

## Aug 1942 – On the Mon Viso from Benghazi to Bari aboard the *Mon Viso*

I think it was at the end of August that several thousand of us were marched down to the remains of the harbour to board the empty *Mon Viso*. She was a new cargo ship of about 11,000 tons, which had just completed her maiden crossing of the Med. with an Italian crew, but German AA gunners and a German officer on the bridge with the Italian captain.

We cast off in the early evening and were accompanied by another ship of POWs, four destroyers and several assorted aeroplanes and initially hugged the Libyan coast as we sailed eastwards. I was right at the bottom of one of the holds, sitting against the wooden tunnel that encased the propeller shaft and so had many ladders to climb to reach the primitive deck latrines that had been hastily constructed. Some of our fellows were so weak they had to be assisted up while others with severe dysentery could not make it at all with dire results as one can imagine. Our rations were biscuits, horsemeat and water and no prisoners were allowed up to the deck during the hours of darkness.

Off Pantellaria Island we were chased by a British submarine but fortunately he evidently realized we were POW ships and he veered off. We learnt very much later that after an unfortunate incident the previous December when a sub torpedoed a POW ship off the Greek coast carrying 5th Brigade SA POW's captured at Sidi Rezegh (Operation Crusader), the RN had warned all its sub commanders after the fall of Tobruk to be particularly careful if action was to be taken against any Axis ship sailing towards Italy from North Africa.

After three or four days we entered Brindisi harbour through one of its two channels and noted that it was also a seaplane and Stuka base and so had received attention from our bombers. We did not berth but were taken ashore on fishing smacks. I remember sleeping part of the night in a garden and then being marched to the railway station whence we departed in cattle trucks at 0400.

## Sep 1942 – Destination Transit Camp P.G. 51 at Altamura, near Bari

When day dawned we could see we were travelling through flat agricultural countryside stretching down to the sea on our right. It was quite picturesque – a pot-pourri of olive trees, vineyards, old seaside towns and villages and even a few yachts at sea. We were very weak and hungry but noted that whenever we stopped the people seemed kindly disposed to us. Our destination was Bari and two impressions I retained were that everything in Italy was very old and that there were Fascist signs up everywhere! From the station we had a fairly long march to a dry canal where we were kept for two days being counted and searched and, occasionally, given some minute quantities of food.

We had very few possessions left at this stage; I remember I buried my camera, torch and books in the desert where we were captured.

Finally we were moved into a nearby so-called transit camp (P.G. 51 at Villa Serena, Altamura), where tents had been erected and there was straw to lie on. Here we enjoyed our first hot meal for months – a macaroni and vegetable stew – which we all thought was wonderful. At least water was a little more plentiful and we could wash ourselves and our clothing, albeit without soap! It was here that we learnt that the 8th Army had been pushed right back to Alamein, although we disbelieved this Italian news initially. Here, too, it was that we received our first issue of those lifesaving Red Cross parcels; although we had only a quarter of a parcel each, this issue was a tremendous morale booster. We were able to write a short note home and I think most of us asked for food parcels, not realizing that these could not be sent.

In an adjacent compound were many of our officers, including Miles Syfret who told me that my promotion to sergeant was about to be confirmed but now, alas, it would not be. Also there was Mr. Ethelstone, our neighbour in Claremont, who had been a POW in WW1; he was later repatriated, I heard.

The so-called Italian stews were really watery soups (minestrone?), containing tomatoes, Swiss

chard (a type of spinach), cabbage and macaroni on different days and, very occasionally cheese or a piece of goat. We received another quarter of a Red Cross parcel there – with all the tins punctured to prevent hoarding for escaping purposes – before we were marched back to the station to take our places in 3<sup>rd</sup> class carriages in great style.

## Late 1942 – P.G. 62, near Lucca.

We travelled through beautiful country (after the desert!) and through a few tunnels through the Apennines and then passed Rome at night. The weather was fine as we raced through flat country to Pisa where we observed the Leaning Tower in the distance.

We finally disembarked at Lucca (P.G. 62, Colle Compito). Here conditions were bad; overcrowded tents, a very meagre water supply for 4000 men, no Red Cross parcels, great heat and mosquitoes as the camp was on marshland. When it rained we were swamped and eventually the camp was condemned by the Red Cross and dysentery was rife. One man went off his head and rushed at the barbed wire and a sentry shot him dead. Another sad instance was that of a tommy who was caught stealing a mate's pair of boots and was thrown bodily into one of the open latrine pits. We even tried eating grass here!

We heard news of the successful (2nd) battle of El Alamein here and, on 8 November 1942, we heard of the Allied landings in Tunis. We realized that despite all the hopeful rumours we heard, that the war had a few more years to run yet.

At last we were ushered into 3rd class coaches again for a shorter journey to Chiavari, a seaside resort on the west coast south of Genoa. Having arrived there we had a 16km march inland to Camp 52, which was situated in a valley in mountainous terrain; scenically it was rather beautiful. We even had to cross a small bridge over the little river (the Entella) to enter the camp.

Here we were issued with battledress uniforms, greatcoats and boots by the Red Cross and our morale improved considerably. This camp, although lacking in space for outdoor sporting activities, was regarded as one of the best camps in Italy. Privates were eventually all dispatched to working camps and we remaining NCO's soon organized inter-hut bridge, chess and spelling bee and general knowledge quizzes. A few lectures were given as well as Church services by lay preachers. All in all life was quite endurable here, though rather cold in winter with no bungalow heating. We were being issued with half a Red Cross parcel per week and a whole Xmas parcel and a whole Canadian parcel for New Year. My 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (22<sup>nd</sup> November 1942) was celebrated in this camp by the cooking of a cake consisting of boiling together well-broken Canadian biscuit, a little butter, Klim, raisins, sugar and water! (The ingredients were all from a Canadian half parcel.)

It was the first time I had encountered frozen earth and snow, but I was not impressed! By now some good concerts were being produced – instruments thanks to the Red Cross. The Xmas pantomime was a great success and on Xmas Day the It gave us each an orange as a Xmas gift. We also could now start a library with books from the Red Cross and, as the weather improved, tennis and volleyball were played. We were issued with paper camp money with which we could sometimes buy tomatoes and onions from the Italian canteens, as well as stamps to post one aerogramme a week home. They took about 14 weeks to reach Cape Town and, of course, were all censored before leaving the camp.

In the spring we could observe, up on the terraces cut into the surrounding mountain slopes, women holding wooden ploughs pulled by cows – very primitive. In the summer I was able to join two walking parties, which our Italian camp commandant permitted in which we walked about 8km up the valley road to the next small village. On the next walk we were allowed to have a dip in a pool in the little river!

At times, when no parcels were available, we became very hungry and this was a common feature of POW life. We also had to contend with bedbugs, fleas and lice but by May 1943 the news was much better; Tunisia had fallen to the Allies and so the whole North African coast was in our hands. As Sicily was invaded (July-Aug 1943) some of the Southern POW camps were evacuated and we had to accommodate some fellows from camp P.G. 65 (we were in camp P.G. 52).

A big feature of parcel issue day was always the bartering market that ensued. All items were valued in cigarettes of which 50 came with each parcel; as I did not smoke this enabled me to swap for food items. As I could never be bothered trying to scrounge sufficient wood to boil water for tea, I also swapped my 2oz of tea for, say, a tin of Canadian sardines. During air raid alarms we all had to go back in to our huts, although being of wood and chipboard composition they would not have offered much protection.

At this time, too, we volunteered for small local work parties for gardening and cleaning the campgrounds, fetching the ration *panis* from the bakery across the river, and various camp improvement projects. I was on a party assigned to collect small round pebbles from the riverbed in order to provide a surface for a path in the camp. Two men would load and carry a sort of wide two-handled bucket back across the bridge and into the camp. At one stage I thought our load was too heavy so I tilted the bucket with my handle and tipped some of the pebbles out. I was spotted by a nearby sentry and what a hullabaloo! The *Carabinieri* (military police) were called and I was marched off to their nearby HQ and thrust in to a clean whitewashed cell after my bootlaces and belt had been taken from me – to prevent attempts at suicide! I was given a meal and slept on straw on the concrete floor that night and the next day our Italian camp sergeant major, who could speak broken English, came into the cell and lectured me on my bad behaviour before returning my laces and belt and marching me back to the camp!

## September 1943 – The Italians leave, but...

It was now early September 1943 and there were daily air raid alarms and at night we could hear bombs falling on Genoa. One happy day we actually saw 100 Flying Fortress bombers of the USAF fly over. Our troops were slowly advancing up Italy and we heard amazing rumours each day, most of which proved groundless when we had our evening secret news reading in each hut from our clandestine radio which tuned to the BBC.

We all expected Italy to collapse soon, but had received secret instructions from the War Office to remain in our camps when this happened. We learnt afterwards that on 3 September an armistice had been signed although the surrender took place only on 8 September. Our troops made an amphibious landing at Salerno on the 9th and soon joined with our forces advancing from the south. On the 10th the Italian fleet surrendered at Malta but the Germans occupied Rome that day and started moving troops southwards.

On the 8 September we heard the joyful news that Italy was out of the war and we were quite delirious with happiness and our bands played music until late at night while most of us just talked about going home and what we would eat and do back home.

The following day disaster struck and our dreams lay in ruins; a more demoralizing blow than even being taken prisoner on the first occasion – German troops surrounded the camp. Youngsters of the Hermann Goering Division disarmed and chased away all the Italians and mounted extra machine guns round the camp. During the night there were two rifle shots and two of our fellows were wounded as they lay in bed. Our new guards were obviously trigger-happy and although our two casualties were taken to a hospital in Chiavari fairly promptly, we did not sleep very easily the next night.

With typical German thoroughness rations were found for us and the remaining small stock of Red Cross parcels distributed. Over the next three days a third of us were marched down to the station and loaded on to long trains of cattle trucks each day. On the road to the station a few fellows escaped but one was shot dead; most escapees were recaptured and joined us in Germany later.

The Italian civilians lining parts of the road were openly sympathetic towards us, passing us bunches of grapes when the guards were not looking. On a siding adjacent to that of our train was a cattle truck train of Italian soldiers whom Jerry had taken prisoner, too. Our Air Force had nearly hit the railway bridge at Trento and had succeeded in damaging that at Bolzano (both in the Tyrol (north-eastern Italy) region) so that all northbound trains had to wait an additional day in sidings while repairs were effected.

## September 1943 – 5 days on a train to eastern Germany via Austria

At Brennero, a station in the Brenner Pass, we were made to disembark and be counted by fresh but C category guards from Germany in field grey uniforms as distinct from the khaki uniforms of our first guards. These men had little sympathy for us, as they were fully aware of the mounting ferocity of Allied bombing and the civilian deaths. At one point I was struck on the back with a rifle butt to urge me back into the cattle truck.