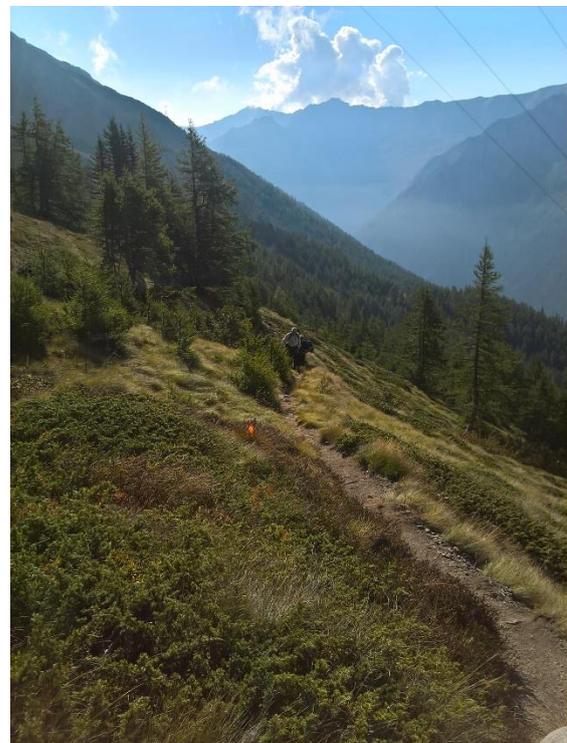


*Lt. Anthony Laing, MC, had an extremely adventurous war. After escaping from Camp PG 49 at Fontanellato, near Parma, he was recaptured by the River Sangro, jumped from a train that was taking him to Germany, spent time in Florence and eventually reached Switzerland by climbing the Monte Moro pass north of Macugnaga. In September 2018 a four-strong party including Anthony Laing's two sons Hugh and Ian, retraced the climb over the pass. The third member was Hugo de Burgh, son of Lt. Col. H.G. de Burgh, who was senior British Officer at Fontanellato. **Christopher Woodhead**, a grandson of Lt. Col. de Burgh and the fourth member of the group, tells the story.*

We left Fontanellato, where we had participated in the 75th Anniversary celebrations of the Armistice, before lunch on Sunday September 9th to head off towards the Alps. The aim was to follow Anthony Laing's escape route over the Monte Moro pass and down into Switzerland.

Like all the escape routes over the Alps exact detail is often patchy. However, it is known that he took the ferry across Lake Maggiore and had lunch in the square at Vebania. Positioned just next to the ferry terminal the square boasts a number of restaurants where we had a fine lunch and after a few glasses of wine were fleeced by a charm bracelet trader.

After lunch we drove the rest of the way up the long valley to Macugnaga the start of the trail over the Monte Moro pass. The "Laing Route". We had now discovered that one of our party, Hugo de Burgh, in an attempt at real authenticity was going to have to make the journey there and back without any "papers" having left his passport in Fontanellato. Once in Macugnaga we checked into the Signal Hotel nestling under the mighty Monte Rosa massif and walked into town for some dinner. We passed the trail head on our walk into town and checked out the first few confidence-boosting yards. We bought supplies, fruit, ham, cheese and buns for the next day and retired to bed setting our alarms for 6.00am.



The walk started before breakfast at 7.00am. The sign post indicated that the first target and path junction was at Alp Bill and would take about an hour. We ascended steeply up a well-made path through deep fir forest which occasionally opened up to show the sun lit Monte Rosa at the head of the still gloomy valley. Alp Bill was the cable car station and the last chance of a plan B. Having done this in close to the predicted hour we cast aside any thought of an easy life and strode past with renewed enthusiasm. It was now about 8.00 am and the signs indicated that it would take another 3 hours or so to get to the pass. The top for an early lunch then. The enthusiasm lasted until breakfast.

Once the sun had swung round sufficiently to shine on our side of the valley we stopped for some breakfast amongst the trees and scrub looking out on the most beautiful view. Quite a number of escapees used this path over the mountains into Switzerland and it had indeed been a regular smuggling or trade, as it sometimes called, route for many centuries. Our appreciation of the effort it required from the escapees given what condition some of them must have been in was about to be greatly increased.



Following our breakfast of fruit and biscuits we started the long haul for the top. On a well-marked trail we began the serious part of the climb. The plan was to walk for about an hour very slowly in the climber's manner and then stop for a drink. The hour rapidly turned to 15mins as the path became steeper. As we climbed the trees gave way to scrub, grass and blueberry bushes, all thinning the higher we climbed. We crossed under the cable car and waved up to the occupants now regretting somewhat our decision to walk up.

As the grass started to give way to scree and rock we turned a corner by a chair lift station to see our destination at the top of the path. It still seemed, and indeed was, a long way off but at least it was now in sight. If the lower belt was made of majestic fir trees competing for the light and, as the trees gave out, to the second of on-the-turn autumn colours in the grass and shrubs, the highest level is made up of a cracked stone quarry hell of the harshest severity. Jagged tumbled rocks of grey which in the winter are covered in snow. We continued up the path now often merely stones and rocks heaped upon each other searching out the next flag that had been left by the Round Monte Rosa

Ultra Challenge runners and the more traditional way markers of red, white and red stripes. The final haul up to the Rifugio was through a narrow gully where sight of our destination was lost. After a further dispiriting haul we rounded the corner to find ourselves nearly on top of the rifugio and lunch and rest.

The power of recovery of the human spirit and body is remarkable. After a sit-down with a bowl of restorative soup at the Rifugio Oberto-Maroli such was our renewed enthusiasm and confidence a bottle of wine had to be ordered and we all felt ready for the journey down and the walk into Switzerland.



The guide book had said it was 2 hours walk down from the top of the Monte Moro pass to the Mattmark Dam. It was wrong. The initial descent was steep and there was often a necessity for metal steps to have been drilled into the rocks. We walked down along the edge of a cliff and over some patches of ice left from the previous winter on which stepping stones had been laid. Once off the rocks a proper path wound down through a herd of black cattle to the bridge over the river before joining the path along side the lake. In another hour we were at the dam and grateful, very grateful to see the taxi still waiting to take us off to Zermatt.

Most of the escapees would have been taken from where they were picked up to Visp to be looked after and checked out. Whilst we probably have little or no idea about the privation and level of struggle that the escapees went through to get to Switzerland we did at least get some idea of how their will was tested just to keep putting one foot in front of the other up the relentless slope to freedom.



The Walkers

Hugh Laing, son of Anthony Laing

Ian Laing, son of Anthony Laing

Hugo de Burgh, son of H G de Burgh

Christopher Woodhead, grandson H G de Burgh

Vertical height gained 1650 m or 5362 ft