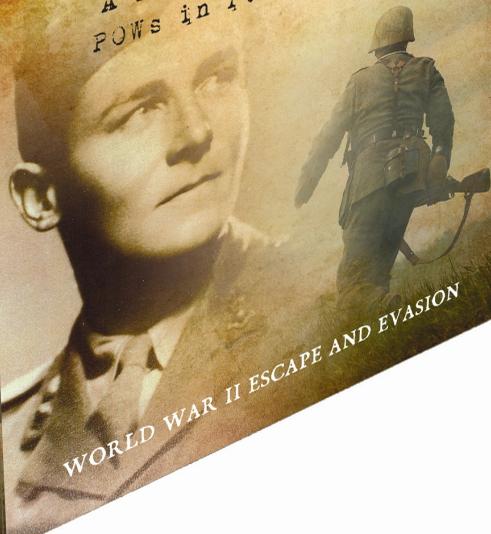


MALCOLM TUDOR

# BEYOND THE WIRE

A True Story of Allied  
POWs in Italy 1943-1945



WORLD WAR II ESCAPE AND EVASION

BEYOND THE WIRE

MALCOLM TUDOR

## 5

## The Mass Escape

**T**he prisoners of war in Fontanellato camp rose early on Thursday, 9 September 1943, after receiving news the night before of the Armistice. Everyone was on parade at five to nine to hear the orders of the Senior British Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo de Burgh. It was the first time that there were no Italians present.

The colonel stated that some time ago he had received an order from the War Office through the usual channels. It instructed that in the event of an armistice everyone in prison camps should stay put. The SBO said that he believed that the order was out of date and did not reflect the true tactical situation.

Colonel Vicedomini had received information that there had been fighting since dawn in Parma and Piacenza between German and Italian troops. It was likely that the Germans would arrive at any moment to take over the camp. If this happened, the Commandant had said that he would defend the village with the force under his command.

Colonel de Burgh stated that he had considered offering the services of his men to help the Italians, but had decided that he did not wish to do anything that might embarrass the British Government.

A place was being found in the countryside where all the prisoners could be hidden. The Commandant had scouts on the access roads to give early warning of any move on the camp.

The alarm signal would be three Gs blown on a bugle. If it

were sounded, the men would quickly assemble in companies and march out through a large gap cut in the wire by the Italians at the top end of the playing field.

Once the parade was over, the prisoners were to don battledress, collect a day's rations, and be ready to evacuate the camp at five minutes notice. They were also to familiarise themselves with their emergency stations.

The Commandant issued the prisoners with small amounts of Lire. The men tidied their rooms and packed away items that they might be able to recover later. They exchanged addresses and passed on messages for their families in case of trouble on the way.

The work done, the captives chatted in the courtyard over a mid-morning drink of cocoa. Suddenly two JU88 German bombers swooped low over the camp. The men scattered and dived to the ground, but the planes disappeared without taking any hostile action.

The prisoners' information service was in overdrive. Allied landings were reported at Genoa, La Spezia, Leghorn, and Trieste. Rumours from the camp staff were even more encouraging. It seemed that the situation would soon be under control and that the Germans would be forced to quit Italy.

Philip Kindersley wrote: 'Had we not had this completely erroneous information, the majority of us would have adopted very different tactics during the next few days, and many more of us would have succeeded in reaching our own lines.' He described his time later in the Bardi area as 'seven wasted weeks' before beginning the great trek south.<sup>20</sup>

The bar was even busier than normal. In the kitchens, Lieutenant Blanchaert and his team began to prepare a special lunch of cold salmon and new potatoes.

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Kindersley was recaptured together with Scots Guards captain Ronald Orr-Ewing near Gubbio on 3 December 1943 after walking 400 miles.

One British officer was already outside the wire. Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Mainwaring had been given responsibility for coordinating the response to any emergency. Once news arrived of the invasion, he had been tasked with finding a refuge for the prisoners if the rapid evacuation of the camp became necessary.

The Commandant had called on Hugh Mainwaring at 7.30 in the morning and said that the situation had deteriorated. He gave him a map of the area and suggested the best direction to take. Accompanied by Captain Camino, the officer left the camp half an hour later. They found a suitable hiding place five miles north-west of the camp. The deep, winding bed of the Rovacchia torrent has steep banks covered with scrub, beeches and poplars.

As the pair arrived back at the camp at noon, a patrol returned with the news that a German column had been sighted only two miles away. It was drawn up on the main road and was ready to take over the camp.

Colonel Vicedomini was true to his word. An Italian bugler blew three Gs, the prearranged alarm signal. Stuart Hood recalled the sound of feet running in the corridors of the orphanage, shouts, laughter, and commands as the prisoners sprinted down to the courtyard.

For the last time the men paraded in their five companies. They marched out through the gap in the wire, led by Colonel Mainwaring and Captain Camino. The escapers walked three in a row, creating a long, straggling column. It was hoped that the crew of any German aircraft would judge the formation to be one of their own infantry battalions.

Some of the Italian soldiers who had helped plan the departure joined their captain in the column, including Lieutenant Peredini and Sergeant Major Rissotto. Colonel Vicedomini and 40 of his troops chose to remain.

The march out was done quietly and in good order. By 12.10 the camp was empty.