

GOD WAS ON OUR SIDE...ALL THE WAY!

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We walked right out the main gate.

But it wasn't quite as easy as that sounds when Jim Adamson and I made our escape from the Nazi prison camp in Florence, Italy, on Lincoln's Birthday last year.

A private first class from Clearfield, Pennsylvania, Adamson and I were with the Third Ranger Battalion when, part of the second wave, it stormed the Anzio beaches. Our battalion got orders to march in and take Cisternia, but after eight hours of heavy fighting and losses we found ourselves hopelessly outnumbered and submitted...those of us yet alive...with our wounded.

For two days we were held in an old building on Cisternia's outskirts. Allied bombs and shells were falling like hail so our captors moved us to Albano, where again we were herded like cattle into a creaking structure. Here we stayed four days, then were trucked to Rome to parade for black-uniformed Fascisti and bemedaled Nazi officials -- before cameras, of course, as the enemy wanted propaganda pictures, to lift the flagging spirits of the "super-race," of "the first Americans to march through Rome." Some Italian peasants cried as we marched by.

Fifteen miles north of Rome we reached our first prison camp. We were determined to escape at our first opportunity, but we weren't here long enough to try a break and enroute to Florence, whence we were whisked the next day, our truck was too closely guarded. For two days at Florence Jim and I studied intently all goings-on outside our barracks -- No. 8 in a line of 14, each of which housed about 150 prisoners.

Our only liquid nourishment in this transient camp, a waystation on the bomb-blasted road to the Reich, was a daily bowl of soup. Occasionally the Boche brought in barreled water and for one hour each day the prisoners were let

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drink from a single pipeline running into the compound, but there were 2,100 of us with thirsts to quench and Jim and I didn't even bother to join the long queues which formed, never to be wholly appeased, when the spigot was opened.

At first Adamson and I made plans to escape by night, but we discarded these when we were told that men seen emerging from the huts in darkness were shot "without questions." We decided then to bolt in broad daylight after observing that Italian civilians, prison camp laborers, were allowed to come and go and finding two British inmates who were willing to swap their soiled civilian dress for our OD's. Captured at Tobruk, the Britons had bought the suits they wore after being freed in the Italian capitulation and before their rearrest by Fascists. One Italian had refused to help us, saying he was afraid of what the Germans would do to him if they found out.

Jim and I observed that the Italian laborers were counted by German guards and did not show passes as they entered and left the gates. We figured we could get through, too, if we could pose as laborers and look natural enough doing it. Donning civilian dress, we shaved with the only razor blade in the camp, the property of our company commander, also a prisoner, and set out furtively for Hut 13, in front of which a buddy had spied a piece of tile pipe. We reached Hut 13, where Indian, Arab and Scotch prisoners were housed, by watching the movements of constantly policing Nazi guards and scampering from door to door as they turned their backs. Guards strode up and down in front of the barracks also, but an American sergeant sensing our objective made it possible for us to reach the tile by nudging it several feet with his foot toward Hut 13's front door while he was walking by.

I spoke Italian quite fluently, but Adamson couldn't speak a word of it so I instructed him to nod and answer "Si, si" to everything I said as we strolled, with me carrying the pipe, toward the gate. We'd chosen to leave Hut 13 by the back door so we wouldn't have to face guards in front of the barracks who seemed more familiar with what camp work parties were doing. Once in the open we had

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150 yards to go, but it seemed more like 150 miles. On our way to the gate we encountered something we hadn't foreseen. Working by the infirmary were five young Italians, each about 16, with a German guard over them. That had us worried, but the guard remained unalarmed despite the fact that his charges, knowing we weren't laborers, dropped their shovels and gawked at us. We were also still wearing our own combat shoes.

With a deep sigh we passed the last of the group. On arriving at the gate we motioned to the guard on duty there that we wanted to lay the tile outside. The gate swung open and out we went, right into the midst of more Nazis performing various chores and just a few yards from some of our own buddies who were on a work detail. One of the Americans recognized Jim and was about to speak when he "caught on" and, God bless him! held his silence.

We dropped the pipe gently near a broken-down German truck and headed toward a lumberpile close to a toolshed. Picking up some lumber for effect, we sauntered into the shed to observe through the windows whether our leavetaking had yet been suspected and to plan our next move. We went out the rear door and legged it into an open field for at least a mile and a half without once looking back. They wouldn't miss us, we knew, until roll call at 5:30, giving us a three-hour start. (A prisoner who escaped later while being taken to Germany by train from the camp told me, after my return to our own lines, that the Nazis never did figure out how we got away under their very noses in broad daylight.)

After walking for about three hours on a main road, Adamson and I were hailed by two male civilians who were working in the fields. We hesitated, fearing they might be Fascists, until we saw some German trucks approaching and then we walked toward the men as fast as we could to get out of sight. As soon as we got to them, one of the men said, "I'll bet you fellows escaped from the prison camp!" From them we got some of the most valuable information we were to hear during our entire five months in German-occupied territory. He said he knew we weren't Italian civilians because we walked too fast, and he warned us to take our time

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if we were to continue to stay out of enemy clutches.

Thus enlightened, Jim and I took to the hills and, checking by the sun, traveled south as best we could toward Rome. Some civilians gave us food here and there, and now and then we'd find some who, without fear of Nazi punishment, gave us beds to sleep in. One of our hosts, overjoyed at seeing American liberators, provided a bed with three mattresses.

We planned to walk every day, but it was too risky with so many Fascists, whom we feared even more than the Nazis, around. On certain days, we learned, the Germans rounded up Italians for labor and as we had no identification cards with photographs, which Italians were required to carry at all times, we had to be continually on the alert.

Several times we had offers to join guerrilla bands roaming the hills, but we declined because we were so eager to get back to our own lines. In these bands were South African, British and even some Russian soldiers. Among them were six Germans who'd deserted their own forces to fight for the Allies.

The first week in March found Jim and me near a little town called Farneze and here we met five South African soldiers living together in a cave. By this time the weather was too poor to travel much and we welcomed their invitation to stay with them for a few weeks. When we felt it safe to do so, we ventured out days to get all the food we could from civilians. And when the civilians had nothing for us, we went out at night to steal a sheep or two about three miles away.

One of the South Africans was a farmer and it was he who killed the sheep and skinned it. We built low fires to make sheep stew and gathered up herbs and green grass to flavor it.

The first week in April found us on our way again, but we took once more to our cave when we discovered that the Germans had heavily fortified Viterbo, next village on our route, and wouldn't let unidentified persons through. We moved to another grotto after two weeks, then to yet another, creeping the while

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closer to Rome. Each day was more frightening than the last as our own air forces bombed and strafed ceaselessly the area in which, often too close to Nazi bivouacks, we were "holed up."

At about this time, we were to learn later, two of the South Africans who for weeks in dank caves had shared our struggle had fallen into the hands of the foe and, on June 6, were shot. One, after celebrating his 21st birthday with too much "vino," had dared to go, ignoring his friends' protestations, to Farneze. Here he "bummed" a cigarette from a Jerry who was seated in a grassy area, and, bending down to get a light, dropped his gun from his pocket. The other, hearing of his comrade's capture, entered the village the same night hoping to obtain his release and himself was taken prisoner.

Ninety miles from Rome Adamson and I met an Italian-speaking British escapee and together we set out for the Holy City. That was on May 29 and the week that followed was the most terrifying of our entire experience. On the very first day we walked into a German bivouac area and were immediately spotted by two goose-steppers. For ninety minutes we hid in the bush without moving a muscle and again luck was on our side. Next day we were fortunate to meet some people in Allumiere who fed us and begged us to stay until the Americans, who by then had entered Rome, reached the town.

The report that the Eternal City had fallen to us seemed too good to be true at first. When an Italian youngster came running into the town screaming that the Americans were in and beyond Rome, and advancing rapidly, we came out of hiding forthwith. Word spread like wildfire that there were two American escaped prisoners in Allumiere and the ovation we received in something we will long remember.

The first Americans we saw were two officers and a private riding in a jeep. Sight of the uniform that was so familiar and so dear to us brought forth tears of both relief and joy.

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After identifying ourselves to the officers, we were escorted to Civitavecchia and there interrogated. We gave all the information we could possibly remember from our 400-mile journey down the Boot, including a report on a dummy airport, complete with wooden planes, which we'd passed within 100 yards of near a small town.

Never once during those five long months did we think of giving up. (We didn't learn until after it was all over that we could have been shot as spies had we been captured in civilian clothes!) We believed God was on our side and He was, all the way!

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