

**ESCAPE FROM
CRETE**

by

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When we lost contact with the outside world many conflicting rumours began to circulate and confusion reigned. I was alone at the Bn. H. Q. trying to make contact with the rifle companies and with the 2/1 Bn. The phones were dead. I could hear whistles blowing and vehicle noises somewhere along the coast road and wondered what the hell was going on.

I ran back to the sig. sgt's dugout to find Sam Penn alone. I told him that I was unable to raise anyone on the phones. In his typical unruffled way he said "You won't Tich, it's all over, the latest order is to destroy weapons and surrender. It's everyman for himself." The shock certainly rocked me. Grabbing the anti tank rifle I dashed to the lookout I had constructed during the action. A convoy of small armoured cars was advancing along the coast road. Taking aim I emptied the magazine into them and then shoved the barrel in the fork of a tree and did my best to bend it.

Back at the sig. hole I smashed the phone, stripped my webbing, stuffed my few possessions into the haversack, grabbed my rifle and ammo and bolted. As I rushed through the olive trees I came upon the padre. I asked him if he was going to make a run for it, but he assured me that he would stay with the wounded. With this I headed for the road, which lay between me and the foothills.

Several mortar bombs crashed around me. Probably the Germans' answer to my antitank shots. As the road came into view, so did more enemy vehicles. I increased my speed to a hundred yards in ten seconds and sprinted for cover as bullets spattered through the leaves above me. Safely across the road and into fairly good cover I stopped for a breather and then into the foothills, where I caught up with Leg Dowling and Owen Kenrick. We discussed our bleak future and moved on in hopes of rescue by the navy.

Our party increased in number as we headed for the south coast. The Greeks in the little villages among the hills were very kind to us.

Guides led us through mountain tracks away from main roads.

Next morning we reached the coast after a cold night without cover.

We remained in hiding along the cliffs, keeping a look out at night for any sign of help from the sea. I tried signalling to sea from concealed spots among the rocks.

One night an aircraft could be heard flying low along the coast. There was no need for the Germans to be flying at night so as he flew overhead I signalled "500 A.I.F. waiting". Several chaps near me threatened to smash the torch if I made any more signals. As the plane circled us, down crashed heavy objects and everyone scattered fearing bombs. When I flashed the torch on the containers some had burst, revealing ration chocolate in small flat tins and medical stores. The monks from the monastery brought containers of rice each night, together with news of the whereabouts of the German patrols. Hopes of rescue began to fade and the monks advised us to move back into the mountains, where they could hide us.

It was at this time that I decided to go it alone. Too many banded together was too risky. Somehow, because I was a signalman, the boys seemed to think I could contact the outside world and bring help and rescue. With this in mind I moved into the foothills by day and returned to the coast at night in hopes of finding a boat suitable for a crossing of the Mediterranean.

A week went by without any luck and after dodging patrols and living on wheat, bamboo shoots and snails, I began to feel the cold at night. I found a wheat sack which helped to shield me from the cold wind. One afternoon I met up with a Greek chap and his son. The father indicated to me that there were three soldiers hiding in the sand hills near the beach - an officer, a sergeant and another. He led me to them and, of course, the usual greeting "What do you know?" The lieutenant was English, the sgt. an Aussie from the 2/1 btn. and the private was a Scot with a bullet wound along his cheek exposing his teeth.

They knew where there was a small boat but it had no rigging, or oars. Having done a fair bit of yachting in my youth, I checked it out and set about searching for material with which to build some rigging. Whilst scrambling along the rocky shoreline I heard voices and took cover among the rocks. Two figures emerged and lo and behold they turned out to be Stapleton and Jarvis from the "I" section. They had nothing to offer but were still hopeful of getting away. We wished each other good luck and went on our ways. It occurred to me later on that if I vanished in mid ocean and they survived, my people might learn of my possible fate.

Next day I was surprised to see my guide and his son approaching. The father beckoned to me to come quickly. I immediately thought of patrols and lost no time reaching them. "Germans?" I asked, but he shook his head and urged me to follow him. By this time I was prepared for any eventuality but not this one. Sitting on a bench in a shed near a flour mill was a young Greek woman dressed in Red Cross uniform. She had heard that our party was making our escape in a boat and wanted to come with us. She could speak fairly good English. I explained to her that two or perhaps three would be risky in such a small craft with makeshift rigging. If by chance either of the two got cold feet at the last moment I would get word to her. I never saw her again but later thought that had she been with me I would not have taken the risks I did and we might have sailed triumphantly into Alexandria, Cleopatra and Mark Antony.

The search for rigging yielded a six ft. length of oregon, which became the mast; a fishing spear with a five ft. handle made a good peak when I broke the centre prong to form the jaws and the boom I made from four bamboo sticks lashed together. The straps from the ration chocolate tins formed the loop, which allowed the boom to swing on the mast. From the flour mill I borrowed a piece of lightweight canvas for a sail of sorts.

With rigging completed and carefully concealed in a crevice in the

cliffs, the search was on for food which would keep. I still had six tins of ration chocolate hidden in the rocky cliff face. The village people had given me some hard bread rolls and a few chunks of goat milk cheese. I dug some potatoes from a vegetable garden and filled my pockets with wheat from the field. So far so good and when a dark, swarthy looking chap wearing a seaman's peaked cap approached our little party as we lay among the sandhills, I became suspicious. He spoke fairly good English and shook our hands and introduced himself as the skåpper of a schooner anchored on the east end of the island. He gave us a couple of cigars, which we broke up and rolled into cigarettes, using the pages of the lieut's diary.

After discussing our predicament he suggested we muster all allied men we could round up and he would bring the schooner around at night to pick us up. When he had gone we discussed his credentials. Some thought him genuine but I was not convinced and on the pretence of going in search of more water containers, as we only had one 2 gallon petrol tin, I returned to my secret hiding place, where my rifle and ammo were hidden.

Incidentally, the Greek boy used to bring a goat to the bush where I hid during the days when patrols were sighted. I would put my tin hat out and he would milk the goat into it. I still had the little primus stove I had carried with me in the Western Desert and Greece and as a special treat when the weather was cold, I would heat the milk and pop some ration chocolate into it and really live it up.

About noon next day while I was cat napping curled up in my bush hideout, I heard a whistle and some shouting. Peering through the closely woven sticks, I could see the dreaded grey uniforms as Germans were rounding up my crew. I watched closely as they were marched past me. I was certain those Huns would hear my heart pounding. This was really a blow to my plans to put to sea that night.

Long after the patrol had gone with their prisoners I agonised over taking the Red Cross woman or going alone. It was too much of a

gamble and I finally decided that she was comparatively safe among her own people. If I had to drown I would prefer to be alone.

As darkness descended I made my way up to the little Greek church, where I obtained my supply of matches and whilst there alone I said a prayer and planned every detail of my departure that night. I vowed that I would never break the law again, if it meant going through again what I had endured during the previous ten days and nights, hunted like a criminal.

Retrieving all the gear I had painstakingly gathered and lumping it down to the waters' edge took hours. Launching the boat was agonisingly slow and tedious. It was as heavy as hell but fortunately the beach was stoney and inch by inch, not daring to make too much noise, I finally made it. My weakened left knee gave me a lot of pain and trouble, but finally the boat was loaded and ready for rigging. Using a floor board for a paddle I made my way to a sheltered spot between two rocks, where I had hidden the rigging. It was assembled in one piece and standing on the rock I was able to lower the mast into the hole in the foredeck. I had planned this manoeuvre to perfection and was soon aboard, paddling furiously to the safety of deep water, where I could secure the mast supports and make a thorough check of all the bits and pieces. For days I had studied the prevailing winds and they followed a fairly regular pattern. During the night a N. westerly would spring up and freshen as dawn approached. This would carry me out to sea and out of sight of land I had hoped. It freshened all right, so much so that my rigging collapsed.

It sure was a shakedown cruise. I spent the early hours of the morning hanging on to the mast and boom in an endeavour to keep under way and avoid aimlessly drifting. With tiller tied and my arms outstretched I hung on till first light. I was frozen stiff, wet to the skin and as sick as a dog.

The stay holding the peak to the top of the mast had somehow come adrift. This necessitated lifting the mast out of the foredeck and

strengthening the stays to cope with stronger winds than I had anticipated. The acrobatics I was forced to perform cured the seasickness and with everything ship^{shape} I was soon under way.

As the sun climbed higher the wind began to drop. I stood off shore about a mile to see if I could detect any movement or sign of life until someone started taking pot shots at me. The reconnaissance plane, which flew around the island three times a day, was due any minute, so I wrapped the bag round my shoulders to conceal the uniform. As it approached I pretended to be a Greek fisherman returning to the island. It flew so low I could see the pilot having a good look at me. He circled and let go a burst of fire as he made another approach. I promptly slid overboard and when I surfaced he was gaining height and continuing on his way, having had his little bit of fun at my expense. Included in my collection of bits and pieces were some wooden pegs I had made for just such an occasion, but I could find no leaks. There were a few small holes in the sail, but nothing below the water line.

Changing course, I headed in an easterly direction, where the rugged coast line looked more inaccessible to patrols. I came upon a small sandy cove, which looked deserted so nosed in and pulled the boat up to prevent it drifting. There was a pathway leading up over the cliff and as I reached the top I came upon a fisherman's hut. An elderly Greek watched my approach. Australian meant nothing to these people, but English always evoked immediate response. It took quite a while to get through to him that I wanted a pair of oars and a needle and thread to mend the sail. Eventually he understood and brought the needle and thread, but he had no oars to sell me. He pointed in the direction of a tiny village about half a mile away and away we went. We arrived at a little white mud house and he indicated that I enter. There were several women knitting and one sewing on an old Singer sewing machine. There was a great deal of excited chattering and one young woman dashed out and vanished among the houses. Within a minute there

must have been a dozen or more, all standing round gaping at me. I took some photos I had of my family from the lining of my tin hat and passed them round. This created much nodding and smiling and by this time many more adults and children had joined the happy throng. They gave me more bread rolls and goats' milk cheese, but more importantly a pair of small paddles. I thanked them for their kindness and amid much waving and "calos taxi" I departed with a young lad about twelve years of age carrying the paddles for me. He badly wanted to go with me to Alexandria.

Back to the boat and more repairs. The holes in the sail were stitched and patched to strengthen weak spots. The old fisherman brought a couple of pegs and tapped them into the rowlock holes and tied the paddles to them. He then demonstrated how to use them. Once more "calos taxi" as I pushed off and headed for the open sea. Much more confident this time.

A few hours of sunlight remained and not wishing to attract the attention of the recce plane I paddled at a steady rate to get clear of the lea of the island. About a mile off shore I picked up a light breeze and at last I was under way and feeling rather weary. I'd had no sleep since the previous afternoon. Throughout the night I had a hell of a battle keeping awake. As the wind increased and darkness descended, I checked the direction of the waves to hold my course. When the north star became visible I used it to steer by. This required much less concentration and just in case I did drop off I tied a piece of rope to the tiller and the other end round my neck. When I allowed the tiller to swing free it jerked my head about. This simple result was very reassuring indeed.

All night long the old tub ploughed steadily along and the riggings held firm. When the first pale streaks of dawn appeared I tied the tiller in a fixed position and commenced paddling, as I was frozen stiff. The exercise did me good and got the blood circulating. Looking back I could still see Mt. Ida which was a good navigation aid.

By mid-day the wind dropped and so did I - exhausted. I awoke to find large, brown cockroaches crawling all over me and having a feast at my expense. I removed my clothes and shook the roaches into the water and paddled ^{on} leaving them to drown. Using my tin hat I sluiced more from under the decking and finally got rid of the lot.

The sun soon warmed things up and dried my clothes, but unfortunately made me thirsty. If I was to be becalmed for long periods each day I would have to ration my water. The allowance was one mouthful, three times a day. There were times when I argued with myself about missing out on a mouthful, but army training stood me in good stead. I never wilted.

Now that I was clear of any enemy capture I had to plan my next phase. North Africa was 250 to 300 miles away and progress would be slow with such a small sail. It would take a week or more in reasonable sailing conditions. A few hours calm during the day would permit a good sound sleep. Eighteen hours sailing at two or three knots would be about forty to fifty miles a day. All going well my food and water would suffice. I was beginning to enjoy my Mediterranean cruise. The atmosphere was so peaceful. Gone now was the dreaded thought of capture and except for an occasional glimpse of a solitary, inquisitive sea bird, I was alone in this vast expanse of water. The rhythmic roll of the swell and the constant lapping at the bows was really quite soothing.

On the third day my last contact with land was lost as Mt. Ida faded from view. I still had the north star to guide me at night and by day I used my pocket knife stuck in the deck. When the blade cast a fine shadow I could plot my course. The direction in which the waves were travelling was also a good indicator. Africa was due south but the last news we had on Crete was that Rommel had crossed the Egyptian frontier. This necessitated a south easterly course, which meant that I could run before the prevailing wind and perhaps reach Alexandria, which was about 350 miles as the crow flies.

Several uneventful days passed. I watched the sun rise and sink. At times during the night I would sweep an entire circle with my German signalling lamp using the naval call sign \overline{AA} as I thought S.O.S. might be dangerous. There was no response. Occasionally at night I heard an aircraft and could see the red of the exhaust pipes. At least I wasn't alone out there. There were times when the loneliness gripped me. Too lonely at times as that inevitable, choking sensation of ebbing reason grips one in the midst of such deathly silence. A feeling very difficult to effectively describe.

By now I was pretty badly sunburnt and my eyes were badly affected by constant salt spray and the glare of mid ocean. The left eye gradually became worse and trying to judge the waves at night with one eye made steering very difficult. This to me was real danger. I couldn't bathe my eyes in the drinking water because it tasted strongly of petrol and this could make them worse. I had to bandage the left eye to prevent the salty spray and glare making it worse. The morning of the seventh day brought a fresh, following breeze, which by evening had developed into a gale. This meant that I had to ease off the sail to take the strain off the riggings. How thankful I was for those periods of calm and the thorough rest, as fifty two hours elapsed before I slept again.

Throughout the night I clung to the tiller and fought to keep the old tub on an even keel. The waves seemed mountainous and as I slid back into the trough she would yaw and the fight would be on to keep her afloat. Like all sinners and law breakers, I prayed for one more chance and I would never stray from the straight and narrow again. All next day I hung on hoping that the wind would abate. Conditions didn't get any worse or any better. As darkness descended once more I lashed myself to the floor boards, fastened the tiller to my neck so that the constant tugging would prevent me from losing consciousness. I was tired, agonisingly tired. My good eye felt red raw, so too did my scabbed face and arms. I was bitterly cold, exhausted and desperate as I braced myself to battle it out. I'm sure that nature's merciful

numbing of the senses prolongs physical endurance, because I could remember very little of that ten hour struggle.

As day dawned so very slowly, the most wonderful day in all my life, the wind seemed to have eased somewhat. I painfully lowered my cramped and aching body and lay there trembling. I can still feel that sensation of victory to this very day, so vivid is it in my memory. How vividly I recall that maniacal distortion of cracked and bleeding lips in what must have been a horrible sort of grin, followed by a malicious tirade of abuse upon that hungry, despicable, seething mass behind me. This is how best I can describe what I felt. Perhaps it was a feeble attempt to forestall the deliriously happy surge of victorious survival that follows in the wake of such overwhelming fear of destruction.

As the sun rose I saw that unmistakable haze away to the south. It wasn't the monotonous blue horizon I had so frequently scanned. I found myself repeating "I've made it!" (It's an ill wind that blows nobody good). Perhaps it knew that I was becoming impatient and all that abuse. So much for prayers and promises. That haze away to the south was like a magnet. Taking a chance I altered course and pushed the old tub obliquely across the waves, which were still quite high. In my eagerness to reach land this decision became my undoing. It was quite a battle holding her on course, as the waves were now hitting me almost side on. The mast, being a misfit, began to kick from side to side. Twice I took the risk of leaving the filler to brace the mast with floor boards, only to be nearly swamped. I convinced myself that it would see me through, so pushed on, but still no sight of land. It seemed that the blow was petering out, so I experimented with a sea anchor made from the old bag I had carried. The boat rode the waves pretty well so I bailed the water which had built up and lay down for what I considered a well earned rest. It had been fiftytwo hours since I had last slept.

During the night I woke to find water sloshing around. She was taking water somewhere, but it was too dark to see where. As soon as it was light enough I made an inspection and found where the mast had opened a crack in the bows. With some strips of bag I sealed it off, but for fear of making it worse it wasn't possible to force it in. This would only be a temporary measure.

Gazing anxiously to the south I could make out a tiny strip at the bottom of the haze. This must be land at last, so I gave the boat every bit of canvas she had in an endeavour to beat the water seeping in. By eight o'clock the coast line became clear. Unfortunately, the seam in the bows had opened up and I was forced to bail at more regular intervals and for longer periods. This was very tiring and when land looked only a few miles off the mast smashed a hole in the bottom and my dreams of sailing into Alexandria went with it. Having been in the Western Desert I knew that there were no prominent features east of Solum, but just where I was I had no idea. Tying my tunic to the rudder clamps, I fixed the water tin - almost empty by now - across my shoulders and decided to swim ashore. The boat had filled but was still afloat. The waves were still quite big but I reasoned that swimming would be faster than hanging on to the boat.

For seven hours I surfed, floated and swam. The tin made it possible to rest by lying on my back, holding it on my chest and kicking my feet to keep moving. As the hours ticked by my eyes gave me hell and the scabs of my face and arms peeled off, causing more discomfort.

From the top of the larger waves I could clearly see the shore line, rugged limestone against which the waves were breaking, dashing spray high into the air. Thank God there were several hours of sunshine left as it would have been impossible to land in darkness. As the water became shallower the breakers began to carry me in much faster. So near and yet greater danger than ever. It was quite a battle hanging on to the tin, as I gradually worked my way along, trying to duck the

big waves. I could see a small stretch of sand between some rocky outcrops, but several jagged rocks were between me and that sand. I studied the situation very carefully and could see that the large waves cleared the rocks by two or three feet. There was no better landing place in sight, so I had no choice. I waited for a really big wave and took off with the water tin braced to take the impact. As I surfed over those sharp, rugged rocks I could almost feel my chest and stomach being ripped asunder. The next moment I was being spun and rolled in all directions. I scrambled clear on my hands and knees and lay there for some time. I couldn't bear the glare of the white sand.

Several times I tried to get to my feet, but each time I just fell forward or backwards. My balance was gone. What a queer sensation. I peered round through the cracks between my fingers, hoping to find some ribbon weed out of which I could construct something to protect my eyes from the glare of the sand.

Again I was faced with the problem - what now? I knew that the road was somewhere near the coast and decided to make my ^{WAY} inland, where I could conceal myself and watch what vehicles passed - friend or foe. The ground surface was mostly sandstone rubble and it wasn't long before I realised that my water softened feet couldn't handle it. Back to the soft beach sand and a hunt for material of some sort to bind my feet. I found a small piece of weed rag and by making a tiny hole for my right eye and tying it around my head I was able to see fairly well.

After walking for some time the rocky coast line ended, thank goodness, as my feet were sore and bleeding. I climbed to the top of a high sandhill and scanned the sea in hopes of seeing the boat, but there was no sign of it. There seemed to be no sign of life ahead of me so I plodded on. Just after sunset I suddenly came upon a tent surrounded by sandbags. I slid into a position where I could observe it. There was a signal van which looked very much like our own type parked nearby.

I could just make out a dark, swarthy chap building a gun pit. Again the gun, mounted on an ack ack stand, looked very much like ours. As I was crouched there a fair haired chap came out of the tent and spoke to the fellow filling sand bags. I was too far away to hear what was said, but could see that he had stripes on both sleeves of his shirt. By this time I was convinced that they were British, but just in case I crawled round to see what lettering and insignia was on the Big van. It was British! When the sergeant appeared again I stood up and called to him. What a sight I must have looked, dressed in tattered trousers and blind folded.

I stood there and when the dark fellow moved behind the machine gun I reached for the sky and shouted "I'm Australian". To me this was a tremendous climax. At last it was all over. They both stood staring at me as I lowered my arms and moved towards them. As the sergeant gripped my outstretched hand he gasped "Good God man, where have you come from?". When I said "Crete" they grabbed my arms and half carried me into the tent and put me on a bed. As I stretched out I could feel the bed rolling and tossing. Whilst I lay there with my eyes closed, I could hear them talking among themselves. I wasn't game to say anything for fear that I might crack. My "guts" were really knotted.

Eventually I regained some composure and sat up suggesting someone hang on to the bed before it tipped me out. The sergeant asked me my number, name and unit as he wanted to radio the particulars to Mersa Matruh. A third chap brought me a hot meal of tinned sausages and potatoes, but try as I might it wouldn't stay down. As soon as I swallowed it would shoot back into my mouth. I managed a good, big mug of hot tea and then out came a couple of bottles of Richmond beer and a tin of Craven A cigarettes. I don't remember anything else till next morning.

They were all up and about when I woke up and this time I ate a huge helping of eggs and bacon. Later I took a stroll back along the foreshore and found the wreckage of my boat, but no tunic which

which contained my paybook, canteen orders, Greek drachmas and snaps of my family. I took a splinter of wood from the boat as a souvenir and returned to find a staff car had just arrived from Mersa Matruh to pick me up. I had stumbled upon what is known as a listening post, which reports the movements of enemy aircraft. The dark, swarthy chap I had thought to be Italian was a Maltese labourer.

On arrival at Mersa Matruh I was taken to the camp commandant, an English brigadier. The only identification I had was a signet ring with my initials and number engraved on it. I told him about the chaps hiding in the mountains and that I was confident that quite a few could be rescued and the sooner the better. He had me driven to the R.A.P. for treatment and a pair of dark glasses. He also gave me several Egyptian pounds. As I left the tent a group of West Aussies had assembled outside. They were all interested in the fate of friends in the 2/11 Bn. They emptied their pockets to give me more money to see me through. One big burly officer pushed his way through and picked me up calling me Tich. It was Ted Bruton, who had left our sig. platoon to go to an officers course, when we were in N.S.W. in 1939. It was a great surprise for both of us. He took me to the kit store to be fitted with a complete new set of clothing, boots, etc. Next day after a hair cut and shave, I was taken to the officers' mess to give a talk on parachutists. Following this, a British newsreel team took me down to the beach to re-enact another landing. It was quite a round of events, but eventually I was on the train for the long drag back to join the battalion remnants in Palestine.

Several weeks after rejoining the remnants of the battalion at Khassa, the C.O. informed me that I was to report to the A.I.F. H.Q. in Egypt. On arrival and getting nowhere with orderly room staff, I wandered around passageways and found that G.S.O. 111 was a Major Sagers. I had known a Captain Sagers when in the militia some years before and decided to try my luck. He turned out to be the same and informed that they were expecting me and was quite surprised to find that the Carroll who had escaped was the Carroll he knew during training in the Claremont Drill Hall.

He took me to the G.S.O.1 and introduced me as one of his cross country runners in 1932. The G.S.O.1 shook my hand and praised my efforts and asked "What possessed you Carroll to make such a miraculous escape?". I said I wasn't quite sure but would rather feed the fish than surrender. This retort seemed to amuse them and we all had a chuckle.

We discussed the possibility of rescuing those who were still hiding on the island and I assured them that this could be achieved and the sooner the better and that I would be prepared to go back as a guide. Next morning I was driven to British Intelligence H.Q. where a huge map of Crete was produced and I was able to pinpoint the exact area where troops were hiding, the monastery and villages where the headmen would help them. Quite a lot of discussion took place and I was asked if I would be prepared to go back as a guide if need be. It was arranged that I stand by at A.I.F. H.Q. and await further developments.

In due course I was informed that a naval officer, who had lived on Crete for some years before the war, was familiar with the area, could speak Greek and was standing by. I was free to return to Palestine.

Two months later several hundred men were rescued by British submarines and taken to Egypt. Mission completed.