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[1 of 1] Item(s)

1. There were a great number of Australians in the British army in World War 2 (they were *enlisted* as if they were English, and were treated from an administrative point of view throughout the war as if they were English). For example, of the 26 officers in my battalion, two were Australian). My case was fairly common - I was working in West Africa and the only practical way to get into the war was to go to England and join the British army as if I were an Englishman, and that is what I did. I stayed in the British army from January 1940 to August 1946, six and a half years, and saw a deal of fighting.
2. The unit in which I fought was No 3 Commando, an elite battalion of the British army, and in fact the first commando to be formed and the first to go into action. I was a lieutenant in the commando throughout its campaign in Sicily and Italy (and later became a Captain and then a Major in a Field Company of the Royal Engineers); but all my "face to face" warfare was done in the commando. In the commando I was a lieutenant, a Section Commander (what would be called a Platoon Commander in the ordinary Divisional infantry), and as such I commanded a highly trained, very highly motivated "section" consisting of 2 sergeants and 29 men. The whole commando had about 430 men, divided into six troops (each troop consisting of 3 officers and 62 men) plus a headquarters of about 30 men. The ones who actually struggled with the enemy face to face (by either charging with the bayonet under covering fire provided by the commando's own heavy machine guns and 3 inch mortars, or by creeping up close enough to throw a grenade at him, or by shooting him from cover at close range) consisted of five of the six troops, that is 15 officers and 310 men. These actual light assault troops, the ones who struggled hand to hand with the enemy, did also in fact carry into battle some reasonably effective and reasonably heavy weapons (for example each troop of 62 men carried four Bren machine guns and four 2 inch mortars) but these relatively light weapons have nowhere near the shocking power against the enemy as the two heavy Vickers machine guns and two 3 inch mortars carried by our so called "heavy weapons" troop. The idea was to bring the Vickers guns and the 3 inch mortars up close, to within about two hundred metres of the enemy, and give sustained fire for only a short time (until the ammunition was all used up) from close range with these quite violent weapons to keep their heads down and to shock them *so that they would ^{submit} as soon* as they saw our bayonets. And in fact whenever we did manage to bring these heavy weapons up close we did prevail without serious casualties ourselves, although in such operations it is very common for the troop commander to be shot (usually shot dead) and then for one or both of the section commanders to be killed, so that the commando's final assault was often led by a sergeant or ^acorporal.
3. A very large problem in all commando operations *was* actually being able to carry sufficient ammunition for the heavy weapons troop (cartridges for continuous fire for the Vickers, and ten pound bombs for the 3 inch mortars) so that you *could* be absolutely certain of carrying the enemy position (and almost all commando operations do in fact capture their objective) - it is not of course nearly so easy to either hold the position or to get away safely afterwards. So in order to get the heavy weapons ammunition to the place near the enemy from which the heavy weapons troop *could* fire effectively, every assault soldier from the rifle sections carried either two 10 pound 3 inch mortar bombs slung on a piece of cord around his neck, or half a box of Vickers ammunition, or a roll of wire netting to help him over the beach defense barbed wire - all this in addition to being fully loaded with his own personal weapons and ammunition - so he lumbered out of the assault boats and up the beach pretty ponderously.
4. The usual sort of objective that commandos *were* given (objectives far behind the enemy lines) meant that having assaulted the beach heavily laden like that you had to break through the barbed wire and go on as quickly as possible. The beach defenses are not necessarily attacked - if good aerial photographs allow you to run up quickly between two machine gun posts in reasonably dead ground and in darkness, you ignore them and go straight on inland if you can. The usual objective *was* about three to six kilometres inland, and *was* either a battery of enemy guns sited to fire on our army landing on a beach, or a bridge or a road junction. A battery of guns is easy, because you capture and destroy it and then run away safely; but a bridge or road junction usually has to be held until the main body of our army can break through to it, and ^acommando is not heavily enough armed to hold a position, and takes terrible casualties if it tries to do so.
5. I shall now tell you about one typical commando operation in detail, the assault on what was called George Beach in Sicily, plus the final act in that attack which was the extremely bloody assault on the Malati Bridge over the Leonardo River. Because of the fame of this assault the Malati Bridge (Punta dei Malati) was renamed No 3 Commando Bridge.

GEORGE BEACH AND MALATI BRIDGE

(a) George Beach:- On D-day for the invasion of Sicily (10 July 1943) the allied armies attacked George Beach, from the sea. The map shows George beach at the south west part of Sicily and nearby the port of Syracuse (the immediate tactical objective); and further north east the very large airfield at the city of Catania (this airfield was the strategic objective for the Sicily invasion, as its capture would prevent the Germans from re enforcing their army in Sicily). In fact that airfield, practically at the edge of the sea, was a sitting target for our navy, and the two naval monitors with their 18 inch guns standing well out to sea had already damaged it badly, and when I first got as far as the airfield about ten days after the George beach landing it was already a shambles of smashed up equipment from the naval shelling.

We, the assaulting troops for the George beach landing, had come from the Gulf of Ataka at the southern end of the Suez canal where we had been rehearsing the attack. We were in a very large convoy of merchant and navy and landing ships of all sorts, and our commando mother ship was the beautiful little cross channel steamer Prince Albert, with about a dozen small "landing craft infantry, or LCI's" slung from davits all along her sides. In the attack on George beach the whole commando was involved, the whole 430 men in six troops of 62 men each plus the headquarters group. But that part of the operation with which I personally was involved was the job of destroying a battery of about ten guns and 400 men, and for that we deployed 248 men and 14 officers in 3 attack troops (for the bayonet charge) plus one support troop with 2 Vickers guns and 2 three inch mortars to first demoralise the enemy.

Each little LCI^{boat} carries one commando section of 29 men exactly, so my whole command was with me in my boat, which is a very comforting way to be (knowing you can help yourself out of trouble if you have to). For example, in Italy a long time later my own little group had been landed onto a quite dangerous beach in full view of the enemy and I had been told to stay there, but instead charged off the beach and captured the local railway station from which the enemy fire was coming, to the rage of my immediate superior who threatened me there and then with court martial until my sergeant pointed out that our disobedience of orders had taken us closer to the enemy so we could not be charged with anything. So here, creeping gently in towards George beach in my own little craft, with a warming glass of rum inside me (the last thing you are given as you sit in the assault boats at the ship's side) I felt very much at ease. The waxing moon was still well up in a clear sky, three days short of a full moon, so there would still be light almost until dawn took over, while yet allowing plenty of dimness in which to hide from enemy fire. About two miles further in we located the tiny red beacon bouy flashing morse code "G's", from which a compass bearing to our own landing spot was known (one of our submarines had positioned the bouy earlier). We could also just pick out a known headland, so knew we were on the right track. The plan was to creep in very slowly and tempt the badly trained Italian beach defenders into firing too early and so giving away their gun positions. They did fire early, but we had thoughtfully placed three machine guns with full magazines on the open deck of each boat, guns which could be abandoned when empty as we did not have to take them ashore with us. As we had seven boats in this group, each with three machine guns and no reason to husband our ammunition, 21 guns immediately plastered the unhappy defenders, who of course stopped firing and hid^{behind their parapets}, while we put all boats to full speed ahead and landed with very little trouble.

We paid no more attention to the seven enemy machine gun posts, but threw our wire netting rolls over the beach barbed wire and ran inland between two of the enemy posts. Then we formed into a long column of men two soldiers wide and set off on the first compass bearing towards our first check point where we knew from the aerial photos that we had to turn onto a different compass bearing to avoid an enemy position; and so went on the five miles towards our objective, the German and Italian battery. We were nearly an hour late, as we had wasted a lot of time creeping in to the beach, and the Colonel had promised the Divisional general (General Dempsey) that the guns would be silenced before the Division landed at first light. So we pressed on as fast as we could, the Colonel leading as usual, and all of us terribly loaded down with extra mortar bombs and extra Vickers ammunition.

We had left the medical officer and his six orderlies on the beach. In the commando the medical people are armed; the Italian militia in the seven machine gun posts surrendered to him (the medical officer himself carried a tommy gun and three very large water bottles - the gun for the enemy and the water for our own wounded).

As we came up to our final check point, a dry water course 200 metres in front of the barbed wire defences of the battery, the heavy guns in the battery started firing on our divisional infantry landing on the beach (and in fact the ^{battery} got off twenty rounds to our great distress before our first mortar bombs silenced the gunners, forcing them to stop firing, and go to their own defensive positions against our attack on them). The plan was for our heavy weapons troop to set up their two machine guns to fire on fixed lines on a compass bearing from the base of a tree we could find from the aerial photos, but in the event there were no clouds in the sky and plenty of light to see to aim at definite targets in the battery. In our double column of men we filed past the known tree and each man dropped off his two mortar bombs or half case of Vickers ammunition with loud sighs of relief as they were extremely heavy and we had carried them a long way. The attacking troops then deployed to their known start line positions (known from the aerial photos).

Our two 3 inch mortars were to fire star shells for two minutes, then high explosive for two minutes, then smoke for two minutes, and continue for twenty minutes, while the two Vickers machine guns hammered away at tactically important points in the defensive perimeter which we had worked out from the photos. Meanwhile the three assaulting troop formations had crept up close to the wire at tactical weak points, and a special small group had captured the huts and stores and office. When the colonel was satisfied that the enemy was so demoralised that the bayonet charge ought to carry the position at the first shock, he gave the order to charge. In fact the first charge got held up in confused fighting without the battery being properly subdued, so my section, which was the colonel's final reserve had to complete the job with one final charge. What happened was that my little force of 29 men were crouched out of sight behind a low stone wall, lined up just in front of the eastern barbed wire, with the main charge coming in from the north. As soon as I gave the order to fix bayonets my men were like racehorses straining to start, and it was very difficult to hold them back; so much so that I twice called out ^{asking} the colonel to let us go. He called back that I had to hold them in check as this was his final throw and the timing had to be perfect (in fact of course I well knew that if this final charge did not totally overwhelm the enemy we would be trapped in confused fighting five miles behind the enemy lines and with no reserves of ammunition, no possibility of help, and a vastly superior enemy). Finally he did shout out to me "go, go, go" and we jumped over the wall, then over the barbed wire which had been erected in a totally incompetent manner, and my long line of 29 men with fixed bayonets rushed at our enemy. The colonel had judged the moment accurately, because as soon as they saw the bayonets ^{most of them} lay down on the ground and put their hands over their faces and allowed themselves to be captured. The battle was quickly over, and except for enemy soldiers lying on the ground all I could find was one German officer scrambling away at the base of a stone wall - he was just out of range of my tommy gun, so I let him go.

Our radio had stopped working, and the army general, ^(General Montgomery) was not getting the message that the attack on the battery had succeeded (though he could of course see that no more shells were landing on the beach). So I was sent post haste back to the beach to carry the message personally, with two of our scouts to run interference for me (leaving my section in charge of the senior sergeant to come back with the rest of the commando later). I got back through the enemy lines easily (or so it seemed to me, though I do not know what difficulties the two scouts overcame in getting me back so quickly - all I did was concentrate on pressing on as fast as possible, weighed down with a tommy gun and a hundred rounds of ammunition and two hand grenades and my haversack - while a scout ran slightly ahead and about five yards out on either side). At a scout's hand signal I would stop, or run across a road, or go to one side to avoid an enemy position, or crouch down if an enemy seemed to be in danger of seeing me. In a very short time we were through the enemy and back in front of the beach; we ran straight through the beach minefield, not knowing it was there, and I delivered my message to the senior officer on the beach, only to have him say the radio had just that minute got the same message through and I could relax.

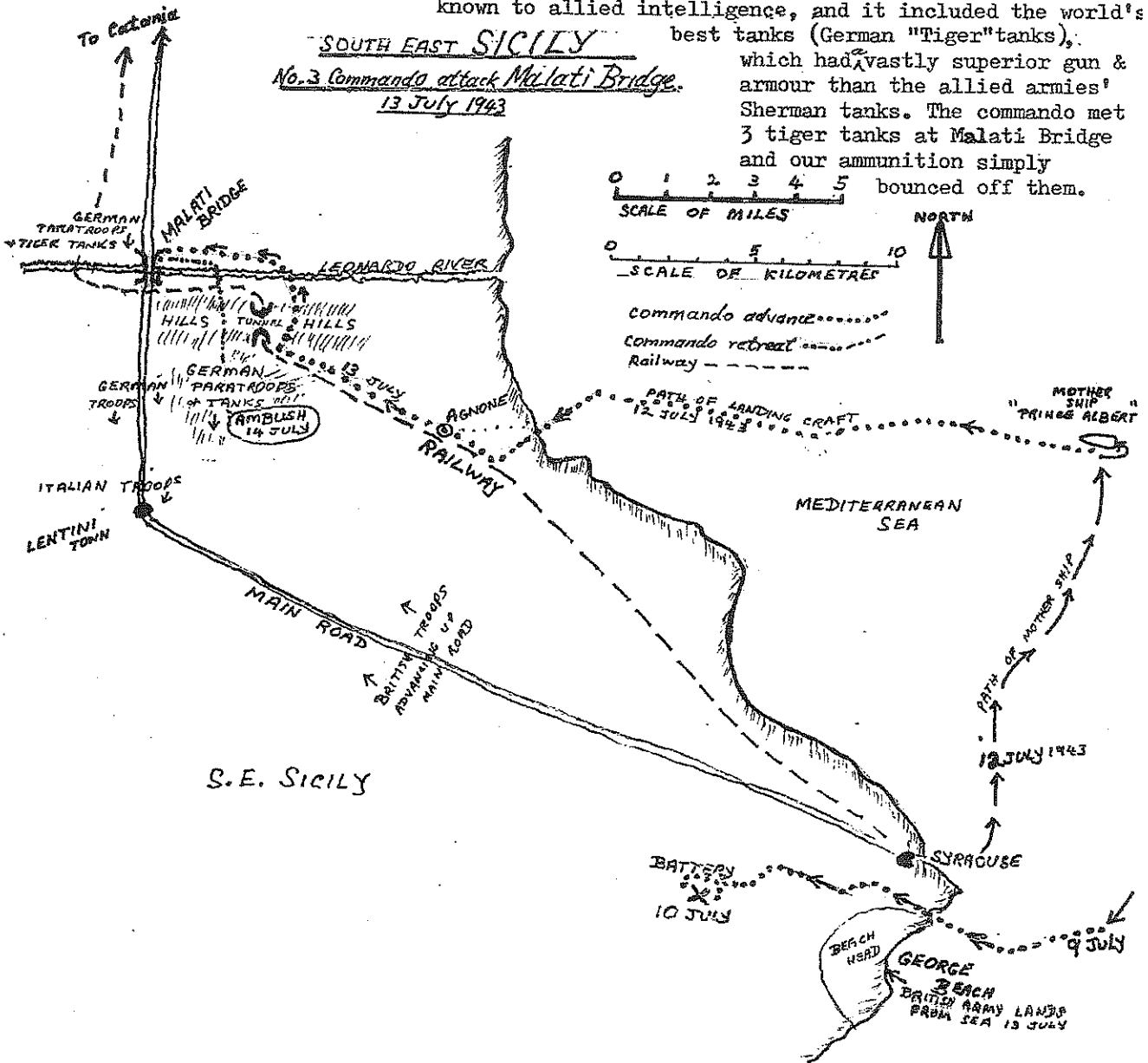
The main body of the commando got back through the enemy lines without difficulty two or three hours later, and then did two small specialist attacks where small parties of divisional infantry were held up. Later that day, when the beach head seemed secure, and the division was advancing north east towards Syracuse, the commando was sent ten miles south west into the hills to take the first shock in case enemy tanks staged a counter attack on our very weak left flank. We were then recalled into the beach head to get briefed before the worst battle of the war as far as No 3 Commando was concerned. That battle was the "Battle for the Malati Bridge" - which I shall try and describe in detail now.

(b) The Battle of Malati Bridge:-

Before I go on I should explain that we were expendable troops (not part of the main battle plan, which went on at its own pace without considering whatever we were doing). The ordinary infantry were very carefully husbanded by their own Divisional generals, and never allowed to attack until every possible tank and gun was lined up to protect them; but the commando could be put in behind the enemy lines with no support fire at all, to do what we could with what we could carry. We were never however asked to do the impossible, and the army commander himself (General Montgomery, for whom we had enormous respect as the army's foremost tactician) took a personal interest before any really desperate venture, to assure himself that what was asked was within our power. We trusted Montgomery, and with reason, because the only times an operation under him went badly wrong was the Malati Bridge where the intelligence about enemy forces was wildly wrong, and the much later Battle of Termoli where the army staff and not the general made all the arrangements "to surprise the old man". But Termoli has nothing to do with this present battle, so let us get back to the preparations for the Malati Bridge.

In the evening of July 12th our colonel was briefed by General Dempsey on the wharf at Syracuse for a hastily arranged attack on the Malati Bridge ten miles behind the enemy lines and five miles inland from the sea. The ^{British} army was moving into position to attack the little town of Lentini (just north east of Syracuse) and the Malati Bridge was five miles further on where the main road north to Catania crossed the smallish Leonardo River. (See the map). But a much larger German force was facing them than was known to allied intelligence, and it included the world's

best tanks (German "Tiger" tanks), which had a vastly superior gun & armour than the allied armies' Sherman tanks. The commando met 3 tiger tanks at Malati Bridge and our ammunition simply bounced off them.



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The commando had (on the afternoon of 11 July 1943) been pulled back into the beach head from the hills on the left flank (as no serious enemy attack had developed from that direction). We had now been reduced to 350 all ranks, but all the sub sections were still at good fighting strength. We were tired after two days and two nights without sleep, and did now manage to get some sleep (in an orchard of fig trees alongside a winery that made a rather unpleasant sweet Italian white wine). No matter how bad the wine was it was better than stale lukewarm water from a water bottle, and much to be preferred to the mixed tea and milk powder in our ration packs. Someone had rolled a barrel of the wine out under one of the fig trees, but no one did more than just sample it as it was really a very bad wine. There was an enemy sniper who gave us some trouble, and some bombing by fighter bombers, but it was restful after our exertions of the past days and nights.

The next day (12 July) we packed up and got back on board our Mother ship, the Belgian cross channel ship Prince Albert, to prepare for the next attack. We had been moving since 3 am after a few hours sleep in the orchard, and did not welcome having another operation scheduled for 9.30 that night. As we climbed aboard our ship enemy fighter bombers were attacking the merchant ships being unloaded for transfer ^{of cargo} by lighters to George Beach. One of the enemy aircraft dropped a line of three small bombs, the last of which just clipped the bow of a large merchantman next out from our Mother ship. This merchantman was full of 4 gallon tins of petrol being unloaded by a working party, and these particular tins were of a brand notorious in the army for being too thin walled and constantly leaking - indeed it was surprising the army persevered with them, because you could order enough tins to refill your boat or vehicle and then find only enough petrol to partly fill it, which was discouraging in operations against the enemy. In this case a small flame flickered for a moment up on the bow and then the whole petrol filled ship erupted in a fire ball, killing everyone in it....even several hundred metres away on the Prince Albert I was slightly scorched.

We settled down on the Mother ship, refilled rifle and bren gun magazines and water bottles, got new hand grenades and new belts of cartridges, and sorted through the small emergency ration packs we were supposed to take. In the event I did not put any food at all into my haversack (the commando did not carry packs, but only small haversacks, into battle) - I was already too heavily laden and I knew we were not going to be in a fit state to eat for a long time to come (a soldier in battle is usually too mentally upset to eat anything at all).

We were to land from the sea on the beach near Agnone (about *twenty miles* north^{west} of Syracuse), just behind the enemy lines; go about six miles inland parallel to and behind the enemy lines, and capture the quite large Malati Bridge (Punta dei Malati) which carries the main road north to Catania over the not very impressive Leonardo River. We were asked to hold the bridge for some hours (until 8 am the next morning when the advancing army would rescue us). There were supposed to be only Italian militia guarding the bridge, which we expected to capture easily, though we knew that holding it against a determined counter attack would be nearly impossible (but then we did not foresee anyone wanting to make a determined counter attack). The Italians in Sicily were mostly very fed up with the war by this time, and easily talked into surrender; though admittedly the Italian corps defending the town of Lentini barring the British army advance on the main road were still fighting with determination our attacking brigade of 50 Division.

We had only eight landing craft (each carrying 30 men) available now on the Prince Albert, so the commando had to go ashore in two flights. My boat was in the first flight of 240 men, and the troop I was in was to lead the advance to the bridge. My party got into the boats at 9.30 pm and set off in the wake of a destroyer (HMS Tetcott) which was to shell the coast defense battery that overlooked our landing beach. The four or five pillboxes on the beach did not worry us too much as we knew no coast defense militia would care much for looking boldly over the sights of a machine gun at the sort of fire power our properly trained machine gunners would be pouring through the pillbox loopholes.

The beach seemed to stretch for miles away to the right, bright in the moonlight, and it was surprisingly narrow, with thick barbed wire lining the inland edge of it about fifty metres in from the sea. We had bangalore torpedoes with us to blow gaps in the wire (a bangalore torpedo is a long length of 2" iron pipe full of explosive, with a quick acting trigger to set it off. One man can carry it, and you push it through the wire and 'lo presto' an instant path. It was designed in India a hundred years ago and is still the best thing available for breaching barbed wire).

The boats came slowly in in the bright moonlight, tempting the enemy to open fire; and when as usual they did (quite harmlessly against the short piece of armour plate on our bows, and equally harmlessly against the light steel of the little bit of deck beneath which we crouched at each side, where because of the angle the bullets glanced off) three spare light machine guns (Lewis guns of World War I vintage) lying with full magazines on each of our eight boats opened up firing straight into the pillbox loop-holes from our expert marksmen. The four slow firing Italian machine guns were no match for our twenty four properly designed Lewis guns, so the enemy fire almost stopped except for one gun which seemed to be firing blind ahead of our men into the sand as we jumped ashore (if you can use a word like jumping when you are as heavily laden as each of us was - for example I was as usual carrying one end of a roll of wire netting to throw over the barbed wire, as I had to be the first out of my boat).

The troop I was in (4 troop) had to lead the advance; and after a few moments confusion with the whole commando held up under the wire, one of my men pointed out a narrow gap just to our left alongside a pillbox below a bit of cliff. I ran across to the Colonel and told him there was a gap in the wire and he ^{said} quite testily not to waste time but to get through it - which no doubt I should have done at once. I rushed through the gap with my section right behind me, and with the little Italian "red devil" grenades thrown from the cliff above bursting harmlessly all around.

As another aside, it should be pointed out that the Italian army had the most useless weapons of any army in the war. The red devil grenade (about as big as an egg and apparently made of plastic, was as near useless as ^{unless he actually hit you} made no difference), their officers' pistol was a toy for a woman's handbag, their one man tank could be put out of action by a machine gun fired at the side at point blank range, and their machine gun fired ridiculously slowly. I feel sure that their soldiers' recognition of the foolishness of much of their weaponry was a factor in their unwillingness to resist determined attacks.

Having run unscathed through the gap in the wire, I was just about to run around behind the pillbox to deal with the enemy there, when my sergeant grabbed my shirt from the back, pulled me to a halt, ^{and} threw one of our extremely effective "36" grenades ^{around} behind the pillbox, and at the very satisfactory explosion he pointed to one German and one Italian soldier, both dead, and said smugly "that's the way we do it in the commando, sir". He was a fine young soldier, he saved my life; young men taught to kill each other. Crazy.

Again I have to digress to explain that all reports of hand to hand fighting are mutually contradictory. In such desperate ventures every soldier lives in his own little desperate world. What he reports about what he sees and does is never the same, or even remotely like, what other participants in the same action say about it. The battalion war diary is written up after each battle, and purports to be a factual account; but it is made up of the combined written memories of all officers and senior NCO's, and all their accounts differ. In the case of the Battle for Malati Bridge you would think we were all talking about different battles, and that goes for all war diaries. In this case our Second in Command is convinced that he found the ^{gap} and was first through it (perhaps because grenades continued to rain down into the gap from the cliff above while the whole commando passed through). Everyone who ran through that lethal gap, with a machine gun firing straight down at us from the cliff, and grenades coming down as if someone was pouring them out of a box, as may ^{in the wire} have been the case, may well think they were first through. But my remembrance is that I was first.

We ran on into the night, following a track which my compass said was leading in the correct direction up to a railway line about a mile ahead that was our first check point where we would have to turn right and follow the railway past Agnone station and to a place several miles ahead where the railway went into a tunnel. In fact I did not care much about absolutely accurate route finding - my section was simply clearing the way, and the main body of the commando would follow at a more deliberate pace sticking rigidly to the planned route. In any case, the track I was on was indeed the right one, and in a very short time we were climbing onto the rail track, which was built up on a distinct embankment, with lower ground on each side. There was a good deal of machine gun fire in the darkness on both sides, and a fearful racket from the beach behind; but I am a bad senior officer and a good junior officer because I have ^{the} ability to close my tormented mind completely to the meaning of such extraneous matters and press on doggedly along the planned way. My mind, as is the case with almost all soldiers, was pushed far beyond its capacity to accept the signals of danger and death all about, and having shut everything out except the bare necessities, left me childishly cheerful as

I recognised our first check point and stepped up onto the railway embankment.

Very soon the whole of this part of the commando was present, and after a bit of milling about, with my section suddenly being embarrassed by seeing the 2nd in Command striding rapidly away along the railway toward the north west, whereas we should have been doing advance guard, we ran ahead and settled down to march as quickly as possible along the railway line. We had gone only about half a mile, stepping out smartly with a sub section walking on the sleeper projecting from each side of the rails, and even though well above the surrounding country we were not really worried about enemy attack; but to our enormous surprise paratroops were suddenly dropping fast down out of the moonlit sky at each side of the track. To our right, the north east, they were British paratroops far out of position from their target at Primasole Bridge fifteen miles north (where the main body of their party was to attack that bridge this same night). But to our left, and only a hundred metres or so distant, the paratroops were German, flown in that night direct from France to be dropped into their own front line to help hold their crumbling front against the strong British 50 Division attack.

We had too close a deadline at the bridge to make it sensible for us to engage in a firefight with Germans at this stage, and as they were coming down with their own wheeled containers of ammunition on pushcarts while we had only what we could carry, we paid no attention to either side but kept on along the railway while the Germans disappeared into the darkness on one side and the British came up and checked with the Colonel on the other side and my section ploughed straight on. These same German paratroops ambushed me and the surviving nine of my men the next day, and captured me and seven men while killing one sergeant and one man - if I had known the appalling trauma the next day was to bring, I would have ^{been} a lot more militant toward those German paratroops. The small British ^{paratroops} force of about twenty men turned due north and marched away toward Primasole; but whether they ever made it I do not know.

(Meanwhile back at the beach, ten of our men and a subaltern had the really fearsome job of holding the tiny beach head while our eight landing craft went back to the ~~ship~~ and fetched the rest of the commando. The Germans and Italians all around kept up a desultory fire on them, but made no determined attack - doubtless because of the bad light and the difficulty of knowing exactly what was going on - and of course our defence was pure bluff and could not have stood against a full scale attack. But much of what the commando did was based on bluff, and we usually got away with it; as we did here. The rest of the unit finally landed against fairly desperate ^{and losing the landing craft} odds with the enemy waiting for them, but got ashore and pressed on inland after us, about two hours behind us, and got to the bridge when we were being very hard pushed by a German counter attack).

To get back to my men pressing on along the railway; within about half a mile we came to Agnone railway station, which I had expected that we would have to attack, but to my great surprise No 3 Troop had made a more direct approach and already captured it by going along a different track from the beach. Their Troop commander was sitting blinded against a wall (an Italian grenade had hit him in the eye, and his Troop Sergeant Major was dead, but we ^{now} held the station and so could get straight on toward the bridge). We still had 150 men in action, and continued steadily on to where the railway line went into a tunnel and where we had to climb over the hills ahead (not wanting to be sitting ducks in a tunnel - especially as the enemy now knew we were coming). The climb over the hills and through the very broken ground on the other side, and then fording the Leonardo River was difficult even for commandos in the darkness, but on the other side of the river there was a track that led straight to the bridge - to the north end of the bridge which we were to attack as we knew the enemy would surely be waiting at the obvious south end where we were coming up from.

In the event there were only a few ^{Italian} militia at the north end, which ^{the commando} simply over ran without even thinking about it, killing two of them and capturing quite a little group, including a fairly senior officer. As I was the leading section at that moment I continued on and ran right across to the other end of the bridge and installed my men in the pillbox at that end (a pillbox actually built into the bridge parapet and its bottom resting on the river bed down on the east side of the bridge). Some of my men had got separated, but I still had twelve of them, including both sergeants (the two sergeants were fabulously good soldiers and excellently trained, as well as being worthy people in themselves and self motivated to destroy the Hitler nonsense for the sake of their families).

Again I should digress to point out that commando soldiers are almost all exceedingly;

quiet and self contained men, a trained policeman about 25 years old being the typical sort of person. They were the sort who would walk away from a pub brawl rather than get mixed up in it, and indeed I never ever saw a drunken commando. They were however good at all forms of combat, armed and unarmed (this one small unit, for example, won boxing championships in five different weight classes against the 15,000 strong Gibraltar garrison). All the officers and men were well able to look after themselves in almost any situation, and the extraordinary feats of the many little groups of men driven off the bridge and into the hills during the next two days would take a book in itself. As one small example, ten officers were taken prisoner at various times during this action, and all except one managed to escape and return to the battalion.

But back to the bridge: I had occupied the pillbox, and put two men in sniping positions nestled into the inner side of the south bank of the river, and two more in the bed of the river, as well as a bren gunner lying on the parapet of the bridge. My senior sergeant quickly re arranged some of the positions, as the bren gunner was ridiculously exposed (none of our people were ever backward in criticizing or altering arrangements, and they all constantly thought for themselves, which takes a lot of weight off a junior officer's shoulders as bad orders are quickly altered - and all officers give bad orders nearly as often as they give good ones.)

I was reasonably confident about my situation, even though I could see occasional quick movement of enemy soldiers (obviously German soldiers and probably paratroops) very close indeed in front and to the right. I scrambled back across the shallow fordable river (the river was abnormally low after a long stretch of dry weather) and found the 2nd in Command and told him my situation and that there seemed to be a good few Germans on the other side. He was a highly trained professional soldier, and took a much more serious view of the matter than a relatively untrained man like me, and sent me back quickly to expect an immediate counter attack. My twelve men were the only ones at the south end of the bridge - the rest of the unit was busily digging in around the other end and finding it very hard going in the abnormally dry ground. My little group soon realised that the 2nd in Command was indeed correct, there were many enemy soldiers - at least a hundred - dug into the outside south end of the bridge, no doubt surprised to have us come at them from the wrong direction (and very lucky for us we made the right decision this time about where to attack from).

There were in fact some enemy within five metres of us, just over the bank, and an awful lot more dug into the same bank but across the roadway from me. We could also hear enemy tanks clattering up the road from the direction of Lentini (i.e. from the south) towards us, and except for piat mortars which we carried in the rifle sections we were unarmed against tanks. For the piat you have to be at the side of the tank and within ten paces of it, so it is not a very encouraging weapon to have to rely on.

About this time a lorry came up the road in the darkness from the direction of Lentini, and for some reason the German paratroopers let it come on. My bren gunner could have destroyed it, but there seemed no purpose in giving his position away; so it trundled past me and almost to the north end of the bridge before one of our people hit it with a piat bomb and the whole works exploded, and live shells and burning explosives of all sorts showered the area for perhaps ten minutes afterwards, though it seemed like half an hour. Just then the second wave of the commando reached the bridge and reported to the Colonel about 100 metres down the road from the north end of the bridge. At that same moment an enemy Tiger tank arrived up the road from the Lentini direction and started machine gunning the general area and firing at the pillboxes with its big gun. German soldiers could also occasionally be seen moving a few yards and then going to ground, but all the time steadily encircling us. I saw one little group of four men carrying between them a heavy machine gun get up from only twenty yards away on my right, dash five yards and then hide, then get up again and again go into cover, but could not get a shot at them. They were obviously going into a flank attack manoeuvre (to give covering fire from far out on their left flank while their main body ^{would} charge across the river) but they got into dead ground from my point of view before I could do more than register their presence and intentions. Indeed even today, after 36 years, I still often wake at night seeing those machine gunners getting into position, and knowing 100 enemy paratroops are waiting for the gunners' signal only ten or so yards away across the other side of the south bank of the river...the same side of the river I was on, and our main force far away on the other bank.

The Colonel sent the newly arrived 2nd flight to attack a small house standing alone

on the north side of the river about a hundred yards away on my left (the east), a house the enemy seemed intent on occupying and which would have cut off our possible retreat into the hills. Fire from the tank killed one ^{of our} officers and six of our men, but they did occupy the area and so secured our left flank. The tank then started to smash up each of the pillboxes in turn with its big gun, leaving my pillbox alone presumably because they thought none of us would be silly enough to be so close. A lot of our men were being killed and wounded, and our only heavy machine gun had been destroyed by the tank, and the crew killed.

It was just coming up to eight o'clock, when the army was supposed to be rescuing us by charging up the road from Lentini, which according to the plan should long since have fallen. It was now daylight, and the commando was in a totally untenable position. We had pulled the explosives wires out from the demolition charges in the bridge abutments and driven off the Italians who alone presumably knew about the demolition (the German paratroops had just come straight from France and jumped to their enemy into an ongoing battle so would not know or care about any proposed demolition). There were now three Tiger tanks in sight. We obviously had to withdraw if we could - a group of mortar bombs fell on the bridge every half minute or so, ^{and} the tanks kept up constant machine gun and heavy gun fire; the enemy was softening us up, trying to shock us so that we would surrender at the attack we knew was coming. I did not know it at the time, but the Colonel sent 3 Troop to make a feint attack into the bed of the river while his runners tried to contact all sections to tell them to withdraw by bounds to the north east, starting at an easily located cactus hedge about a hundred yards north east of the bridge.

No message reached me, totally exposed on the far (south) side of the river. My senior sergeant suggested that the lack of action from ^{our party} must mean the commando was withdrawing in accordance with well established principles (lightly armed assault troops can not hold a position against determined assault by professional soldiers). He could also see that the storm of fire from all weapons of the enemy meant an assault by infantry was coming. I told the men that we would cross the river bed, climb the far bank (the north bank) then run straight up the road into the smoke of the bursting mortar bombs (to give us cover from sight of the tank gunners who could kill us all with one aimed burst). As we ran into the smoke a bomb picked up the sergeant and threw him forward only slightly wounded into the covering smoke and he got up and ran on to safety. I fell onto the road but full in view of the tank which sent a burst of machine gun fire which tore my haversack to pieces as I lay face down on the road but left me unhurt. In total desperation I wriggled out of my haversack (regretting the razor and one precious razor blade which in Sicily would be nearly irreplaceable - I suppose in a similar situation a woman soldier would regret her lipstick - and two days later I was being spoken to by the army commander General Montgomery after my escape from the German paratroops and was much embarrassed by my unshaven condition). As soon as more mortar bombs fell and the smoke and dust from them rolled over me I got up and ran on, finding the 2nd in Command on the road about a hundred yards further on directing the retreat. He pointed out where my men were in the line that was "retiring by bounds" in the classic evolution (one lot firing while alternate groups ran back and then they in turn give covering fire).

I was confused and a little concussed, but was able to go along quite happily as the two sergeants did their job in the "retiring by bounds" evolution. We got back rather less than one kilometre north east of the bridge and turned back down (south) into the river bed as the country became wooded and with contours unsuitable for organised withdrawal. We had done the job we were sent to do, the deadline for the army's arrival had passed, so could now honourably take to the hills in small groups and find our own way back through the enemy and into the British lines. The Colonel gave each group as it filed past him a most likely compass course back (groups consisting of the remains of 30 man sections and ad hoc groups where a Troop had been very badly knocked about). The group I finally took back consisted of me, my two sergeants, and nine men. So as not to bunch into easily negotiated paths we all diverged a bit at once, and my route chanced to be straight up over a bare rocky hillside (in full view of the enemy for the first hundred metres).

My group was I think one of the first away, and we spread out and made a dash for it for that bad first hundred metres, and all steeply uphill. You can not of course outrun gunfire, which comes at you at about half a kilometre a second (a target half a kilometre away is hit one second after you press the trigger), but you can confuse the enemy's aim by dodging a little and of course you can get out of sight more quickly if you run fast.

In fact the only fire was from the big guns of the three Tiger tanks; which was not very clever of them because they could have killed us all with properly aimed machine gun fire - perhaps they could not elevate the machine guns enough. Three shells would burst just in front of us, then another three as we dodged to one side or the other. They fired like this for perhaps twelve rounds in all, until we were over the ridge; and killed one man who was hit by a shell landing right on him. The rest of us were not even scratched by a shell splinter. I admit however that I did think my last hour had come, as the shells were very close indeed. There were a lot of small boulders on the ground, and it could be that the shells were bursting so far down among the rocks that the shell splinters could not spread. Anyway we got over the hill and into cover in no time at all it seemed, and after a short rest set out on our trek home.

The correct (classic) way to get through enemy lines is to wait for darkness, then get into single file, and each man holding onto the one in front march as silently as possible ^{through the enemy} on the required compass bearing; with many pauses to listen and re assess the situation. All soldiers know this, and indeed a large party of German paratroops did in fact pass under the Malati Bridge to safety in this way the following night with a British sentry on the bridge above them (we learnt this when we captured a patrol ^{of these same men} after a severe battle at Termoli some months later). But in this case the front was so close that we were already among the enemy, and an Italian army corps was manning the hills right along our right flank (we were full in view of them if we stood up) and we already knew that German paratroops and some battalions of the German Hermann Goering Division were all around in the hills to our front and to our left. There seemed no safety anywhere, and we had only one option it seemed to me, and that was to react to events and try to keep going generally south if we could. That was in fact the wrong decision, and others who went to ground fared better than my group did. But both my sergeants concurred in what I was trying to do, and it is of course easy to be wise after the event. Some groups fared very badly and were killed, but a surprising number did in fact get back safely, all after the most fearful exertions and ambushes. And of course the enemy were not all that happy either, knowing that a battalion of elite British troops was milling about behind their lines and within their defensive perimeters.

There was an Italian army corps occupying the ridge on our right (west) after we came south over the hill on our way home. The broad treeless valley we were in had plenty of long grass but no cover at all if we stood up, and the Italians were only three or four hundred metres away on our right, overlooking us. We therefore went on by slow crawling, continually stopping and searching the ground twenty yards ahead, examining every blade of grass with the field glasses. The Italians sent one of their silly light tanks down after us, but the man in the tank was a lot more frightened of us than we were of him, it seemed; and after making a big circle well out from the machine gun we were carrying (while we stayed well out of sight in the long grass) he reckoned he had done his duty and went away.

We crawled slowly on down the broad gentle valley, until at last we reached an orange orchard and thought we could relax. But a group of twenty six Italians were already there. Our approach was so quiet that we took them completely by surprise and captured the lot without firing a shot. We herded them into a circle and sat around them on the ground and discussed what we could possibly do with them. I asked each man in turn what he thought, all the way round the circle of nine soldiers, each with a rifle or machine gun on his knee; and each worrying about the appalling difficulty we had got ourselves into with all these prisoners. These nine were all God fearing young men of good education, and the senior sergeant was a devout Roman Catholic. No doubt many of the Italians could understand English - I don't know what they must have thought as the clear consensus to shoot them all emerged. I immediately vetoed it (not on the grounds of common humanity, though I do not think we could have done it in any case) but because we were trapped behind the enemy lines and may well ourselves face death or capture within the hour, so it behoved us not to do anything which we would have to answer for in front of enraged enemy soldiers. In the event we simply took their weapons away, dropped the key parts of them down a well, and told them to vanish as far as possible out of our sight - which they did very thankfully; and we went on south, now going slightly uphill.

Our position was now totally untenable - a whole Italian army corps was all along on our right (west), the little township of Agnone (full of Italian soldiers which we had stormed through the previous night) was not far away on our left, Italians were obviously occupying our valley because we had just caught a mob of them, and we were very well aware of the German paratroops who had jumped into their front line just ahead of us *last night*.

Our army intelligence knew about the Italian army corps and the Italian militia and had briefed the Colonel about them, but it later turned out that in this tiny stretch of country ten miles long and say five miles wide that we were hopefully trying to crawl through in broad daylight, there were in addition the following German soldiers :-

- 1st Parachute Regiment.
- 3 battalions of the Panzer Grenadier Regiment Koerner.
- Tanks and self propelled guns of the Hermann Goering Division.
- The No 904 Fortress Battalion.

We should of course have simply stopped wherever we possibly could and hidden in the grass (we couldn't get onto the hilltops because they were all occupied by the enemy). But we didn't stop, and for that I must take the blame. I was very tired, almost out on my feet.

At our going on again, the second sergeant gently detached the field glasses from around my neck and suggested that he do leading scout for a mile or so, and I was very happy to see him do it. We kept on up a rocky slope, down which the survivors of our party would crawl in enemy hands the following night closely pursued by our own soldiers of our 50 Division.

We came into another orchard, a poor thing of only a few trees, and stood up again going in single file, with the sergeant leading with the field glasses. An appalling burst of point blank rapid fire from obviously German weapons, and we went to ground where we stood. I fell into a bit of a furrow, and rolled over onto my back trying to get my tommy gun into action with the strap caught in some way on my shoulder. My runner had his leg shattered by a burst of machine gun bullets and was moaning in shock for me to help him, though there was nothing at all I could do. The sergeant with the field glasses was dead, shot straight through the chest. The senior sergeant was lying in an exposed position a little to my right and turned his head to me and said he was looking right down the barrel of a German high speed machine gun (what we used to call an aircraft machine gun - it was reputed to fire at 50 rounds per second and I can well believe it after having one spraying me with bullets from twenty paces). Such a weapon ought to have killed us all at one burst, but perhaps they were as frightened as we were and didn't get off a good aimed burst.

The sergeant then went on that the other sergeant was dead alongside him, and the German officer holding the machine gun had called out to him to surrender, and what did I think. There are strict rules in these matters for elite troops, and the senior sergeant knew I would be working out the rate of casualties. At ten percent dead or dying (and two now out of our ten gave us twenty percent) we were entitled to surrender, so I called out to him to negotiate a surrender with the German he could see. He quickly did so and the German came running among us brandishing his machine gun, closely followed by a group of them brandishing lighter weapons. They were fascinated by the tommy gun that was still caught up on my shoulder strap, never having seen one before, and under their guns I very very carefully unhitched it and passed it and my special harness for carrying the long and awkward magazines to a delighted soldier who strapped it all on and laid down his own machine pistol. He was welcome to it as far as I was concerned, as I was already disenchanted with the short range and the heavy ammunition and the way the magazine tended to fall out with a clatter at difficult moments.

We were now prisoners, and right in the German front line being hard pressed by our own 50 Division. I don't know what it is like being a prisoner behind the lines, because the sergeant and I escaped the next night (we had to escape, otherwise they would have shot us as we knew too much about them by that time; and in any case they had orders to shoot commando officers as a matter of course, though I do not think this lot would have carried out such an order except under extreme pressure) but in the front line *being a prisoner is difficult.*

It was very tricky for the first few minutes, with the Germans (paratroops) nervous and trigger happy (they were as tired as we were) and were themselves in a difficult tactical position, with allies on their right and left melting away and a brigade of British troops attacking their front. The German officer took me aside and said in a mixture of French and English phrases how dangerous their position was and that the whole lot of us *including the Germans* would be killed unless I did exactly as I was told. He also said his doctor had looked at the shattered leg and hip of my runner and that he was beyond help in the sort of situation we were all in, and if I agreed he would give him an injection and that would be the end. We were all a long way out of *step* with the terms of the Geneva convention about prisoners, as I should not have been having military discussions

with my enemy, nor should I have agreed to keep my own men in a compact group and under what little cover there was (the "correct" action is to force the enemy to guard us effectively, but as this would have resulted in them shooting us all it was scarcely an option). In fact, within the constraints of the situation, they were careful and considerate young men, and except for a differently dressed SS man whom they all detested and ignored they were as good a group of captors as we could have wished for.

It should of course be realised that there is a well known syndrome that links captors and captured in a special deadly relationship, and all captured people ought to be aware of it. You tend to learn to "love" your capturers (presumably because you are like a baby totally dependent on them). The captors also get a special fellow feeling for you, which makes them protective of you if you can develop a human relationship with them (i.e. if you can make them see you as an individual suffering human being even as they are). So you should face them as much as possible, get plenty of eye contact, talk to them whenever you can as one person to another - ask to see their photos of their loved ones and ask about their families and tell them about yours. Don't sulk or ^{turn back.} turn _A

It was of course especially easy for me, and by extension for my group of men, as we were all, captors and captured alike, under observation and fire from an attacking brigade of our 50 Div; so we shared a common fear and suffering. Indeed the young German officer who captured me went to enormous trouble to see I did not go to sleep throughout the long night march that followed, feeding me with judicious doses of benzedrine which they all carried. I was so full of benzedrine by the end of the terrible night that followed that my head felt as if a continual storm of cold air was blowing through it. I was surprised also to see that the German officers carried a quickly evaporating liquid which they rubbed all over their heads to cool them and keep them awake - they were far ahead of us in survival techniques of this sort. Their weapons were slightly better than ours (but ours were easier to keep working in the rough and tumble of battle). Their junior officers were much better trained than ours, and they had not nearly so many; and looked after them much more carefully - there was no question of an officer automatically sacrificing himself by personally leading an attack, and the men quite obviously protected their officers and treated them as being precious to their own survival (rather as we tried to protect our Colonel though we looked on all the other officers as totally expendable). They were also very Prussian in meticulous attention to detail in quite small infantry evolutions (colored pencils and bar charts even in a desperate retreat in the face of the enemy). There were endless differences of detail in the way they carried out their retreat, and as a student of Montgomery's well known books on infantry tactics I was a lively spectator of all they did. Their senior officer had I believe already decided I was to be shot if the going got too tough, but the junior officers would probably have resisted this) for their own survival when they themselves were captured, which had started to look fairly likely.

As soon as it was full dark a careful retreat by bounds started, with a little fire of sticks built every hundred metres or so (British infantry kicking over the captured fires located the closeness of the pursuit). Four tanks went with us in the paratroop company that had captured me, and as day dawned the tanks were put at the four corners of a well maintained orange orchard where the company lay up for the day. We prisoners were put in the downstairs part of a typical Sicilian farm house, and their wounded were pushed in with us (I think their doctor must have been killed, or they had run out of dressings and operating material). They were lightly armed paratroops with no support facilities, and their right flank ^{was} now I could see engulfed. The four tanks were not theirs, and had been picked up in some way from the Hermann Goering Division and did not co operate with the infantry as they should have done. The men were now it seemed to me too tired to think straight, and were full of "stay awake" drugs, and the tanks were not co operating with the infantry, otherwise they could I believe have broken clear that morning - the advancing British also had to rest some time. They made a defensive perimeter and waited as a beautiful sunny day dawned.

Two soldiers came for me and led me away, and apologised in the broken lingua franca we had come to use, saying I had to be shot in accordance with Hitler's orders (they never used the word Fuhrer and never gave the Hitler salute in this unit, making quite a thing of using the traditional military salute, to infuriate the SS man I think). I told them it would be the death of them if they shot me, as they were being surrounded as anyone could see. I also demanded to see their Major. Without any argument they took me to the Major, to whom I explained that there was no way an execution like this could be concealed, that he would very likely be a prisoner himself before the next night was

past, and he may well find himself being hanged by angry English soldiers who did not like his lot much anyway. He was surprisingly gentle about it, and told the two soldiers to take me back to the other prisoners and not to harm me. I did not find myself in any way frightened, and even felt rather sorry for the sort of decisions he was having to make (which shows to what ridiculous lengths the "prisoner syndrome" of identifying with your enemy can go).

They (we) were increasingly shelled and mortared during the day; I was sure both their flanks were out of touch; I could see that the tanks were not being kept together as an effective strike force but were being misused as separated perimeter guards; and there was increasing desperation among the ^{Army}. They were pinned down by fire and totally unable to move until darkness. At one stage they summoned me out of the ground floor of the farmhouse where the dying and prisoners were all crowded together, and explained that I had to walk slowly with a bucket across a broad path making a vista right out of the orchard, at the end of which a British machine gun was positioned, and draw a bucket of water slowly from the well (there was also a dead dog in the well) - the idea was to show that prisoners were present. I did this, hoping some sort of surrender might be worked out, but nothing came of it, and the water did in fact taste OK. We had no food of course, nor I think did the Germans have any except a few biscuits; nor did we want any.

A dying German officer lying across my legs had been talking to me during the day. He had a bullet through the stomach, and was slowly bleeding to death from a punctured spleen. He said I was going to be shot, as also was my sergeant, as they had decided to break out and could not take prisoners with them. The men would however be spared; so I had to escape, and my sergeant. He pointed out that only the hated SS man was really interested in having us shot, and if we could evade him, and were extremely lucky, we might make it. When darkness had just started to fall we waited until the SS man was at one of the two doors and crept out of the other one and wriggled along a grassy furrow for what seemed miles, with many false alarms and terrors; and finally heard talking in front and waved a whitish handkerchief and were told to come forward. A British fighting unit took us in and gave us some tea (we were in no fit state to eat) and gave us some weapons (we could not possibly report to a unit like ours with the enemy having taken our weapons - we simply had to return armed). In any case we had still to walk across the hills, infested with enemy, to the main road where we hoped to pick up a lift back to the commando. That is what we did, with no further problems except that on the way out the army General (Montgomery) was on the main road and demanded to speak to me, which was extremely embarrassing for a young officer who had not shaved for several days.

Later General Montgomery said the Battle for Malati Bridge was a "classic" battle, a model of how a commando operation ought to be conducted (from the army's foremost tactician this was praise indeed). He said we should put on the bridge a bronze plaque saying "No 3 Commando Bridge" which we did - I sometimes wonder how it measures against about three thousand years of Sicilian history, with who knows what bloody episodes. We went in 350 strong, we lost 153, and 197 came back....terrible losses. Some later battles were bad, and some frightening but not especially bloody; but this was the worst of the war for us, mainly because we were against hopeless odds for so long.

Ten days later I went back with a party to identify and bury some of our dead. We identified all we could find, digging ^{out} the identity disks sunk into the rotting flesh. Some had already been recorded and buried in shallow graves by our own retreating troops, but they had all been dug up to steal the very high quality boots we wore.

The tactical result of Malati Bridge, of our attack at the coast and our retreat between the coast and the main road, was that important German forces were kept tied down too long on the coast; so letting our 50 Division outflank them along the main road.

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