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MEDICAL CORPS RESCUE PRISONERS

EIGHT MILES INTO NO-MAN'S LAND UNDER SHELL FIRE

Thanks to the courage and determination of two officers and 55 men of a field ambulance unit 177 wounded British and Allied soldiers, prisoners in Italy, received medical treatment two days before our fighting troops occupied the town of Caserta.

One morning a small patrol of the Reconnaissance Corps returned with Capt. Hudson, whom they had brought <sup>out</sup> of the hospital and who had been taken prisoner at Gazala in N. Africa. He reported that 124 British, 31 American, 15 Indian and 7 S. African prisoners of war were in a hospital eight miles away and badly needed attention.

Immediately it was decided to take medical supplies, food and water to the hospital. That evening, under cover of darkness Major Dougall set out with his company of a Field Ambulance Unit guided by Capt. Hudson, who, although weak from months of under nourishment and ill health, insisted on accompanying them.

This convoy of three ambulances and five 3 ton lorries, carrying food and supplies and a water waggon, soon met its first obstacle. An American patrol, not for one moment expecting any allied transport to be in that area, opened fire on the Major's jeep. The company commander stopped the convoy, explanations followed, and the journey was resumed.

A further anxious moment occurred, when rounding a bend, they nearly ran into some trees felled across the road.

In the inky blackness it was too dangerous to remove them in case they were booby traps. But so great was the anxiety to get to the hospital, and incidentally to keep the vehicles moving for shell bursts were coming nearer that Major Dougall took the risk of driving his car round the obstacle.

Getting round safely the others followed and about two miles from the town, Major Dougall and a sergeant left the transport and proceeded on foot to explore an entry into the main road; possibly the first time the R.A.M.C. has been used as a reconnaissance patrol in no-man's land.

The hospital was reached without incident, but the gates were locked and guarded by Italians. After twenty minutes cajoling the guards were persuaded to admit the two Britishers. They did not know if any Germans were about and great was their relief when, from the inky blackness of a doorway, a challenge in English rang out.

The sick and wounded men were astounded to see a British officer and sergeant walk in and one man cried out, "Look, the British are here, British I tell you, British". Like lightning the glad news spread, and from other wards walking patients crowded in.

Half an hour later the convoy arrived and the Major and Capt. McNeil, one of his company officers, began a round of the patients and by the aid of their torches - the Doche had destroyed the electrical plant - examined the men and where necessary fresh dressings.

At first light they were again at work 'going the rounds', cleaning up the wards, which were in a filthy condition and preparing breakfasts for 177 men the first British breakfast the men had had for many months.

Their diet had consisted of macaroni twice daily, a little soup and a small morsel of bread. Water was the principal drink, but occasionally ersatz coffee was issued.

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Had it not been for the Red Cross parcels these men undoubtedly would have been short. These gifts, state the men, came through regularly every week and were more than welcome, containing as they did, excellent tinned goods, chocolate, cigarettes and medical supplies.

In March the Germans removed a Lt. Colonel and other British doctors. The wounded were thus left in the care of L/Cpl. F. McKearney, R.A.M.C. and Pte. H. Bealey of the Buffs. Bealey took charge of all dysentery cases, diagnosing, prescribing and even giving injections.

C.S.M. Morrison, one of the patients said it was a revelation, the way Bealey carried on and the trust the other fellows had in him. Of L/Cpl. McKearney, the sergeant major's praise knew no limits. He organised everything, daily inspections of every man, charts of progress, diets and so on. He personally did all the dressings and even when the wounded arrived from Sicily managed to cope with them as well. But for the skill and untiring efforts of these two men, many of the others would have died.

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#### MILITARY AFFAIRS