

An Italian Experience

Part 2 Vagabonds Rest

After escaping from an Italian work camp situated in the Vercelli rice fields of north-western Italy, and having failed to reach sanctuary in Switzerland, Malcolm Webster and William Wigglesworth spent twenty months behind the German lines until war's end in Europe.

Their survival was possibly due to the help provided by many Italians who were disenchanted by the Axis Alliance, Mussolini's Fascism, the terrible losses of one hundred thousand men on the Russian front and the knowledge that over three hundred Italians had become POWs during the North African campaigns. This thinking and divisiveness brought on by an armistice, on 8th September 1943, between Marshall Badoglio and the Allies, developed a willingness, particularly amongst the peasants and poorer working

classes, to assist former POWs who had escaped from work camps.

Despite the great risks involved, the attractive rewards being offered for information leading to the recapture of POWs 'on the loose', together with the German Command's threats of reprisal and severe punishment including the death penalty, some very courageous Italian people living in German-occupied Italy continued to provide aid to ex POWs.

After wandering as civilians in the pre-Alpi area of Piedmont, Malcolm Webster and William Wigglesworth arrived at Mezzana Mortigliengo, a small hamlet in the foothills of the Italian Alps directly north of Vercelli, where they were befriended by Celio and Mariettina Confienza, who had two small sons, James and Tiziano. The family was to

play a major part in helping the two Australian escapees for a period of six months - December 1943 to mid-June 1944. For three weeks, the two Australians slept at the Confienza home, but during the day stayed away from the village.

The nearby enemy garrison was determined to recapture the two Australians who always seemed to be one step ahead. Pressure was being applied to Mezzana, even to the extent of completely surrounding the village at dawn with troops. House to house searches were mounted and many questions asked relating to the whereabouts of the elusive escapees. Fortunately, they had already decided to move away and live in the nearby hills called 'Colline Rosse'. A couple of shelters were constructed, but later demolished following the landowners' objections and fear of reprisals. A rocky cave was found but it too, had to be abandoned immediately after a suspect village 'informant' discovered the cave.

In another village close by to Mezzana there were three English soldiers in hiding who had been captured in Tunisia. It was also subjected to a dawn search by the enemy. Two of the ex-POWs got away under fire but the other one was wounded and recaptured. Some of the villagers were taken away, together with the ex-POW, and not heard of again. It was decided by Celio Confienza and a few other trustees then the two Tommies join forces with the two Australians and be maintained together through Celio, as the chief organiser. One of the Tommies, Ern Manners, came from London, the other, Bert, from down Southampton way.

Together, the now group of four discussed at length the need to remove quickly from the villagers the grave dangers of execution and reprisals against their courageous helpers. They talked of a new hideout well away from Mezzana and one that was built underground. This time, after some hours of exploring the countryside about eight kilometres via bush tracks from Mezzana an ideal location was found. It was situated



Celio Confienza (right) and Malcolm Webster with a Volkswagen scout car which was seized from German troops in northern Italy by the Partisans, c 1944.

in a steep sided, canyon-like valley with a pretty little crystal clear stream running through it. The area was called 'Colline Rosse' (Red Hills) because of the red gravelly nature of the terrain which was mostly covered by heath, oak and chestnut trees.

Armed with shovels, a pick, a hoe and an axe borrowed through Celio Confienza, the escapees set to work digging out and constructing a new home. Two days of digging excess soil into concealed areas, produced a side cut into the hillside ready for roofing. Whilst two of them cut trees for the roof, the other two fitted it all into place. It was all packed with gravel, soil, grass and heath and camouflaged to blend in with the surrounding terrain. The internal walls were lined with heath, kept in place by interlacing thin pliant tree branches, held securely by a series of wooden uprights firmly fixed between the earthen floor and the roof. The floor was covered by a thick carpet of heath and dried grass.

The overall dimensions of the dugout were around four metres by three with a ceiling height of over a metre at the head end, tapering to around sixty centimetres at the low part. The only entrance was a 'porthole' just under sixty centimetres square which they naturally crawled through. It was cosy and warm, the four escapees were very pleased with their handy work and hoped that it would be reasonably waterproof during the impending Spring rains. Malcolm suggested their new abode be called 'Vagabonds Rest' as he and his companions certainly looked like 'drifters' and 'vagabonds'. Residence at 'Vagabonds Rest' was taken up on the 31st March 1944 with the fervent hope that this time they wouldn't be evicted.

April, as expected commenced with threatening skies and, in keeping with the Piedmontese people's saying 'In April it rains for thirty one days', the springtime rains descended in all their fury. Soon, the wildflower appeared throughout the hills and valleys painting a colourful scene of blue and yellow from the profusion of wild violets and primroses softening the slopes of the grim red hills. In the meantime, following the pounding from thunder-

storms and torrential rain, it became apparent that the dugout's roof could not handle the heavy rain. Soon, everything was saturated, which forced the four occupants to beat a hasty retreat and find a farmer's suitable hay loft to hole up in whilst waiting for a sunny day to dry out all the gear.

The farmer was an old man who greeted them warmly by kissing in the traditional manner on both cheeks. He got a good fire going and soon dried out all their wet clothes and blankets. Loaves of bread and cheese were supplied, together with the usual home-produced red wine to add an inner glow. After a good nip of grappa, the local white and potent brandy distilled from the refuse of grape skins, the four men burrowed into the farmer's hay loft and slept as if they didn't have a care in the world.

Next day the farmer invited some of his trusted friends to meet the four wandering ex-POWs. They arrived with food and wine and talked of their fear of the Republicans and the Fascist Black Brigades who were notorious for their cruel and sadistic

methods of punishment. However, they were very optimistic about the war's outcome and looked forward to the arrival of the Allied armies. In particular, they expressed their admiration for the Russian successes against Hitler's armies; among which was the recapturing of Sebastopol that liberated the whole Crimea Peninsula. Despite the friendly openness of their new found friends the escapees would not talk about where or how they had lived since leaving the work camps near Vercelli, except to say that they were wandering ex-POWs very dependent on sympathetic Italian people.

After drying out back at 'Vagabonds Rest' the roof of the dugout was removed and replaced at an increased slope to help with a quicker run off. A drain was dug along the high side to lessen the water flowing down the hill. All the dugout's internal heath was dispersed and replaced with fresh material and to complete the operation the whole area was again carefully camouflaged. Although another

Mariettina Confienza with POW escapees - two Australians and two British - who joined the Partisans, c. 1944. Malcolm Webster is second from left.



heavy downpour created some further problems, it was a lot better, but far from perfect. With the ever-increasing heat from the sun, their gear would dry out quickly but this tended to bring out the snakes including a few vipers which were despatched. One amusing incident was witnessed when Bill Wigglesworth was having a sleep in the dugout when he was joined by a large snake; on discovery, Bill darted out of the porthole, followed closely by the snake; his mates just laughed.

Thanks to the organisation by Celio Confienza and his wife Mariettina, food supplies and newspapers were collected every Sunday night at a rendezvous on the outskirts of Mezzana. Celio would pass over a bag containing the rations, collected from the committee of helpers to cover the escapees' weekly needs. Malcolm Webster, with his better knowledge of the Italian language, would translate the newspapers for his companions. The trip from the dugout to Mezzana and back was around fifteen kilometres along rough and stony tracks, particularly hazardous on cloudy and dark nights. This round trip would take over four hours of walking and was done in pairs, the two still waiting in the dugout would spend a worrying time, hoping and praying nothing would go wrong with their mates. There was always a threat that they could be waylaid by an enemy patrol, or even shot, if fleeing from possible capture.

One particular night Malcolm and Bert arrived at the rendezvous just outside Mezzana and waited a long time before Celio appeared in stocking feet, without the rations and newspapers. He seemed extremely nervous as he advised them that the village was under strict curfew from 8 pm until daylight next morning. Also, the area was being patrolled by enemy troops with orders to shoot at any person disobeying the curfew. Malcolm was very disturbed by Celio's news and the risk to venture outdoors to meet at the 'pickup' point. He begged Celio never to take such a risk again unless absolutely sure the 'coast was clear' and emphasised that the escapees would not in the future enter the village and endanger the Confienza family. Taking off his boots to overcome any noise on the cobble stones, Malcolm crept back with Celio to collect the bag of rations from

the house. It was a great relief, once Celio was safely indoors. Fortunately, at that time, the Republican patrol was elsewhere.

The thought of being captured was always a major worry as the German SS were well versed in special torture methods to force captives to reveal names of those helping escaped POWs. Despite any resolve not to divulge such information and to protect the lives of others, one could never really guarantee one's reaction until put to the ultimate test of enduring the intense pain of mental and physical torture. The four escapees were well aware of the sadistic treatment meted out by the German SS and the Fascist Black Brigade.

As a stark reminder of the need to avoid capture at all times, news came through in May 1944 that five Australians and one Englishman had been caught by a detachment from the Fascist Militia Legion 'Tagliamento' at Piacone on the Sessera River. Despite being unarmed and not members of the underground forces, the six ex-POWs were summarily executed on the spot.

Malcolm kept a diary on a daily basis. Among many lighter moments recorded, was the episode relating to a 'field mouse' who set up house in the dugout and was most active at nights, gnawing at the food sacks but despite eliminating three of its nests the mouse lived on with the escapees. The little fellow had certainly discovered easy access to a good food supply without much effort involved. In an attempt to minimise the food loss, all bags containing rice, polenta meal and macaroni were suspended from wire hooks fixed to the dugout's ceiling. Notwithstanding, the mouse still managed to get at the food, and continued to chew holes in the bags causing some of the contents to shower down on the sleeping men. It was decided the mouse had to go, irrespective of the many days of friendly association. Malcolm undertook 'Operation Field Mouse'. He rigged up a special weapon which consisted of a reasonable sized rock, tied to a length of cord and suspended by a hook just above a selected spot on the dugout's shelf. At this spot, a lure in the form of a crust of dry bread and cheese was placed on a piece of

newspaper. On hearing the paper rustling Malcolm would release a slip knot and allow the rock to crash down on the unsuspecting mouse. However, when it came to crunch time Malcolm didn't have the heart to trigger the kill, so he pulled it all to pieces and returned the rock to the nearby stream. Next morning he wrote in his diary "Eat to your heart's content". So, their little friend lived on as family, and finally ended with 'Vagabonds Rest' all to him or herself.

Whilst living at 'Vagabonds Rest' vigilance was maintained from dawn to dark, with each person doing two hours on guard and six off. A large oak tree on top of a nearby hill provided a great view of the surrounding area, in all directions for many kilometres. Only twice were patrols sighted, one being German troops, who fortunately stayed on the walking tracks and did not venture near. Notwithstanding, the four escapees, on these occasions would mount their escape plan and move down the valley and lie 'doggo' in the thick heath. As a further precaution, cooking was only done at night by a screened fire, thus preventing showing possible telltale smoke.

Meals consisted mainly of macaroni, polenta made from maize meal, bread and cheese. There was no meat. After the evening meal and the usual chat beside the small fire they would crawl into the dugout to sleep. For a while there would be some good natured banter about snakes, centipedes or scorpions being in one's bed, which became progressively harder as the heath and dried grass flattened out. Ern, the Londoner, would talk about two pork chops and a plate of cakes, Bert of his longing for a feed of Yorkshire pudding covered in 'Bistro' and Bill of the girl back home he hoped to marry when the war was over. Malcolm thought of his trout streams and fly fishing and wondering what tomorrow would bring - peace, capture or just another day in the life of an ex-POW trying desperately to survive behind the German lines in those grim red hills at the foot of the mighty Italian Alps.

Then on 6 June 1944 came that historical day when the Allies established their foothold on Hitler's fortress and launched 'The Beginning of the End'.

When the Second Front opened in France in 1944 the four escapees joined the Italian Resistance Movement, which had become active and increased in numbers because of the young men being called up for compulsory duty with the Republican forces, opting to be Partisans instead. It was time to prevent further hardship and possible imprisonment or death to those courageous people who had so readily provided assistance to so many escapees. After three months spent in the dugout, it was especially urgent to minimise the extremely dangerous situation confronting the Confianza family and the small band of helpers from Mezzana, if they were to be caught by a ruthless and unforgiving enemy. So, a farewell 'Festa' and good wishes given by villagers at Mezzana, the four became Partisans in the Italian Resistance Movement.

Malcolm and William became members of the Detachment 'Dellatezza' and adopted the battle names of Sydney and Melbourne respectively, 'Dellatezza' was commanded by an eighteen year old, Giovanni Gnatta, who was called 'Topolino' and was part of the 110th Brigade 'Fontenella'. Whilst some weapons had been dropped in the zone, it was many weeks before their Detachment was fully armed and able to mount effective guerrilla warfare against the Fascist/Nazi enemy. At one stage



Giovanni (Topolino) Gnatta, at left, and Angelo Saggia of the Detachment 'Dellatezza', 1945.

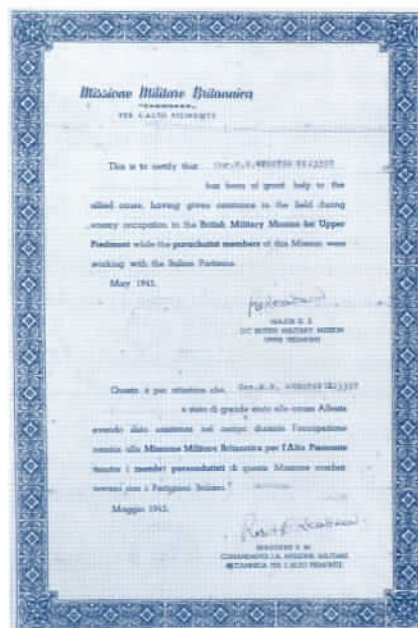
Dellatezza had only one rifle, one shotgun and one revolver between thirty six men and it was a 'cat and mouse' game for some weeks to avoid elimination by the Fascists; and many times the Partisans found themselves withdrawing into the Alps to spend cold nights at altitudes over two thousand metres.

The first few months proved hard and difficult, trying to survive, but the Resistance Movement was a big worry to the enemy. Strong enemy garrison forces were necessary in the area to maintain order and keep the local textile industry working. The Partisans continually harassed the enemy's supply lines and kept pressure on the garrisons. When the British Military Mission, code named 'Cherokee', was parachuted into the zone under the command of Major McDonald in late 1944, radio contact was then maintained with the Allied forces and more frequent arms drops were made. They consisted of mortars, machine guns, light automatic weapons, hand grenades and explosives. Gradually the Resistance Movement became a strong fighting force and an ongoing nuisance to the enemy.

The civilian population was suffering badly with reprisals and atrocities being inflicted on them. Homes were burned down and defenceless villages were subjected to aerial bombing by German Stukas. Many people were imprisoned or executed for providing aid to the Partisans. Hostages were often taken by enemy troops, lined up against walls and threatened with execution if attacked by the Partisans. This tactic frustrated the Resistance Movement somewhat, however attacks were mounted against the enemy at every possible opportunity. Industrial strikes were organised in the factories to hamper enemy supplies, but these strikes were short lived because of the ruthless reprisals against the unfortunate workers.

With the advent of the war's last winter, the enemy commenced a major 'itals' in the zone with numerically and much superior forces in a final effort to eliminate the Partisans, operating in the Biellese zone. The Brigade 'Fontanella' withdrew its forces and dispersed them onto the plains of Piedmont. Malcolm's detachment,

Certificate awarded to Malcolm Webster by the British Military Mission in Piedmont, May 1945.



together with other detachments withdrew eastward across the river Sersia, then turned south onto the plains. Long gruelling marches were made only at night with the Partisans remaining hidden in farms during the day. Food was difficult to obtain and some hungry days were experienced. Where possible food was brought from the farms. Conditions were extremely bad with snow, ice and the bitter cold of Italy's worst winter. The detachment 'Dellatezza' was often under pressure and even survived an enemy attack by crawling along irrigation ditches and hiding concealed only two hundred metres from the German Todt Organisation repairing the bombed out autostrada bridge across the river Sesia, near Vercelli. Eventually the Partisans returned to their zone of operations to continue their ambushes and maintain sabotage of railway lines and bridges.

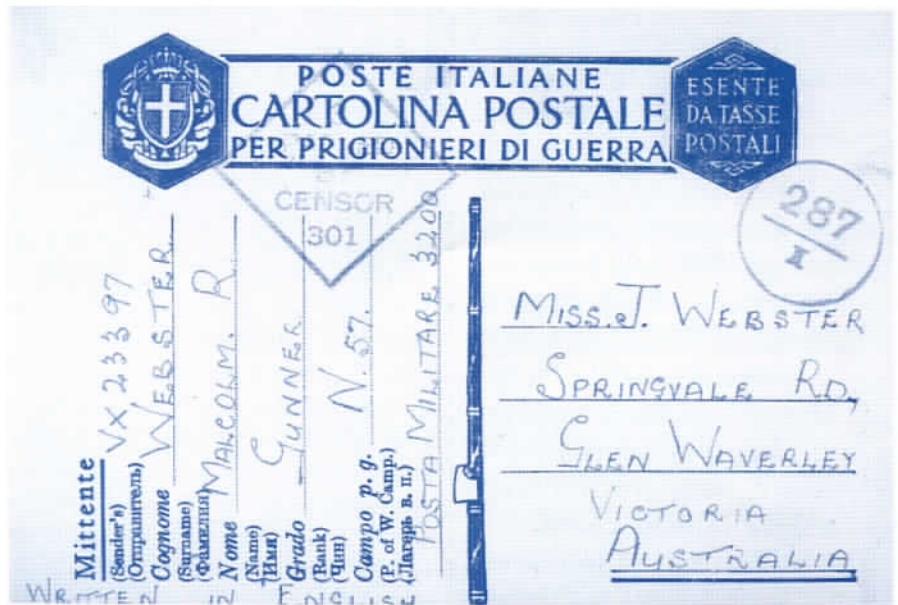
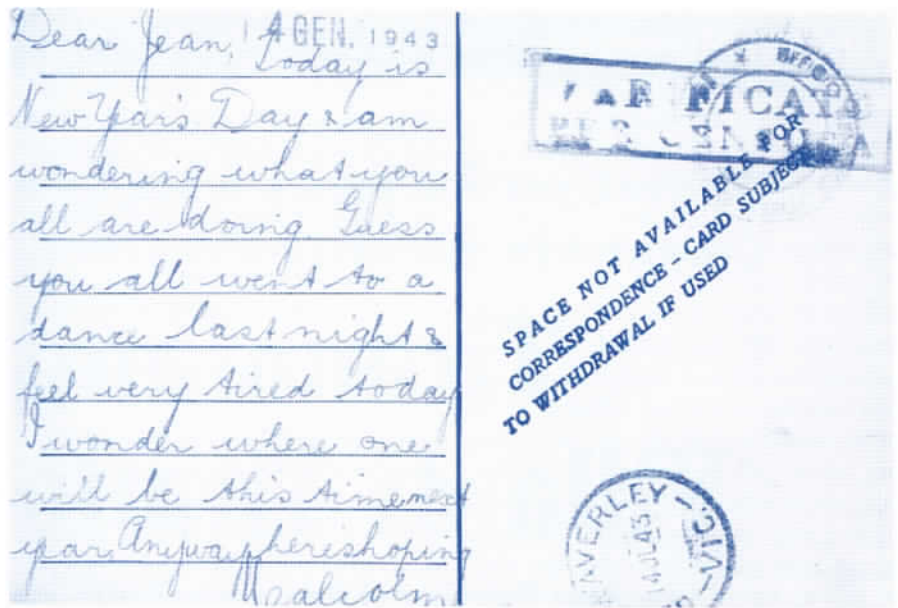
The Allies finally crossed the river Po and General Mark Clark, Allied Commander in Chief in Italy requested that all people rise up and frustrate the enemy's withdrawal. Following this request, the Resistance Movement became very aggressive and harassed the enemy continually. The Republicans were surrendering everywhere and the German forces were completely trapped in northern Italy. When the 'Fontanella' Brigade occupied the city of

Vercelli on 26 April, 1945, there was only token resistance as the Germans had withdrawn westward and set up a line on the Cavour Canal. The Partisans staged a victory march through Vercelli on 1 May, 1945, and cheering crowds in the city centre listened to speeches made by both military and political leaders. Just after midnight on 2 May, mechanised units of the 5th American Army, supported by infantry entered Vercelli and within a few days all German forces surrendered. Suddenly the war in Italy was over, although the cruelty and evil stopped, the pain, the sadness and the scars would remain for a long time.

Malcolm Webster was discharged from the Resistance Movement, May 1945 and immediately became a member of the British Military Mission to northern Piedmont. After some weeks and many sad farewells with those families and friends who helped him so much in his and William Wigglesworth's survival, he was flown from Naples to England aboard a Liberator on 22 June, 1945. Eventually he was reunited with his family in Melbourne, Australia on 8 September, 1945 after being missing, presumed dead for over two years and an absence of nearly five years.

Malcolm expressed great admiration for the Italian civilian population that showed such courage and endurance through the suffering of reprisal and punishment by a ruthless enemy, their example certainly strengthened the resolve and will of all Partisan forces. He pays special tribute to all the people who risked execution or severe punishment if caught, aiding escaped POWs and, in particular, Celio and Mariettina Confienza, originally of Mezzana, who at great risk to themselves, were the main organisers in maintaining Malcolm and his companions for six months. He also recalls the Zampese family of Scoldo, who took him into their hearts and treated him like a family member, the friendship so generously and warmly given by the people despite the terrible risks taken, made it possible to survive a very dangerous period in his life.

All four comrades survived the war, but sadly today only Malcolm remains to relate the story of those three months living in 'Vagabonds Rest'.



A postcard sent by Malcolm Webster, as a prisoner of war in Italy, on New Year's Day 1943, to family in Glen Waverley, Victoria.