

D Squadron

ESCAPE AND EVASION - A TROOPERS VIEW

It was a cold wet Wednesday morning. We were huddled together in the back of an 8 tonner, with the wind and rain driving through the gaps in the canvas. The majority of the squadron had been captured the evening before, after a long and vicious battle. Having been rounded up we were now being transported back through the enemy lines to the first stage of the processing and selection of PWS.

At the end of our journey a local airfield, and after many hours of wailing and processing we were once again put on board the trucks and sent off down the road.

By this stage most of us were fairly tired and our minds and bodies had drilled into a state of numbness. After several hours travelling when all sense of direction had been lost this state changed with an eruption of chaos. Several explosions rocked the truck as it careered off the road. There was much confusion as we were hauled off the truck and directed to the cover of a ripe corn field. The ambush had been set by a long range reconnaissance patrol, who had orders for us to follow escape routes back to friendly forces. After a quick brief we set off in groups of four and using the torn scrap of map that we had been given, began to make our way to our first RV. The weather had now closed in, and we made our way slowly through the rain and howling wind. We started going cross country but as the hours passed we moved down towards the valleys and the villages that nestled within them, in the hope of finding some shelter. At around 4am we found a small farm and after a quick recce to check for enemy OP's we moved into one of the barns to catch a couple of hours sleep.

We were woken at 0530 by the farmer who was somewhat surprised to find us in his barn. Luckily one of us spoke enough German to explain our predicament. His answer to this was to take us in for breakfast and then run us in his car to within 1km of our RV.

The daylight hours were to be the most dangerous as we had long distances to cover between each RV, and the search teams were well organised, with helicopter air cover coordinating the movement of mobile ground catcher teams.



After that first RV we made our way carefully down to the edge of a lake where we had to be moved across by assault boat. Once on the other side we gathered our bearings and started off towards the next RV. What nobody had been doing was pay any attention to the dull drone of a distant helicopter. Seconds later we were running for our lives, pursued by the staccato of machine gun fire and the screams of soldiers, who had been pinpointed onto us by that distant but deadly observer.

We stumbled blindly through a thick wood until the screams and cackle of the guns died away. We had learnt our lesson to keep our ears open as well as our eyes.

Later that morning we came across a small timber factory. Once more in broken German we tried to explain our situation to an elderly foreman and once more we were helped. After a much needed cup of coffee and some bread, we were given a lift to the next major town in the back of a timber truck. We were deposited on a small side road just away from the town centre, through which we had to pass to get to the next RV. What a sight we must have seen. Four dirty unshaven bodies, in black denims and boots, aching, what must have seemed very suspicious as we edged our way cautiously through the town.

Having been given the lift it meant we could hide up for a couple of hours before we were required at the RV - sleep much needed by this stage.

The recce patrol at the RV directed us to our pick up point where our own helicopters would pick us up. We made our way without any encounters through the night to the PUP. Having reached the final RV we sorted ourselves out into sticks, awaiting the choppers. Soon the familiar sound of rotor blades was heard, but as that old saying goes "Never count your chickens before they've hatched". It was the enemy aircraft. We knew we only had a few minutes before the ground forces reached us. Seconds later more helicopters were heard, and two Pumas came hurtling in at tree top level. As they settled, a warning was shouted that two enemy patrols were at the bottom of the track, some 600m away. We sprinted towards the aircraft in a desperate bid not to be caught so close to our final escape. We boarded rapidly and the engines increased in pitch as the blades clawed in the air for lift and suddenly we were away leaving the enemy forces with nothing but an empty field. We had made it!