

# My Escape from Crete



**Jim McDevitt**

# My Escape from Crete

Jim McDevitt

Permission to publish these selected pages of text from Jim McDevitt's book "My Escape From Crete" was granted by his wife Jean McDevitt in writing in July 2008.

## **Acknowledgements**

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

© 2002 Jim T. McDevitt

ISBN 0-473-08310-8

Production by Brendan Gaffney

Printed by The Copy Press Ltd, Stoke, Nelson

Published in April 2002 by J.T. McDevitt,

43 Cambridge Terrace, Papatoetoe, Auckland.

Phone/Fax (09) 278-7372.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any information retrieval system or transmitted in any form, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the copyright holder. The contents or any part of this book may not be used for the compilation of any other publication, recording or production.

# Contents

I	Good riddance to barbed wire .....	5
II	Assumed Cretan identity .....	12
III	We trek to White Mountains .....	15
IV	Mixed patrol visits Therisso .....	21
V	Awandering with Alan .....	28
VI	I meet the mysterious Captain Emilios .....	32
VII	We get a shock or two .....	39
VIII	Summer in Skafi .....	45
IX	Operation Roundup .....	50
X	Relaxation amidst chaos .....	57
XI	Snooper planes and leaflets .....	61
XII	A close shave .....	64
XIII	On the move again .....	67
XIV	Down at Ktista: The graveyard of our hopes .....	74
XV	Meeting Fifi at Sklavopoula .....	84
XVI	Another boat chase .....	97
XVII	Fortune smiles on us .....	99
XVIII	Easter scares .....	126
XIV	The betrayal .....	133
XX	Hans Wachter – Super Sleuth .....	150
XXI	Barefoot capers .....	162
XXII	A lucky break .....	169
XXIII	The turning point .....	179
XXIV	My Clayton’s dental appointment .....	186
XXV	Lucky contacts .....	190
XXVI	Gestapo investigations .....	206
XXVII	A most unexpected visitor .....	218
XXVIII	Bitter pills .....	233
XXIX	The last roundup .....	245
XXX	Appointment at Tripiti .....	266



## 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

and warblers, as well as a few graceful egrets, the likes of which we had first seen in Egypt.

Meantime, our interest in the progress of the war in North Africa never faltered. A serious Allied setback down there would gravely affect the timing of our evacuation from Crete. The most exciting news of this period concerned the presence of Winston Churchill in Cyprus. He was there to inspect the huge Allied invasion forces. We still wondered whether Crete was the target. Our authorities hoped the Jerries thought so. It was part of their "Grand Strategy".

On 2nd of May, I remembered to celebrate my 25th birthday, and my third on Crete. As far as I was aware, I was still hale and hearty, and my dimples had not yet changed into wrinkles! Rather than spend a quiet evening in the dreary Water Cave, I joined Sergeant Corbould and Jim the Pom on a social visit to Leivadas. On the way down the track from Koustoyerakos, we caught up with two officer friends of ours – Colonel Seiradakis and George Esichiou, who was sometimes called "Mr Sparks". The pair seemed to be revelling in their evening stroll, especially as they had been leading sheltered lives out of necessity. We stopped by the wayside and began chatting to them.

"By the way boys, the wireless set is working again. All the gremlins have been exorcised. Have any of you heard lately from Tom Moir?" inquired the Cypriot.

"No. Unfortunately not so much as a whisper," I replied. We could tell from the looks on the officers' faces that they were disappointed. Could it be that "Mr Sparks" was holding an important message from Cairo for Tom? I reminded the two officers that the deadline set for his return still had several days to run before we panicked. Try as we did, we could not prevent our friends in Leivadas from openly discussing details of our coming evacuation!

"Your days on our enslaved island are definitely numbered." This was the statement which we were to hear echoed again and again over the next few days and those words certainly helped to cheer us up no end, when we gloated over our prospects of being rescued by the Royal Navy.

On our way back to the Water Cave, we passed through Koustoyerakos again. Despite the lateness of the hour, the village was not entirely silent and deserted. We were surprised to come across two Cypriots, one of whom was the loquacious Kostas. The pair appeared to be quite merry, possibly from drinking too much wine. We gladly accepted the packets of choice English cigarettes which they offered us.

"Two guesses as to who gave them those gaspers in the first place,"

whispered the sergeant. "Of course they could only have come from their compatriot, the wireless operator. No need for a second guess," he added.

The night was so balmy that we slept out under the stars, but near the Water Cave. It seemed a pity to drift straight off to sleep with so many things on our minds, so we lay back for a while and discussed recent events.

"Somehow I just don't seem to be able to get Tom off my mind. I keep thinking that some kind of trouble is dogging his footsteps. That feeling of mine is like a strange presentiment," explained Sergeant Corbould. Eventually we must have been overcome by exhaustion and drifted off to the Land of Nod. Sometime later we awoke with a start. Jim the Pom roused us when he heard someone climbing the mountainside.

"Could be Jerries on the warpath. Then again they shun moving about in the darkness," someone suggested half asleep.

"Let's hope it is Tom Moir and Harry Masters returning to the fold." This pious wish came from myself. It so happened that it was neither of these possibilities. Our nocturnal visitor turned out to be "Big John" Simpkin. We ribbed him for disturbing our happy slumbers. While visiting the village of Moni, he was forced to make a quick exit when the Mixed Patrol arrived. He sought shelter in the local chapel and had fallen asleep in the complete darkness, only to wake up several hours later. He knew it could be too risky to remain hidden in the chapel until the next morning, hence his decision to head back to the Water Cave.

By rights, Jim the Pom should have rejoined the others in Canyon Camp. However, he persuaded Charlie to let him pay another brief visit to the village on some pretext or other. He admitted later that he had a feeling that big developments relating to our evacuation were afoot and he wanted to check his hunch. There was another reason for his wanting to visit the village – to fetch some cigarettes for his mates in Canyon Camp. The expoliceman, guarding the way to the wireless den, had been good enough to bring the wireless operator to meet the Tommy. The Cypriot presented him with several packets of cigarettes, including some with the brand name of "Papastratos Numéro Ena". At the same time he confirmed that the Englishman's hunch was well founded.

"Just imagine my friend! In a few days from now if all goes well, you will be able to sit back and puff as many fags as you crave for," commented the officer as he parted with the cigarettes.

With these authoritative words still ringing in his ears, our Tommy friend hot-footed it back to the Water Cave to spread the good news. As can be well imagined, he got quite a kick out of being the very first to ferret out what we had all be longing to hear. Following closely on the

heels of this juicy bit of news, there came another exciting event. It sent our hopes soaring and our chins wagging. A courier arrived with an urgent message for Charlie Hunter. That note was short and sweet. All it said was "Report immediately to the wireless-den sentry". Charlie put aside his hairdresser's scissors and comb and hurried to the suggested meeting place.

We all waited impatiently for the Aussie to join us. We were dying to hear the "pukka gen" about our evacuation plans. The members of Tom's team were called aside to hear our fate. Charlie put on his most important look and he preened himself in readiness for the big announcement he was about to make. Putting his hand into his inside pocket of his faded jacket, he pulled out a sheaf of message forms. His odd sense of Irish humour demanded that he keep his audience in suspense. First of all, he pored over the messages at the top of the pile. These were the ones that were made out at Tom Dunbabin's headquarters on Mount Ida, while the other two wireless transmitters were on the blink. The feigned look of worry on Charlie's face puzzled us at first. He began to read out the top message on the sheaf. All of them were from the SOE in Cairo.

"The Royal Navy regrets that the planned rescue of the Cretan survivors can only cater for a limited party of twenty personnel on the first operation because of the risk of enemy action at sea."

None of us liked the contents of that first message, and we were quick to voice our disapproval. We could plainly foresee a lot of heartaches ahead when it came to sorting out the lucky twenty.

"Tell us, Charlie, how the order of preference will be worked out," piped up the red headed Aussie nicknamed Bluey. Of course he had already studied the contents of the other messages so he did not consider it necessary to answer this inquiry, reasonable as it was. He merely proceeded to read the next one.

"Top priority has been given to rescuing 'Lady X'. The next two places have been reserved for the SOE agents being relieved in the field. Staff Sergeant Moir will allocate the remaining seventeen places. Priority must be given to those in a poor state of health."

"Who is this mysterious 'Lady X'?" we all asked together, our curiosity aroused. Charlie seemed reluctant to discuss her identity, claiming that it was a matter of the strictest security.

Once again we all began to mutter under our breaths when we realised that the number of seats on our rescue boat was fast diminishing. Picking those with the most serious health problems would cause many gripes. Sergeant Corbould made us all laugh when he said he had a brainwave.

"From now on, we should start really enjoying crook health. Our

ailments could prove to be our passports to the Middle East and freedom," he reasoned. He himself set the ball rolling with a liturgy of his own afflictions. It included malaria, jaundice, and chronic "gyppo" tummy, as well as his hacking, graveyard cough. The other lads staked similar impressive sounding claims, whilst I stressed my own painful attacks of kidney-stones, which were eventually to need hospital treatment. Charlie told us that he was leaving the selection duties to Tom Moir when he returned. The Aussie waited for our mirth to subside before moving on to the next piece of paper.

"In the event of there being any remaining places after the selection of the ailing ones, they should be allocated to the more elderly personnel and to the bare-footed brigade." This announcement caused another outburst of merriment. Old Tom Spriggs and Len Beere would qualify by age as would Charlie himself, whilst Len would get another preference because his boots were kaput.

Charlie Hunter could see that we were disappointed with the selection criteria set out by our people in Cairo. At that stage he relented. "Cheer up lads! I have to confess that those first messages were stale. Now for some of the better news! Since those messages were received, things on the North African Front have flourished for the Allies, and the Royal Navy definitely rules the Med again. They have promised to lay on a much bigger rescue craft for us. Instead of a small launch, they will now send us a motor-torpedo boat of the type known as submarine chasers," Charlie proudly announced. We began to cheer excitedly on hearing this latest bulletin. The wireless operator thought we might even see such a speedy vessel as the *Hedgehog*, the *Porcupine* or the *Escampadour*. With any luck, our vessel might even be skippered by that famous sea-dog, John Campbell. Like "Crapper" Miers VC, Campbell was amongst a band of most daring seafarers then serving in the Mediterranean.

The next message read out by Charlie was the most revealing of the lot. It confirmed the date, place and timing worked out for our evacuation by Tom Moir.

"All evacuees should be standing by at Tripiti on the night of 8/9 May at 2200 hours, Egyptian Standard Time."

"Well chaps, for nearly two years now we have not had to worry what time of the month it was let alone the hour of the day. In short, deprived of our calendars and our watches, we have become used to Cretan time. When our big day comes around we will have to revert to English time again, if we expect to catch our dream-boat," suggested Charlie, with a broad grin on his face. The remainder of the messages in Charlie's sheaf were also of great

interest. One mentioned that all evacuees had to be approved by Staff Sergeant Moir, but special cases would be the concern of SOE agent Xan Fielding. There was a separate instruction ensuring that the evacuation proceeded in an orderly fashion. The display of all lights on the beach was prohibited except for the officially approved identification lamp signals. A time check for Egyptian Standard time would be made by wireless signal with Cairo headquarters. I can't recall exactly what the time lag was in those days, only that there was one.

Before our team dispersed, Charlie impressed on us the necessity of keeping mum about the finer details of our big event. Even our closest cobblers and our loyal friends in the villages were not to be told the important facts. One of us would approach George Eschiou about borrowing a torch for flashing signals to the Navy. George was bound to have a spare one that he could lend us. To him a torch was as necessary as a pencil for encoding and decoding his night time wireless messages. It was also left to our end to suggest an official identification call sign for flashing to the Navy. What would it be? E for Evacuation or R for Rescue were suggested. Charlie favoured the latter. We could not recall what it was in morse code terms.

"Dit-da-dit, it should be," later advised the Cypriot officer. That's what Charlie wrote down in this note-book so that there would be no slip up on the night. We also had to decide on a starting time for sending our first lamp flashes.

"How about zero hour minus twenty minutes?" suggested Charlie. He had obviously given this important detail some consideration beforehand. The R signal was to be repeated six times in succession, with a pause of thirty seconds in between each group of flashes. It is worth repeating here that not a single one of us still owned any sort of a watch. All had long since flogged their wrist watches to the prison camp guards. Those after dark bartering deals for food were arranged by the Palestinian prisoners, most of whom spoke the same lingo as their captors. It did strike us as rather ironic at the time we parted with our wrist watches, signet rings and cigarette cases, that the tins of bully beef we received in exchange were actually our own side's in the first place. They had been captured by the Jerries when they overran our food dumps on the island.

Charlie Hunter found himself in a bit of a quandary when he came to borrow some sort of a time-piece, in readiness for R night. None of the villagers seemed to own a wrist watch either. The wireless operator needed his own for keeping his transmission appointments with Cairo. Then again, he was afraid that if he did lend us his watch he might not get it back. He

had to consider the blackout down at the beach, plus the excitement of us blokes getting ready to board our rescue craft. Eventually one of the villagers came to our aid. He promised to lend us his one and only alarm clock. It was a real Godsend with its luminous dial, visible in the blackout.

Over the next few days, Charlie made many calls to the wireless den to answer queries raised by Cairo during regular transmissions. For instance, they were interested in learning of any build-up in the strengths of the garrisons in our region. They asked about the number of sea planes, E-boats and patrol launches on station at Paleochora. It had to be assumed that the Royal Navy need not worry any longer about the Junkers troop-carrying processions moving between Crete and North Africa, because the Jerries were now using air bases in Sicily instead.

Before our leader set out on his secret mission on Good Friday, he mentioned a daring plan to carry off a few coast-watchers with us from Souiya when we left the island. Perhaps that is why our people "down below" wanted to know the various strengths of the enemy forces in our region. We had heard that the troops at Souiya were mostly elderly Austrians who might welcome the chance of a change of scenery, if given the opportunity. It was also rumoured that the local people had scotched this plan of a raid. Quite rightly they pointed out that our evacuation attempt might well be foiled by such a foolhardy operation. Besides that, the Jerries were bound to carry out savage reprisals against the local population, whether or not such an attempted raid succeeded. We for our part were absolutely thrilled to learn that the daring plan had been scrubbed. The idea of playing hop-scotch in the darkness over the enemy minefields at Souiya did not appeal to any of us would-be evacuees!

Meantime our tiny community at the Water Cave continued to get as much enjoyment as possible out of our last days of anxious waiting on the Isle of Doom. Even when one of our gang accidentally forgot to stir our milk and flour boiled mixture and it got burned, no one blamed the cook or cursed his ancestry. There still remained one or two details to fix up about our getaway. Battery torches were as scarce as hen's teeth in our part of the world at that time. Eventually we persuaded George Esichiou to part with one of his emergency ones.

Time passed quickly. By day and by night we dreamed continuously of our joyful day of rescue. There was still no word from Tom and Harry, and this lack of communication worried us quite a lot. Mind you, considering the hush-hush nature of their mission together with the lack of telephone contact with the villages, it would not have been easy for our leader to advise that he was on the homeward trail. Likewise, a call-up on

the 'Cretan Wireless' was out of the question for security reasons.

I well remember the day when "Alekos", as Xan Fielding was code named, sent a message by courier to Tom Moir on the assumption that he had arrived back at the Water Cave. Charlie acted on the message on his behalf. The courier was fagged out by the time he reached us because he had travelled post-haste from Xan's lair which was situated in the mountains between Kares and Kyriakosellia.

Charlie gathered us around him to discuss the message. We learned for the very first time that a courageous and indomitable Australian soldier of the 7th Division, and he himself an escaped prisoner-of-war, had been close hiding in a cave near Samonas in Apokoronas. We consulted our map of Crete and discovered that this village was situated about one and a half hours hike from the large, heavily garrisoned settlement of Neo Horio. We heard that this unfortunate recluse, Norman Douglas Scott, had become a helpless quadriplegic during his long term of lonely concealment. Xan wanted to know if there was anything our group could do to bring our stricken comrade down to our assembly point prior to R Day.

The secret agent's call for help mentioned that Norman Scott's condition was still deteriorating, and that he refused to give himself up to the Germans in Neo Horio and there seek medical help. Xan also advised that nearly all of the inhabitants in that region were kindly disposed towards the Allies, and could be relied on to help us get the Aussie on the trail to the south coast. Well, after having this pathetic problem tossed into our laps, and with the time of our evacuation fast approaching, we sat down in a huddle to discuss things.

We wondered how we could jack up guides, escorts and a pack animal at such short notice. The helpless victim would need a constant escort to keep him from falling off his beast's saddle. Besides that, his procession would tend to attract suspicious attention as it passed along the main highway and up into the foothills villages. We devoted quite a lot of time to discussing this serious matter. In the end, Charlie decided to advise Xan that, all things considered, it would be impossible for us to fetch the afflicted Aussie to our assembly point with such a short time at our disposal.

"I have a strong hunch that Alekos realised right from the outset that we could not help young Scott on his way. All he seems to have wanted is a second opinion on the impossibility of rescuing the Aussie," observed our leader quite sadly.

Gosh! The mountain tracks above the Water Cave continued to be busy thoroughfares the closer we got to R Day. The day following the dispatch of Charlie's message of reply, yet another courier dropped in with

a note from Xan. He wanted us to record the names of two New Zealand evaders who had been roaming the eastern end of the island. It seemed most unlikely that either of them could make it to the Water Cave in time for our evacuation. The first chap's name was Wally Swinburne. Our secret agent had been advised of Wally's whereabouts by Manoli Bandouvas, one of the island's most renowned guerilla-band leaders of that time. The other Kiwi named in the message was Sergeant D. Nicholls. This NCO had met up with another Cretan freedom fighter named Petrakogeorgis.

One more day of waiting gone, and one stage closer to our long-awaited dream of rescue! Our mood of excitement and anticipation kept growing all the time. It was certainly a very pleasant sensation to realise that our hide and seek days would soon be coming to an end. About this period, the SOE wallahs in Cairo again warned us by wireless signal to make sure that our evacuation did not end up in a stampede, and that no gate-crashers spoiled the show. As a result of this appeal, Charlie got me to go down to Koustoyerakos to discuss these matters with the village elders.

"My friend, don't worry your head any further on that score. We will be honoured to arrange a suitable escort of armed Andartes to look after you when the big occasion comes around," I was quickly advised. "We guarantee that there will be no panic down at your assembly point." At our next team meeting we expressed our misgivings about the tell-tale noise our MTB was bound to make when it showed up. Her engines would probably be super-charged to give her extra speed to manoeuvre out of such a danger spot as Tripiti. After all, we had to consider the threat posed by the coast-watching enemy base at Souiya.

"Let's hope the Navy lives up to its name of the Silent Service, observed Charlie Hunter, as we pondered the noise threat.

"I've just had one of my rare brain-waves," I told our leader. "We should try and arrange some sort of diversion for the elderly Herrenvolk down at their base in case they are not already tucked up in their little bunks, while all the action continues." I favoured a session or two of bouzouki music to help muffle the engine noises on the big night.

This matter required further consultation with the village elders. They all roared with laughter when we put our crazy suggestion to them. Being typical prankish Cretans, they relished the idea of hoodwinking their *uniformed neighbours*.

"Bravo, you smart lads! Why, we may even be able to co-opt the services of Grigori, our popular fiddler, to give these homesick, geriatric Austrians a real musical treat on the appointed night! Poor souls! They

really swoon when they hear the lilt of a violin, especially when such a tune as *Lili Marlene* is played. We will make them all drowsy beforehand by offering them some of our well-matured wines," declared one of their spokesmen, impishly.

As Charlie and I were leaving the village we bumped into George Esichiou, the wireless operator. He told us that he was enjoying an evening stroll before his next scheduled radio call-up with Cairo. He reckoned his den was too small and cramped to swing a cat in! The Cypriot had lost his worried look now that the gremlins of the air-waves had been exorcised from his wireless set. Mind you, he still expressed concern about Tom Moir's continuing absence. In lighter vein, he admitted that he was now getting as keyed up about the big evacuation as we were.

"Well my friends, I am not divulging any military secrets when I tell you that Tom Moir, Colonel Tom Dunbabin and Xan Fielding have been your constant and forthright supporters when it came to stirring up our authorities in Cairo. This trio have continually pressed them to speed up plans for your rescue. Tom Moir, in particular, painted a somewhat exaggerated picture of your lads' desperate plight. When your prospects seemed rather glum, such as when it was announced that only a few of you could be rescued at the first attempt, Tom got me to send further distress appeals on your behalf. He even raised the grim spectre of walking skeletons with frost-bitten bare feet! He also mentioned the Australian sergeant with the graveyard cough! Your leader claimed that unless you survivors were rescued urgently, many of you would become pathetic, hill-happy cases! Because of these heart-rending appeals, the Royal Navy was persuaded to lay on a more commodious vessel of the Fairmile class. Now for the funny part! A medical man with the rank of Brigadier from Headquarters, Middle East command, has been picked to make sure you all survive during the homeward trip to Egypt or Libya! What a scream!" declared the Cypriot.

Further evidence that other important steps were being taken in connection with our evacuation soon followed. It was reliably reported that Xan Fielding had met up with the mysterious 'Lady X' at Gournes, and that he would be escorting her over the mountain ranges and on down to our stamping grounds. We already knew that these travellers would have to make a wide detour of the usual pathway through the Omalos Plateau because the Jerries had set up a permanent base there. What was even worse, their armed patrols often ventured far afield from that mountain base, thus making it unsafe for shepherds and civilian travellers alike.

At long last, R Day minus five dawned fine and serene.

"Today let us beware, is the deadline set in advance by Tom for his

return to the Water Cave,” declared our anxious Charlie. It was also the day agreed on for Joe Salmon and myself to go out into the highways and byways of Kissamos and Selinos to round up our dispersed fellow-evacuees. Things began hopefully enough, but we could not help groaning when we heard the distant muffled sound of the Jerries carrying out realistic war-games on the plains below. We whiled away our time by relaxing in the sunshine. At the same time we prepared a preliminary list of all the blokes to be evacuated.

Early in the afternoon the sounds of mock battle mercifully ceased. It turned out to be one of those extremely hot days, so maybe the troops retired to Souiya or elsewhere for a siesta. When our leader returned from his stroll to the wireless den, he critically examined Joe’s footwear and then mine. After all these months of continuous testing wear, my boots still looked roadworthy enough, although the uppers had split slightly. Charlie handed me a pair of new boots to try on. He remarked that they had been delivered by the RAF Parachute Service.

“Unfortunately these new boots look a bit narrow across the instep. They are more suited to the dainty feet of the Indian Division. Anyway Jim, they should do you at a pinch,” declared the Aussie, acting in his role of our welfare officer. Just how true his prediction turned out to be, I was soon to discover!

There was still no sign of Tom and Harry returning despite the late afternoon hour. We could not help worrying about them not keeping their appointment with us. If only Tom would show up and give Joe and me his blessing before we set out on our “Last roundup” mission!

“I can plainly see that you Jim, are rarin’ to get started, and chalk up another few sunrises and sunsets before you leave Crete. You can leave any time now,” advised the Aussie. Charlie’s farewell words to me were to keep my eyes open all the time and get back to the Water Cave in good shape. I was feeling in high spirits as I trudged at a fast pace over the mountain ranges. My pathway took me well clear of Koustoyerakos and Lcivadas. Shortly after I crossed the Turkish-built stonebridge near Moni, I stopped to greet two friendly villagers who were preparing an irrigation watering system in their garden plot. The pair look aghast when they recognised me.

“Why Dimitri! You must surely be ‘ekso frenon’ to venture into this danger zone, and in broad daylight! Didn’t you know that there is a detachment of the cuckolds in the President’s house over there?” queried the elder of the two. Mind you, I would dearly have loved to explain why I was taking such a great risk but I did not want to justify my seemingly foolhardy

presence there. Then again, having begun my errand of help, I was loath to turn back or even to bide my time in hiding until nightfall.

Continuing my way along the rutted track I soon came across yet another most concerned villager. "Kyrie eleison mas! How can you walk so blithely into the lion's den? The horn-wearers have been hanging around our neighbourhood all afternoon, or don't you know?" exploded the concerned man. After receiving this second warning, I began to feel foolhardy, especially when I noticed the stranger crossing himself several times. His reaction was a sure indication that crisis time had arrived. Anyway, these friendly warnings did not go amiss. I suddenly remembered I was carrying some incriminating documents which I would hate the Jerries to discover if ever they detained and searched me. If only I had left them behind with Charlie! I hastily fished out the scraps of paper and the letter I had been given to deliver to Brigadier Andonis Torakis when I reached the Middle East. I had jotted down some names and addresses of people to look up when I landed back in Cairo, including those of the Cretan proprietor of the popular Café Trianon. I felt very sad at having to tear these papers into tiny pieces, and to hide them forever inside the bole of a nearby gnarled and ancient olive tree.

That little task completed, I felt less ill at ease. Instead of taking a wide diversion around the village President's home, I decided to follow the track which ran quite close beside it. I wondered how many of the Jerry detachment were still keeping an eye on any passers-by. The place seemed peaceful enough. I could not hear anyone talking. It certainly gave me a strange feeling as I climbed the hill, and it took me all my time and composure to try and look casual and unconcerned. I had reached the top of the hill and was thinking what a relief it was to be clear of danger when I got a helluva sudden fright. Three or four rifle shots rang out in quick succession. Naturally I feared at first that some unseen, nasty Nazi was taking pot-shots at me. Then I heard some excited shouting. Since no one appeared to be following me, I considered that it was someone else who was then in trouble. I quickened my step. I could feel my heart pounding within me as I began to follow the well-worn pathway towards Rodovani. I recalled that the ancient city of Elyros used to flourish in this region and that present-day Souiya used to be its seaport, although it was then known as Sia. I waved back to some friendly shepherds tending their flocks in the fields but I did not stop to speak to them. A few more hours of brisk walking and climbing and I found myself once more in the familiar countryside near Akladiakes. Seeing the place again made me think of the anxious fortnight I had spent there during the September 1941 Operation Roundup.

By then it was close to sunset. While I was bathing my aching feet in the gurgling stream which I knew so well, I spotted a stranger with a rifle slung over his shoulder, as he passed close by along the goat track. He turned out to be a member of the well-known Sartzetis Clan, which had been engaged in a family feud with the Pendaris Clan. In May 1942 I had heard the two opposing parties blazing away at each other while I was sheltering near Leivadas, and I mistook them for belligerent Jerries.

My planned early start the next morning was delayed. I noticed an enemy patrol exercising on the hills opposite my resting place. When they disappeared, I set off on the trail. There was only light German road traffic by the time I crossed into the Kakodiki Valley, and passed close by Vlithia. I took off my boots and forded the stream, not far from our former campsite of Waterview. I was climbing the mountain near Macha when I was surprised to hear someone calling out "Dimitri, wait a moment." I could only suppose that the caller recognised me from such a distance from the clothes I was wearing. My outfit was the same as I had been given by Fifi away back in December 1941. My caller turned out to be George Fratzeskakis. I had not seen our friend since the previous October. It was a real pleasure for us to meet up again after all those months. We chose an even piece of ground and sat down under the shade of some almond trees to have a long chat. George was always well-versed in the latest war news. He filled me in on what was happening in our nearest war-theatre. I learned that "Fortress Crete" was soon to have a new Commander. General Alexander Andrae, who took over from General Kurt Student in July 1941, was about to leave the island and be succeeded by General Brauer.

"Until recently, this new tyrant has been persecuting our people in the Herakleion Sector," informed my friend. I wondered if this officer was the same Colonel Brauer who had led one of the Nazi Airborne Assault Regiments during the Battle of Crete.

George let it be known that he was not rejoicing because of the approaching change of command. He considered Brauer to be every bit as cruel and ruthless as Andrae. Come to think of it, I had read a pamphlet or two which RAF planes had recently dropped over Crete and in which Brauer and his ilk were warned that they would be arraigned before the War Crimes Commission when the war was over. Before I parted from my friend, he made me promise to look him up on my way back from Western Selinos. More climbing, followed by more or less strenuous walking, landed me in Cephalonia a few hours later. On my arrival there I was assured that I had been lucky enough to miss an enemy roving patrol by about an hour. There were a dozen Jerries in the party, two Greek policemen and two agrofilakes.

These last-named uniformed officials were really rural policemen. One of their duties was to settle arguments between villagers, such as occur when Grigori's ravenous goats find their way into Michali's vineyard, and devour all his ripening grapes. On this occasion the visiting party had been checking up on livestock records as well as examining identity papers.

"O Theos einai megalos!" exclaimed one of my friends, remarking on my well timed visit so soon after that of the Jerries. Perhaps after all, my belated departure from Akladiakes had worked out for the best. When I heard them mention "O geros Australos" I pricked up my ears hopefully. Alas! I learned that the elderly Aussie they were referring to had taken to his scrapers before the armed detachment had arrived in the neighbourhood. As a consequence, no one knew where to contact him when the scare was over. Although scouts went out looking for Old Tom Spriggs, they had no luck. Sadly, I had to push on to Vothiana without him. However, I left appropriate instructions as to where to contact me.

When I met up with Alex Makrakis again, he expressed both his pleasure at seeing me as well as his disappointment that I had not left the island after our last farewell. He again offered to contact Murray McLagan for me. This time, my compatriot did not have to come all the way up from Koudoura on the south coast. Murray had been waiting in the tiny hamlet of Ayios Panteleimon, which is situated on a hilltop overlooking Voutas. The pair of us settled down in a sunny spot and well away from the public thoroughfares, to have a good chat.

"First of all Jim, I must tell you about a strange and rather weird experience I had this morning. On awakening, I noticed the distinct outline of the figure five etched on the roof of the cave I was sheltering in. Of course, I immediately realised the significance of that phenomenon. I knew for sure that today would be the one when you would be calling for me. What a happy omen that turned out to be," he enthused. I advised him to memorise the names of the two local families who had been caring for him during the last months.

"Don't worry! Their names are Dagounakis and Fiatakis," he replied. Alas! After that pleasant start to our chat, Murray warned me to stand by for some really grim news. Apparently the folks in Kousto-Yerakos had been trying to contact me and let me know the bad news but I had been too much on the move.

"What incredibly bad luck for Tom and Harry! The poor blighters were arrested by the Mixed Patrol the very day you left to collect us," explained Murray. To put it mildly, I was deeply shocked when I heard about the sad fate of our two friends. Just when their day of rescue was so

close! Was it possible that the shots I had heard that day were connected with their capture?

“The good part of the bad news is that we have been assured that the show will go on as planned. That should cheer you up. Another cancellation would have sent us all completely barmy,” he continued, pensively.

I begged to be told more details about the shattering incident. According to Murray, there was no chance of it turning out to be just a wild rumour. As I recalled so clearly, the day Tom and Harry showed up at the village fountain at Moni was a very hot one. We could well imagine how pleased they must have been initially, as they relaxed after their arduous cross-country trek from Deres to keep their deadline appointment with the team.

“The reports passed on to me stated that Tom and Harry were accompanied by a Cretan patriot. He was the same chap who liquidated the Nazi agent from Corinth, in the kapheneion at Kakodiki, some time ago. Another compelling reason why our lads looked forward to a rest beside the fountain was that they were both breaking in new pairs of Italian jack-boots. They intended taking them off the island as souvenirs, when the time came. What a rude shock the trio must have got, when they first spotted a group of armed, uniformed men coming towards them! The party proved to be the Mixed Patrol – four Jerries and two Greek policemen. The three weary travellers had to do some quick thinking. From what we now know, Tom and Harry must have decided to stay their ground and try and bluff their way out of their dilemma. The Cretan could not afford to hang around and face the impending direct challenge. He was under threat of execution for his part in the Kakodiki affair. That is why he quickly announced to his companions that he was about to make a dash for it. Our lads saw their chance of ridding themselves of all the incriminating plans, photographs and documents they had collected in readiness for Cairo. The hurried exchange took place furtively. Before anyone could say ‘Quinston Tsortsil’ the Cretan took off like a streak of lightning. He veered and weaved and dodged his way amongst the olive trees. The oncoming members of the Mixed Patrol were caught off guard. It took them precious moments to unshoulder their rifles and take aim at their elusive target.

“Fortunately for all concerned, the Cretan made a clean getaway. He sped over the mountains towards Koustoyerakos, and quickly contacted some of the village elders. He pleaded with them to arm themselves and rush to free Tom and Harry whom he feared would have been arrested. Well, to cut a long story short, it was decided to let things stand. Any rescue attempt was bound to cause loss of life as well as spoiling plans for

our big evacuation. On top of those possibilities, widespread reprisals were bound to take place," explained Murray.

Back again to the reconstruction of the probable happenings when Tom and Harry were challenged. So far as we could make out, both men were carrying forged identity papers the day they were captured. The leader of the Mixed Patrol seemed satisfied enough with their documents. As ill-luck would have it, who should be one of the Greek policemen in the Mixed Patrol but Christos, the arch-traitor stationed in Souiya! In his opinion, the lads' papers needed further looking into. He suggested that the two suspects be led away for further closer questioning. They certainly did not appear to be genuine Cretans, in Christos' opinion. On the track towards the President's house, Tom and Harry managed to pass on secretly to the other policeman their remaining documents, and gold sovereign pieces. Fortunately he was sympathetic to their cause and did not denounce them. When the pair were body-searched, the Jerries discovered only one suspicious scrap of paper in Tom's pocket, which was worth querying. I would have to wait until we arrived back at the Water Cave to hear how Tom and Harry fared after being escorted from Moni to Paleochora on foot, and thence to Canes by motor vehicle.

As soon as I was told about Tom's capture, I could not help thinking about the strange premonition concerning our leader which Sergeant Corbould had expressed many days ago. Could it be that this Aussie NCO was some sort of psychic?

The same day that Murray turned up, I contacted Des Reynolds and Len Beere. Both of them had carried out instructions not to wander too far away from their usual hideouts, thus making it easier for me to contact them. The next day, the four of us watched the various magical stages of yet another brilliant sunrise. We worked out that over the past twenty-two months of wandering around Crete, we must have witnessed hundreds of sunrises and sunsets, especially as we had been living outdoors for most of that time. The miller's charming wife dropped by our hideout to give us some food. Judging from the contents of her basket she had been collecting fennel and grape-hyacinth bulbs. She told us about two very alarming news items. First of all, the Jerries had just publicly announced the sinking of a caique loaded with Greeks from the mainland. This tragic event took place off the west coast of Crete. Their vessel was dive-bombed as it was sailing for Egypt or Libya. All on board perished. The second item was equally as upsetting, especially as it took place only a few kilometres from Vothiana.

"The wily Gestapo, of all people, have just set up a listening post at nearby Voutas. Instead of taking over the local school as a billet, they have

## Appointment at Tripiti

On the morning after our group's arrival at the Water Cave, Charlie Hunter gave me a sheet of paper torn from a school exercise book. I was asked to complete part of the final embarkation list. This little task was complicated, for instance, by the fact that we did not know the surnames of the Cypriots, only their assumed first names.

When Sergeant Corbould and Bluey Salmon arrived with their contingent from Kissamos, we sat down together to work out all the names.

For the record, here are the names, in alphabetical order, of the New Zealanders whom we listed for that memorable evacuation from Tripiti: Len Beere, John Findlay, Alan Grant, Les Kelly, Milton Knight, Ken Little, Jim McDevitt, Murray McLagan, Arthur Pauling, Jim Quinn, John Symes, Bill Wood.

So far as I can recall, there were a similar number of Aussies on our list, plus three Tommies and quite a few Cypriots.

Charlie evidently took the Royal Navy's instructions about safeguarding the orderliness of the evacuation seriously. He considered it essential that all our names be put in a saucepan (we had no hats), and that they be drawn out by chance. I drew place number 20 in our little lottery. Ken Little drew the next number after mine. Charlie had been ordered to leave one copy of our embarkation list behind with the village elders, just in case our rescue vessel suffered the misfortune of being "lost at sea", due to enemy action.

You can well imagine how all of us hopefuls must have felt as the hours of R day, 8th May, 1943, ticked slowly by. We were intensely excited. Smiles and good-natured banter were very much in evidence. Our leader made sure that the names of Wally Swinburne, Sergeant Nicholls, Norman Scott and Old Tom Spriggs were recorded as having missed out on our evacuation.

At one stage in the afternoon, Charlie Hunter gave the signal for the lads from Canyon Camp to begin the long trek down to the coast. Petros Georgiakakis had been summoned from his village to act as their guide. All those campers were waiting in readiness for such a call. Meantime, those of us still waiting at headquarters set to with a will and tidied up our premises. We returned all our cooking gear and our unused provisions to

the villagers of Koustoyerakos.

Our leader obviously had the local custom in mind when he looked up at the sun shining in the clear blue sky and measured four hand spans in a westerly direction from it. He then declared it was time for our group to begin our exodus. We followed the well-worn pathway up to the Koutsonara spring, which supplies the locals, and filled our water bottles. This was a well planned part of the programme, because there was no other source of fresh water between there and the south coast. The Aussie also warned all hands to be careful not to fall down any of the ravines or precipices we would strike on the way to Tripiti, especially as no ropes were being carried to help rescue any such unfortunate hiker!

What a magnificent view we enjoyed as we skirted high around Mount Psilaphi! During our previous very extensive wanderings around the island of the Lotus-eaters, we had never before seen such impressive scenery. It was like being in a completely new world, which until now had been effectively shut off from our gaze. Below us and stretching for miles and miles in all directions, there arose mountain fold after mountain range. Two towering peaks, higher than those surrounding them, came in for our special admiration. They could have been Mount Gingilos and Mount Valachios. Distance and the brilliant sunshine playing on them made these peaks look an enchanting bluish colour. We pored over our one and only map of the region and tried to pin-point Mount Venizelos. We also worked out where the famous Samaria Gorge – the longest in Europe – began amongst those confusing ranges.

Come to think of it, I had actually seen these breathtaking mountain peaks before. That revelation happened away back in March 1941 when they were completely covered in snow. At that time I was standing on the heaving deck of the troop ship *Breconshire* which was transporting our unit from Alexandria to Piraeus.

“Away over there to the east and still in the foreground, stand the challenging peaks known as the Untrodden Crags! You have heard the locals talking about them with a kind of respectful awe. Since they are so inaccessible to man, they happen to be the last habitat of the wily sure-footed Cretan ibex or “elafi”. These wild animals are definitely on the endangered species,” informed our leader. “It was during one of the locals’ hunting expeditions into this inhospitable territory that some villagers stumbled upon the bleached bones of two Allied soldiers. These poor wretches must have perished there during their trek towards the evacuation beaches of Khora Spahkia, away back in May 1941,” he added rather mournfully.

For several hours our long straggling procession of eager marchers pushed on over the rugged mountainous terrain. The blinding rays of the sun beat down fiercely causing us to perspire profusely. We made good use of our walking sticks to prevent ourselves from slipping over a precipice or sliding down one of the many unstable gravel scree we encountered on our way. In places, the usual tracks had become obliterated with dislodged trees and piles of rubble. These had been deposited during winter storms or even during the more recent spring thaw. I remembered that Staff-Sergeant Tom Moir had described some of the scenery of this barren region as reminding him of Mount Tarawera, back in New Zealand.

At one stage during our mass exodus to the south coast, some of us became concerned that we were being followed. This was true enough, but the culprits were not armed Nazis but winged, gliding onlookers in the nature of carrion hawks and golden eagles. There were also a few bearded buzzards taking a distinct interest in our steady progress. It was quite refreshing to find ourselves descending to the tree level of the mountains. There were plenty of sturdy pines, sentinel spruces and stately cypresses to be seen, and we were grateful for the natural shade and cover they provided. From time to time we came across several gaunt tree skeletons and we remarked on their weather-beaten, naked limbs, some of which had been polished by the continuous action of the elements over many seasons.

One of the highlights of our trek came our way when some of us adventurous souls made a temporary detour from the rest of the party. We had set our hearts on getting a farewell glimpse of the Jerries camped far below us and to the west of our look-out point. We gazed down on the sleepy seaport of Souiya and on the enemy encampment further inland. The forbidden sights we saw that final day were certainly memorable ones, even though our range of view was a comparatively distant one. Thus, for the very first time, we were able to study the broad sweep of the Jerry-held beachline. It seemed to be a mixture of shingle and sand. We noticed a line of trees on the beach. These could have been tamarisks.

We commented on the large caique anchored in the bay, and we wondered if it was the so-called "salt boat" we had heard so much about. Not a sign of a single patrol boat, and certainly none of the sea-planes which used to visit the place. Souiya, we observed, was only a small settlement in those days – a collection of white-washed stone houses with tiled roofs and a kapheneion bedecked with sun awnings. That pile of decaying ruins beneath the mountain looked quite interesting. They were all that remained of the big aqueduct which stood there during the Roman

Occupation. The tents and scattered buildings obviously belonged to the coast-watchers. We were able to make out a few tiny figures moving about on a level piece of ground. In the distance they could have been mistaken for toy soldiers, but we knew full well that they were real enough.

We were satisfied that the troops down there did not seem to have a clue as to what was happening on the side of the mountain which divided us. I could not help grinning when I saw a member of our group waving a farewell gesture in the direction of the Souiya garrison! Not long after we resumed our trek, we heard the dreaded drone of the Luftwaffe aircraft in the sky. It was not easy to spot the culprit intruders, due to the high speed with which they were patrolling the coast line. We felt deeply apprehensive about their presence in our air space. However, we reasoned that those prying aircraft had little chance of spotting our movements on the ground. It is true to say that we would have been far more worried had they been slow-flying "recce" planes.

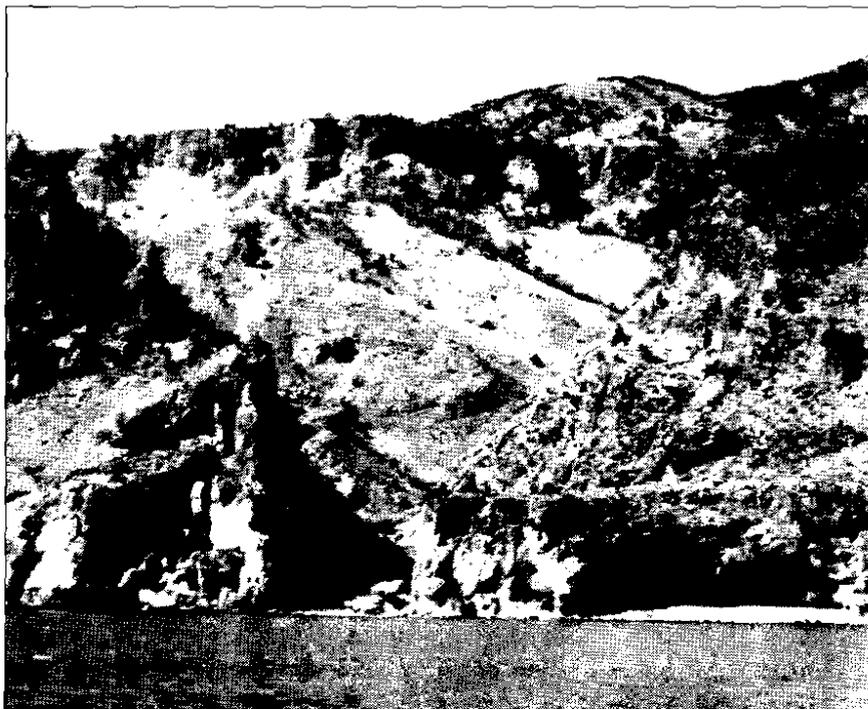
We were thankful for the easier travelling conditions we experienced as we got much closer to our destination. So far as we could make out, none of our would-be evacuees had suffered sprained ankles, let alone fallen down a ravine. A shout of joy and triumph rent the air as we walked in single file between the two awesome sides of a narrow gorge. This meant that we had descended from a height of several thousand feet to almost sea level. It was plain that we were then walking on a dried up water-course along which torrents would have rushed after the spring thaw had melted the snow on the mountains. On entering open territory once more, I was surprised to see plenty of healthy vegetation growing there. Patches of aniseed-smelling fennel, horse radish, mustard and sage plants abounded. The oleander bushes with their blooms of many different hues added a lively touch of colour to the scenery. Whenever I see oleanders I am sure they remind me of Crete!

What a climactic joy it was to get my first glimpse of peaceful Tripiti! Our map told me that this cove, and the gorge behind it, marked the convenient boundary between the Eparshies of Selinos and Sfakia. Now that the Nazi patrol planes had returned to their base we felt relieved that we had the place to ourselves. It was time to do some leisurely exploring. There was not a single building to be seen anywhere; but we did come across a colony of beehives scattered all over the place. Some of the hives were almost hidden amidst the tall heather and oregano. The vast expanse of blue sea looked calm and alluring, with not so much as a ripple to disturb its surface. Almost due south of our position loomed the lofty peaks of Gavdos Island, whilst at its feet lay the smaller outcrop of Gavdopoula. At a guess, I would say the distance between Gavdos and Tripiti would be

twenty-five miles. Some Cretans still regard Gavdos as the legendary home of the goggle-eyed Cyclops monster which was immortalised by the Greek author Homer, in his *Odyssey*. Anyway, it is worth mentioning that Gavdos was for centuries regarded as of great strategic importance to traders. Apart from early invaders such as the Romans, the island has been occupied as a convenient base for pirates and smugglers from Algeria, Malta and Turkey, and even from Sfakia, across the water to the north.

For our last time on Crete, we stood around in groups and welcomed the setting of the sun. It was noticeable that the hills enclosing Tripiti dropped very steeply to the shoreline. We commented with satisfaction that any German raiding party planning on cutting short our evacuation would have to come by sea, rather than over this rugged terrain. As the Royal Navy was well aware, their Fairmile would have no need to worry about battling against a nasty tide because there would be no swell!

Loud cheers rent the still air when we noticed a detachment of black-turbaned braves from Koustoyerakos trooping down to the foreshore. They



*The cove at Tripiti where we were rescued by a Royal Navy submarine chaser in May 1943.*

carried their rifles on their shoulders and wore bandoliers of ammunition draped across their chests. These “andartes” seemed to materialise from nowhere. We certainly had not spotted them coming down the mountain trail behind us.

“Seeing such an impressive escort service, should make us feel like VIPs – Very Important Passengers!” declared one of the Aussie bystanders. As the evening shadows deepened, we lined up close to our allotted positions. On hearing someone calling my name, I pricked up my ears. I answered the call and met two of the famous SOE agents who had been operating down our end of the island. Now that we expected to leave Crete within a matter of hours, these agents did not have to worry about making themselves known to us. Fancy meeting up with Xan Fielding (Alekos) and Arthur Read (Leftheri). Thanks to them I was introduced to the mysterious ‘Lady X’ of the wireless messages. Just as I had hoped, she turned out to be that lovely and intrepid lady, Katina Perakis. What a happy, heart-warming encounter that was! We exchanged friendly hugs and joked about the “love and kisses” postscript which Ned Nathan and I added to the end of Fifi’s letter away back in December 1941. Come to think of it, I should have given Katina an extra hug on Ned’s behalf to make up for our absent friend in Stalag 8B, Lamsdorf!

## Farewell to Crete

Time seemed to drag ever so slowly for us impatient waiters beside the water's edge. Some of our pals whiled away the time by breaking rank and strolling restlessly up and down the narrow strip of sand. As for myself, I joined some of the others in a final pleasant dip in the briny. On stepping out of the water I noticed that I was glowing all over. That's right! Hundreds of phosphorescent pinpoints covered my naked body, a phenomenon I had first noticed when we enjoyed our night time swims down at Ktista in 1941.

Cries of alarm and shock were heard on all sides when things began to happen on Gavdos Island. Lo and behold! A steady stream of morse-code lamp flashes stabbed the night skyline away to the south of our position. We could tell that they were coming from a high look-out post on the island. The rapid fire messages came across clearly and were well punctuated. What did it all mean? Our optimists reckoned that it was probably only a routine exchange of communications with Souiya or Paleochora; most likely the former. The pessimists feared that the enemy radar station or listening post had picked up the beat of our incoming Fairmile's engine.

After my refreshing dip in the briny, I rejoined Charlie Hunter. We still had plenty of waiting time to fill in before zero hour came along so I got chatting to our group leader, hoping to catch up on some more of the gossip titbits which I missed out on during my roundup errand. Sure enough, I was treated to some more most interesting comments about our imminent rescue. I even learned the latest "guff" about the identity of the Secret Intelligence agents who would be sailing along with us to freedom.

There was news too, of a last-minute change to the type of vessel which the Royal Navy would be sending to pick us up. Instead of an MTB (motor torpedo boat) we would now be boarding an ML (motor launch).

During my absence in Western Crete, some distinguished company had called in at the Water Cave, having been guided there by a runner from Koustoyerako – Xan Fielding and Arthur Read, along with the mysterious 'Lady X'. The two agents had collected their charge and a guide from the village of Kyriakosellia. Strange as it may seem, the female traveller was

not kitted out in a suitable pair of stout boots as one would expect. No, she wore her usual pair of high-heeled shoes instead. Just think of it! Had she traipsed out of her village wearing boots, then all her neighbours would have become alerted about her present secret travel plans – something the SOE tried hard to avoid.

The south-bound party took a risk in travelling via Omalos, but they were cautious enough to skirt around the high altitude plateau, for fear of being spotted by the member of the Jerry outpost, which we all knew had been established there. Some Luftwaffe types were seen to be moving about the new airstrip laid down to cater for light planes, such as Fieseler-Storchs.

As things turned out, there was an amusing side to the mountain trip made by our distinguished guests. Whenever the group bumped into different knots of shepherds grazing their flocks on the high level pastures, these curious folk naturally quizzed the travellers about the unusual spectacle of a smart-looking lady tagging along with them.

Stelios, their trusty guide, came up with what appeared to be a plausible story suited for the occasion. “Stelios explained that he had abducted the fair young maiden from her villa and that the group were fleeing from the wrath of her family, as he purposely glanced down at the poor girl’s unusual footwear,” declared Charlie, with a laugh.

Another important caller whom I missed meeting at the Water Cave was a Scotsman with a broad accent. His name was Alec Tarves. Charlie had been told to expect him at Tripiti to pick up a new wireless transmitter from our incoming boat. It was a real thrill to meet up again with Stelios Papaderos who had looked after me during Operation Roundup No. 2 the previous year. He was a former Greek Army officer who had landed so unceremoniously amidst a howling gale and rainstorm near Souiya, towards the end of November 1942 and only a few months after I had first met him. Another big surprise came with my meeting with Nickos Souris whom I was longing to meet at Therisso in July 1941 because he held an important post in the Allied escape system. Better late than never, I thought to myself!

I shall always remember how Charlie and I stopped our nattering on hearing some of our Aussie contingent from further along the beach singing their all-time favourite, *Waltzing Matilda*.

Perhaps Charlie regarded this impromptu vocal treat as being a cue to set out on his signalling mission. Glancing at his alarm clock, he let out a gasp of surprise.

“Cripes Jim! It’s gone 2100 hours already,” blurted Charlie. He checked that his stock-in-trade was all present and correct. Besides his

luminous time-piece, he carried his torch, pencil and message pad, on which he had noted the Morse code symbols and the message spacings.

“It won’t be long soon!” quipped Murray McLagan. By the way, this particular saying was quite often bandied about amongst those waiting evacuation from the beaches of mainland Greece in April 1941. To us impatient and anxious hopefuls, time seemed to drag ever so slowly, but with Charlie’s dutiful departure, a new phase was entered upon. Quite in keeping with our long vigil, we started guessing as to where our dream boat might be at various intervals. Without the help of a single watch, it was not easy to guess accurately what hour it was. Alas! When what we took to be 2200 hours had come and gone, and all our peering into the gloom ahead of us brought no sight of our rescue craft, we began to worry. “The Navy’s late again! I hope our boat has not run into trouble,” piped up one of the Tommies.

So many more precious moments passed without reward that we were beginning to doubt if anything would show up in the end. It was common hearsay amongst our blokes that many trips by the *Hedgehog* and the *Porcupine* to the other end of the island during 1941 and 1942 had been cancelled because Luftwaffe planes kept on shadowing them all the way.

Our hopes brightened again sometime after 2300 hours (our estimated time). One of the bathers still frolicking about in the water suddenly let out an excited cry of delight. He claimed to have detected the first faint vibration given off by a marine engine of sorts!

“Wishful thinking!” scoffed one of the cynics. “Imaginitis,” teased someone, just as dubious.

Anyway, from those moments on, we all resolved to “cut the cackle” while we listened, as we waited. That electrifying hush, which had absorbed us all, was shattered only when our armed Cretan escorts advanced towards us. They made sure that no gate-crashers had joined us. Once again, the lone swimmer reported that there was definitely something unusual going on out there. He hoped to God that it was not one of “theirs”!

“Well I’ll be blowed! The bloke in the water must be right after all! I swear I can just make out some faint, hopeful sounds,” declared Frank Ezzy. Some minutes later, even the most cynical amongst us became convinced that our long vigil had been rewarded. Sure enough, we could barely detect that faint throbbing sound drifting across the calmest of seas.

Someone passed the word around that it was now time to take off most of our clothes and to step out of our footwear. As I piled my possessions on the growing heap on the sand, I could not help thinking of Fifi back in

enjoy the luxury of the hard wooden seating which ran around the blunt end of the ship, another matelot appeared before us, and pushed a cup of steaming cocoa into our hands.

“What a happy coincidence this is Ken! On the first day I arrived on Cretan soil from the famous *HMS Ajax*, I was offered a similar mug of Navy cocoa, sweet and hot. Now, once again on my last day on the island, I get the same courteous treatment,” I commented enthusiastically to my companion.

Ken and I could have moved further along the deck had we so wished, or even disappeared downstairs to the overcrowded cabin. Truth to tell, we preferred to remain in our present positions, the better to enjoy the continuing drama of our evacuation. Yes, we got a real kick out of watching this once in a lifetime event. Whenever we recognised one of our cobbbers, or one of our Cretan friends, we yelled out our own form of welcome aboard.

I well recall how the Navy lads whistled when they saw the Aussie with a king-sized beard step on board. Really it was a wonder that this bloke made it safely to the top of the ladder, what with his facial encumbrance which was liable to trip him up. Came the stage when all of our evader community were safely stowed on board. It was now the turn of the Cretans to join us. They were all grinning from ear to ear, that is, all but one poor chap whose face and forehead were cut and bruised and covered with oozing blood. The chap sitting next to Ken and me threw some light on how this unfortunate came to be so battered about.

“That’s the poor wretch who was beaten up by the sentries. Tried to pass himself off as one of us. Xan Fielding decided to let him go aboard, seeing he was so desperate to join the Greek Sacred Brigade in the Middle East,” he explained.

Three of the Cretan army officers whom I recognised on deck were Stelios Papaderos, Charalambos Seiradakis (both from Leivadas), and Manoli Papagrigrakis (from Rodovani).

In between ferrying trips, Ken and I studied the many impressive features of our purring dream boat. We were greatly taken by her trim, battle-worthy appearance. Her array of modern armaments, which included anti-aircraft guns and new-fangled radar gear, made us soon realise how such vessels came to be christened “Hedgehog” and “Porcupine”. They were simply bristling with weaponry. As I near the end of my writings about my Cretan exile, I regret that I did not learn the name of our ML’s skipper, or something about her naval exploits in the hazardous war zone.

Just as the protracted embarkation was drawing to a close, a ship’s

Sklavopoula. It was she who had given me my civilian garb and seen to it that my army boots were strongly reinforced with rubber tiring wired to soles to make them last longer. I also got rid of my shepherd's crook which had served me so faithfully over the past many months.

I should explain here that this ceremonial ritual of casting off clothing and footwear was a standard procedure on the part of all would-be evacuees leaving Occupied Crete. Once again, I recalled how the four Kiwi lads who were picked up from north-western Crete by the Greek submarine *Papanicolis* were hauled aboard clad only in their coming-out suits!

Meantime, the wave of unfettered excitement which gripped us all, and made our hearts beat faster, became even more intense. Even so, because of past disappointments, we still remained just a trifle restrained in our optimism. Naturally some of our pals voiced their fears. What if that incoming vessel turned out to be "the enemy". Then again, there was the possibility of our ML being picked up by the shore-based searchlights. Tom Moir, our gallant former leader, had often told us how Allied agents, passing close to Messara Bay, a Nazi stronghold further to the east, used to dread the wide-sweeping searchlight beams which posed a serious threat there.

More whoops of joy rent the air when someone with Xray type eyesight claimed that he could make out the dim outline of something interesting on the horizon. From then on, we all became even more all-eyes and all-ears, as the saying goes. By peering in the right direction and fortified by a keen sense of hopefulness, others of us also claimed to be able to make out a vague, indefinable form out in the distance. As time passed we noticed that the throb of the engines had died down to a steady muted purr. When we failed to notice our ML's shape becoming well-defined, we suspected that her skipper decided not to risk coming closer to the shore.

The next highlight of our unfolding drama took place when Big John Simkin, the expert Australian diver and hero of the 1942 salvage operation, proudly announced that he was about to "take off". Those closest to him cheered him on his way as he dived into the starlit sea. Charlie Hunter had earlier given the swimmer his blessing to do his act. He wanted to be the very first to reach our dream-boat, and to assure the skipper that all was in readiness for the big show. After a temporary lull, we heard a hubbub of voices coming from the further end of the beach. Not wishing to miss a single trick, some of us dashed along in that direction. We were rewarded with the sight of the first rubber dinghy being rowed shorewards. Two new SOE agents dressed nattily in Cretan attire, wearing knee-high boots



*Fifi with Ned Nathan in London for the twentieth anniversary of the Battle of Crete in 1961.*

and carrying back-packs, stepped jauntily ashore. They inquired for "Alekos", whom we knew to be Xan Fielding. After exchanging greetings, the pair handed over a big bottle of gin and what looked like a package of documents in a waterproof covering.

As befitted the special occasion, Katina was honoured with first place in the outgoing dinghy. The other seat was taken by a young Alexandrian who had served in the Battle of Crete and joined the Intelligence Service from the outset of the Occupation. This was the Scarlet Pimpernel chap named Nickos Souris.

"Hooray! At long last the big show is under way!" enthused Ken Little. Still confident that no enemy surprise party was within earshot, we cheered as the pioneer dinghy was deftly rowed away into the darkness. In due course we discovered that only two dinghies had been allocated to the ferrying service. We could therefore foresee that our rescue operation was bound to be a long, drawn-out affair. Come to think of it, only two rowers could have been spared because the guns had to be manned in case of enemy intervention!

After what seemed like an eternity, it was good to notice that our ranks had thinned out considerably. Now it was the turn of Ken Little and myself to thankfully take our places in one of the dinghies. Our rower was a man of few words. Maybe he was saving his energies for the task in hand. It was sheer ecstasy to feel ourselves being swiftly propelled over the placid waters towards our dream-boat. The nearer we nudged towards her, the more thrilled we became.

Our ML was doing little more than marking time over the same spot. Actually, she was nosing forwards at a snail's pace. The water all around us was being whipped up into a white, seething mass. Typical nautical aroma of tar, oil and steam assailed our nostrils. It rekindled memories of voyages back home on one of our inter-island ferry steamers. We wondered what the man with the dangling, weighted line was doing, that was until we heard him announcing the various depths to the officer leaning over the deck rail. "Ten fathoms", a pause, "Nine fathoms" and so on. I felt like telling the Navy lads that there was deep water right up to the shoreline. On second thoughts I kept my counsel to myself!

Then came one of the greatest moments of the entire blissful evening – being hauled up from our dinghy to the safety of our dream boat, via a rope ladder. "Welcome aboard, chums" greeted a friendly Jack Tar. He sported a well-trimmed beard like that of Captain Emilios, the SOE agent whom I had met in August 1941. Sure enough, Ken and I felt ecstatic to be on board our rescuing ML. Even before we had time to settle back and

quartermaster bloke did the rounds and presented us with a warm, woollen blanket to drape our half-naked shoulders. I shall never forget the amused look on the face of our benefactor when he glanced down at our bare feet, and gave a wide grin. "Maleesh the slippers, chum," Ken declared as the sailor moved on to the next passenger

Surprisingly, the last person to step on board was one of our SOE agents. Even in the half-light I recognised him as Arthur Reade. Perhaps, he did not relish the idea of leaving behind his fellow-operators, Xan and Paddy Leigh-Fermor!

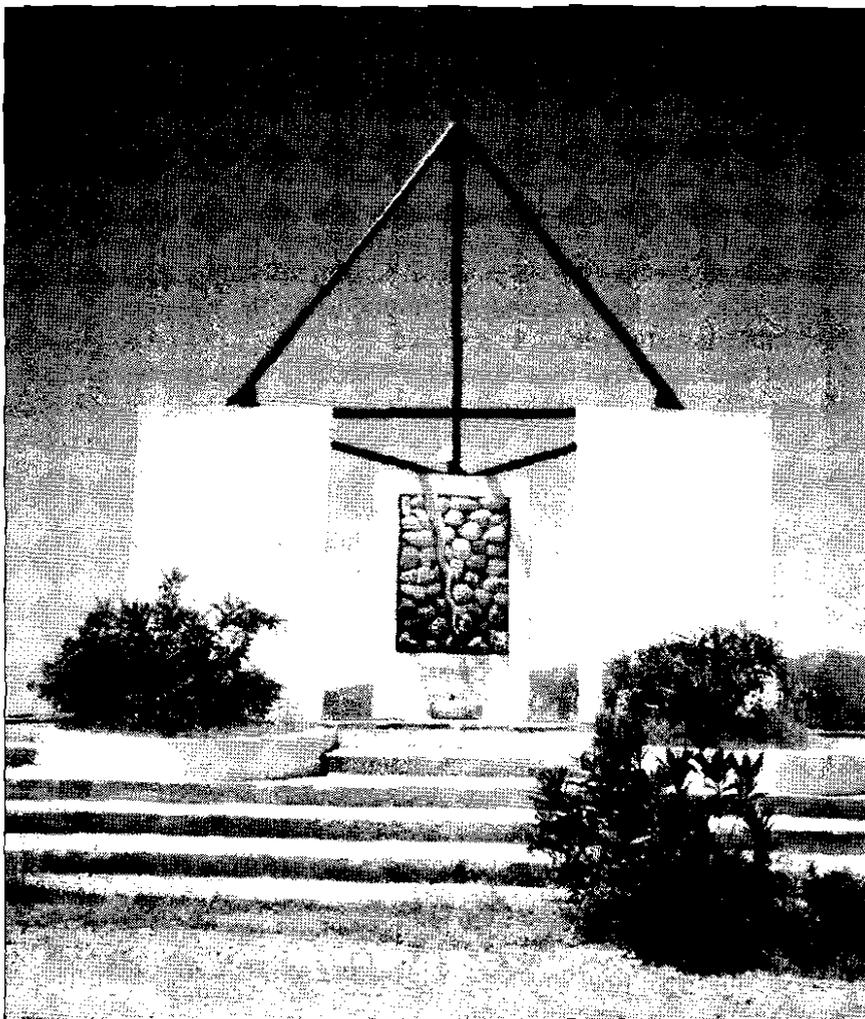
Just how long our entire rescue operation had lasted, none of us had an accurate idea. After allowing for the late start, Ken and I reckoned that the hour must now be well past midnight. The reason for our ML's late arrival was put down to the difficulty of picking up Charlie's Morse code torch flashes. The heat-haze of the day must have turned into a sort of nuisance coastal mist which played havoc with the visibility. Anyway, as final shipboard preparations were going ahead for our departure, we presumed the date had passed from 8th May to 9th May. This, by a happy coincidence, was Ken's birthday. "Bound to be the happiest and most memorable day of my life," he declared.

At last, our ML's turbo-charged engines were now revving up from a pulsating throb to a shattering din, then she shuddered from stem to stern. Instinctively we grabbed hold of our seats with a firmer grip. Some of the steel-helmeted gun crews swivelled their guns so as to face the westerly direction, whence our feared enemy trouble might come. Orders were bellowed out. There was a ringing of bells, and a hissing of steam. With a powerful lurch forwards, we felt we were well on our way to freedom. Flap James let us all know that our take-off reminded him of a clanging Bondi tram back home! Behind us we left a white turbulent stream of phosphorescent wash.

In double quick time we reached a point directly opposite the headland which separated peaceful Tripiti from dangerous, hostile Souiya. The eyes of all on deck scanned the dark outline of the coastline. Would the glare of searchlights disclose us to the night time sentries? Had the general alarm been sounded? Would we soon be seeing a steady hail of tracer-bullets and lots of fearsome shell-fire? The suspense was agonising.

Eventually most of our pent-up fears and anxieties were stilled. We relaxed once more on our hard seats and drew our blankets about us. How lucky we had all been to come through the present dangers! Not so much as a shot or searchlight beam from the Jerry coastguards! Our getaway had been a resounding success!

Meantime, our trusty craft surged full-speed ahead, ploughing relentlessly through the starlit night. A steady stream of sparks of many hues belched forth from the ship's funnel. High up on lofty Gavdos Island, the lamp flashes still stabbed the night sky. Once we had passed unscathed by this island, which was Hitler's most southerly conquest now that his Forces had been completely routed in North Africa, we all felt more secure and elated.



*The Cretan war memorial at Koustoyerakos, a centre for guerilla activity.*

After all the intense exertions and excitements of the past few days, most of us on deck seemed to be content to sit back and dream of soon being united with family and friends in the free world. As the dark forms of the Cretan mountains gradually receded in the distance, and were eventually lost to view, memories flooded back about twenty-two months' friendship with the loyal, generous and ever-helpful people of the heroic island we had just left behind. Little did we even suspect then that those gallant friends of ours would still have to endure another two years of harsh Nazi enslavement before they, too, would be free again.

At some stage in my reverie, I became aware that Ken had taken himself off to further explore our dream boat, and to chat with our motley passengers. When he rejoined me he passed on some worrying news.

"The skipper allowed me to inspect the workings of his radar-set. Imagine my surprise when we picked up the steady ping on the Asdic detector, which showed that an enemy submarine was hunting us. That's why you may have noticed we have been following a zigzag course to keep out of the raider's way," informed Ken.

"Did you find out our destination?" I then inquired of my cobbler.

"Yes, it's not Mersa or Alex, but Tobruk," he replied, obviously glad to share this important morsel of information. Ken also mentioned that the skipper had told him we were doing an impressive 40 knots until we were clear of Gavdos Island.

Just about the time dawn should have broken, someone pointed to a gigantic cloud of dust which was about to bear down on us. We covered our faces with our blankets. This oncoming, gritty sandstorm was nothing new to us veterans of the Western Desert. Doubtless it was being whipped up by the all-pervading khamseen wind. I recall that about this time the skipper of our ML was warned by radio message from Tobruk to slacken speed in the interests of safety. A rendezvous had been arranged with another Royal Navy launch, to make sure we kept well away from a newly laid minefield. This accompanying ML would guide us safely to our destination and pass many half-sunken ships which were scattered all over the place.

We were surprised to see so many uniformed personalities waiting on the wharf to welcome us back to freedom. Some SOE "top brass" were there, alongside members of the Special Air Service and the Special Boat Service. It was whispered that these latter troops were getting ready to secretly infiltrate support for Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia.

As we trooped ashore from our crowded ML, most of us must have looked like a weird mob, what with our semi-nakedness, our bare feet, and our storm-tossed appearances. When the simple ceremony of welcome

was over, we posed for group photographs, watched by a curious crowd. By far the greatest interest was shown to our Aussie pal with the king-size beard!

Our next combined move took us into a large establishment, where our remaining clothing links with Crete were collected, and presumably cast into the nearest incinerator. We lingered long under the fresh water showers. Then a strange thing happened! Instead of being issued with khaki shorts and shirts as befitted the very warm weather, we got kitted out in winter-style battle-dress uniforms! Still, I must admit we all saw the funny side of this discomfoting experience!

After being so used to wearing light clothing back on Crete, we all felt quite imprisoned in our heavy garb. But all seemed forgiven when

each of us was presented with our first bottle of beer in well over two years. Our Welfare Officer, a chap by the name of Commander Whitehouse, beamed as he watched us sample those bottles of Canadian White Horse beer.

“Your blood is worth bottling mate!” declared Frank Ezzy, with typical Australian fervour.

Eventually our newly-appointed Conducting Officer, a bloke by the name of Major Simcox, introduced himself to us. He explained that he would be looking after us during our three days trip by motor convoy back to Cairo. Our new minder never ceased to



*Calliope and Eftichis Daoundakis in Akladiakes in 1994 – great friends and helpers to all escaped POWs and evaders.*

tire of, or get exasperated by, the dozens of questions our group fired at him. I well remember Murray McLagan's claim that "Major Simcox is easily the best Pom I have ever met in my life!"

Before we had time to pile aboard our canopied trucks, another British Army officer rushed up to give us some startling news. It had just been relayed back from the SOE boys on Crete.

"Would you believe it? All of you chaps must be feeling like the luckiest bunch in the Middle East at the present moment. Within an hour of your dash from Tripiti, hundreds of well-armed Jerries landed in your cove and took up positions all over the place. According to Xan Fielding's message, the frightful din made by your getaway craft alerted everyone, as did those Morse code messages flashed from Gavdos Island," announced the officer.

I reflected with great satisfaction that our individual bids for freedom had at last been rewarded, and our fondest dreams of being rescued from the Isle of Doom had come true, after all those anxious months of wanderings.

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.

This is Jim's story ... a story of hardship, of survival, of friendship and of courage; set against the backdrop of one of the world's most ruggedly beautiful islands.



*Of all the books published on escapes from Crete this is by far the most interesting. Jim writes in a warm, friendly style and describes the many situations and characters perfectly — he brings life to the narrative and maintains tension to the end. A book to be savoured by anyone with a link to World War II or an interest in history.*

Bill Ellison

— author of *Kiwi at Large* and *Kiwi Vagabond*.