacious companion of many a weary mile. I learnt on my release that he had been recaptured four months later near Rome, and though he is now in Germany, I am glad to say he is fit and well.

In Again—Out Again

As luck would have it, I met up at this time with one Millefanti Ercoli, an ex-Carabinieri, enamoured of a Bari beauty, and exceedingly anxious to reach that city. Millefanti knew, or thought he knew, of a way through the German lines near Ortona, and since he was so certain, and wanted a running mate for the trip, I gladly went along with him. Unfortunately, his information was faulty; we were recaptured in No Man's Land near Arielli by a German patrol, only a quarter of a mile from the Eighth Army lines, and I had the doubt-

ful pleasure of spending yet another Christmas in the bag, this time in German hands at Aquila. Boxing Day, however, brought me freedom by means of a simple ruse.

The building where we were located was surrounded on three sides by barbed wire: the fourth side was the barracks for the German garrison. It was, therefore, possible, if one could avoid being seen by the sentries, to jump out of one of our windows, and find a way out through the German quarters. Normally this would be impossible, but on Christmas night new and inexperienced troops took the place of the old guard, and in the morning I was able to put into practice a plan I had already evolved. There were several Italian tradesmen doing odd repairs round the place, so, tying a sack round my waist, and carrying a couple of bed boards on my shoulder, I made my way across the intervening space, and entered the German barracks. Here I blundered into the officers' quarters, and was roundly berated by a haughty Nazi lieutenant, who finished by showing the right way out to an exceedingly scared and trembling Italian carpenter. I hastily beat it for the hills, and subsequently heard that some 34 fellow-prisoners had followed my example during the day. They tore the place to pieces to find props for their disguises, and when timber ran out, one bright fellow even shouldered a lavatory cistern. I only regret I wasn't at roll call that evening to study the German commandant's reactions!

Three Months Alone

Winter had by now started in dead earnest, and so the only thing to do was to lie up until the snow had gone and then try to cross the line again. I therefore spent a rather chilly and uncomfortable winter all by myself some 4000 feet up in the Appenines living in a charcoal-burner's shack. And when I write "shack" I mean it, for the only thing I did not lack was snow water and fresh mountain air. I slept on dried leaves with a piece of canvas, an old quilt and an abbreviated blanket for covering; and, although there was no one to talk to, I nevertheless had plenty of small but persistent companions. For this three months I spent my time mooning over my little fire, dreaming of dear old New Zealand, and trying to make less unpalatable the dreary macaroni and polenta (cornflour porridge) cadged from Italians in the villages below.

In April I made another useful contact—this time an English sergeant who, having done a certain job behind the lines, was following the official route back. This seemed good to me, and he consented to take me with him. He certainly had the right route, and everything went well until about 1000 yards short of the British lines near Alfedena, when we ran into a German listening-post, which made us both prisoners again. This was another bitter blow to my high hopes, but I still was not in Germany, so I cheered myself with the thought that there might be possibilities on the journey.

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