

Armistice 75th Anniversary Celebrations

Fontanellato 9 September 2018

Chairman's speech by Sir Nick Young, Cav. Uff.

Mr Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Monte San Martino Trust, people of Fontanellato.

When the prisoners of PG Camp 49 Fontanellato gathered in this very spot exactly 75 years ago today, not one of them would have imagined that so many of their sons and daughters, grandchildren and other family members, from Britain and many other countries, would be here again, 75 years later, to celebrate the occasion.

Picture the scene. Just yesterday evening, soon after their supper, the news came through that the Italian Armistice had been agreed.

As you have heard, from the diary extracts read just now, Colonel de Burgh, the senior British officer, cool amidst the excitement, called the prisoners to order. There would be a formal parade at 9am the next morning – here, on this very spot. By the time they lined up to hear de Burgh speak, Colonel Vicedomini, the Italian Camp Commander, had already given orders for the wire to be cut – just around the corner, by the playing field.

De Burgh said that, although orders from London were for prisoners to stay put, he believed the order was out of date and that the Germans were approaching with the intention of taking them to Germany. He told his men to change into battledress and get ready to leave upon the sounding of three G notes on the bugle.

By midday, the bugle had sounded and the prisoners had marched out of the Camp, facing an unknown future of adventures, dangers, and possible recapture or even death.

That we are all here today, to tell the stories of our fathers' escapes, is due, of course, partly to their courage, fortitude and ingenuity in getting away and, in some cases, returning home in time to continue the fight against fascism.

But it is due far more to the kindness, bravery and generosity of tens of thousands of Italian men and women, many of them extremely poor, who took pity on the escapers, and gave them food, and shelter and protection.

It started with Vicedomini himself, and his men, opening up the Camp and facilitating the breakout. He was beaten savagely by the Germans when they arrived here that day, and carted off for brutal interrogation and imprisonment. He returned, a broken man, at the end of the war, and died soon after.

Then it was the turn of the people of Fontanellato and nearby villages. They provided the men with food, a bed for the night, Italian clothing, guidance and advice about how to get away, and information about what the Germans were up to.

And then, as we all know, the spirit of St Martin, who gave his cloak to a beggar, spread to villages and towns throughout Italy, as the prisoners made their way home. Almost everywhere, they were greeted with kindness and help, despite the fact that the Germans had threatened death for anyone caught assisting escapers.

We have so many people to thank – too many to name.

But let me for now thank you Mr Mayor (Francesco Trivelloni), and the people of this lovely town, as the representatives of your fellow Italian men and women, for your kindness and generosity, not just to us this weekend, but to our fathers 75 years ago. Many of us owe you our lives.

I now bring you greetings:

- From the British Ambassador in Rome, who says that the celebrations today are “a wonderful symbol of gratitude to the Italian people, and of the bonds that now exist between Italy and the UK”;
- From the Italian Ambassador in London, who sends best wishes to the kind people of beautiful Fontanellato, and expresses gratitude for the work of the Monte San Martino Trust in ensuring that “the bonds of friendship and help between Italian people and the escapers are not forgotten”;
- From the Founder of the Trust, Cavaliere Ufficiale Keith Killby OBE, who celebrated his 102nd birthday a few weeks ago, and finally
- From our sister organisation, the Escape Lines Memorial Society: “The Italians who helped escapers were remarkable for their humanity, their belief in freedom, their strong camaraderie and their selfless compassion.... We can and must all learn from their example.”

Finally, allow me to thank you personally, Francesco, for all you have done now and in the past, to encourage the work of the Trust, and to welcome and entertain us in this lovely town, and I would like to ask you to accept this plaque as a small token of our gratitude and love.