

# My Escape from Crete



**Jim McDevitt**

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## **Acknowledgements**

*Special thanks to my dear wife Jean for the countless hours spent on the manual typewriter transcribing my much-altered hand-written manuscript.*

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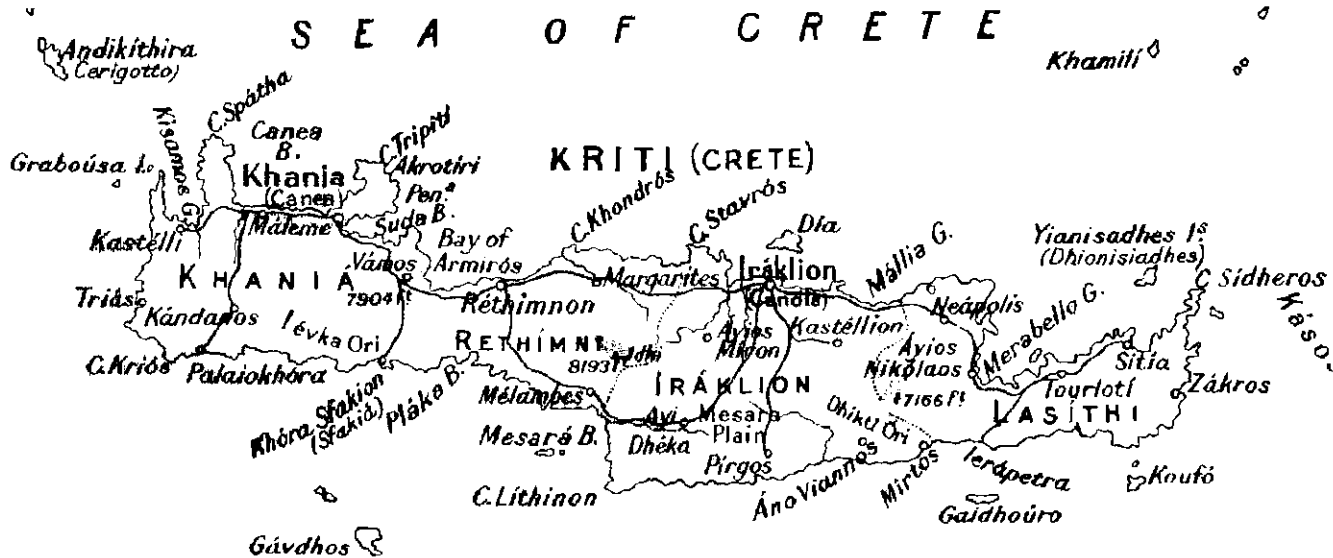
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SEA OF CRETE



## The turning point

It was natural that I felt quite miserable at having so recently lost so many good coppers from the scene. Our former happy home had been broken up.

Afta echi o polemos! As the locals would have said. Where was I to go now? Being a free agent, I opted for another trek into the Kissamos region. A brisk walk of some seven hours landed me in the village of Kalathenes. I made discreet enquiries from some friendly villagers, as a result of which I tracked down a group of three Aussies. Slim had told me about them. One bloke was named Earl James, but his mates called him “Flap”. He hailed from one of the Sydney suburbs. Then there was a tall, rangy guy by the name of John Duncan. (What! Not another John!) He too, had a rather unusual nickname – Papastratos. The Cretans reckon that this Aussie reminded them of a long, well-filled Athenian brand of cigarette before it was shortened in size, because of the tobacco famine. The third member of the happy-go-lucky trio was a sergeant called John Corbould, and his home-town was Mildura, the centre of Australia’s grape-growing region.

This amiable trio quickly welcomed me into the fold, and volunteered to show me, a new chum, around yet more territory, boasting that they were familiar with every village and hamlet within miles. In return for their kind offer of a guided tour, I promised to reciprocate by introducing them to Selinos at some future date.

“Let’s try our luck in Palaia Roumata,” suggested Flap. The mention of that name reminded me that this was where the airmen from the crashed Bristol Beaufort had spent last Christmas, and where Des Reynolds had bought his black-market boots. Incidentally, the war news from “down below” was still favourable to our side, so we split up into two groups and travelled in broad daylight. I was interested in seeing so many Jerry troop transports that day as we walked casually along the main highway. When we came to a bend in the road at Floria, we paused to pay silent homage at the wayside memorial cairn. It had been erected by the families of some thirty freedom-fighters who had been executed by the Nazis as a reprisal for taking up arms against the invading paratroopers in May 1941. Small photographs of all the heroes were displayed on the shrine in accordance

with the accepted Cretan custom. They all looked too young to die!

Leaving sorrowful Floria and the main highway, we pushed on across some very steep territory towards Kochres. All that concerted climbing taxed our energies, and we failed to notice that the heavens had clouded over with ominous rain clouds. We reckoned that by then, we were in a sort of no-man's land. Being hardy souls, we struggled on doggedly through the deepening darkness. Presently the rain fell, gently at first, but it soon became a downpour. Without overcoats or shelter we got drenched to the skin. In the confusion, we hopefully followed through a narrow gorge believing that it would lead us eventually to Palaia Roumata.

True to form, my three companions made light of our present woes. The harder the rain pelted down, the faster flowed their amusing comments about the foul weather. From time to time they stopped in their tracks, gazed up at the murky sky and yelled out "Send 'er down. Hughie! You little beaut!" That's probably how these Aussies behaved back home, when the saving rains came to end their long droughts. Just when it appeared that our present predicament was hopeless, Papastratos yelled back to us that he had discovered a tiny chapel. It was obviously one of the many hundreds built by the Cretans in Ottoman times, presumably as a meeting place for patriot forces. My carefully-wrapped box of Key brand matches were still dry enough for me to light some of the votive lamps on the walls. The place was extremely cold and damp, but we were grateful for the shelter it provided. We kept our blood circulation going by doing some prolonged physical exercises such as we had learned during our army training days. We also prevented ourselves from becoming too miserable and depressed by joining in some community sing-songs.

Sleep was impossible that night. Came the longed-for dawn. The rain had ceased and we managed to dry out our clothes as we trekked merrily along. Flap volunteered to go on ahead and advise some of his friends that we would soon be arriving. In due course, he fetched Dimitrios Bidzenakis and his charming wife, Evangelia, to where we were basking in the early morning sunshine. This family was renowned for having looked after so many of our footloose comrades, right from the start of the Axis Occupation. They never seemed scared by the risks they were taking by offering food and comfort to the likes of us.

Our visitors probably guessed correctly that we had been fasting for ages, because they brought us bread, cheese and some delicious preserved black olives. As soon as we had settled down, they told us that they had some surprising and heart-warming news to pass on to us. Dimitrios had

picked it up on the village's secret wireless set.

"Last night the Allies began their mighty offensive at El Alamein. Poly boum-boum! One thousand guns going off together! Fantastic!" he yelled triumphantly, as he reeled off more battle details. The date then would have been the 24th October, 1942. It was to be a turning point of the war in North Africa.

Dimitrios also told us that the opening gunfire salvoes could be clearly heard in Alexandria, which must have been some fifty or sixty miles further along the coast. Well, as you can imagine, we could talk of little else, save this latest news bombshell. Back here on Crete, we jubilant spectators were favourably positioned to see for ourselves some of the side effects of the gigantic battles going on across the sea. As on many previous occasions, the skies above us were once again filled with noisy, swastika-marked aircraft. Convoys of lumbering Junkers rushed fresh reinforcements and supplies to the war zone. Red Cross planes disgorged the first flood of battle-casualties at Maleme Airfield. The following day we heard a rumour on the Cretan wireless that Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox, had stopped off briefly on Crete after being ordered to the battle front by Hitler from his sick bed in Germany. That same day, we all witnessed an extra special treat, when a wave of Flying Fortresses of the USAAF carried out a devastating air attack against the busy Maleme Airfield, for the very first time. Similar daylight raids took place every day for the next ten days or so. One noticeable result from these daylight attacks was that the morale of the Cretans, like that of our own, rose to new dizzy heights.

Sure enough the deeply dug-in Axis Forces near the El Alamein Line clung on desperately to their defensive positions, but within another two days the Allied break-through was reported to be well under way, although it was seriously hampered by the thickly sown land-mines and booby traps, which were spread over hundreds of square miles. The BBC announcer reckoned that it would take twenty years to clear the millions of enemy land mines from the vast Egyptian Desert!

About the first week of November 1942, we all rejoiced to hear some more stupendous news from North Africa. Legions of American troops, under the command of General "Ike" Eisenhower, made seaborne-landings in Algeria and Morocco. Thus, within the space of a few days the fortunes of war had changed dramatically in our favour. Meantime, thousands of fresh Axis reinforcements continued to pour into Crete which was used as a staging post for the North African Front. Our SOE boys estimated that some 90,000 Nazi and 20,000 Fascist troops were circulating on Crete about this time.



With daily Allied air raids being carried out on so many military targets, the authorities began to fear that an invasion was a distinct follow-up tactic. I well remember that new gun emplacements were built during these hectic days, as were hundreds of “funk-holes” along the coastlines. The troops who were to remain on Crete busied themselves with another round of war games. These sounded so realistic that they could have been mistaken for the din of a fair-dinkum invasion.

The stunning Allied advances across Egypt influenced our side’s newspaper cartoonists to resurrect such well-known characters as Commander Pugwash, Colonel Blimp, and Pilot Officer Prune. Another of their favourite subjects was Moustapha, the wandering Bedouin tribesman with his three dark-veiled bints, his donkey and his flock of sheep. Whenever our boys had been chased by Rommel from base to base across the Western Desert, these same cartoonists depicted Moustapha trailing far behind his retinue. Now that our side was flushed with victory, the Bedouin was shown strolling out boldly at the head of his procession, no longer fearful that he could be the first to be blown up by a stray landmine!

Back here on Crete, our latest victories had one or two other predictable side-effects. For instance, it was rumoured that the bored and fickle young ladies of the cities had once again dusted their English lesson books after they had lain neglected for so long. Some Cretans were so thrilled with current events that they tossed their komboloia into the air, regarding them more as victory beads instead of worry beads! During this period of rejoicing, the red-haired lad from Kakodiki and the blonde youth from Sklavopoula no longer minded being escorted to Paleochora and being asked to prove that they were not Englezi, disguised as Cretan villagers!

Each passing week made us all too well aware that we were facing yet another winter season on the island – our second. After living outdoors in varying kinds of weather for so many months on end, we considered ourselves hardy enough to defy our next winter. We were comforted by the thought that any privations that we might suffer, would be worth it all in the end. As was the case the previous November, the seasonal rains brought a bountiful harvest of various edible weeds, including the blue flowered chicory, plus lots of mushrooms. I discovered that certain parts of the Eparchy of Kissamos are famous for their crops of edible chestnuts. We came across them growing wild even in remote areas. What could be better than chestnuts roasted on an open fire on a freezing day! They taste superb. Sometimes we boiled them for a change, and at other times, such as when we were on the march, we devoured them raw. The local people learned to

cope with yet another serious shortage of flour made from wheat by substituting barley, oats, and even chestnuts for their flour. Bread made from the last-named has a distinct sweet flavour about it.

Owing to wartime difficulties, our rather pleasant stay in the hill country behind Palaia Roumata came to an abrupt ending. Hordes of Jerries moved into the friendly village and established a permanent base there. Within days, the sound of buzzing chain-saws echoed throughout the erstwhile peaceful neighbourhood. Gangs of soldiers toiled all day long chopping down eye-catching stands of ancient chestnut trees.

“The cuckolds intend using our timbers to help strengthen their new lines of fortification,” declared an enraged Dimitrios Bidzenakis. To speed up the movement of the logged timber, the Jerries conscripted dozen of villagers into their workforce and set them to extending a branch road from the main highway to Palaia Roumata. With so many troops concentrated around the village, the number of patrols increased. Unfortunately the young Maltese chap was captured not far from our hideout about this time. His capture served as a grim warning to us blokes to hit the trail once again.

In easy stages we passed close by such villages as Platanas, Fotocado, Zybragou, Panathines and Armenohori. There were so many uniformed detachments moving about that it was unwise for us to stay long in any one place. On one memorable Sunday, we acted a bit foolhardy and tossed our usual caution to the winds. Some longstanding friends of my Aussie companions invited us to a wedding celebration at a village called Topolia. Not expecting to encounter any hostile troops on the way, we split up into groups and travelled along the main highway in broad daylight. Sergeant Corbould agreed to walk on ahead of us and to signal if he spotted any approaching traffic. It so happened that our precautionary plan took no account of the bendy nature of the road in those parts. When our leader noticed a fearsome convoy of personnel carriers, he could not see us to pass on his warning signal. What a rude awakening the rest of us got when the big vehicles, all packed with troops, suddenly appeared. What were we to do? It was too late for us to take evasive action. To do so at such a critical stage would have been a sure give away to the Jerries that we could be “overstayers”. To make matters worse, instead of proceeding past us, the leading vehicle came to a halt just ahead of us. The vehicles were so monstrous and the roadway so narrow that we were forced to walk on the edge of a steep bank. What an embarrassing situation to find ourselves in! All we could do was stand our ground and hope it was a mere coincidence that the convoy had stopped where it did. I noticed a hefty feldwebel or



*A Greek 5,000,000 drachmae note.  
The currency was enormously debased during the German occupation.*

sergeant as he jumped smartly down from his command vehicle and strutted sternly along the road. He stared searchingly at the lines of troops in each transport. They were sitting bolt upright and facing one another on the long bench-like seats. I tried to act calmly and casually, which wasn't easy. I felt a cold shiver running down my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck seemed to stand on end especially when I heard the stolid sergeant walking right behind me!

I dared not look back at my follower for fear of being questioned or, worse still, asked to produce my out-of-date identity paper. Nor did I quicken my pace. Only my heart-beat speeded up, but the uniformed man behind me could not hear that!

Out of the side of my eye I stole many a glance at the poor, cowed-down troops sitting silently in their places, in sharp contrast to the way they behaved in their hey-day. Not even so much as a whisper could I hear coming from the ranks! After what seemed like an eternity of suspense, I safely passed the last transport. Time to heave a sigh of relief! I secretly rejoiced that I had just come through my ordeal unscathed and was still a free man!

When the danger was past, the four of us drew closer and did some quiet chuckling. A few more miles of travel brought us to the scene of the wedding. When the joyful ceremony was over, friendly people invited us hungry strangers to partake of the feast laid out for the guests. At one stage, we noticed three Greek policemen eyeing us with curious interest. These armed officials probably guessed who we were. Instead of approaching they winked at us from a discreet distance. Things became exciting when a smart-looking young lady guest came to our side and

engaged us in conversation, but being alert and on our closest guard, we gave phoney replies to most of her enquiries. Although the Nazi authorities forbade their troops to fraternise with the Cretan girls, we heard that some of them did so, but in secret. Somehow, we suspected that the inquisitive young lady talking to us could well be classified as pro-Nazi, so we excused ourselves and took off promptly.

It so happened that our group's visit to the wedding did have a sequel. The following day, some Jerries called at the local police station to check up on the rumours they had heard that certain Englezi had shown up at the previous day's social event. From what we gathered later, our unknown police friends fobbed off the callers with some cock-and-bull story and the matter was dropped for lack of evidence.

"I bet that blinking sheila we spoke to yesterday was an informer," declared Papastratos when we discussed the affair of our chance meeting.

the Jerries organised a big swoop from Omalos to the south coast, shooting everyone they came across in their path, and without sighting a single commando.

Came the day when my leg had improved sufficiently for me to take a stroll over the mountains to the east to a village called Asfindelei. Some of the hills over there provide a special type of reddish clay which the locals use to mould their water-pitchers. This was my first visit to the place, which could explain my being mistaken for a Jerry agent. The more I argued in my defence, the more the stubborn villagers refused to accept my story. It was a very awkward situation I can tell you. The arguing went on for quite some time. Feeling desperate, I decided to resort to a spot of "reverse psychology". It had worked in my favour in my previous wanderings.

"All right my friends," I told my obtuse questioners, "I admit I am an imposter posing as a footloose Englezos. What are you going to do about it?"

Well, you should have seen the faces of those confused doubters after I had dropped my bombshell! I secretly enjoyed hearing them all arguing amongst themselves, while I stood aside calmly listening but saying not a word. Finally, I did speak up for myself again swinging back on my claim that I was a genuine evader who knew the names of all their friends in Akladiakes. My little ruse worked wonders, and everybody enjoyed a hearty laugh, thus ending the tension.

Back once more in Akladiakes, George the Cypriot told me how lucky I was at not bumping into a much-despised traitor from Maza who was then on his way to Paleochora. This chap received regular food rations from his masters and held a special permit to carry firearms to defend himself against his irate neighbours.

The following day, I found myself back at Koustoyerakos. The day after my return saw three Aussies showing up at the Water Cave – Frank Ezzy, Charlie Hunter and Sergeant Corbould. They appreciated the tisanne of faskomilia which I brewed up for the thirsty travellers. It was great to see so many of the gang squatting contentedly around the blazing log fire, while each in his turn gave an account of adventures and narrow brushes with the Jerries over the past few weeks. One particular incident related by the newcomers told of a lucky escape from recapture. They were sheltering in the local church at Deres during a rain storm when who should join them but a bunch of four drenched Jerries, out on an orange collecting mission. Happily, the men in uniform did not feel like fraternising, let alone asking for identity papers!

Sergeant Corbould realised how interested I would be to hear how he fared that night we called at Leivadas, only to find all the menfolk had vanished. Passing through the silent, blacked-out neighbourhood of Koustoyerakos, he nearly jumped out of his skin when some unseen person called on him to “halt”. At first, the Aussie imagined that one of his mates was trying to play a joke on him, but seconds later, when he saw the owner of the voice step out of the shadows, and effectively bar his way with a rifle pointed directly at him, he was glad he had kept his mouth shut. His first impulse was to put his new pair of boots to the test, by taking to his scrapers. Then, taking another look at the sentry’s rifle, he decided to stand his ground and try and bluff his way out of the grim situation. “Halt! Papier, kamerad! Ausweis! Taftodita!” demanded the sentry. Since his challenger had asked for his identity paper in three languages, the sergeant knew exactly what was required of him. First of all, the shrewd Aussie began yabbering away in the local lingo, mentioning anything that happened to come into his mind. How’s that for method in madness? This carry-on was only a ruse to find out how much Greek the lone sentry knew. It so happened that the man in uniform knew only a few words of pidgin Greek. That matter settled, the Aussie fumbled around in his coat-pocket, and withdrew his cigarette tin which was home for his out-of-date taftodita, as well as his razor blade for cutting “gaspers” into economical sections. Sure enough, John felt a bit apprehensive about producing the document for inspection, even if the friendly darkness would hide its blemishes and shortcomings. Then again, he knew full well the trouble he could be in if the sentry spotted that the document was a forgery. Perhaps the man in uniform could not tell that it was invalid, although he might have been aware that the Cretans often stored their identity papers in cigarette tins. The guard took on his most officious stance as he studied the forged document presented to him. I bet it was all so much Greek to him! After giving a few grunts, the sentry returned the identity paper to its illegal owner. What a lucky break, thought the sergeant to himself!

“Papier gut! En taxi!” On hearing these approving words, the Aussie relaxed somewhat. So far so good! But his ordeal was not yet over. He still had to explain how he came to be roaming around the village in defiance of the curfew. When first quizzed about this point, he feigned ignorance of the question. Once again he lapsed into the local lingo hoping thereby to confound his companion. A lot of gesticulating also probably helped his delicate situation. He tried to express frustration and innocence at the same time. After all, he was definitely on trial for his liberty if not his life. It would be curtains if he had to be led away for further questioning by the

well-drilled Gestapo!

About this stage in proceedings, the Aussie had a brain-wave. Pointing pleadingly to his imaginary sheep-fold away up in the mountains and brandishing his shepherd's crook to good effect, he made quite commendable baa-baa noises. Mind you, he found it no easy matter to control his urge to burst out laughing. Those poor woolly creatures would surely be awaiting their master's return. Thank God, the Jerry finally caught on to things. Despite the darkness, the observant Aussie detected the look of enlightenment which showed up on his adversary's face.

"Jawol! Ich verstehe zsie! Katalava! Parti!" announced the man with the rifle, as he at last waved the Aussie onwards and upwards.

Harkening back to that same night at Leivadas, my friend had another comment to make. "We can count our lucky stars Jim, that you and I decided to go our separate ways. Things could have been much tougher if the two of us had been stopped for checking by that sentry," reasoned my Aussie mate.

All of us relaxed in the weak sunshine for most of the next day. Just on nightfall, I trotted down to the village to get the latest news bulletin. While there I noticed a complete stranger talking aside to two of the Paterakis brothers. He was dressed smartly in Cretan clothes, but his scraggy beard was quite unlike the usual local type of facial fungus. Several years after the war ended, I happened to be browsing through a copy of George Psychoundakis' excellent book, entitled *The Cretan Runner*, when I recognised this chap's photo. His name was shown as Geoffrey Barkham, and his non-de-guerre was "Manoli". This bloke's job was that of wireless operator. These incidents all go to show that our SOE agents went out of their way to safeguard their cover as secret agents, even when amongst friends.

At the conclusion of the very satisfactory news bulletin, the announcer put over some mysterious coded messages, presumably for the guidance of SOE operators in Greece or Crete. Here are two examples of those coded messages. "The moon shines brightly tonight, Stavros," and "The fox eats grapes tonight".

On meeting up with the village schoolmaster, I quizzed him about the recent investigations carried out by the interrogating parties, who had camped in his village for many days.

"The cuckolds made up lists of everyone who still remained in their homes. They then set up a special panel of Gestapo men, and they grilled everyone in turn; some of them several times on different days. First of all, they asked the married women where their husbands and sons were. The

to the others the names and locations of the two evacuation sites, which should be regarded as military secrets. I got quite a surprise when Tom later on invited me to join the team he would be forming to help organise our big evacuation, including the contacting of our scattered evader community when the appointed time came. I gave the matter some thought before replying. I well remember that the selfish side of my make-up suggested I would be a mug to risk my chances of evacuation by trekking over the mountains to contact the others. In a flash, my mind went back to the harrowing stories told by blokes who had missed out on the evacuation at Sfakia in May 1941, because they volunteered to act as couriers or helpers of the wounded. Happily, I quickly dismissed all my selfish thoughts. How could I be so mean as to turn down our leader's offer to co-operation for the general good? After all, Tom had unselfishly risked life and liberty to return to Crete to arrange for our rescue. So in the end, I told our leader he could count on me when the chips were down.

I remember the day when one of the SOE guys led a Cypriot bloke to the Water Cave. The newcomer had a thick black moustache, and could talk the legs off a table, as the saying goes. His first name was Kostas. A cone of silence should have been placed over him from the outset, as I shall explain.

“Kostas reminds me of that well-known identity back home which we Kiwis call the barber's cat. Its chief claim to notoriety is that it is all wind and whiskers!” joked Jim Quinn. Incidentally, Jim's version is quite different from the one I often heard back home! It appeared that Kostas had been banished from his former stamping grounds down Rethymnon way, by Xan Fielding, one of our SOE agents, because the Cypriot bragged too much about secret matters, and so had become a nuisance and a security risk.

A few days after Kostas showed up, a Tommy was also guided to our hide-out. The poor wretch's feet were in a real mess, and he was suffering from frostbite. Tom got me to go down to the village to get some cotton wool, olive oil and tsikoudia, to relieve the visitor's feet. In the afternoon, Staff-Sergeant Moir called his first team meeting. Sergeant John Corbould and Charlie Hunter were appointed original members. Tom wished it to be known that, in future, visits to the neighbouring villages would have to be cut back to a minimum. The Aussie sergeant volunteered to go on an immediate scouting trip to the Eparchy of Kissamos to check up on where some of our blokes were hiding. Tom gave him five gold sovereigns to spend on food for the blokes he contacted. John was sure that Manoussos, our chief ally in Deres, would lend him a donkey to bring back the remainder of



his purchases to the Water Cave.

“Gosh chaps! I feel like Shylock with his miserly horde, as I set out to walk the golden mile,” he quipped as he stowed the coins, wrapped in paper, inside his socks for safe keeping.

“Put those precious coins under your pillow tonight Sarge, and dream of a happy retirement,” countered a witty Charlie Hunter.

When reports reached us that lots of Jerries were patrolling near some of the villages where the sergeant would be passing, we felt concerned for his safety. Inside our spacious fire-lit cavern that night, we all felt immensely comfortable, especially when we listened to the chilly wind howling and whistling outside. Our sing-song session was followed by some story-telling. Wally Allen added to the list of unusual Australian occupations which I had heard about while we were camped at Waterview. He told us about a bird-fancier back at home who reared an endangered species of native bird. It was called the “Oo-ah”, and was reputed to lay a peculiar shaped egg, which made it all the more painful to lay!

By the second week of April, Sergeant Corbould had made it safely back to the Water Cave. Sure enough, he was accompanied by Manoussos and his donkey loaded up with provisions. We helped Tom divide these rations into two separate lots. He planned to leave only a skeleton staff at his headquarters and to let the others establish a new satellite camp.

This would have to be within handy distance of a supply of fresh water. Tom was worried about our expanding community being raided by the Jerries, hence his decision to disperse some of us. The new settlement was to be known as “Canyon Camp” – a name which had a “Wild West” ring about it.

We were sad to see our happy family being split up. Those of us left behind watched with interest as the procession of pioneers streamed up the mountain track with their loads of bedding, food supplies, water pitchers, and cooking utensils. When the drama of the exodus had ended, Tom and Manoussos retired to a spot on the steep mountainside, which was well out of earshot of us curious eavesdroppers. Harry, the RAF bloke, was called in as an interpreter. When the huddle broke up, it was whispered that the Cretan, a former military intelligence agent, had offered to help Tom gather lots of vital information before our evacuation took place. I heard a whisper too that the SOE was planning a series of commando raids on various Cretan bases, and these attacks were timed for the coming July. Any vital information now gathered would be put to good use in jacking up those raids.

I found the next few days full of interest and free from boredom. I

tagged along with Tom when he visited the neighbouring villages. During one such call, I was introduced to the Cypriot wireless operator, George Esichiou. In pre-war times, George served as “Sparks” on a merchant ship. During our rounds, we made arrangements with some of the villagers to supply us with fresh milk, yoghurt and cheese. Tom insisted on paying cash for all these items. As our leader remarked on many an occasion “we are what we eat. If we don’t eat, we are soon kaput.” There is also a popular army verse expressing this same theme, but is rather too crude to repeat here. Fortunately for us evaders, we found that the winter famine had eased considerably, what with the new season’s dairy products and a variety of vegetables from the irrigated gardens becoming available. Incidentally, it was reliably reported that even the Jerry garrison at Souiya had been feeling the effects of the winter food-famine, and that they had been forced to tighten their belts – the ones with the “Gott Mit Uns” insignia on their buckles.

As it turned out, Tom’s ordering of extra food supplies came just at the right time. When he returned to the Water Cave, he found a deputation from Canyon Camp waiting to voice their complaints about the Spartan living conditions up there.

“Our tucker boxes are kaput! As the Cretans would say – not a mouthful of food left! The view and scenery up there are first class, but we need more than that to exist. Then again, the bitter night cold would freeze the fittings off a pawnbroker’s signpost,” declared the deputation spokesman. Tom listened sympathetically to their case, and promised to increase future food supplies. He loaded them up with the stuff we had fetched from the village. After the happy pioneers had left us, Tom got me to summon Petros Georgiakakis and his donkey, in readiness for his second buying spree in Canea. Tom dished out some more gold sovereigns and, as before, Petros stowed them safely in his headgear and socks.

## XXVIII

### Bitter pills

Some days later, Petros returned safely with his purchases. Alas! He also passed on some very sad news. Three Kiwi lads, named Davis, Huston and Ratcliffe, were caught in a surprise raid on their hideout near Meskla. Quite obviously, their secure hiding place had been betrayed by a “bad Cretan”. This sad news deeply affected us all, and more especially our leader. Tom showed his concern about the trio’s capture by calling a meeting of his team.

“Well boys, we just speed up our evacuation plans. I have managed to dig up a rare 1943 calendar – a difficult task these days on Crete,” he informed us. We pored over the calendar he showed us, and finally settled on a moonless night for our big evacuation attempt.

“I have agreed on the night of 21/22 April. Let’s hope this date suits the Royal Navy,” declared Tom. He hurried off to the wireless-den to get a message away to Cairo. When he rejoined us, we could tell from his worried look that all was not well.

“Bad luck chaps! The wireless-operator told me that his set has been plagued by gremlins, and is on the blink. The batteries are fully charged. It strikes me that wireless transmitters are as temperamental as our motor-mowers back home,” he commented. Anyway, our leader had arranged for one of the SOE runners to take a written message to Xan Fielding’s wireless-den, somewhere in the mountains near Kyriakosellia. That message detailed all our suggested evacuation plans, and mentioned the failure of George Esichiou’s transmitter. Tom was careful to include the map reference of Tripiti in his message to Xan. (There was another Tripiti on Gavdos Island.)

Alas and Alas! Yet more disastrous news was in store for us. Not long after our runner had left the Water Cave with Tom’s message, another courier put in an appearance. His mission was to advise our end that Xan’s transmitter had also mysteriously packed up. It was a wonder that the two couriers had not met each other on the track. The only sure way of sending Tom’s urgent message to Cairo now rested with Tom Dunbabin’s wireless set, which was operating on the slopes of Mt Ida, miles and miles away, and close to Herakleion. When we heard about the two transmitters being off the air, we felt that Fate was conspiring to keep us on the island many more days yet. Our patience and hopes were being sorely tried.

Bluey Salmon arrived at the Water Cave, having heard of Tom's arrival on Crete. Tom gave him a great welcome. This Aussie and I were the only ones present who knew our leader from the previous year. The young Aussie was honoured by being made a member of the team. He immediately volunteered to return to Kissamos to contact the blokes whose hideouts were pin-pointed quite recently by Sergeant Corbould. Naturally we could not help feeling downhearted by the double failure of our communication system. Tom called us together again and tried to cheer us up. There was no sense in just sitting around and hoping.

"You Jim and you Bluey are free to do your roundup acts as soon as you like," instructed our leader. As soon as dusk fell, the two of us were off on our adventure. We were both young and well-seasoned night-travellers, so we made pretty good time on the rugged tracks. Initially, the only stops we made were to allow us to take a refreshing swig or two of water at a village fountain. When we arrived at Milones, we went in search of two Aussies, Slim Howard and John Greaves. The latter, it will be recalled, was the chap who was indirectly responsible for my hasty departure from Waterview in October of the previous year, and for my lucky absence from the place when the Jerries raided the next morning. It was not an easy matter to find the haliva, or shepherd's shelter, where the pair had been hiding. Our perseverance and our good sense of direction finally paid off, and we found the place we were looking for. No sign of the two Aussies, however; great disappointment for us. Anyway, the two empty bunks in the shelter, which were packed with springy camel-thorn, looked mighty inviting, so we dosed down thankfully and tried to get a wink of shut-eye. Within half an hour we both awoke with a start, when we heard strangers approaching. We rubbed our eyes, and grabbed our walking sticks in case we needed them to defend ourselves.

"Rustlers or Jerries?" queried my companion in a guarded whisper. It so happened that our nocturnal callers were two members of the brotherhood of rustlers. They must have been as surprised at seeing us as we were them. Perhaps this shepherd's hut was one of their regular roosts. The bandits seemed friendly enough, so we started chatting. They knew the two Aussies we were asking about, but could not tell us where they might be.

The first light of dawn was streaking the sky so we decided to get mobile again. After a while we split up and went our separate, lonely ways. While travelling in the half-light, I got a real scare when I stumbled upon a remote sheepfold, and got challenged by the shepherd. I lost no time in explaining who I was, where I had come from, and where I hoped to go,

to relax down in Koustoyerakos. The day's highlight came when we were invited to meet in the village school-room for a special treat. The wireless set was ceremoniously uplifted from its secret hiding place in the chapel, and placed at our disposal for several hours. To save any possible arguments as to which radio stations we would tune in to, we appointed Charlie Hunter as our chief knob-twiddler. The locals left the room and the afternoon's show became strictly ours. This was the first time for over two years that we had been able to listen to the wireless and choose our own programmes. On the few occasions we had picked up foreign broadcasts, the language was always Greek. After listening ecstatically to the Forces' Radio from Cairo, and enthusing over Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* and a song by Sophia Bembo, we picked up other stations, such as Belgrade, Ankara and Sofia. At one stage we feared that our most pleasant afternoon's entertainment might have to be cut short. One of the village look-outs burst into the room to tell us that a group of Jerries was visiting Leivadas, the next village below us. In the end, we were told not to worry unduly as their visit seemed to be purely a social one.

On Easter Monday, we enjoyed yet another welcome change from our rather humdrum mode of existence. The villagers again invited us to a big celebration which they called a "panagyri". Visitors from the neighbouring settlements also joined in the fun. As interested spectators, we enjoyed a selection of national dances, all of which were staged out-of-doors. As was my experience in Therisso in July 1941, I was particularly captivated by the beautiful village maidens. They looked resplendent in their colourful national costumes. Local custom demanded that we admire them from a distance. As Sergeant Corbould sadly remarked, "they were the protected ones, whilst we were the endangered species!" The haunting, lilting music of lutes and lyres, of bouzoukis and banjos helped us shed all traces of the "Occupation Blues".

The merry month of May with its wild orchids, anemones and carpets of blood red poppies soon overtook us. Surely this would prove to be the blessed month of our rescue by the Royal Navy! Every time that we touched a blooming poppy, the closer to admire it, the petals came adrift, possibly affected by the warmth of our hands. This was also the season of the grape-hyacinth, so we often gathered the bulbs and handed them over to our friends to make into a special type of Cretan preserve. With the advent of the warmer spring weather, we noticed a greater variety of bird-life around us. The calls of the cuckoo and the nightingale greeted us again. Some of our chaps reckoned that these birds never leave Crete on seasonal migrations. Other species of birds which we noticed were wrens, robins











































































In July 1941, after five weeks behind the barbed wire of a prisoner-of-war compound in fallen Crete, Jim McDevitt spotted a chance for freedom. Without pausing to reflect on the dangers, the bold young Kiwi took his chance ... and so began a 22-month game of cat-and-mouse with the island's conquerors.

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