

Wil (Stg.)
May 1944

My dear People,

You have asked me several times for an account of myself from those summer days, when hopes ran so high and so many projects were being prepared, and finally the day many weeks later, quite near Christmas, when at length you received an answer to your enquiries... and had to postpone, at least, those beautiful projects you had made.

That evening we sat down to dinner in quite the normal way: Charles was there before me, and Bingo, on my left, arrived at the same time as myself; opposite me Harry and old Farmer Giles were late as usual. Farmer Giles was a delightful old man with grey hair and twinkling blue-grey eyes: he belonged to the Indian Army and often used to get his leg pulled on that account, but his name was Giles Farmer. He was our chief source of rumour; he would never fail to come to table with some little tit-bit of information for our benefit... there had been a raid on Milan, the latest BBC news had said this or that... and today he came with the story that the Italians had signed an Armistice!! We liked old Giles, and as he was an elderly man, and had spent many years of his life under the tropical sun of India we forgave him many little excentricities, but....

"Calm yourself, calm yourself" said Charles "we really appreciate the way in which you try to provide us with all the latest news, but we don't want you to strain yourself in this way!" In prison camp even the most unlikely piece of news must be sifted, and not thrown away until one is more than a hundred percent sure that it is untrue, and so of course poor Giles was bombarded with questions from all sides...

"Who told you Giles?"

"Where did you hear it?"

"Don't take any notice of him, he's been out in the sun too much this afternoon...."

"Quiet please! Let Giles tell his tale, and then we'll see".

"Yes, come on Giles and tell us all about it".

"Well" said Giles "whilst as I was changing for dinner I noticed that the sentries were behaving in a more extraordinary manner than usual...."

"Come on Giles, cut the cackle, of course they're unusual, that.."

"Quiet.. go on Giles"

... well they were dancing about and shouting "Guerra finita, Guerra finita, andiamo a casa" and pointing up to my window and waving their hands".

I turned to B-J's table, and shouted across to him, the hubbub in the dining room had grown in volume, and I had to shout to make myself heard.

"B-J, David, I say, have you heard the latest?"

"Yes, and it's true! Fairy has just been talking to the sentries and it appears it came over the wireless at seven thirty. If we hurry outside we ought to be able to hear the BBC".

Just then there were two big bangs on the table, the usual signal calling for silence, denoting that someone was going to make an announcement. The hubbub died to a murmur, and the murmur to perfect silence as the S.B.O. rose in his place and stood on a seat.

"Gentlemen! I have just been told that Great Britian has signed an Armistice with the Italian Governement... loud cheers, stamping of feet and clapping of hands... I will see the Camp Commandant as soon as possible, and let you know the results as soon as I can".

Everyone had by this time finished dinner, and we all trooped outside into the garden to listen to the wireless. It was a warm September evening, and just beginning to get dark. Lights were still burning in some of the rooms where people had hurried down on hearing the glad tidings, and had forgotten to switch out the light. We stood about in little groups under the big chestnut trees, waiting for the news and what it would bring. The wireless began to splutter... Italian, French, German, screeches and wails, and then at last an English voice.. "...has signed an Armistice with General Eisenhower...." and it faded again. We had heard it with our own ears, however, it was true!!!

I wandered off on my own. My mind was in a whirl and I wanted to think things out a little for myself. The 8th of September. Perhaps I shall be home for Mabs birthday on the 30th. Three weeks. Yes, they ought to be able to arrange to get us away in that time. Of course the primary job will be to chase the enemy back to Germany, but with a landing in Genoa they will be in this area in less than a week, and then there will only be the arrangements to get us away. Oh boy! Oh boy!

I wandered through the dining hall. A couple of hardy foursomes were playing bridge, and a couple in the corner were battling at Blackgammon. I had arranged to have a game of bridge with Jock McGinlay, but neither of us had mentioned it under the circumstances. I could only meander around from group to group, listen to a word or two of what they were saying, and move on. Was it possible? After all those long months of prison life were we going to be free men once more? Were we going to be able to walk by ourselves, not have to wear silly patches on our clothes, be worried by aggravating searches or have to appear in long rows to be counted by ridiculous Italian officers (who couldn't count anyway)?

At nine thirty the S.B.O. called us all together and gave us the latest news. The British Government had instructed that we say put, and the Italian Commandant had requested that we stay in the camp. The information about the Germans was rather vague, but standing patrols were being organised and would give us timely warning if any Germans came towards the camp. There was a rumour that we had alnded at Livorno, Spezia and Genoa, and in that case it would only be a case of holding out for a week at the most, until our own forces came to collect us. And that was all for the moment. There would be a general meeting at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, when he would give us any further information,

That night I got undressed, slipped into my pyjamas and got into bed. Ignorance is bliss they say.. in any case I felt no danger whatsoever, and slept like a top until the following morning: the last time in pyjamas and between sheets for many a long week. But I did not know that at the time.

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The following morning at breakfast time, the S.B.O. spoke to us again..

"Gentlemen! I have again spoken with the Camp Commandant. The terms of the Armistice say that if Italian troops are attacked, they are to defend themselves, if necessary by the force of arms: the Camp Commandant has interpreted this to mean that if the Germans come to try and take us away he must defend us. That he will do. We still have our own pickets on the three approaches to the camp, and they will give us ample warning of any enemy approach. The Germans are at present only using the road to the West of the camp, and for the moment has not made any attempt to approach. For the moment there is no reason for us to leave the camp, but those who wish to sleep outside the camp area may do so. I will let you know as soon as there are any further developments. Thank you."

We then started to break down the barbed wire surrounding the garden.. the Italian commander who had inaugurated the camp was said to be an engineer, whatever he was he certainly knew how to put up wire, because it took us a long time, and much energy to pull it down. The sentries were still at their posts around the walls, and watched our activities with great amusement. We told them they should be watching the other way, to see if any Germans were coming, instead of looking towards the camp, but they had become completely indifferent (if it were possible for them to be more indifferent than they were before).. "per noi guerra finita" they said. It had been a war they had embarked on by order, it was not their war and they had no interest in it: if the Germans wanted to go on fighting... a shrug of the shoulders... "ma per noi, più!"

It was delightfully pleasant to stroll along under the warm September sun, through those fields we had looked at through the barbed wire for so many long, weary weeks and months. I stopped to talk to the odd peasants whom I met on the road: they were all overjoyed at the good tidings, and all had the same tale to tell... "Now we can all go home".

Within the camp there was a subdued air of excitement, an air of uncertainty. Where were our own troops? Had we really landed at Genoa, and the other ports on the neighbouring coast? What were the Germans doing? Were they really so busy getting their stuff out of Italy through the Brenner Pass as to be too occupied to bother about a few Prisoners of War? Was it not safer to all go to the woods with as much food as we could take with us, and wait there? If the British were so near, there would not be so long to wait, and at least we should not be caught sleeping in our beds.

We all drew a Red Cross parcel, all our tins out of the food store, and anything we had in the confiscation store in the Italian compound (here I for the first time received that nice blue polo jersey you sent me, but could not retain when it arrived because it was blue). Unfortunately our laundry was down in the town, and so I could not pack

a spare set of underclothing, but I made up a neat pack on the old Tobruk pattern.. shaving tackle, spare shirt, towel, plenty of socks and wool to mend them, soap (for bartering purposes among the Italians), my little pink elephant wrapped up in one of David's thin socks, as many tins of tobacco and cigarettes as I could push in, and a blanket around the lot. I decided to wear my thick underwear and my new battle-dress which had arrived only a week or so previously, and carry my greatcoat. Bingo gave me a couple of his good English blankets, for which I was very thankful, because those little Italian things only come as far as your knees, even when you roll yourself into a ball. The rest of my kit, all my notes on Psychology and Hotel Keeping, and my diaries, and last of all that famous work of art I had written for you.. the story since 1935.. I packed in my suitcase. I was ready.

The feeling of uncertainty in the camp was increasing. With the smell of freedom in our nostrils none of us had any wish to be caught by the Germans whilst sleeping in our beds, and so in spite of the very effective watch on the roads, there were many of us who preferred to spend the second night out of camp, under the trees of the nearest wood. I was one of those, and as soon as we had had supper, together with Jonny Maclean, our little packs on our backs and our coats and blankets over our shoulders, we slipped over the garden wall, stumbled through the dismantled barbed wire, and gained the open fields. Here and there we met an odd Italian soldier from the guard, dressed in civilian clothes: when we asked them where they were going they merely smiled, made that rather vulgar, but very suggestive Italian gesture, and murmured "Scapare". It was easy to see that, although the Camp Commandant might be willing to defend us should the Germans come, he would very soon not have any troops left to defend us with. Our time there was growing short, but tonight at least we should be able to sleep in peace.. even if the Germans came to the camp, they would not enter the woods.

We crossed the road along which we had walked many a time, our gay red patches flapping in the morning breeze, but this time there were no guards trailing their muskets as they slouched along beside us. This time we climbed the further slope, the going through the ploughed field was rough, but we did not intend to go far, just as far as the shelter of the nearest trees, where we could make our beds for the night, and from where we could watch the road, in case any German patrol came along in the early morning. We soon found a pleasant little nook, slipped our packs from our backs, rolled ourselves in our greatcoats, and after smoking a last cigarette under the starry sky, were soon asleep.

The next morning we did not awake until seven o'clock. I suggested to Jonny...

"If we can find a farm house somewhere around here we could leave our kit there, and not have all the trouble of bringing it out here again tonight, and also if we have to get away from the camp in a hurry, we can travel light. Shall I do a recce?"

"Good idea, he replied, let's leave our kit here, and go together".

Just behind the place where we passed the night there was a path through the wood. We followed this for about a quarter of a mile, until we came to a farm house, situated just above the road we had crossed the previous evening, and in view of the camp.. "Just the spot" said Jonny. We walked into the courtyard and accosted the old woman who was working there. I had to be spokesman...

"Buon gicrno Signora. We are from the camp down there and would like to know if we may leave some things with you. We slept in the woods last night, and don't want to take all our things back to the camp".

"Un momento" was all the response we got, but being a prisoner teaches one the value of patience, if nothing else, and so we waited. Soon another woman appeared, presumably the daughter of the old one, who greeted us very volubly, and assured us that we could leave as much as we wanted there. She invited us into the parlour, a little low-ceilinged room with a small table in the middle, a very decrepit couch leaning against one wall, and a still older and more decrepit sideboard leaning against the other one. She bade us be seated, and brought us two enormous pieces of white bread and some very nice cheese. Neither of us had seen white bread since our desert days, and as we had not had any breakfast we fell to with gusto. She asked us whether we had any clothes or boots to sell, and was very pleased when we promised to bring as much as we could the next time we came.

I had already had the good idea of bringing my suitcase up to this farmhouse, and leaving it with them. Then if the Germans should come to the camp, I should be able to save my kit and my precious papers. I went back to the camp with this project in mind, but unfortunately when I arrived I was detailed by Fairy to act as interpreter to the S.B.O., and was not able to leave the camp all the morning.

Things seemed to have been moving. The S.B.O. had obtained the consent of the Camp Commandant to allow us to disperse from the camp, and to provide us with one hundred lire each. I was present at these talks, and could see that the Commandant had been impressed by the desertion of his own soldiers, and saw it was quite impossible to protect us if the Germans did arrive.. he wanted to get rid of us immediately, but the S.B.O. insisted in having at least one hundred lire for each officer and man in the camp, and said he would arrange for the necessary entries to be made in our personal pass books. By this time there was a flourishing market between the Italian soldiery and ourselves: everyone was busily trying to accumulate as many lire as possible by selling all their kit, but the sellers were too many, and the buyers too few, so that very soon the bottom fell out of the market. A pair of boots would only fetch fifty lire and a shirt not as much as twentyfive... six weeks later I had to buy a new pair of boots for myself, and they cost me a thousand lire, and I thought myself well done by! Just before lunch, however, I had time to go up to my room, and found two Italian soldiers on the scrounge. They asked me if I had anything to sell. As a matter of fact I had deposited my suitcase in the cellar and had nothing left, but as an afterthought offered them one of the Italian blaxets. "Si, si they replied. And so as soon as I saw they were interested I began to bargain with them, and

before five minutes were up had sold them two blankets, a couple of sheets and my old pyjamas for a matter of some two hundred lire odd. I was most proud of this piece of business because the blankets belonged to the Italian Government and were not mine at all, and in any case if they had only waited for another five minutes or so there would have been nobody in the room, and they could have helped themselves!

I filled a pillow slip full of tinned food, made up a bundle of clothes and blankets for the people in the farmhouse, and placed it all in readiness in the garden. Word had gone around that the camp was to be cleared by two in the afternoon, and I had arranged to go with Fairy's party. Already little groups were beginning to move off, stumbling figures, laden with all sorts of kit could be seen making for the woods to the South of the camp. In the garden there were piles of kit all over the ground, here and there someone waiting for a friend, or people saying goodbye to each other. They did not know where they would be in six months' time... some would be in England, some in South Africa, some in Egypt, some in Switzerland, and some, unfortunate ones, in Germany.

Fairy had ordered his party to be ready at half past one. We were to rendezvous at the farmhouse at two o'clock, and so I struggled up the hill with my heavy load of foodstuffs and clothes. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the sun was very hot, so that by the time I reached the farmhouse I was already bathed in perspiration. It was only the beginning, but happily I did not know!

At the farmhouse I sold the good woman all the things I had brought with me, and came away richer by about five hundred lire. They pressed wine onto Jonny and I, whilst MacGinty went up to the bedroom with the daughter of the house to keep watch. What he was doing up there I do not know, but very soon he came tumbling down the stairs with the news that the sheet was hanging out of the upper window... the signal that the Germans were approaching. "En route" came the order from Fairy. We were off!!

I shall make this the end of a chapter. Think of us on that hot summer afternoon, the warm Italian sun burning on our backs, which were laden with enormous bundles of clothes, blankets, food and I don't know what besides. An unknown piece of country before us and the Germans a bare quarter of a mile behind us. Our own troops God only knew where!

Chapter II

Jock MacGinty and I were at the end of the line, a long stumbling line of hurrying men, laden with bundles of all shapes and sizes. I had pushed as many extra tins of food as I could carry into a pillow-case, but it was very unwieldy and kept slipping off my shoulder. The path we were following wandered up the hill through a maze of low bushes that pulled and tugged at the loads on our backs. Jock soon got tired of carrying the suit-case he had brought with him, and taking out only a few odds that he could stuff into his pockets, he threw it into the bushes at the side of the path. I felt very much like doing the same thing, but we did not know what lay ahead of us, and when we should be able to procure any food locally, so I clung to my white pillow-case in spite of the many imprecations it dragged out of me.

I have never known a man march as fast as Fairy... he simply flew ahead, and it was not very long before Jock and I were well to the rear. Ian was waiting for us though, at the top of the hill, to show us the way the others had gone, and very kindly offered to help me with the pillow-case, in spite of the fact that he was heavily laden himself.

The path lead us over the brow of a hill, and then fell down into a deep ravine. Sliding down, clutching at the long grass or an occasional shrub was not so difficult, and the rest at the bottom where we were able to have a drink out of the little stream was very welcome, but the climb up the far side was killing. I was fortunate in that I had nails in my boots, but one of the party called "Stinker" was wearing ordinary shoes and had no purchase on the smooth grass and gravel of the hill-side. We would climb for a quarter of an hour and then rest for ten minutes... but what a long quarter of an hour that was until it was time to have another rest, try and get your breath back, ease your aching back and wipe the sweat out of your eyes.

And so we made our painful way across the hills and little valleys of this broken country. We were very out of condition, the sun was beating down on us with all the fury of the late Italian summer, and we had heavy loads of clothes and food on our backs. We had to keep to this difficult, roadless country though, because all the motorable roads were patrolled by the Germans, and it was only here, where they were unable to come with their motor vehicles, that we were free from pursuit. Fairy was not taking any chances of being captured a second time though, and pushed on with that same determination that won him the V.C. in those hectic days before the fall of Tobruk in 1942.

At about five o'clock we came upon a little village, and so cheerful was the greetings of the peasants that the call went up from all of us.. "How about some tea?". But Fairy was not going to be caught sitting in a village, and lead us another kilometer farther on, where we found a tiny glade in a little wood on the slope of a hill. Here the rest of the party sank down on the grass, while Jock and I went back towards the village to see what we could forage.

We called at the house of the girl who had hailed us in English as we had passed, and asked her if it were possible to have some boiling water, as we wanted to make some tea. She said.. "With the greatest of pleasure", and immediately began to light the fire underneath the cauldron. Then she disappeared into the village whilst we watched the kettle boil, and returned in a few moments with sixteen eggs, two for each of us. She brought bread and milk, and said that although she had not enough for all of us, we must have some before we left, as a reward for coming back to fetch the tea.

"Where did you learn such wonderful English?" I asked her. "In England, she replied, I used to live with an English family in Bristol before the war". She had been married for two years, but her husband had already been away in the army for the last eighteen months, and she had not had any news of him for the last three months. She was full of confidence though, "He will come back soon", she said, and in the meanwhile was doing his work in the fields and the farm. She wished us good luck, and a speedy safe return to our homes: she would not take any recompense for the things she had given us.

All too soon Fairy gave the order to continue on our journey... the sun was no longer so hot, but the pack had grown much heavier it seemed, and the pillow-case was always sliding off my shoulder. Until the sun went down I remember but little of that journey... a long thin line of weary men trying to keep up with that indomitable Fairy: if it had not been for him we should have stopped by the wayside a long time ago.

At length the going became somewhat easier, and I noticed we were going down-hill, descending into a wide valley with a road at the bottom, and several little villages huddled together here and there. Once we stopped by the side of an old woman who was resting her oxen at the plough: she gave us an apple each. Another time we sat on the seat in front of a tiny inn on the roadside, and drank large draughts of ice-cold water the people fetched us from the well. They vehemently assured us there were "niente tedeschi" in that neighbourhood, but I am afraid I was not caring much for the "tedeschi" at that stage of the proceedings... my mind was concentrated on a nice bundle of straw where I could just roll over and become unconscious.

We followed the road that wound its way up the valley towards the line of wooded hills we could see in the distance. Fairy pointed to them and said "That's where we are going to spend the night..." Our hearts sank within us: they looked such a long way away. The sun was sinking and our shadows on our left were growing longer and longer, soon they would disappear altogether.

Suddenly, topping a little rise, we saw in front of us a team of oxen pulling a cart... and it was going our way! It did not take us long to overtake it, the hopes of unburdening ourselves of our bundles lent wings to our tired feet. I went ahead as interpreter and ambassador to see if we could put our loads on the cart. Yes, the peasant was very willing, he was going as far as the village I could see on the side of the hill, and would take all our baggage "molto volontieri".

The sun had already disappeared behind the hill, and the stars were shining by the time we reached the cluster of houses. A stiff climb, the oxen straining at their harness, their muscles shimmering under their slicken hides, and at last we were at the entrance to the village, and just alongside a beautiful barn full of wonderful straw. Si, we could spend the night there "molto volentieri".. our young man was a very willing young man.

In a very few minutes we were surrounded by enquiring men and women who wished to shake us by the hand, and were very eager to know when the Allies were coming. In a few weeks we told them (and we really believed it!) and then all will be well: they heartily agreed with us. The women brought us water to wash in, and the proprietor of the barn, the father of our willing youth with the bullock cart, brought a fiasco with which to celebrate the occasion; wine he had made himself he assured us. I think he must have been helped by some understudy of Bacchus because it was one of the most beautiful wines I had tasted for many a long day: a rich red wine that sparkled like champagne, and did not taste any the worse for being drunk out of our cups made from old butter and dried milk tins.

Completely washed, clothed in a dry shirt and pants, with bully beef and fresh white bread under my belt, I felt quite a different man... rounded off by a mug or three of that red nectar the world seemed a decidedly different place from that of a couple of hours ago. The memories of that awful walk faded gently out of our minds, and one by one we sought the comfort of our blankets in the straw. Soon all was still: the villagers had gone to their homes, and all that was to be heard was the rustle of the straw as someone settled himself down to sleep, or the lowing of a distant cow in its stall.

L& 15th June 1944.