

Excerpts from the Memoirs
of
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”
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The original German text can be found
on the website of the German Historical Museum:
[Amerikanische Landung im Raum Anzio-Nettuno 1944](#)

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Anzio / Nettuno

The scene at the Bremen rail station was one of mass confusion. Soldiers of all branches of the military and all ranks mingled trying to find the right train to take them to their leave destination. The Feldgendarmerie [military police] added to the hub-bub with all of their new security measures. The Kettenhunden [Chained Dogs], so-called called this due to the gorget that was worn suspended by chains around the neck, gave every passing



soldier the eye as though he might be a spy or a possible deserter. There were two prominent characteristics of the Kettenhunden, an arrogant self-importance and a deep mistrust of every man. Of course now this included every woman because the Wehrmachtshelferinnen [Woman's Army Assistance Corps] were also under their jurisdiction. A romantic farewell with heartfelt sentiments from my new bride was not possible in the crush of the crowd. I boarded the packed train and it set off toward the South. No one knew how far south we could go with this train.



Feldgendarmerie Insignia

The trip to the Brenner Pass was interrupted by air raids. They were 'only' over-flights of bomber formations on their way to bomb cities in Germany. Nevertheless, the train had to stop somewhere and wait until the skies were clear. Once we got to the Brenner in Northern

Italy it was the train itself that suddenly became the target. It had crossed over into the hunting grounds of the Jabos [Jägbomber: Fighter-bombers] who harried trains with bombs and cannon fire. From this point on there were many disrupted stretches of track and in particular damaged bridges. At those points we had to exit the train and make our way across the rickety rail bridges by foot to where another train waited on the other side.

The Bremen train was no longer a reliable means of transportation, I frequently had to get out and walk. Sometimes, on the other side of a damaged bridge there wouldn't even be a



Brenner Pass Today

train, but rather a line of trucks that would take us to the next rail station that was still intact. All this sure raised our confidence that we would win the war, even though the Jabos and bombers now had

complete control of the skies.

I finally got to Bologna and reported to the command post. There I learned that I was to continue on to Rome and report to the command desk located in the railroad station there. Since it was night we were assigned quarters for the night but with strict orders not to go into the city streets after 2200 hours. The commander of the Fascist Militia had declared a state of emergency and ordered a complete curfew after 2200. I would soon see for myself how warranted this measure was.

During the night there was a fair amount of shooting to be heard, sometimes very close to where we were staying. The results of the shooting would be visible to us next morning. In the Bologna town center the corpses of the young Fascist Blackshirts who had been shot by the partisans during the night were lined up. There were also the bodies of the partisans who had been shot by the Blackshirts. Bologna was an important center for the communist partisans and night after night it was the scene of terrible excesses on both sides.

Every morning the local militia orchestrated this gruesome display of the results of the night's fighting in the big piazza directly in front of the cathedral. Here is where I was confronted for the first time with the existence of the partisans. Up to this point I had not been very aware of them, especially here in the middle of an area that was supposedly controlled by Mussolini's Fascists in his "Fascist Republic." It was an image of horror that greeted me on this morning. It was harrowing and almost unbelievable if I had not seen it for myself. It was incomprehensible that people who lived in the same city could kill each other, especially like this in the most direct and brutal manner. The men who lay there were not 'simply' shot, but massacred on both sides.

At the Bologna railroad station I found a connecting train and took it to Rome. I arrived in a railroad station there such as I had never seen before. It didn't even look like what I would have thought of as a rail station. This was truly a "Grand Station" and I reported to the military command desk there. I had no opportunity to see Rome, as it was considered an 'open city' that German soldiers were not allowed to linger in. We were only allowed to stop there for as long as it took to pick up a connection to our next destination. I had always wanted to visit Rome, but besides the train station there was nothing I would be able to see. But then I did get a small possibility for sightseeing as I resumed my journey. On the train to Rome I met a fellow from my company who was also coming back from leave. We got together to try and find out where our company was stationed now.

At the command desk we had to pick up new marching orders. We were given travel orders to go to Frosinone, a town to the south of Rome about 35 kilometers from Monte Cassino. To get out of Rome we would have to take a streetcar from the main "Grand Station" south to a much smaller station that served as the endpoint of a rail line that went to Frosinone. This seemed simple enough and we settled in to make a little sightseeing tour of the Roman neighborhoods between here and there. Once we arrived at our destination we found that we had had no need to hurry. We had arrived way too early to make the next connection. Our connecting train would not leave until after dark. From here the trains did not travel during the day because of the threat of attacks by Allied fighter-bombers.

We had time to kill and since I noted a barber shop right there in front of us, I decided to get a haircut, thinking that it might be my last chance to do so for a while. I innocently placed myself in the hands of the master barber who looked at me rather funny then went to work. That this could have been a dangerous situation never dawned on me. Only later did I think about it.

It was the 22 of January 1944 when I, totally unaware and unsuspectingly sat down in the barber shop. We took little note of all the people hanging around in the shop. The Italians always seem to clump together in groups around their towns and villages, why not here? They did not exhibit any particular friendliness to us, but they weren't overly friendly on the streetcar either. The streetcar ride was pleasant enough in itself. From the platform we were able to see what Rome had to offer, but once seated in the tram, the Romans we found there did not look at these two German landser [Landser: common soldier; enlisted man] in a very friendly manner. We did not take it to heart. It was understandable that they behaved like this now that this damned war was playing out in their own country. The fighting at Monte Cassino was not far from them, also the the front lines were getting close to Rome as well as the Pope's Summer palace in Castel Gandolfo.

And on this 22 day of January 1944 the front line would come even closer to Rome, very near indeed. So, as I was getting my haircut, I was trying to get the barber engaged in conversation using my rather poor Italian, but the barber did not seem as though he was willing to chat. I was surprised at that because most Italians were quite ready to converse with anyone who makes the attempt to speak their language. Something was not right. I thought back to the violent nights in Bologna, but here it was broad daylight and the partisans only battled against the Fascists. The German soldiers were not (yet) a target although that would soon change also in and around Rome. My friend and I both thought something fishy was going on. Then suddenly we heard loud booms in the distance which did not sound to us like aircraft attacks. It sounded damned close to cannon fire and of a very heavy caliber. Our first thought was that out on the nearby sea there might be a passing enemy ship exchanging fire with one of ours, or just making a raid and raking the coast with their naval guns. It will certainly stop in a moment or two, we thought, but it didn't.

We left the 'Salon' and found ourselves among a crowd that had grown very big. We were on a terrace with a scenic outlook over the "Mare Nostrom." Below us were the former Pontine Marshes that had been drained and reclaimed by Mussolini. There they stood, and us also, on this terrace in Albano and witnessed as stunned spectators the landing of the American armies in Anzio and Nettuno. We watched as though we were theater-goers attending a play that began in the morning and was continuing on through the day.



The Beachhead at Anzio/Nettuno (Note Albano Laziali at the top left)

Then a very uncomfortable feeling overcame us. Even more uncomfortable was the realization that we were the only two German soldiers on the hill amongst this large crowd. There was a very noticeable tension in the faces around us but no physical or verbal attacks on us from the Italians. We found the whole situation to be very eerie. There we stood and saw the events that played out on the landing area. It was an incredible theater piece that we watched as

though we were the audience. We couldn't believe that what we were seeing was even possible. This had started in the morning and no one in Rome had the slightest notion what was going on even as they sent us off in the streetcar. Two German Landser now stood on a hill in Albano and watched the war as if it were a movie show. We watched the play unfold without being really a part of it.

Indeed, there was considerable activity in the air, all American machines, above all the double-tailed planes called "Lightning." They were flying over the area where we stood, but did not attack. They were concentrating on the area where the landings were taking place and left the suburbs of Rome, and therefore Albano, alone. The weather was such that from the terrace we could see very clearly from the terrace the battleships. These warships fired non-stop on the coastline beyond the area where the landing was taking place. We could see where the soldiers were landing and where skirmishes were taking place. We had to do something, we couldn't just stand there and watch like an audience in a theater. But what should, what could, we do in this very uncomfortable situation?



Lockheed P-38 Lightning

Twilight was slowing coming on and the unreal quality of what was happening impressed itself more forcefully on our consciousness. It was getting darker and in front of us was the war in all of its dangerous glory and behind us, and also where we were standing, the lights of the city and village were burning brightly just as on any other night. As the war came to the front door of Rome it was regarded as an imaginary event. Even here the lights burned in all the houses and the streetcars ran as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening. We found it all to be very surreal.

The two of us stood there with no idea what to do next. We were supposed to go to Frosinone, but where could we find a vehicle that would take us there? Where we were standing now the war was beginning to make itself known. We waited on the road that could take us to the south in the hopes of finding a vehicle headed to Frosinone. At the very least we wanted to get out of the area we were in right now. But instead of trucks rolling in the direction of Frosinone, all of the military traffic we saw was coming *from* that direction. These were the first German troops headed out to set up the new defensive line, but with them also came units of the Feldgendarmerie [Military Police] who were there to direct traffic. However, they also had other functions that could be very unpleasant for us. As we carefully continued to look around we noted a 'tactical insignia' on a passing troop truck indicating that it belonged to our "Malaria-Division," and we noted other markings that identified the troops going by as the 155 Panzer Grenadier Regiment. I was a part of that outfit briefly on Sardinia. This told us that at least this section of our Division was being sent to the Anzio/Nettuno front, and possibly our entire Division would be sent there.

Once we figured this out, we decided to get out of here as soon as possible. We did not want to get commandeered by a passing company or, worse, by the Feldgendarmerie. We thought it more prudent to stall for time. We two brave 'heroes' moved under cover of darkness to grab the last streetcar headed back to Rome!

The atmosphere on the tram during the return trip was much more unpleasant than the morning trip. The Romans on the tram seemed even more unfriendly to us. We arrived back at the command desk in the train station without incident. We reported in with some dumb story about how we couldn't find our outfit. The stupid story was hardly believable, but at least we had come back and were reporting for duty again. We had managed to pull off that stunt, but we were still in hot water. Due to the invasion the command desk was now a collection point for displaced soldiers and for soldiers on leave who could not continue on. This meant that in the coming hours this rag-tag collection of soldiers would be thrown together as a company and undoubtedly sent to the invasion front. Somehow we had not thought about that possibility. We could just as well have reported to the 155th Regiment. What to do? Since our first fairy tale had worked, we came up with another fairy tale. We told the command desk that we had discovered where our outfit was located. The impossible happened, they believed us! We gave the leader of the new company notice of our departure and we were furnished with a new set of orders to leave Rome. This time we 'selected' a route to Frosinone that would take us in a wide arc around the danger zone where the new defensive lines were being established.

Malaria Takes Over Again

We set out for Frosinone, but I didn't get very far. Before the town even came into sight I was overcome with fever and chills. The malaria was reporting in with a new attack. I dragged myself to the first company headquarters I could find and I was immediately sent to the closest clinic. I landed in the Hauptverbandsplatz, H.V.P II / 190, located in a little Abruzzi village called Villa Santo Stefano. The H.V.P. was set up in the village school. The tiny village was good and safe. The hospital staff was made up of German medics and doctors and also Italians who all took exceptional care of the sick and wounded soldiers. There were no conflicts or bad feelings among the hospital staff. Everyone worked together as a team to deliver the best of care. I have good memories of my time in Villa Santo Stefano and of the caring personnel in the facility. I still have many photos of them.

The personnel who stood by to care for the soldiers were all civilians. I still remember the inhabitants of the village who remained kind and friendly to the German soldiers even though the front lines were coming closer and closer to their town.

The reason for my stay here was not so nice. Malaria had me fully in its grip. The photos show that I was no longer 'plump.' I was nothing but skin and bones.

I finally had to give up my tropical uniform in exchange for the standard Feldgrau [Field Grey uniform]. Of course this was much better for the very cold Abruzzi climate. It wasn't until February 8, 1944 that I was able to leave the hospital. I had been there since January 22, 1944.

By then we knew that the landings at Anzio and Nettuno were solely an American operation and covered a front of about 35 kilometers. They did not advance to Rome. They gave the German 14th Army time to build a defensive front using units that included our entire Division.

It would take several more weeks until I could leave the hospital. Malaria continued to wrack my body. All in all I suffered three back-to-back attacks from it. No sooner did one leave me than the next came on. I was really beaten up, it was torture. The attacks weakened me so much that they had to extend my recovery time.

As bad as it was, I still had to be thankful for the malaria because it kept me away from the front. Later I heard that the 155th Regiment was almost completely wiped out at Anzio-Nettuno.