

Excerpts from the Memoirs
of
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”
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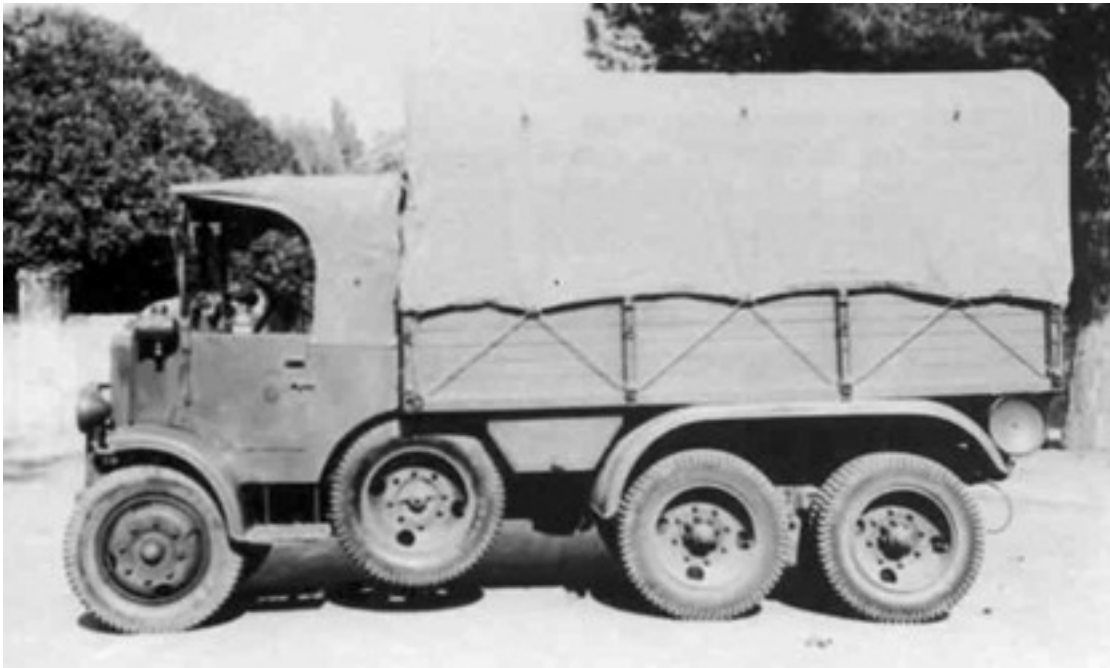
Portions of the original German text can be found
on the website of the German Historical Museum:
[Rückzug aus Italien 1944](#)
and
[Begegnung mit Partisanen in Italien 1944](#)

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RETREAT FROM MONTE CASSINO

So there we were then, we two Landser [Landser: common soldier, enlisted man], a stolid Private First Class and a Buck Private charged with the operation of a heavy truck for furnishing the troops at Monte Cassino with supplies, primarily ammunition. Two things were not so good, the truck itself and the dangerous cargo of explosives we had to carry. There was a growing state of confusion following the disengagement and it was difficult to reach the positions we were assigned to supply. The problem was not only the growing number of air attacks that were now coming at night also, but also because our drop points were often not reachable due to them falling into enemy hands. If we couldn't get rid of our load of munitions there was a chance of us being accused of being slackers and therefore we risked harsh disciplinary action.

Amid all of our obvious problems we two were united on one point: that this truck would also serve as a means to achieve our own personal goals. We were going to use this truck to stay on the edge of the general movements toward the North. We would swim along, or better, drive along with the masses of troops falling back. At any rate we would try to do this for as long as the gasoline held out and for so long as the truck didn't get shot up by the enemy who was in the skies above us now day and night. We were not going to give up this vehicle willingly even though it was a piece of junk. This was not a very good plan from the view of 'Military Necessity,' but we were going to do our best to continue falling back and not get bogged down in one place.



Italian SPA Dovunque 35 Truck

Our assignment was to transport munitions from the ammo dumps to the artillery batteries for as long as the dumps still existed and the batteries were not wiped out. The situation changed daily and usually word came after it was too late for us to either load or unload.

The artillery had to constantly change positions. They were still trying to lob their shells into the British positions particularly in the town and monastery of Monte Cassino, or what little remained of them. There was no longer any respect or quarter given, soldiers occupied the ruins of the monastery, mostly Polish units, but also Gurkhas.

The senseless Allied bombing attack had reduced the town and the cloister to a pile of ruins. The 'successful' bombing had the result of impeding the advance of their own armor for a while. The German Fallschirmjäger [paratroopers] were able to hunker-down in the rubble and pick-off a fair number of the advancing tanks. German artillery of all calibers pounded the town and cloister. Now it was German shells that widened the field of destruction on the mountain.

It was impossible to drive during the day. This meant that at nightfall everyone would start out to reach their destinations, whether they be to the front or to the rear. A dawn you had to quickly get off the roads and get yourself and your vehicle under cover because the Jabos [Jagdbombers: Fighter-Bombers] would be making good use of their total control of the air. At night the roads were hopelessly choked with traffic. If you did not belong to a column you might have to try and find your way using side-roads. This had its own risks as we would soon find out for ourselves.



The Town of Cassino after the Battle

The overflowing streets were favorite targets for the Jabos and night-fighters. This was new and not the case just a short time ago. The Allies were now in the skies at night and illuminated the darkness with “Christmas Trees.” They then dropped bombs and strafed the targets that presented themselves as a helpless balled up mass of vehicles in the choked streets. They could have done the job with their eyes closed. It was hard to miss hitting something in this mass of vehicles and men. But with the bright light of the “Christmas Trees” it was, naturally, all the better to see what you were shooting at and all the better to destroy the target. The tracer rounds in the strafing machine guns helped them find their victims.

We were totally exposed to the enemy fire and overcome with a great anger at these 'cowardly' attacks as we called them. We were even more angry at the total failure of the German defenses against these attacks. Our heavy flak guns could not do much to protect the streets, but surely light caliber flak could have hit something. Moreover, another thing that was totally absent was the presence of German aircraft and night-fighters. It seemed to us as though there weren't any more. This engendered a very deep, unhealthy and hopeless anger in us. Nevertheless, the night did offer some protection especially

when the weather turned bad and the planes could not fly. That is when we would drive like crazy, sometimes with our headlights on even though the Feldgendarmerie [Military Police] ranted at us and threatened all the drivers. The main thing was to get through with the supply truck's load of food or ammunition to the front lines where they were desperately needed. Full chaos reigned when a night attack hit a munitions truck or a fuel truck. It cost precious time to get the road cleared and sometimes it was morning and the traffic was still jammed up. The first enemy Jabos would find a battle ground before their eyes that was filled with targets. They would have free range to profit from the chaos and increase our casualties.

With all of this I still had the 'pleasure' of dealing with my Tobruk-Trauma [See "Driving Supply Trucks in Africa – 1942 – Part III" on this site.] I still had uncontrollable panic attacks when aircraft flew over. Nevertheless, it didn't matter, I still had to drive the munition truck. I had learned that transporting munitions was only dangerous if the shells were armed with a detonator. Without them they were supposedly safe to carry, but I didn't really trust it. I always made sure that the shells and the detonators were kept separated. Then, in the event that we took a hit, the munitions would 'only' burn. I never really believed that. I was sure that any hit would cause the whole thing to blow up in our faces.

Night after night we got our orders to either load up or find a battery and drop a load. It was amazing that in spite of all of the difficulties we were still able to find the gun positions, that loading orders were still issued, and that loading and unloading were still possible.

It was the month of March 1944 when we two got underway with our wreck of a truck delivering ammunition and gasoline. We preferred carrying ammo to gasoline. But we did not mind carrying a spare 200 liter drum of gasoline on board our truck. It was hidden under the bed of the truck and filled with precious gasoline. Due to a lucky opportunity we were able to commandeer this gas drum to use as our "Retreat-Reserve." This 200 liters of fuel was intended to aid our escape in the event that gasoline became totally unobtainable. This was a real possibility giving the rate at which the Allies were blowing up our fuel dumps or capturing them. This was a very illegal hoard of a valuable commodity but it could save our lives.

The driving became more and more critical and difficult because more and more the positions we had to find did not exist or had been evacuated. The truck could not be unloaded and there was no 'authority' there to verify our attempt to make the delivery. This made us very uncomfortable, because it could have had bad repercussions. Failure to make a delivery with proper documentation could raise suspicions that the cargo was simply dumped somewhere or that the driver intentionally took a wrong turn to avoid a dangerous road. Such suspicions could be acted upon even without hard proof, and the punishments were severe even up to a full court marshal. I myself had something very unpleasant happen to me in this respect.

In May of 1944 the Allies still had not yet succeeded in establishing a unified front from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic Sea, even though Monte Cassino had fallen and they had the opportunity to do so. The continued resistance of the German troops astounded the enemy. The reason that the resistance was so strong is that the elite German units were in the forefront. They were made up of Fallschirmjäger, units of the Waffen-SS, and the Herman Göring Luftwaffe Ground Division. These outfits were made up solely of volunteers who still in 1943 and 1944 were signing up to be part of these elite troops. These young men were fanatical fighters, who totally committed themselves to the battle even when the outlook was dire. These troops were in the center of the German line just north of Cassino and made up the veritable backbone of the units deployed there. These were troops that

Kesselring could rely on completely to carry out even the most absurd commands. It must be openly stated that there was a real difference between the 'normal' soldiers of the regular army, who were older and behaved differently from the young firebrand, volunteers of the elite units. Even our officers behaved differently from their comrades in those units.

That is not to say that the regular army units behaved like cowards, they were just more reasonable and careful. They would not fight with as much fanaticism and abandon as the elite troops who were filled with a war lust that was unknown in the regular army. This led to considerable tension between the outfits on the front at the times when they were mixed together on the battle line. It even came to the point where some elite squads did not want to listen to orders coming from regular army officers.



Young Fallschirmjäger at Monte Cassino (Photo collected from <http://www.khmeusel.de/Lebenslauf.html>)

It was very surprising that, in spite of the bad developments on every front, and after the disaster at Stalingrad and the loss of Africa, young men continued to volunteer for the elite units that were suffering the most casualties. It never came into their minds that these units were the ones thrown into battle where things were the hottest. The younger these men were, the more fanatically they fought.

With this unbroken stream of replacements, which was growing ever stronger, the commanders were able to continue their war. There were plenty of volunteers ready to fight and die. There was no force or pressure on these young men to join up, they did so of their own free will. When people speak and write about this time in history the story must be told as it really was. The volunteers came forward because they were convinced that this war was about the destiny of the German people. It was a war where the very existence of their nation was at stake and they could not leave their people in the lurch. The fight for the Fatherland was even more necessary when the odds of death were all the greater.

Of course part of this was due to the Nazi indoctrination of the time, but it was also due in great part to the spirit of Nationalism that was deeply rooted in the German people. It was also felt by the Austrians who in 1938 were brought into the fold as well as by the other German populations in Poland, Alsace, Sudetenland and elsewhere who were 'brought home to the Reich.' No one hindered the young men in their delusions, these youths who now had to go to the front and serve their harried Fatherland, and perhaps die, a more likely outcome than survival.

It was clear to me that a negotiated peace was out of the question. The Allies wanted nothing less than unconditional surrender. Our fanatical young men wanted nothing to do with a 'dishonorable peace.' They wanted to fight to help determine when and what kind of a peace would be forged. Their fanaticism was increased even more when they found out what Mr. Morgenthau in the USA had in mind for Germany. The [Morgenthau Plan](#) fueled the flames for Goebbles. Because of this plan the Germans not only maintained their will to resist, their will became almost fanatical. It did not help things at all that the plan came from a Jew. It only convinced everyone in the Reich that the Jews wanted to use it to bring down the entire country.



Morgenthau Plan for the Post-War Partition of Germany

We were farther away than ever from a negotiated peace. The vast majority of the German people did not want to experience a dictated peace like we had to under the Treaty of Versailles. So we fought on, even more stubbornly and fanatically than in the previous years. The young firebrands wanted to fight and to win battles for their Führer, Adolf Hitler. It was madness, but it governed the thoughts and actions of many. They were not a minority. The young firebrands had strong support from the folks at home who were very proud of what the young men were trying to accomplish.

These young men were not aware of how they were being misused by the leadership, or that they were being unscrupulously sent to their death in a war that Germany could not win. The high-level leaders recognized this but let the youth of Germany march off to fight and die anyway. This was a criminal act on the part of the political and military leadership against the German people. It was in no way just Nazi lunacy, it was a lunacy that all of the leaders shared who were charged with the care and leadership of the people.

Under Hitler this national delusion evolved, with the help of his 'faithful' Paladins in the Wehrmacht, the State, the Party and the Waffen-SS, into an unconscionable crime that would cost the lives of millions more. This crime against their own people has to be added to the many other crimes that occurred in this war. It must also be said that the German people were not only willing helpers of the Nazi dictatorship, but also its very willing victims. Nevertheless it was still a crime inflicted on a people who had given their full trust to their leaders. The people were not aware of how irrational this belief was, because in the beginning, during the building of the Reich, the leaders had fulfilled all of their promises. Now the people of Germany would fall along with the Nazi spirit that their nationalism was built upon. Most of the people still could not see the magnitude of the crime against them and they were still ready to continue on like lemmings into the abyss.

In the news reports from the front lines the military leaders and the Führer held up the betrayed youth of Germany as brilliant examples of self-sacrifice and heroic courage. These young men were extremely proud when they heard these reports, even though many of their comrades had been lost. They were still under the illusion that the German Reich was not lost and that they could fight on to an ultimate German victory.

There were also whispers of a 'Miracle Weapon' in the works. This gave new life to the delusion that victory was still possible. They kept fighting even as they had to keep falling back closer to the borders of Germany and then within the borders of their homeland. The totality of the Nazi ideology and led us to total war and would carry us on to total destruction and the people trod the total path of total madness.

But, now, let's get back on the road with the brave Swabian and me, the stolid North German who were underway in the not very sunny South. We were having a lot of problems and difficulties getting around with our classy SPA truck. Of highest importance was keeping fuel in our gas tank. When we came to a fuel dump for a normal refueling we would try to get a little extra for our 'reserve' tank. We always had trouble with the men who ran these supply stations. The Zahlmeister [Paymaster or Purser] who had responsibility for dispensing gasoline treated the commodity as though it was their own property. Even when the fueling stations were threatened with being overrun by the enemy, they preferred to have everything in order and completely intact before it was all blown up rather than opening up the pumps to anyone who needed fuel. Even trucks that managed to drive in on fumes could not get a drop from these idiots without correct signatures on the proper paperwork. On many occasions soldiers would have to take the fuel they needed for the supply trucks by force. The truck drivers and the Zahlmöpsen [Purser Boobs in Landser jargon] would face off with loaded guns, one to protect the fuel supplies, and the other to take by force what was needed to continue running ammo and food to the lines. There came situations when food and clothing stores needed to be cleared out. The soldiers wanted to simply come in and grab what they needed. The army Zahlmöpsen saw that as an act of plunder that had to be countered by force of arms. To their minds the order to clear out storehouses implied strict rules, not a free give-away to just anybody.

So it was that the supply depots would be carefully managed by the Zahlmöpsen and be in perfect order when the enemy overran them. Unbelievable? Maybe, but completely true.

It also happened that orders would come down from on high opening up food or clothing storehouses for the Landser to come in and serve themselves. Unfortunately this often led to ugly situations where the soldiers did act like plunderers. I had occasion to go to a clothing depot that was originally intended for Italian paratroopers. I got a nice pair of brand new pants and a really wonderful pair of boots made from the finest leather. But I also saw how many of the German soldiers made themselves at home there. I ended up being ashamed of their behavior when I saw how the impoverished local Italians reacted with surprise and dismay when they found out how the soldiers had emptied the storehouse.

In addition to managing our reserve tank, we also had to manage our 'normal' usage in the truck. Our ancient old truck guzzled a huge amount of fuel. We were able to keep our reserve tank filled by means of a siphon that allowed us to fill it directly from the truck's gas tank. This was our version of a gas pump and it was the best method for keeping our reserves topped off. It also left a wonderful aftertaste of costly gasoline in the mouth.

The two of us did our duty as best we could, but we took care to maintain a certain independence. I continued to have problems with malaria attacks which would hit me from time to time. This was coming to be somewhat routine with me. When I noticed the first signs I would go to a medic station or a clinic. There I would get Atabrine and caffeine injections and after two or three days I would be back underway. This was not always by choice. They always tried to get me out of the door as quickly as possible to make room for the wounded who always took precedence over the merely sick. They just gave me a couple of injections to control the fever and pushed me out until the next attack, which was never long in coming. This customary heave-ho was the cause of some serious complications that would give me a great deal of trouble later.

Somewhere, my mail caught up with me. It was the Glory of Prussia that the mail would get through even under the most difficult circumstances. I had to learn from a letter that things were not going well with my mother. In the last of the stack of letters I found out that she was out of the family doctor's hands and had to go into the hospital for an operation. I was very upset, but had to wait for more letters from my father or from Ilse [his fiancée] to find out how things were progressing. I could not know when or where the next mail delivery would find me. To my great distress I had to read it in a letter that my mother had died on April 8, 1944. She was not quite 50 years old. She was buried in the Alt-Aumunder cemetery. As I read this frightful letter I realized that everything was over. I no longer had a mother and I couldn't even be part of her funeral because the letter had gotten to me so late and I couldn't ask for bereavement leave. At any rate this sort of leave had been suspended anyway. I had nothing but photographs of the grave and a photo from her with Christmas greetings.

Later I learned that she could have lived if she had only had a different doctor and not the local SA physician, Dr. Engelmann. He was always drunk, but he was the only doctor who was still practicing in our little town of Vegesack. He was also the only one my father could reach. A family doctor was not only needed for treatment but also for getting her admitted to the hospital in Vegesack. When she needed to go into the hospital the second time there was an unbelievable delay. My father had a great deal of difficulty rousing the doctor from his bed to obtain the referral to the hospital. Without this referral from the treating physician, she could not be admitted. When my father finally got the paperwork he still had to get her to a hospital where they had the ability to perform the operation she needed. An air raid alarm caused even more time to be lost. After the operation, she bled to death.

Yet another young life came to an end and along with it all of the hopes and dreams that my parents had ever had. My father never got over it. All my hopes of going home and reuniting with them after the war were also gone as were my dreams of being able to spend time with my mother which I would have been able to do even if I set up my own household. She could no longer give me anything, she could no longer speak to me and I could no longer go to her with my little problems, or joys. I felt alone in the world even though I still had my father and a wife. None of that replaced my mother who was truly the dearest thing in the world to me in spite of me being a brat who caused her quite a bit of grief. I was very alone even though I was married. I could no longer go to my mother with my joys and my sorrows. Even today I remain very solitary. It has almost never been possible for me to give myself over to another person or be so open with another that I could experience an emotional release or a feeling of stability. There has always been a barrier hindering such feelings. Why? I don't know. Perhaps my expectations are too great to ever be fulfilled. It is certain that I had a mother-fixation, but without being a 'momma's boy.' I have never suffered from an Oedipus complex.

My sorrow over my loss was great, but it was soon overshadowed by other problems that threatened my very existence. There was no time for private cares and private worries. There was no longer a place in me for melancholy thoughts and ideas about the future. The only thing I had time to worry

about now was trying to survive the events that were unfolding around me.

This is the time when the great Allied offensive began that we all had feared. On May 10, 1944 the US 5th Army and the British 8th Army began the offensive at Garigliano that would end on May 18, 1944 with the German withdrawal from Monte Cassino. Now the Allies were on the move toward the North along a very wide front. The result was a nearly uncontrolled retreat of the German units without any direction from central command. The Allies advanced with the great strength they had amassed on the ground and in the air. By the sea they were supported by the battleships who sailed unhindered by any German resistance.

The retreat across the breadth of the Italian peninsula was not orderly, it was a defenseless rout. The building of a defensive line was out of the question. Whenever we dug in to attempt to do so the line would soon fall to the onslaught of bombs and mortars, and the Allied tanks and infantry would soon continue on northward. When they entered Rome victoriously on June 4, 1944 the last possible rallying point had fallen and there was no longer any stable front to speak of.

This was also the time when the partisans stepped up their attacks on the Germans. The troops were vulnerable and only had a limited ability to protect themselves.

So there we were, the Schwab and the Bremer, in the middle of all of this chaos. Our ancient truck was full of artillery ammunition that we couldn't unload anywhere. We did our best to find an artillery battery that was still in place, but we failed every time. None of them were dug in, everyone was in motion to the rear. We had to be especially careful to have the proper paperwork executed at each place we stopped. I will soon tell you how important that turned out to be.

Night driving had gotten so difficult that long runs were hardly possible. Because of that it had become more important than ever to stop driving at the first light of morning and to search for cover for us and the truck. We had a camouflage tarp to hide our truck from aircraft passing overhead. For us, like most of the others, this retreat was being done without support from our unit. It was a very solitary affair. We traveled quite a way completely on our own. There was no headquarters we could locate. Nevertheless, we really wanted to find the DINAFÜ [Divisionsnachschiebführer: Quartermaster], otherwise we could be declared deserters.

There was also no way to organize mess halls or assure delivery of food to the troops. General Feldmarschall Kesselring issued an order to his troops telling them to live off of the land. Since supply and mess could not be guaranteed every man had to take food from the civilian stores and stocks of the Italians to any extent that they could. So much was 'requisitioned' that the farms were devastated. So much of this was going on that it bordered very closely on plundering. Requisitioning in exchange for money hardly ever happened. The order from Kesselring was carried out quite ruthlessly according to the slogan, "It serves these damn Itaker [slang for Italians] right for having betrayed us."

We were hungry and on our trip we had to find food somewhere. I came to the conclusion that we would be better off abandoning the main roads in favor of the less traveled side roads. With the help of our maps I tried to work out alternate routes. I had to take care to make sure that the selected route would not take us too far afield. The Kettenhunde [Military Police] were still very active even during the retreat and if they stopped us we did not want to look like we were deserting. We also felt that we could move faster on the side roads, find better cover and perhaps even run into elements of our own outfit. Our Division emblem had to pop up somewhere. Above all else we had to make sure that our paperwork carried the correct signatures and stamps from every responsible company HQ. This piece

of paper was our lifesaver with the DINAFÜ and the Kettenhunde. It was our proof that we had permission to be separated from our company and that we traveling according to our orders.

If we managed to get through the night and the usual schlamassel [mess] reasonably well, then we would try to drive to a farmhouse located far from the main road. We would camouflage the truck and, under the best circumstances, we would be able to bed down in a barn. As much as possible we would get ourselves cleaned up and try to get some sleep so that we would be ready for travel the next night. Since we now had to live off the land we had managed to accumulate a small menagerie. Many of the farms we came to were deserted. That surprised us at first, but we realized that many of the inhabitants had fled to the mountains to wait out the battle, or were holed up with the partisans. At the deserted farms we were able to provision ourselves with small livestock, primarily chickens. We improvised a hen house in the middle of the munition boxes to keep them. If we came across stray sheep with lambs we would put them on the truck. However, this kind of animal husbandry and the necessary slaughtering was quite bothersome so at every chance we had we would trade the animals for cheese and cornbread with any farmers we found who were still in their homes. Not all of the farms were abandoned and we came on some where the whole family was still there. Often, though, the men were not about, and this made us think of the partisans.

With my little bit of Italian I tried to assure the household that we had nothing bad in mind and that we just wanted to stay there peacefully until evening came. We had some bad experiences, but they had more to do with German soldiers than the Italian farmers.

On one of these days we came upon an inhabited farm house. We asked for permission to park our truck there and we received a friendly welcome from the people who lived there. After we washed up we planned to go back to the truck to sleep, but the people invited us to stay in the house and to stretch out our blankets on the floor. This was not without a certain amount of danger. We did not know if they were really being friendly or just setting us up for the partisans. But we were dog-tired. We just wanted to sleep and not think about danger anymore.

As we blissfully drifted off to sleep we suddenly heard a loud ruckus and frightened screams from woman's voices. We jumped up to see what was causing it. What we saw was not good. A German sergeant and a private had forced their way into the house and with drawn pistols were demanding that the women turn over their money and jewelery. I got extremely angry at these two blaggards. We both had our carbines with us. I grabbed mine and slipped in behind these two 'comrades' who still had not noticed us. Backed up by my brave Schwab I confronted the intruders and told them to give up the pistols, that the safety on my rifle was off and I would certainly make use of it if I had to. The two of them were very surprised and immediately tried to explain to us that the women had threatened them, which was total nonsense. There then followed a very loud and animated dispute that we eventually won. Our victory was due in part to me boldly telling them that my comrade and I were scouts for a company of combat troops who were expected to arrive shortly and be quartered in this house.

Boldness often carries the day and a good lie can do wonders as it did in this case. These 'heroes' slinked away and the farmhouse was now free from these creatures. We learned later that this kind of behavior was not rare. Many German soldiers carried on their own private wars and plundered the people along the way of our retreat. This resulted in brutal retaliation on the part of the partisans. That should certainly surprise no one.

After we roused these 'warriors' we were treated like heroes by the farm people. With eyes full of tears they thanked us for protecting them. In gratitude they transformed lunch into a luxuriant feast and

brought up their best wine from the cellar. We had become dear friends of the family and as night fell and it was time for us to move on they seemed truly sorry to see us go. Nevertheless we had to keep moving even though we had no fixed destination.

Something else happened shortly thereafter that started out very badly, but eventually worked out all right for us. This experience seems incredible and hard to believe, but what I have to recount is the absolute truth.

In following my map we came to a road that I thought we should take. I thought this route might avoid a great loss of time in the event that some sort of disaster on the main road held travel up. Such road blockages always led to very dangerous situations. However, when we arrived at the turn-off we found it blocked by a squad of German troops who had set up a barricade. They told us that we could not travel the road by ourselves. Due to intense partisan activity reported along this road we could only continue on as a part of a convoy. We would have to wait here until more vehicles happened along and then we could travel as a group. Time passed and no other vehicles came along. We were losing valuable time, it would be daylight before long and we would lose our cover. The Landser at the barricade suggested that we go back to the main road and join back in the crush of vehicles heading north. I explained to them that we were prepared to take the side road in spite of the risk of running into partisans. After a considerable back and forth they reluctantly allowed us to pass, but not before carefully making note of the ID number of our truck, just to cover themselves.

We were now able to roll on in the darkness with our beat-up old SPA over the forbidden road. The quiet and the unobstructed driving was a pleasure for us. From time to time we noticed some movements on the ridge along the side of the road but we didn't think much of it. We drove along quite content and relaxed. As morning dawned we saw a large farm house beside the road and we figured it would be a good place to stop and wait for evening.

When we approached the farm house it appeared to be empty like many other of the houses and farms we passed on our travels. The quiet and our uneventful ride added to our sense of well being. However, at this point we saw a woman emerge. We gave her a friendly greeting and told her that we wanted to stay here for just one day and to hide our truck in the barn. That, and perhaps a chance to wash up. We also asked for some milk and bread to eat and we offered to pay for it in Italian Lire.

Her timidity and aloofness were very evident, but that was very understandable in this turbulent time. We did not come as invited guests, we were barging in and had invited ourselves. We tried to be friendly and we asked that she extend her hospitality for just a single day. We would pay for everything, we had no other agenda or dark thoughts. We just wanted to sleep and get a little something to eat. The woman we were speaking with allowed herself to be won over. She had decided to trust us and she offered us hospitality.

Among the women on the estate of the villa was a pretty black-haired young girl who looked me over very thoroughly and whose gaze I couldn't avoid. I soon found out that her name was Maria. I could not have known at this point that Maria would save my life. Sparks flew between us immediately in spite of the fact that she was Italian and I was a German Soldier and in spite of the fact that the Italians and the Germans were now enemies.

It did not surprise me much that the women on the whole were rather reticent, what perplexed me was a certain anxiety that they showed. We had acted so respectful and proper with them that I could not figure out why they were still so tense. We soon found out.

We got our truck under cover and when we turned around we saw an old man standing before us armed with a carbine. Behind him were two or three more armed men. When we saw these men all of our feelings of well-being evaporated. We had the very uncomfortable impression that we had fallen into the hands of the partisans. We also believed that the women had been a sort of decoy. They were friendly with us just to make it easier for them to hand us over to the partisans.

This was a really tense situation. We couldn't defend ourselves because our carbines were still in the truck. Fighting back would have been senseless anyway. They had all the advantages over us, we could not have won a fight.

What I am about to tell you is the absolute truth, it happened just as I am going to describe it to you. It is not a fantasy, not imagined and not embellished.

We were standing opposite the farm house and all I could do was to try to use my broken Italian to engage the men in conversation. After some hesitation, I succeeded and they seem to look favorably on my efforts. My success was due to the fact that at least I was trying to deal with them in their own language rather than just gesturing which would have been more typical of a German soldier. They saw that I was making an effort to accommodate myself to them. I explained to the old man, who I figured to be the boss, the situation that I and my comrade were in. I told him why we happened to be here and I tried to make it clear that we wanted nothing more than a roof over our head for one day. In the evening we would disappear as though nothing had happened.



Italian Partisans in 1945

This quickly led to a question and answer session which in turn segued into a longer conversation. All the time the men continued to keep their rifles in their hands with a very unmistakable purpose. In the conversation we learned that this house belonged to the caretaker of the estate of an Italian aristocrat whose grand villa was only a kilometer away. He had fled the Germans. The boss said that he had not belonged to the Fascists through all the time that Mussolini was in power. Now we knew for sure that we were in the hands of partisans who had come down from their mountain hideouts to check on the estate where they bumped

into us. They also made it clear that the women here were not decoys like I had first thought. The old man made it known that he was the leader of the band of partisans who were battling against the Fascists and the Germans. For him the Germans weren't so important anymore since it was clear that the British would be here in the next few days.

Now, instead of taking us prisoner or shooting us dead, we got into a real conversation. I let them know my opinions about war, Fascism, Naziism and about the essence of Democracy. I told them about my life as much as my poor ability in Italian would let me. The Padrone let it be known that he was a confirmed Communist. I told him that as a youth I knew a lot of Communists and Social Democrats. I myself was a member of the Socialist Worker Youth organization. Like all Socialists, I did not vilify the Communists, because I had gotten to know them as people when I was young.

This was a very bizarre situation where a couple of German Landser and a band of partisans found themselves in an animated conversation as though there wasn't a war just over the next hill. It wasn't only the conversation, we drank wine together brought to us by his daughter, Maria, who I was now able to get a good look at. Another thing that was not customary was that Maria listened attentively to our talk and kept looking at me with a certain intensity. It made me self-conscious, especially when she gave me a warm smile. I got so that I couldn't take my eyes off of her and, inside, I cursed this damned Shit War that would separate us when the evening fell and would never give us the chance to grow closer.

Now that we two Landser and the partisans had drunk wine together, there was nothing for it but for the Padrone to invite us to be his guests at the mid-day meal. He did so with the wish that we might continue our conversation. He said that up until now he had never had the opportunity to sit down and talk with German soldiers. He had always figured them to be just like the Fascists, perhaps a little worse. Maria beamed and made it known that she would also be delighted if we would join them for lunch. Of course we had no objections, even though my brave Schwab still feared that something bad could happen. I wasn't totally convinced of the contrary, but from my experiences with the Italians I was pretty sure that after inviting us to eat with them, they would respect the customs of hospitality.

Now a new problem arrived at the door in the form of even more armed men. When my comrade and I saw them we both got a queasy feeling in the pit of our stomachs. The men and the Padrone began to argue. I was able to make out that the new men wanted to take us prisoner and carry us off somewhere. I got the jitters and really thought that it was all over for us. But our Padrone was a proud man and he made it clear to the other men that these two Germans were his guests, and that the customs of hospitality were sacred and they would be respected even in these troubled times. As long as these two men were in his house they were under his protection. Yes, they might be enemies of the Italian people, but on his property under the sign of hospitality there would be no animosity or murder. That was it, word for word and crystal clear.

So we sat down with the whole family at the table. For the rest of the day we two German Landser and several Italians enjoyed each others company and understanding. Unbelievable, but absolutely true just like what followed after that.

In the course of our discussions about the war and the post-war times I mentioned where I lived in Germany. I also expressed my wish that some day I would have the opportunity, if I came out of this alive and healthy, to come back to the Italy which I had come to love and visit as a simple tourist. Then in the peace and quiet of peacetime I would return and visit with the people of Italy that I had come to know and value in spite of the madness of war that had colored our relationships. At that the Padrone insisted that I must come back and stay with him! He told me that the English radio had reported that Bremen was almost totally destroyed. There would not be much of a future to be had there. He would assure my safety, nothing would happen to me. Since I already spoke Italian fairly well, I would be able to live quite well in Italy. The British would be here in a few days. He offered to hide me for a while to avoid my being taken captive, then we would see what we would see. He would do all of this to please his daughter, Maria, who had implored him not to harm a single hair of my head. She didn't want anything to happen to me and she made her father promise to take care of me. Papa believed that she was in love with me. I was also totally captivated by this Italian beauty. It was unbelievable that in this den of partisans I was invited to stay there with them and become part of the family.

I finally had to make it clear to the Padrone and to the lovely Maria that none of this could happen. I was already married and I could not leave my wife and my homeland in the lurch. There was a long, sad discussion, but even Maria had to admit in the end that we would have to part, painful as it would be.

As evening came on and we made ready to leave, the partisans told me that we would have to leave the truck and its cargo of artillery shells behind. They did not want to release them to be used by the German gunners. I had to explain that it was out of the question for us to leave the cargo and truck behind. Without the truck we could not stay ahead of the advancing British army, and without the cargo we risked being declared slackers and could be shot on the spot.

All of this was happening just a few days before the Allied invasion of the French Coast, amongst a band of partisans in 1944. On the evening of this extraordinary day another miracle occurred. Two German Landser moved out northward in a truck laden with ammunition, but under the protection of the Italian partisans. We could not have a deeper thanks in our heart for these splendid men. They showed us true humanity even though we were ostensibly their enemies.

I would have loved to have gone back to visit these worthy men after the war. Unfortunately, the road map I used went missing. I had carefully marked our route on it as well as every stop we made. It would have allowed me to locate each stopover. I was never able to find the exact location of the Padrone.

The partisans accompanied us as far as they could. When we parted the Padrone again left us with the wish that we would live to enjoy the peacetime that would follow. We drove on without our 'escort' until we reached a place where there were again German outposts. The guards were shocked to see us emerge from an area they knew to be full of partisans. They could not believe that we were able to make it through traveling totally alone over those dangerous roads. It was so unbelievable that they scrutinized us and our paperwork very closely.

Even today I still think of those men who held my life in their hands. They had the chance to do what it is that partisans unfortunately do, namely, kill enemies. I can only hope that these men and women, in particularly the dear Maria, did not become victims of the Italian Fascists or the Germans.

We were now out of partisan territory and we continued driving north with the vague hope that we would continue to avoid harm and somehow we would find a situation that would allow us to finish our time as soldiers somewhere out of harm's way. This hope, although it was completely irrational, was the kind of anchor that dominates a soldier's thoughts. It is truly the one anchor that a battered soul can grasp on to in the most dangerous places and situations.

Things were very bad for me now. The malaria had returned along with complications that made it nearly impossible for me to travel. My brave companion didn't know what to do or how to help me.

My condition was getting worse and causing problems with my heart. Nothing came of my visit to a medical aid station. They did not have the time or ability to do a comprehensive examination.

The symptoms were becoming more insistent in part because of the food which was not agreeing with me at all. This was a very compelling reason for me to get myself to a more ordered environment, but it would take a while to do so yet.

We two rolled on, still with the vague hope of getting into a better situation. The brave Schwab and the stolid Bremer, who was no longer a proud soldier. He was now a heap of bad luck who still hoped things would get better, but who no longer believed it.

[To be continued...]