

A Desperate Escape Attempt From the POW Camp in Laterina, Italy

"There was no way to stop him (I have not transcribed the previous tape yet so I do not know to whom he is referring to here). He wanted to go. A lot of people followed him but Constantine (my father's close friend), Pandolia (A Greek American POW from Boston) and I said this is crazy. But Johnny Cox and some of the other boys followed him.

They went up to the barbed wire and they were walking around like they were exercising and then they stopped. About 5 to 6 prisoners gathered around each pole and started to pull the pole down. They were trying to get through to the second line of the fence, but the Germans discovered them and started to shoot them with machine guns from the towers. The prisoners retreated back to the Latrines which were built from concrete and brick.

They went inside and were trying to decide what to do. They made another attempt to escape but they couldn't get through. There were 2 to 3 injuries and I think George the Sergeant, a handsome fellow, was shot in the back and killed. This meant that he had made it outside the wire. We in the barracks laid flat on the ground to avoid the machine gun fire which was coming from all directions. Then they brought the dogs inside so everyone locked themselves in their barracks. We had an official funeral for the Sergeant the next day and we buried him in the cemetery at Laterina. When we had the funeral, the English said, "We will remember you.", and they vowed to continue to attempt to escape. This is when they decided to make a tunnel."

The above event was also described in the book A green Hill far Away (Lane Publishers, 1998) by Private Fred Hirst

"It was supposed to be in Barracks number 12 which was near the barbed wire. I was becoming friendly with the Italians and I had some money with which I bought picks and shovels from them. The South Africans were very good in the tunnels because they had worked in the gold mines. Under a bed they cut the cement with a chisel and they took a whole piece of cement from the floor and they started to dig. They made a square room. In the meantime the Germans received a complaint from the Red Cross that we could not longer sleep on the floor and they started to bring bunk beds and they gave us mattresses with straw inside. They were burning the old straw and putting new straw inside. We burned all of the straw so that we could put all of the dirt in the mattresses. Only during the night did we go into the tunnel to dig. Later it was day and night. The Germans had put a guard with a dog to patrol between the two wires after the previous escape which was a distance of 5-6 feet. We were continuously digging and the Italians brought us more tools. I was working too. Constantine thought it was too dangerous and he didn't work in the tunnel. He wanted to go back home because he had a mother, sister and fiancée waiting for him. I started to dig over there and I think my number was 27. After number 60 or 70 the . The kitchen people had to have our numbers so that we could get double rations on the day that we worked so that we would have the strength to dig. In the meantime some prisoners were breaking up the beds and taking the wood to make walls to hold the sides of the tunnel up. When the tunnel was expanded there was not enough air and we had to make an air pump.

The Death March from Laterina to the Train Station

There was a bridge about 1/2 to 1 mile away over which a train would come to pick up prisoners from the camp to take them to Germany when they had empty cars. Most of those who went were Americans because they were trying to go first, while us older prisoners were trying to stay back.

Later on an airplane was coming at morning and night at the same exact time to bomb the bridge. We presumed this was to keep the Germans from moving the prisoners. More POWs were arriving each day. These were fresh soldiers, full of life, and not skinny and hungry like us. Once in the camp, however, they became disheartened when they saw what we were eating.

One day a group of 500 was selected and sent to Germany. Among them, was Pandoli Anacopolis from Boston and Maurice and Louie. The only ones left in our group were Constantine, a few Italians, the two other Greeks that we didn't see to often, and myself. It was June 19, 1944 when we started to hear artillery and later machine gun fire from the allied advance. We were happy and thought we would be free.

Around 7:00 PM the Germans started to group us and told us we would be moving, walking north. They gave us a little food and put us in a column in rows of 6. The German guards were assigned to alternate rows at opposite ends of each row. As we were walking, we were all very sad that we were being taken away from freedom. The Italian farmers and civilians in the streets were saluting us and removing their hats. They were telling us the war is over and that soon we would be free.

Next to me there was a French Lieutenant from the DeGaulle army. He told me he was going to step outside the column and pull down his pants so that he could relieve himself. I told him not to, that maybe the Germans would kill him. He stepped out of the column anyway and a guard shot him a few feet from us even though he was motioning to the guard to say he had pain in his stomach. They didn't believe him and they killed him. We had all become like animals, the Germans and prisoners alike. Many prisoners had been killed but we did not know how many.

Around 7:30 PM, just before dark, some of the prisoners with the most courage started to run from the column. The Germans shot them dead. They had no intention of simply inflicting injury. Finally it became dark. One of the Greeks, a short fellow, jumped behind a large wood pile and he was free. We never found out his fate. In the meantime it started to rain, a drizzle, and it was very dark. When we went through a Medieval town called Sienna, not far from Florence, I saw a narrow road intersecting the main road and I ran out of the column down this road.

I was dressed in civilian clothes covered with an American jacket and overalls and I was carrying a small suitcase. All of a sudden I heard a shot and light from a flashlight from far away fell on me. Two to three Germans started to chase me so I ran up to a door at one of the buildings. I saw one, two, three prisoners dead and mutilated by the door, so I gave up. They were shouting at me in German and I didn't understand. They pushed me up against the cement wall and they were positioning their machine guns to execute me.

In a second I was thinking I am dying and I will not see my mother again (*My father never did as she had been deported from Salonika and gassed at Auschwitz which he would find out after the war*). I held my hands up and began talking to them in Italian telling them I have an old mother that I have not seen in years. I told them that I never fought the Germans and was a prisoner of the Italians. I told them I had been a prisoner already for four years and pleaded with them to spare me so that I could see my old mother who was waiting for me back home.

They did not understand a word that I said. A soldier hit me in the head with the butt of his gun and as I was bleeding, I tried to hold the machine gun away from me and I repeated my plea in French. I was almost crying and they stopped for a moment as one of the Germans spoke French. He spoke to the other soldiers and they pulled me by my arms and they started to hit me with a gun in my knee and back, yelling "Raus, Raus". They pushed me back towards that long line of prisoners. Before we got there they had taken my glasses.

When we reached the column, the guards from the camp tried to kill me on the spot but some Australians and other prisoners got mad and grabbed me, pushing me deep inside the column. They mixed me inside so the guards could not get me. It was a miracle that I was alive. Things were turned around and I was sick and dizzy. Mechanically my legs were moving, but I felt as if I had no control over them as it started to rain harder. The Germans finally marched us into a soccer stadium where they were putting all of the prisoners. The guards started a few fires and we laid on the ground in the rain and slept.

In the morning I found Constantine and I told him what had happened. He said that it was too dangerous to escape and told me not to attempt it anymore. In the morning they started to march us back to the camp in Laterina. There was no artillery or machine gun fire to be heard. It was quiet as if nothing had happened. It was not long before they started to move us back to the camp and we were thirsty and hungry as they had not given us anything to eat or drink since the day before. Some prisoners on the outside of the column were grabbing wheat from the side of the road and eating it while marching.

Around the town of Sienna, the Germans had placed the bodies of prisoners who had tried to escape the night before and who were killed. There must have been over 50 of them, not only dead, but mutilated. They had cut the ears off of some and the hands of off others. I could never have imagined that a human being could be so barbaric as the German soldier. They had no reason to do this and these were not SS but regular Whermacht.

My life in Laterina after this was not the same. The rain did not stop for 10 days and we didn't hear one shot form the American side. We did not hear the airplane that was bombing the bridge each day. We were there 10 days living miserably with little food and everybody was in bad shape. We were waiting to be free, but the allies never came. One day the Germans took us and put us on a train. They put 80 of us in a boxcar and we couldn't even all sit. Inside was a big box for us to relieve ourselves in. It was horrible, worse than trains to carry cattle. We still had hope that the planes would bomb the railroad and we would be free. The planes were coming and the train was stopping under the bridges so the planes would not see them.

I was in the company of two British soldiers, George Atwell and Johnny Cox who decided they were going to escape. I asked how are we going to escape when they have barbed wire behind the doors. They decided that they would cut a piece of wood from the floor of the boxcar so that a man could slip out and lay between the rails when the train stopped and make his escape. It was dark and I had a little candle in my pocket that I had saved from my days roaming the Italian countryside. I gave them the candle and some of the prisoners had some tools or knives which they used to cut open a hole in the floor. At the next stop, a few people climbed out of this hole and escaped but we did not know if they made it or were run over by the train as it pulled away."