

AN AUSTRALIAN PILOT ON 237 (RHODESIA) SQUADRON

Jack Hackett, an Australian Air Force Pilot, was posted to 237 Squadron in June 1944, shot down in the French Alps in September 1944 and rescued by Italian Partisans. This is the story of how he was traced and found alive and well in England some sixty years later, and includes his account of the time he spent with the Italian Partisans and his eventual escape through enemy lines to link up with American Forces in Southern France.

Written by Bill Musgrave with input by Jack Hackett – October 2004.

1. Posting to 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron

237 Squadron formed part of No 251 Wing that was assembled in Corsica in April 1944 to provide air cover for the invasion of Southern France. Other squadrons attached to the Wing were No 238 RAF Squadron and No 451 Australian Squadron, all equipped with Mk VIII and Mk IX Spitfires. While at 73 OTU at Abu Sueir In Egypt in early 1944, Jack Hackett requested to be posted to 451 RAAF Squadron, but instead was posted to 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron – arriving at Serraggia on June 8th 1944. (In a similar situation Rodney Simmonds requested a posting to 237 Squadron, but was turned down and ended up on 238 RAF Squadron in May 1944, under the command of another Rhodesian, Archie Wilson. I doubt that Rodney ever regretted this turn of events.)

While awaiting the countdown to the invasion of Southern France, the Wing was based on the East Coast of Corsica, together with U.S. Air force Medium Bomber and P47 Thunderbolt Fighter Squadrons. In April 1944 Corsica provided a very strategic base from which to attack German Forces in Italy. The Allied Forces were held up at Monte Cassino, a long way south of Rome, and the situation at the Anzio Beach Head was getting a bit desperate. To bolster their defences The German High Command decided to reinforce the Herman Goering Division, and these troops were clobbered by the Allied Fighter Squadrons from Corsica as they moved southwards along the roads through Tuscany. The break through at Monte Cassino was achieved on May 20, the link up with Anzio occurred a few days later, and Rome was captured on June 4th. The whole German Army then withdrew northwards along the East Coast and through Tuscany to a new defensive line in the Appenine Mountains to the north of Florence. Once again the German Forces were subjected to continuous strafing attacks from Corsican based aircraft and other squadrons based to the south of the Allied Lines, and again the Germans suffered very heavy losses of military hardware. During a bomber escort mission on one very clear day it was possible to trace the whole Italian road network from burning vehicles. These operations continued through June and part of July, and on the 19th July 251 Wing were moved to an air fields near Calvi on the West Coast of Corsica, in readiness for the planned invasion of Southern France.

Soon after the move Ian Shand replaced John Walmisley as CO of 237 Squadron.

Sometime after the move to Calvi, Jack took part on a mission led by the CO, escorting American Medium Bombers to a target near Genoa. On the return trip Jack, conscious of the need to conserve fuel, fell slightly behind the formation and the CO instructed him to catch up. Jack opened the throttle and to his horror the handle came out of the throttle housing. His plane accelerated sharply and in no time he overtook the formation of bombers and fighters, and radioed the CO to inform him that he had no control over his air speed. The CO radioed back instructing Jack not to land at Calvi before the rest of the squadron, as “he didn’t want the runway cluttered up with bits of aircraft”. When Jack’s turn came to land he was very conscious of the timing of when to switch off his engine so as to achieve the ideal combination

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of speed and angle of glide to avoid a ditch at the approach to the runway, and not to overshoot at the far end.

Unbeknown to him an audience had gathered on the runway expecting to witness a crash. But Jack accomplished a perfect landing, missing the ditch with a smooth touchdown, controlling the direction with rudder and brakes, and finally braking to a standstill well within the limits of the runway. Lying in bed that night and thinking about the incident he suddenly came to the conclusion that he'd been a bit of a fool, realising that he could have shut the engine on and off at will simply by using the power on/off switch and allowing the rotating propeller to re-start the engine.

On another occasion Jack remembers flying on a bomber escort mission to a target near Florence, with all aircraft fitted with 45 gallon long range drop tanks. Jack took note of the time of take-off and after 45 minutes decided to switch over to his main tank. He switched off the feed from his drop tank and then switched over to his main tank – wrong sequence! Within a matter of seconds the engine stopped and the aircraft plunged into a downward glide falling away from the main formation. Jack grabbed hold the auxiliary fuel pump lever and commenced a vigorous pumping action. For what seemed ages nothing happened and Jack began thinking of a forced landing, and then suddenly the engine started with a mighty roar and Jack was back in business.

2. The Invasion of Southern France

The invasion, code named Operation Dragoon, was set for 15th August 1944, with the main landings to take place in the area of the Beach Resort Areas of St Tropez, St Raphael and Frejus. The Invasion was originally intended to coincide with the main Invasion in Normandy in June 1944, using American Troops from Italy which would become surplus to requirements after the link-up of forces battling at Monte Cassino and Anzio. The original plan would have allowed for a two-pronged attack through France from the west and south, which would have facilitated its capture. The delay in this link-up postponed the Invasion of Southern France by some two months, and no doubt contributed to the increased severity of the fighting in Normandy.

The softening-up process in the south of France started a couple of weeks before the invasion, comprising attacks on coastal installations by American and Free French Medium Bombers from Corsica and Sardinia, while Corsica based Fighters scoured the road and rail networks in Southern France attacking vehicles and trains, and other military targets. In one instance 237 Squadron was delegated to attacking radar installations along the coast, and on one of these flights Jack suffered the infuriating experience of one of his cannons jamming and slewing the aircraft off the line of fire. Meanwhile additional Spitfire Squadrons were transferred to Corsica from Italy, and dispersed on the three airfields at Calvi, creating one of the largest concentration of Spitfires ever assembled, made up of eleven RAF Squadrons, one Australian Squadron and two or three U.S. Air Force Squadrons, in total about 260 Spitfires.

The troops for the invasion were gathered from the American 7th Army Forces in Italy, and assembled in the Naples area, comprising seven Armoured and Infantry Divisions, and an Airborne Glider Division. A massive fleet of 800 Ships were provided and the whole force embarked and set sail on August 13. They passed through the straits separating Sardinia and Corsica and arrived offshore of the invasion beachheads in the early hours of the 15th August. Huge Naval Guns and Bombers pounded the coast while Landing Craft loaded with troops and weapons headed for the beaches. Fighter Aircraft from Corsica provided continuous air cover, and continued inland attacks of military targets. The large force of Glider Borne Troops, in 332 Gliders, landed a short distance inland, and by the next day a link up with one of the Beachhead Divisions was established. The invasion was in effect a “walkover”, and the main

objective was achieved in two weeks. This was due largely to the low morale and inexperience of the German Troops, the depletion of their forces to reinforce the armies in Normandy, and the unexpected aggressive response by the French Resistance Forces.

Hitler described August 15th as “*the worst day of my life*”. He had just survived an assassination attempt, German Forces in Russia were in full retreat, the Warsaw Uprising was getting out of control, the Armies in Normandy were facing defeat, and the remaining German Forces faced complete encirclement in France. The fact that Germany was able to recoup and launch counter offensives and continue the war for another nine months was a remarkable achievement.

3. A Short Spell in Southern France

In the days following the invasion, beachhead patrols continued and some bomber escort missions were carried out. Some 10 days after the Invasion, the Fighter Squadrons from Corsica started to move to bases in Southern France. No 251 Wing were relocated on August 27th to Cuers Airfield in the district of Aix-en-Provence, a few miles north of Toulon. This was a famous airship base in pre-war years, and included a huge airship hangar, taken over by a US Squadron of light aircraft, which could take off and get airborne inside the hangar and come flying out through the open hangar doors. Soon after arrival at Cuers the CO informed Jack that he had recommended him for a Commission.

Due to the virtual cessation of fighting in the southern France, aerial activity was reduced to cover for some bomber missions, standing patrols and weather recess. However, early in September Intelligence reported signs of a German thrust over the mountain passes from Italy, and 251 Wing were instructed to investigate. The first flight was carried out 9th September covering an area of the Alps between Turin in Italy and Briancon in France, but there was no evidence of any significant military build-up, and very few vehicles were seen on the roads. On 21st September a flight of six aircraft were dispatched on a fresh mission, led by Ian Shand. Jack was a member of this flight, flying as No 2 to Dinks Moubray. They flew towards the southern most point of the Alps, about 20 miles to the north of Monaco and spotted vehicles moving along the Tende Valley in the vicinity of the French-Italian Border. They dived to attack, flying at a low level along the length of the valley and destroyed some 12 vehicles. As Jack pulled-up behind Dinks Moubray he noticed his engine was vibrating and slowing down. He sensed something was seriously wrong and radioed the C.O., who told him his glycol cooling system had probably been hit and damaged and that the only option for him was to bale out – the severe mountainous terrain precluding any possibility of a “belly” landing. At the same time he instructed Jack to climb and get over the crest of the mountain and bale out in the adjoining valley, to avoid falling into the hands of the Germans they’d been strafing. Jack managed to stagger over the crest at reduced speed and was seen to bale out. Dinks Moubray followed him down, noticed a large tear in his chute, but saw him land safely. On October 11th the squadron was officially informed that Jack was safe in the hands of Italian Partisans. That was the last the squadron heard of him.

4. The Search for Jack Hackett

In January 2003 we were put in contact with an Air France Regional Airline Pilot by the name of Alexandre Durastanti who lives in Bastia, Corsica, and devotes nearly all his spare time to research and correlation of aerial activities over Corsica during World War II. He has accumulated a phenomenal amount of detail in every aspect of military aviation, and is only too willing to share this information with other interested parties and respond to any queries on related topics. Corsica was home to the 12th U.S. Air Force from 1943 to 1945, made up of Medium Bomber and Fighter Groups spread over twenty air bases, and comprising mainly B-25

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Mitchells, B-26 Marauders and P-47 Thunderbolts. Alex has devoted most of his time to researching the operations of the US Air Force Groups, including visits to meet ex-American Aircrew in the U.S. More recently he has extended his coverage to RAF & Commonwealth Squadrons, initially establishing contact with the 451 RAAF Squadron Association in Australia.

I was put in contact with a certain John Poate, a Pilot who flew with 451 Squadron in Corsica and was shot down while strafing a German airfield in Italy, and taken Prisoner of War. John Poate undertook to try and track-down Jack Hackett and contacted several air force related institutions, but without any success. The problem was that we did not know Jack's service number, and later we learnt that 'Jack' was a nickname – his given name was John Albert Hackett. If John Poate had known this he probably would have found him.

At this point Alex took up the challenge. Alex's approach was to contact all Australians with the name of Hackett. He obtained 163 names and addresses from Telephone Directories via the Internet, and on 9th May he started posting a standard letter and photo to each address, describing the background to Jack's involvement with 237 Squadron, and ending with the comment '*Hoping this message in the bottle will find someone with an answer*'. Within a short while he received some replies with encouraging information, but no positive identification. Then on 14th June he received the following e-mail message from a Michael Hackett living in Queensland, Australia, a relation who was aware of the name 'Jack'. :

Dear Mr Durastanti,

I read your letter with great interest. A real blast from the past it seems. I am reasonably sure that the person in the photo is my Uncle Jack who served in the air force in the Second World War and was indeed shot down and lived with partisans in Italy, as I understand until the end of the war. My father Jim was also in the Australian Air force but was in New Guinea. Jack lives in England with his son Geoff Hackett in Staffordshire. You can contact him directly through Geoff. Good luck,

MICHAEL HACKETT.

So contrary to our assumptions that Jack, if still alive, would be in Australia, we now learn that he is living in Staffordshire, a mere 1½ hours drive from Milton Keynes. This news triggered an immediate follow-up. On Sunday 4th July we motored up to Lichfield in Staffordshire to meet Jack at his son Geoff's home, and his son Bryan travelled down from Yorkshire to join us. Meeting Jack again after a lapse of sixty years was an stimulating sensation. We settled down in the lounge and started to reminisce on our time together on 237 Squadron. Bryan set-up a sound recorder and we enticed Jack to give an account of the sequence of events he went through from the time he baled out. These are described in the next chapters. In the days preceding this get-together Bryan had been browsing the Internet and a search under the name *John Albert Hackett* revealed details of an Italian Historian by the name of Sergio Costagli, specialising in the research and publication of historical events, which occurred in the Maritime Alps of NW Italy during World War II. Details included a considerable amount of documentary and photographic evidence of Jack's activities after he was shot down. In Jack's account of the sequence of events he frequently mentioned the name of Eugenio Meinardi, a medical student who could speak basic English and helped him a great deal after he was shot down. Bryan e-mailed this information to Sergio who replied that he knew Dr Meinardi, now retired, and that they lived close to each other in the city of Cuneo.

At Alex Duratstanti's request we then arranged for him to meet Jack. Alex flew over from France and stayed a couple of days with us. On Thursday 29th July Brian collected his father and brought him down to Milton Keynes to meet Alex and spend the day with us. After

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months of effort and perseverance in searching for Jack the eventual meeting was emotional for Alex – with a “Dr Livingstone I presume” ring to it. Alex has a good understanding of English and an exploratory chat followed.

5. Baling-Out – Rescue By Partisans - Hide-Outs - Shoot-Outs and Back Over the Alps on Foot to Allied Lines

After being hit while strafing, which damaged the glycol cooling system, Jack managed to entice the Spitfire over the southern ridge of the Tende Valley at reduced speed, and levelled out to avoid stalling. He then set about the tortuous ritual of baling out from a Spitfire. He pulled back the perspex canopy, undid his straps, opened the side door and knelt-up in a bent posture within the confines of the cockpit, his feet on the seat and leaning over sideways towards the open side of the cockpit, and simultaneously controlling the angle and direction of the aircraft with his right hand on the joy-stick. He then took quick stock of the situation and dived out head first, very conscious of the closeness of the tail-plane to his body. Unbeknown to Jack his parachute caught the sharp edges of a cartridge clamp on the right side of the cockpit as he dived out, tearing a slit in the silk chute. Everything seemed to be happening at once, and Jack, contrary to standard practice, immediately pulled the ripcord. The chute opened successfully with a sharp wrench on Jack’s body as it unfurled, but due to the torn slit he descended faster than normal and he hit the ground rather hard, but without causing any serious injury.

On landing Jack proceeded to hide his parachute in accordance with standard practice but he was unable to dig a hole, so he gathered it up and covered it with branches and foliage. He then sat down to rest and reflect, and unpacked his ‘emergency rations’ package. He opened the slab of chocolate, which exposed a packet of unhealthy looking dust that blew-away in the wind, concluding that it must have been a left over from World War I. He then unpacked a small compass, thinking he’d have to set a southerly course to get out of the mountains, but found it to be useless. He then took out the package of 10 cigarettes and proceeded to smoke them on the spot. He then set-off and using the sun as a guide he headed in what he thought was a southerly direction, which took him parallel to the valley below where he noticed German vehicles. After a while he heard some voices ahead, and hid behind a large boulder to see what was going on. Within a very short distance he saw a canteen with 20 to 30 German Troops drinking beer and joking amongst themselves, and concluded that he’d better get out of there pretty quick.

In an endeavour to get into a safer area he decided to head-up the side of the mountain and try and cross the valley heading into France, but time after time he encountered precipices and sheer cliff faces. He persisted for several hours and by dusk was getting a bit desperate, and also worried about encountering mine fields. As darkness was beginning to set-in he came across a clearing and saw a shed with lights shining from it. After some time an old man emerged, and shortly after walked back inside which happened several times.

Jack weighed up the situation, thinking ‘*here was an old man living on his own up in the mountains, whose life span preceded Mussolini and the German occupation, who more than likely would be sympathetic, and at worst not in favour of reporting him to the Germans. Also, he would be a better bet than trying to find his own way home through the mountains, bye-passing German positions and minefields unassisted*’. So Jack approached and knocked on the door of the shed and held his breath.. The old man let him in and Jack pointed to the wings on his battle dress blouse and said “*Inglese Pilota*”. The old man sat him at a table and brought him several helpings of soup and some bread and water. When he had finished the old man took him outside to a small shed in the yard and indicated that he should sleep there. They went inside and the shed was crammed with sacks of potatoes, and as Jack settled down the old man

went outside and locked the door. Jack believed that this was not a bad omen in the sense of being reported to the Germans, and feeling “cheesed off” with the day’s events, settled down amongst the bags of potatoes and slept.

At daybreak the following morning Jack was woken by the rattling of keys in the lock and the opening of the door. In walked a young medical student by the name of Eugenio Meinardi who could speak basic English, followed by a middle-aged man who was second in command of the local Partisan Group, and a third man whom Jack assumed was the person in the village that the old man contacted to lead him to the Partisan’s hideout. Eugenio greeted Jack in English and then acted as an interpreter while the 2/IC of the Partisan Group questioned Jack in detail to verify his claim to being an English Pilot. Then Eugene asked Jack if he knew of the tune ‘*Deep Purple*’ and whether he could remember the words, and Jack was able to recite three lines, including ‘*where the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls*’. This finally convinced the group that Jack was genuine and everyone relaxed. They asked him if he had any money, and he had a wad of French Francs, which he gave to them. They gave this to the third man who disappeared. They continued chatting amongst themselves, and it was clear that all now believed him. Then after a couple of hours, in walks the third man with about six bottles of cognac and cigarettes. Between the four of them they downed two or three bottles of cognac, after which the 2/IC put the remaining bottles aside, probably for his CO. They then sat around chatting and smoking, and eventually fell asleep until late afternoon. Eugenio then informed Jack that they were going to take him to the Partisan Base. They gave Jack a coat to cover his uniform and set off down to the German Occupied village of Tende, where they walked through a narrow back street in single file, with the third man leading, followed by Jack.

A German approached them from the opposite direction, walked past the third man and came up against Jack, and in typical gentlemanly fashion they offered each other the right of way hopping from side to side in turn. Eventually the German got a bit impatient and muttered something in anger, so Jack let him pass. He continued past Eugenio and the 2/IC and continued on his way. Soon after the third man left them to go home. The remaining trio continued through the village and started to head-up the side of the mountain for a couple of hours in darkening light until they came across a rough track where they halted and flashed a signal with a torch. A flashlight signal then appeared from some distance ahead indicating that all was clear and that they could proceed. They followed the rough track in a downward curve and came across a long hut in which there was the CO and 30 to 40 Partisans. They went inside and Jack was introduced to the CO, who then had a lengthy discussion with the 2/IC, and all seemed fine. Eugene then informed Jack that they were to sleep there that night. Jack, the CO, the 2/IC and Eugene settled down in a small compartment, had another slug of cognac, smoked and fell asleep. The remainder, including two rough looking Russian Soldiers who had been rescued by the Partisans, slept in the main area of the hut.

Jack estimates they spent two to three months in this location high up in the mountains. They were well aware that there was a strong force of Germans down in the valley, and the Germans in turn were aware that there were Partisans up in the mountains, but with evidence pointing to an early ending of the war they did not relish a brawl. Similarly the Partisans refrained from moving down into the valley to harass the Germans. To gain a better idea of when the war may end the CO and 2/IC questioned Jack at length on the progress of the Allied Armies through Normandy and beyond, and the situation on the Russian and Italian Fronts. During the time they were living in this hut several things happened. One day they ventured out through the snow and moved up the valley, and at a certain point a dozen German Soldiers appeared in front of them, with neither side giving the impression that they were looking for a fight. They stood and stared at each other with neither side “*requesting the next waltz*”, and eventually the Germans turned and walked away. The Partisans suspected that they would collect reinforcements and return, so they decided to vacate the area. They gathered up their baggage

of blankets, guns and ammunition and moved out through very thick snow. They walked for about two hours, with Jack having difficulty in keeping up.

Eventually they stopped besides a mound of snow and started to dig, revealing a door, which they walked through to expose a concrete bunker, with icicles stretching from ceiling to floor, and freezing cold. They decided to sleep there, and proceeded to burn some wood to warm the place but this only created suffocating smoke. They eventually settled down body against body for warmth, covered with blankets and slept through the night.

The following day they moved out of the bunker and headed further up the Mountain, arriving at a clearing where there was another long building, similar to the one they left the day before. They occupied this building, laid out their bedding and stayed there for about one week. Nothing happened until one morning about 6 am the door opened and a Senior German Officer walked in together with a Junior Officer, probably on an inspection tour. They immediately realised they were in amongst 30 to 40 Partisans and were hesitant about what to do. The Senior Officer mumbled something and then slowly turned around and walked out through the door followed by the Junior Officer, and headed across the clearing towards the trees. The Partisans, many of whom had been roused from their sleep, were then fully alert and questioned what they should do. "We're going to get them" shouted one, and grabbing their vast array of weapons they streaked out through the door and chased after them. Jack then heard a lot of shooting from among the trees and eventually the Partisans returned with the main items of the Germans' clothing and weapons. So Jack presumed the two Germans had been killed, probably on the grounds that there was no other alternative. Following this they immediately "upped stumps" and returned all the way back to their original hideout in the long hut where they had originally met the CO.

They resumed daily guard duties, and by this time there was snow everywhere and as the days passed Jack took the opportunity to try some skiing. During this time people occasionally came up from Tende to request medical attention for a member of the family. Eugenio attended to these cases, going down to the village to see the person, and prescribing some treatment. Eugenio, who by this time had become Jack's minder, asked if he would like to accompany him on one of these trips, telling him that he might find it a long walk, but he'd get a good meal. So one evening they both walked down to the patient's house in Tende where Eugenio examined and prescribed treatment for an old man, after which his wife went to a lot of trouble in preparing a delicious meal. They then had to struggle back up the mountain in deep snow on full stomachs, eventually arriving back before dawn.

Jack had gathered the impression that the population of Tende were aware of the Partisan band in the mountains and had developed a certain liaison with their presence.

During this time Jack was aware of an elderly man who had come up from the direction of Tende to meet the CO, and learnt that he knew a route over the mountains to the American Lines. Jack asked Eugenio to enquire whether he could join him the next time he made this trip, and the reply came back "You certainly can but we will have to wait for the snow to harden to facilitate walking through the thick snow and to avoid leaving any footprints". Eugenio added that the two Russians would also be going.

This became a frustrating wait for Jack, who was out every morning to check conditions - the hardening of the snow required a few days of calm weather followed by a sharp frost to freeze the snow. Then finally after a couple of weeks, towards the end of November 1944, Eugenio informed him that the Guide would be attempting another crossing the next day. The Guide duly arrived and after bidding farewells to Eugenio, the CO and 2/IC, the group set off in the early evening - the guide, Jack and the two Russians. They climbed up the mountain and

eventually reached the upper ridge where the Guide told them to keep below the ridge to avoid providing a silhouette against the sky for anyone watching. They walked through complete darkness all night.

At one point the Guide stopped and positioned everyone close together one behind the other, and proceeded to edge his way through a minefield. Poking around with a stick as he moved, he suddenly stopped and made everyone move to the right, pointing out a mine immediately in front of them. In this way he guided them past three or four mines and finally out through the far side of the minefield. As dawn broke they came across an open clearing with a lot of heaped haystacks, and it became evident to Jack that the timing of their passage through the minefield and arrival at this point was the reason for starting their trek early the previous evening. The Guide made them burrow into the haystacks where they relaxed and slept all day. Jack, without thinking lit a cigarette and had a smoke, and suddenly in a flash realised how stupid he was, thinking he could have set the whole of North Italy alight.

Come darkness on that second night they set off again and continued through the mountains, again negotiating another minefield. As dawn broke the following day Jack noticed that they were now moving down towards the valley. The Guide signalled that they could relax, and pointed to an empty packet of Camel Cigarettes, a sure sign that there were Americans in the vicinity. They walked on for another couple of miles and came across a clearing where they could see American Army trucks. In total they had travelled about 8 miles. Jack, wearing Italian Army clothing, approached a gum-chewing GI who was leaning against a truck having a smoke, and asked him where he could find their Commanding Officer. The GI did not question him and merely indicated a row of houses, pointing out the one at the end. At this point Jack bid farewell to the two Russians and expressed his deep gratitude to the Guide, shook his hand and bade him farewell. The Guide and the two Russians continued into the base, probably to hand over the Russians at an appropriate reception. Jack then went up to the end house and knocked on the door, and an officer appeared and invited him to come in. A second Officer appeared and they proceeded to put him through the usual interrogation session – full name, rank, squadron details, base, details of mission, where shot down, etc. The Senior Office then said “OK, we’ll give you a meal and you can rest here, and this evening we’ll take you down to Nice”. This was early December 1944.

They provided Jack with some American clothes, shoes and shaving kit and drove down in a Jeep to a Hotel in Nice in the early evening. Jack was given a room and was invited to join a dinner party with the Americans after he’d settled in and had a bath. At 7.00 pm they called for Jack and went down to the Dining Room and joined a party of about ten Americans, including some women. A proper meal was served and Jack chose a steak dish. He took one bite and was unable to swallow anything, so he excused himself and went back to his room. One of the Americans followed him and asked what was wrong. Jack replied that he was feeling sick, so the American told him to have a good sleep and in the morning he’d take him to Doctor. In the morning they took him to an Army Doctor who diagnosed Yellow Jaundice, brought about by a deficiency in his diet during the past few months. He was taken to hospital immediately where they put him on a special diet, with daily blood counts. He remained there for about two weeks, and during this time a British Liaison Officer visited him, and following the usual interrogation session Jack asked the Officer if he could arrange for him to get some money to purchase some writing material and stamps so that he could inform his family that he was ok. The Officer replied in the negative, claiming that there was nothing he could do under the circumstances, but did promise to look into the matter. The happy climax was that three Americans gave him \$10 each, so Jack was able to pass on the good news to his family. After two weeks Jack was discharged from hospital and transferred to a Transit Camp in Marseilles, and then flown to Naples on 5 January 1945, where he ended up in the well-known 56 PTC – Personnel Transit Camp.

He was interviewed again by a British Army Officer and asked what he wanted to do – return to Australia, a posting to England, or what? During his transit through England, prior to boarding a ship to Egypt, he had spent some time in Lancashire where, in Jack's words 'he had met a lass and become semi engaged', so he chose to be posted to England.

This episode in Naples begs the question of why Jack was not offered the option of returning to 237 Squadron? At this time the squadron was based in Italy, and as far as I can remember we were not even informed of him being in Naples – if we were, a couple of us would certainly have flown to Naples to greet him. Ian Smith went through a similar experience after he was shot down in June 1944 – aircraft glycol cooling system damaged by ground fire while strafing in the Po Valley, tried to make it to the Gulf Of Genoa to bale out over the sea, but burning engine forced him to bale out north of Genova, joined a band of Partisans who after several months helped him to escape along a route extending from a village north of Genoa, passing through the Alps south of Tende, and meeting up with the Americans at a point a few miles further south from where Jack came through. They had walked for 23 days, covering a distance of about 90 miles. This was late November 1944, a mere few days before Jack came through the lines.

Ian Smith's escape has been well documented. Of interest is the mention of two regulations applicable to 'evaders' returning to Allied Lines: i) if missing behind enemy lines for more than three months one is entitled to a posting back home. ii) upon return to the Allied side, one is to be returned to the unit under whom he was operating at the time he went missing. Ian had a strong desire to go to England, and while at Marseilles he had tried to get on a direct flight to England but this was overruled on account of ii), and he was sent to Naples. The Interviewing Officer in Naples told him that he could be transferred to Cairo immediately, from where arrangements could be made to get him home. Ian replied that he had a strong wish to go to England as he had several relatives there and it was in fact his second home. The Officer nodded his head and said 'If that's what you want, that's fine'. Ian Shand happened to be in Naples, on squadron business, and he called to see Ian. He tried to persuade him to return to 237, but to no avail. This was the end of the first week of December 1944, about the time that Jack was spending the night at a hotel in Nice.

The fact that Jack was also sent to Naples from Marseilles implies that this was done in accordance with regulation ii) above, as was the case with Ian Smith, but according to Jack there was never any mention of him returning to 237 Squadron. Instead, Jack in accordance with his request, was flown to England on 15 January 1945, where he was posted as an Instructor to No 57 OTU, flying Spitfires once again. He received some good news at this point on hearing that he had been granted a commission on September 10 1944, so that from the time he was shot down his pay had accumulated at a higher rate. He was promoted to the rank of Flying Officer on March 10 1945

In closing, Jack wishes to express his gratitude to the various people who helped him in this venture, commencing with the old man in the mountains who sheltered him for the first night and put him in contact with the partisans, to the CO and 2/IC of the partisan band who accepted him within their midst and shielded him from the Germans, to his new friend Eugenio who helped him continuously and gave him companionship and guidance, and finally to the old man who guided him over treacherous mountain terrain to freedom.

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