

U. S. AIRMAN'S FOUR DAYS SWIMBy Monson Representing the Combined Australian Press

Nothing they knew indicated that there should be any let up in the war. They themselves had been heavily shelled in their positions along the road up to an hour before dawn and now their comrades who had landed on the northern beach had probably been shelled. They raced on.

At Vibo Valencia we overtook a column as it ran into the wildest manifestations of excitement on the part of the population since the advance into Italy began. There could be no further progress until the city had been formally handed over by the leading citizens. They handed it over to an artillery major, with Bren-carriers, they handed it over to his second in command, they handed it over to the correspondents, Christopher Buckley of the London Daily Telegraph, Daniel Deluce of the Associated Press of America, Donald Munro, Free France's Independent Press and myself.

Out from the crowd two men in hospital slacks were pushed forward. They were very happy men these two for they had gone very close to death, closer than most men go and live to tell of it.

They were an American fighter pilot Lieutenant George R. Forbes of Albany, New York, whose Invader was shot down into the sea off the coast and Private Alan Sharman, 21, Lime Avenue, Northampton, a parachutist captured in Sicily. Forbes told an incredible but verified story of having swum for four days in the sea without a bite of food or a drop to drink before he reached the shore.

When I said to him that it was humanly impossible "surely" he replied, "nevertheless it is true, sir."

"I was shot down on the morning of 18th August and swum ashore on the evening of 22nd. The first day I had a rubber boat but I could make no headway against the current using only my hands for paddles so I abandoned it.

"I had my Mae West and for next four days and nights I swam or floated trying to reach the shore which was only ten miles off. By day the current carried me up the coast to the north and by night carried me back.

"I just could not make it but on the fifth day in the water I managed to crawl ashore more dead than alive. I ^{was} covered with sores and was practically delirious but with treatment I completely recovered."

I would say that this was not publishable until the next of kin had been notified for it is the most remarkable feat of human endurance ever recorded.

Sharman was captured in Sicily with Captain Bridgeman Evans and two others and taken to the mainland. Near Palmi they made a break for it and reached the shore, got into a boat and were about 40 yards from the beach when they were fired on by machine-guns. Sharman was shot through the leg but is walking now. All were recaptured, the others being taken to Rome.

All the while they were telling us their stories the crowd was milling round us, shouting long live our countries, showing addresses of welcome into our hands and greeting the Eighth Army men as liberators.

Darkness had almost fallen and still we had no knowledge of the landing force. Our party decided to push ahead and try to join up with them. We turned out of Vibo Valencia and raced along the coastal highway. Miles slipped by and we pushed above the beach where the landing was supposed to have been effected but saw no sign of anyone.

Then in the failing light I glimpsed a man as he vanished from the verge of the road and drop into the shrubs below the embankment swinging his Tommy gun round as he dropped. I called to the driver but we were going too fast for him to stop at once. Then on the high embankment on the other side we saw another soldier. We shot beneath him. He must have seen the American star painted on our bonnet.

Above the roaring we heard a shout, "Stop! stop! you bloody fools, mines."

We realised the situation but it was too late. We saw a ridge of broken
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asphalt across the road indicating mines were laid across the track but we couldn't stop in time. The brakes screamed, four wheels passed on to the ridge and we stopped - with each wheel straddling the mine. One wheel was two inches from the mine when we had a look later. We jumped out.

I asked "who are you?" He replied that he was of the landing force.

He then asked "Are you of the Eighth Army?" We said that we were. He gave a whoop of pleasure. Men then slipped from the trees, crowding round and asking how we had managed to get there so quickly.

Said Corporal Stanley Meek, who had shouted the timely warning: We didn't expect you could get through until tomorrow night. We had just laid these mines and are putting wire across the road as part of our defensive position across the road in case Jerry attacked.

"We landed at dawn this morning. It was raining hard and the sea was running high. Commandos had landed just ahead of us to clean the beach of barbed wire and mines but found the nonstop Jerries didn't put up much opposition, but they had a battery of 88 millimetre guns on the high ground overlooking the beach and they gave some of the landing parties a heavy plastering.

"There was also a bit of machine-gun fire and some mortar fire. We had some casualties, including men killed, but they were not heavy."

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Out of the dark which now/fallen Captain W. Ecrepont of Ayr, Scotland, of the Royal Marine Commandos, suddenly appeared. "Who are you?" he asked. We told him.

His Sergeant, Hubert Charles Uxbridge, slipped out of the darkness.

These men were appearing seemingly out of space. I was glad I was on their side. They came so noiselessly, unexpectedly, and looked ready for business.

What I liked about them particularly was that they recognised us as possible friends when in a lonely spot on an isolated shore. They expected no one but enemies and in the darkness at that. Yes, I liked them for their quick recognition which might easily have proved fatal for us, if they had been ready to shoot rather than comprehend, though those figures melting into the shadow of the trees earlier and the snouts of the Bren-guns which were still pointing towards us showed they were very ready to shoot. And our vehicle was still straddling their mines.

Ecrepont was pleased to see us. He too had not expected contact before the following night.

His story was simple. They had been first for the landing and found no opposition until they were a hundred yards up from the beach. Then the Germans must have spied them. They commenced pumping shells on to the beach where the main force was then leaping from the invasion craft.

Said he "They kept giving the landing force hell throughout the morning. I had succeeded in locating the gun and was moving up with a party to deal with them when I was told that the Australian Kitty bombers were on the way pronto.

"They did it very effectively. The guns ceased firing after the first attack. The Germans then pulled out and we haven't contacted them since, though we believe that they are about two miles ahead."

Outstanding courage was shown before the landing by Sergeant M. Evans, who when his unit was heavily attacked by three German heavy armoured cars, dashed forward and knocked one out by hurling hand grenades at it and killing the crew. The others then drew off and the final threat to the landing force was withdrawn. The landing force had established its beach head, silenced all opposition and had placed itself in the foremost position in the line at the hour of the Italian armistice.

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