

## **Views from the Other Ranks (ORs)**

***These notes formed the backbone of a talk by Anne Copley at the annual lunch of the Monte San Martino Trust on 10 November 2021.***

1. Books on the subject – many categories: see Julia MacKenzie's bibliography at <https://www.librarything.com/catalog/JuliaMacKenzie>
  - 1.1 Eric Newby – Love and War in the Apennines – most famous
  - 1.2 George Millar – Horned Pigeon – rip-roaring adventure
  - 1.3 Stuart Hood – Pebbles from my Skull - soul-searching
  - 1.4 John Verney – Dinner of Herbs – Evelyn Waugh-ish
  - 1.5 Gordon Lett – Rossano, Valley in Flames – straightforward history

Many categories, but for my purpose they all fall under the description of books written by officers.

2. Another category – accounts by Other Ranks (ORs) – some similarities– eg acknowledging courage of their Italian helpers, and expressing their gratitude to them - but also big differences:
  - Short talk so there will be generalisations.
  - No intention to pit one against the other.
  - OR accounts give insights that officer books perhaps don't. I'll come to that. First – other differences which contribute to those insights.

### Stages of imprisonment

3. On capture:
  - 3.1 Either in ones or twos – plane crash/small skirmish, or mass captures – Battle of Knightsbridge; fall of Tobruk June 1942 where 32,000 prisoners taken
  - 3.2 Officers separated – why? To prevent their leading insurrection?
  - 3.3 Transport to transit camp – officers by car/ORs by marching and/or trucks – days in desert heat, shot if fall behind, packed so tight in trucks that dead bodies remain upright
  - 3.4 Transit camps – bare enclosures surrounded by barbed wire. Length of stay – depended. Officers short or non-existent
4. Transport to Italy.
  - 4.1 Officers by plane (talk of overpowering pilot/ one successful hijacking to Malta...) Or by ship above decks but not particularly comfortable – Ward and Denny talk of apologies and slap-up dinner on arrival in Italy to make up for it

4.2 ORs by cargo ship – in the hold. Three to five days of dysentery, seasickness, resultant effluvia shifting with every ship's roll. Plus fear of torpedo from own side. Nino Bixio, holding 3,200 prisoners, which limped on to Greece with a loss of life of 336 PoWs; and the SS Scillin, holding 814, which was sunk by a British submarine with only 27 PoW survivors. Kept secret for many years by British government

## 5. Camps

5.1 Officers – varied – Chieti particularly poor, but on the whole, whilst boring, humiliating and frustrating, relatively comfortable. Batmen. Food prepared in kitchens (Red Cross parcels shared) Beds on one level (or even single rooms) with drawers/cupboards. Wine and vermouth rations (Newby). Parties. Bridge clubs. Laundry done by nuns (Fontanellato)

5.2 Red Cross report of PG12 Vincigliata (*now a wedding venue*), housing top-ranking officers:

"[The Chateau] has been improved by many alterations during the course of the centuries without altering its medieval character and which presents an imposing spectacle on the top of a hill near Fiesole....

For the purposes of exercise, the British Generals have a little garden with well-kept flower borders and raked paths.... The rooms are very well arranged, each one being next to a bathroom, the latter sometimes functioning for the occupants of two rooms. The question of water supply has presented certain difficulties and it sometimes happens that there is none for several hours, even for a whole day.

Among the common rooms which lead out of one another, there is a vast dining hall with old leather armchairs before a very heavy massive wooden table. From it leads the Common Room which is decorated with frescoes and furnished, among other things, with a divan covered with cushions. From this leads a smoking room with a vast stone fireplace. Further rooms for reading or writing etc are furnished with comfortable armchairs and the surroundings create a very pleasant atmosphere for reading or meditation."

5.3 ORs – if any sense, volunteered to be batmen!

5.4 ORs - Huge overcrowding – especially after fall of Tobruk. Italians not ready to cope with influx of 32,000 prisoners & Red Cross took a while to find where they'd all been put.

5.5 All sorts of buildings pressed into service. Some had to build their own huts – started in tents.

5.6 Paul Bullard painting of PG53 Sforzacosta – old warehouse factory buildings – huge, windowless, three-tier bunks. 300 men per section. 7,000 prisoners in all. Benefits of top and bottom bunks.

5.7 Some camps had different compounds for different ranks. PG78 Sulmona – Edward Henry Harold Ward, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bangor - experienced both – BBC correspondent – officer – after one week summoned by senior officer:

“I’m most awfully sorry, Ward ...but I’m afraid the Italians are going to send you war correspondents down to the troops’ compound. It seems they’ve had orders from Rome about this. Something about the ‘Stato Maggiore’ not recognising war correspondents as officers. Damn silly, but that’s what they say’. ‘Oh that can’t possibly be right,’ I said. ‘Of course, we’re officers. There’s no question about it one way or the other’. I couldn’t take it seriously.

And he was despatched to the ORs compound – 8 months – stuff carried down in wheelbarrows by batmen who had to leave him there. Description of 80 to a hut, bunk beds, always noise – singing, swearing, chatting plus more bodily noises.

After 8 months, back to top compound – the best, reserved mainly for Australians as Italians thought they might be able to “turn” men from the colonies. 2 to a room with a stove for heating and servants. Ward quote has echoes of above Red Cross report:

“They were furnished with beds with spring mattresses, bedside cupboards, chests of drawers, table and a couple of chairs and, in some cases, even hanging cupboards. It was possible to buy rugs at an exorbitant price at the canteen”.

Found it uncomfortable at first:

“For a long time it embarrassed me acutely when batmen ‘sirred’ me. The well-meant sympathetic remarks by officers on the awful time I must have had with the troops irritated me intensely. For the first couple of weeks I should have been genuinely delighted if the Italians had changed their minds and had sent me back to the troops. Back to the noise and friendliness and vitality which I found to be so strangely lacking among the officers”.

However, the greater comfort won out and Ward acknowledges that he soon took it for granted again.

## 6. Conditions for ORs

6.1 V little water. Cleanliness problems – shaving, washing. No nuns doing laundry – no sheets!

- 6.2 Food – Skilly – oil drum with a few veg floating in it. Took it in turns to carry from kitchen – perks of getting the dregs
  - 6.3 Starvation – PG53 Sforzacosta – winter 1942 dying at the rate of 10 a day  
PG70 Monte Urano – 6 a week
  - 6.4 Treatment – depended on camp commandant. Servigliano not bad, only a few deaths. Sforzacosta diehard fascist - Commandant Petraghani - probably contributed to high death rate. Worst – PG57 Gruppignano (Australians and New Zealanders) - Colonel Vittorio Calcaterra – torture. Despatched by partisans after Armistice.
  - 6.5 Things picked up in Spring 43, Red Cross parcels started to arrive. But ORs didn't pool them like officers – kept to themselves and ate, not in a “canteen” but on the edge of your bed. And carried your belongings around with you, nowhere to safely store them.
7. Escape
    - 7.1 Fontanellato and Servigliano – organised. Otherwise chaotic and ad hoc equally for officers and men. Both found welcome and assistance from local Italian contadini.
8. Differences post-escape
    - 8.1 Here is where the OR accounts provide insights officer accounts don't. Because? officers didn't bed in with a contadino family in the same way – their training was to push on (quite a lot of criticism of those who didn't get back into the fight), and anyway had not been subjected to the same level of privation as their men.
    - 8.2 Officers used to command.
    - 8.3 Class divide? Couldn't communicate on same level – John Verney quote:

As on various similar occasions in the future, I was struck by how naturally the soldiers accepted peasant hospitality. Uninhibited by language difficulties, they shared with the *giovanotti* a spontaneous human warmth which we consciously lacked. Their 'Give us some more of that soup, cock. It's bloody good' was better understood, and appreciated, than our refined 'Well if you're *sure* you can spare it' sort of politeness
    - 8.4 So, English insurance clerks from Birmingham, Australian farmboys, South African lads straight out of school, came to live the feudal lifestyle of the Italian contadini for up to 18 months until the final liberation of all Italy.
    - 8.5 Their accounts bear witness, through a foreigner's eyes, to what several describe as a “return to the Middle Ages”

- oppressive system of the mezzadria with the power of the padrone over his sharecroppers,
- the illiteracy and poverty of their saviours,
- but also their skills in self-sufficiency and the subverting of their padrone, keeping back some of his purported share
- the nature of their food (polenta – now chi-chi but known by escapers as the “Yellow Peril”)
- the work they undertook – learning to drive oxen to the plough, actually employed as bakers or watchmakers
- and the strong familial feelings that arose, with many of the young Allied servicemen calling the heads of their particular family “Mamma and Babbo” and remaining in contact for the rest of their lives.

8.6 Each account coloured by the narrator’s own personality:

- Dreamy romantic
- Affectionate amusement
- Scratchy irritability
- All imbued with enormous gratitude

8.7 And this unique set of circumstances, unrepeated anywhere else in the theatre of WW2, and giving rise to a fascinating collision of cultures and language is the main subject of the book I am researching.