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Air Ministry News Service

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ITALIANS AID AIRMEN TO ESCAPE

The navigator of one 'missing' Wellington bomber and the entire crew of another have returned from Italy to North Africa in a British destroyer. By request they broadcast over the destroyer's loudspeaker system an account of their escape. Their aircraft were lost during the nightly Wellington offensive against German targets in Italy. Here are the stories the men told, each a proof of R.A.F. resourcefulness and, incidentally, of Italian loathing for the Germans.

S T O R Y N O . 1.

Wellington X for X-ray 'ditched' at night off the mouth of the Volturno river. The captain, Flight Lieutenant Irving Francis McDermott, of Winnipeg, sustained a gash to his shoulder and was cut about the face: most of the crew were bruised by the descent into the sea, but they paddled ashore in their dinghy near the river mouth, watching artillery flash from both sides of the battle front.

In the morning they walked through enemy wire entanglements and minefields, only to be stopped by a deep swamp. Further along the shore they met two Italian men and a woman searching on the beach for pig food. When the Italians realised they were British all three of them kissed the crew and took them home to a breakfast of sweetbreads, grapes, walnuts and wine.

That night at a mixed party an Allied leaflet was proudly produced, and their Italian hosts spent most of the time telling the bomber crew what they thought of the Germans and Fascism in general. Next morning the crew were taken triumphantly to a British H.Q. in Naples.

S T O R Y N O . 2.

Sergeant R.C. Wilkins, an R.A.F. navigator from Aldbourne, near Swindon, Wiltshire baled out of a burning Wellington on Sept. 4, the night after the invasion of Italy. After landing among falling flares and bombs he met an Italian farmer who was watching the R.A.F. attack on the Germans. The farmer was friendly and made him understand by expressive gestures, such as drawing his hand across his throat when the name 'Mussolini' was mentioned, what he thought of the Italian regime. Sergeant Wilkins' adventures thereafter were as follows:

Sept.5 - Roused by two armed Italian policemen in Green uniforms, and marched South towards Naples. They frequently had to make detours because bombs had cratered the track they were following. At the police station was shown a copy of one of our leaflets, and derisive gestures were made concerning the Germans.

The same two Carabinieri, with their prisoner, then set off on foot again further south. The only cars passing them on the road were driven by Germans, who completely ignored the hitch-hike sign of the policemen. At the next village Wilkins was met by a private car which took him to the main Naples police station, where he was fed and then fell asleep. A few minutes later, he was awakened by a policeman who urged him down a deep shelter as the air-raid warning had been sounded. This happened six times during the night.

Sept.6 - Introduced to an American fortress crew who were also prisoners-of-war. From this day on, he spent most of his time in shelters, as it was an accepted rule that all prisoners, guards, Italians and Germans, should go below ground immediately the sirens sounded.

Sept.8 - News of the Italian armistice was received by the Italians all kissing each other, and the prisoners being told they could now dine with the guards. That night Sergeant Wilkins heard much shooting in the Naples area. The Germans issued a proclamation that for every German soldier found dead 100 Italians would be killed.

Sept.13 - Set out to escape. Saw one American officer, who, finding his Italian wooden-soled sandals too much to cope with, was marching in bare feet.

Sept.26 - Eventually, with three Italian sailors, started out in a rowing board. This scheme, however, failed when, after a few minutes' rowing, the sailors decided it would be better to return to shore. After another attempt to form an escape party, Wilkins found that the Germans were conscripting Italian male labour for forced work in Germany, and that his own district was being combed.

Sept.27 and 28 - Slept in a rain-soaked vineyard, living on the grapes and suffering severely from mosquito bites. Many Italians, escaping the conscription, were with him.

Sept.29 - An elderly woman gave him shelter and food in an attic, where he found six Italian sailors who had escaped from ships in the harbour and were evading the German round-up. Here he remained for some days while in the distance he could see the smoke from harbour fires and hear the noise of German demolitions in the port.

A few days later Wilkins was watching from an attic window when British destroyers sailed into the bay. Guessing that Allied land forces were close at hand he ventured out. He reported to a party of coloured anti-aircraft gunners with British officers occupying a hill, and was able to convince them that, despite his beard, he was a member of the R.A.F.