



In June 1940, a suggestion reached the Air Ministry from a London engineering firm that a bombing raid on a certain aqueduct in southern Italy would pay a handsome dividend to the Allies, should the aqueduct be destroyed. The aqueduct formed part of an extensive pipeline system known as the *Aquedotte Pugliese*, which drew its supply from the River Sele and passed it through the Apennine mountains into south-east Italy. It carried the main water supply for the province of Apulia, inhabited by some two million Italians who live for the most part in Taranto, Brindisi, Bari, Foggia and other towns. To deprive them for a month at least of their regular water supply and compel them to fall back on local reservoirs would, it was hoped, create alarm and despondency and have a considerable effect on the morale of the Italians, who at that stage never dreamed that the war would involve any fighting on their soil.

TRAGINO 1941: BRITAIN'S FIRST PARATROOP RAID

By Karel Margry

The raid, it was thought, might even have an effect on the war in Albania. Taranto was an important naval base and Brindisi and Bari were embarking troops and stores to the Albanian theatre, and dislocation in these ports might prove of indirect help to the Greeks fighting there. (By the time the operation against the aqueduct was carried out in February 1941, fighting had extended to

North Africa — Mussolini's forces had invaded Egypt in September and the first British counter-offensive was now pushing them back into Libya — and it was calculated that the raid would even have an effect on that theatre.)



Top: The target of Britain's first paratroop raid ever: the aqueduct across the Tragino creek, deep in the Apennine mountains of southern Italy. Situated across the valley of the Ofanto river from the hilltop town of Calitri, it carried the main water line from the headwaters of the River Sele eastwards to the coastal province of Apulia and the strategic ports of Taranto, Brindisi and Bari. At the time of the raid, February 1941, Britain's parachute arm was still in its infancy. The Central Landing School had only been

opened at Ringway airport near Manchester in June 1940 with a dropping zone for parachutists being found at nearby Tatton Park. By the end of 1940, about 200 volunteers of what was by then known as 11th SAS (Special Air Service) had qualified as parachutists. It was from their number that a special 'X' Troop was selected for the raid on Tragino. *Above:* Today, a memorial in Tatton Park records the park's role in creating Britain's parachute arm.



Left: 'The Guinea-Pigs' — a unique photo of 'X' Troop taken on the Tatton Park drop-zone during its six weeks of training for Operation 'Colossus'. Almost every account of the raid on Tragino states that 'X' Troop consisted of seven officers and 31 other ranks. However, none of these accounts made explicit whether this number included the two men attached as interpreters, nor mentioned that the original group included an officer and two other ranks who had been selected to stand by as reserves at

Malta. In reality, 'X' Troop, including the reserves and attached interpreters, consisted of 39 men: eight officers and 31 other ranks. Of these, 35 actually jumped in the operation. (Courtesy of H. Pexton) Right: The commander of 'X' Troop was 30-year-old Major Trevor Pritchard, second-in-command of 11th SAS and known after his first three initials as 'Tag' Pritchard. This photo was taken in India before the war, when he was still serving with the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

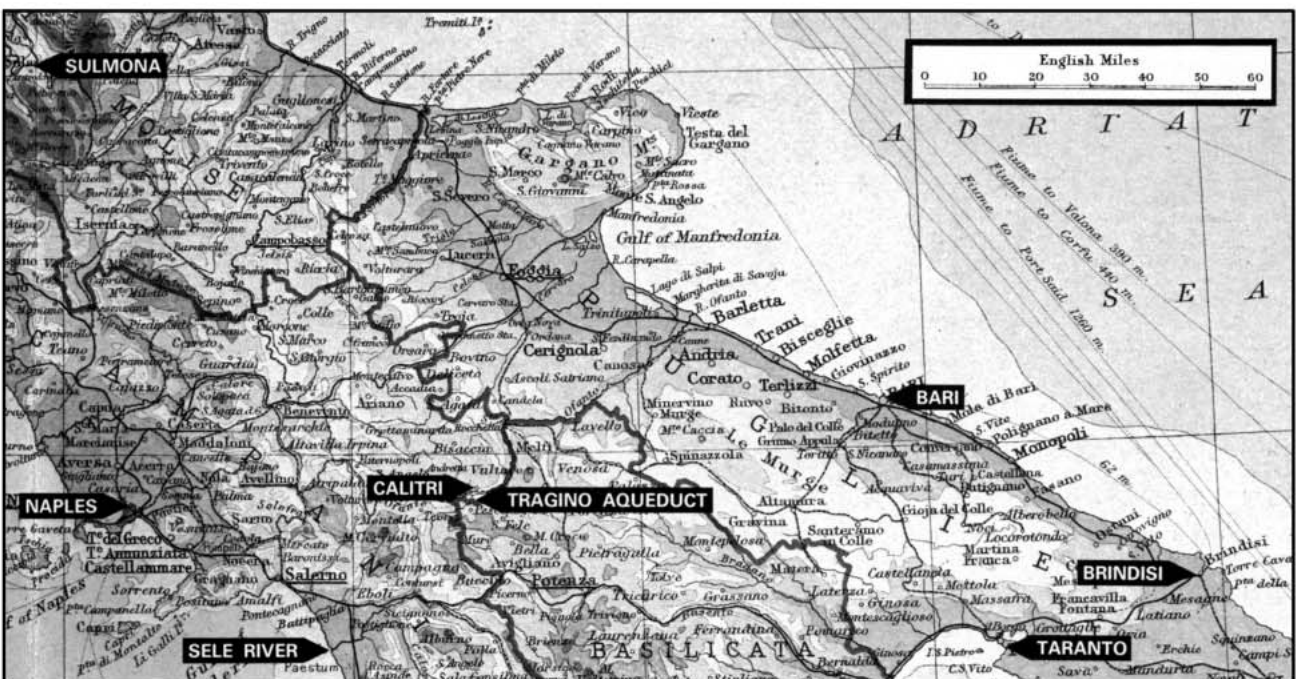
The aqueduct in question lay in the heart of the Apennine mountains in the province of Campania, south-west of the 4,000-foot peak of Monte Vulture and just south of the small hilltop town of Calitri. It crossed a small stream, the Tragino, a tributary of the River Ofanto which flowed eastward in the valley between the aqueduct and Calitri.

On December 5, 1940, a meeting was held at the Air Ministry at which the Planning Staff decided the target to be an important one, but not suitable for a bombing attack. It was therefore referred to the Director of Combined Operations for urgent consideration. As a result of further deliberations, a decision to use airborne troops was arrived at and on January 11, 1941, Operation 'Colossus' was officially approved.

The plan was that a party of officers and men from the newly-created parachute arm should be transported to Malta by air, and the operation launched from there. The parachute force would be carried and dropped by six bombers. Two more bombers, also from Malta, were to carry out a diversionary bombing attack on the railway yards at Foggia. It was hoped that the Italians would believe that these yards were the target for the whole force. After blowing up the aqueduct, the force was to make its way on foot to the west coast of Italy where they would be taken off by submarine.

This was to be the first airborne operation ever mounted by the British army. In fact, it is almost certain that the official reason for the operation — the strategic importance of the

Tragino aqueduct for the war in Albania and North Africa — was in reality nothing but an excuse for what, in fact, was to be an experiment. Were British parachute troops capable of carrying out a mission in enemy territory? Was their equipment satisfactory? Could the RAF take them to the right spot and arrive at the right time? These were some of the questions to which, it was hoped, the raid would supply the answers. Other reasons for the raid, not to be overlooked, were more of a propagandistic nature. At home, the creation of a parachute arm was still controversial and its advocates were anxious to vindicate its existence. Abroad, the raid would announce to the world that Britain had parachute troops and, even at its lowest ebb, was still capable of aggressive action.



Half of 'X' Troop consisted of engineers, the other half of infantry. Right: Captain Christopher Lea commanded one of the three infantry sections. (Courtesy of C. R. Lea) Far right: Lieutenant Tony Deane-Drummond commanded another section. On January 24, he was sent to Malta, the take-off base for the operation, ahead of the rest of 'X' Troop to make preparations there. The third infantry section was commanded by 2nd Lieutenant Geoffrey Jowett.

'X' TROOP

Britain's parachute arm had by then been in existence for only seven months. On June 22, 1940, Churchill, had given instructions to his Chief-of-Staff, General Ismay, for the training of 'a corps of at least 5,000 parachute troops.' Major John Rock, RE, was given charge of the military organisation; and shortly afterwards the Central Landing School (renamed Central Landing Establishment in September) was formed at Ringway, the civil airport of Manchester, under the command of an RAF officer, Group Captain L.G. Harvey, to train men for this new type of warfare. With a combined RAF and Army staff, it was the RAF's task to produce the parachute equipment, to evolve the methods of dropping, and to teach the troops their air technique, while the Army studied the special organisation for fighting on the ground and the weapons and tactical training. The first months of the CLE were difficult. Co-operation from the War Office was found wanting and the Air Ministry was obstructive and clearly opposed to the new arm. Six old Whitley Mark I aircraft was all that was made available for parachute training. However, Major Rock found ready co-operation among his RAF colleagues, chief among them Wing Commanders Louis Strange, Nigel Norman and Maurice Newnham.

The troops that formed the first pupil parachutists were men of No. 2 Commando. All officers and other ranks were volunteers. All through the summer and autumn, rigorous training went on. Four weeks of intensive physical training, were followed by real parachuting at Tatton Park near Knutsford, CLE's drop-zone some six miles south-west of Ringway. After that, the men moved to Scotland for six weeks of training and mountaineering at the Commando School. Now very fit and keen for action, the next five months came as a definite anti-climax, as they relapsed into routine training and no one appeared to know how, or when, they were going to be used. Soon, the men were showing signs of boredom. Tired of waiting, of showing off before generals and cabinet ministers, while there was fighting in North Africa, men began to ask to return to unit. In November, No. 2 Commando was renamed the 11th Special Air Service Battalion. By now, some 200 of its men had qualified as parachutists.

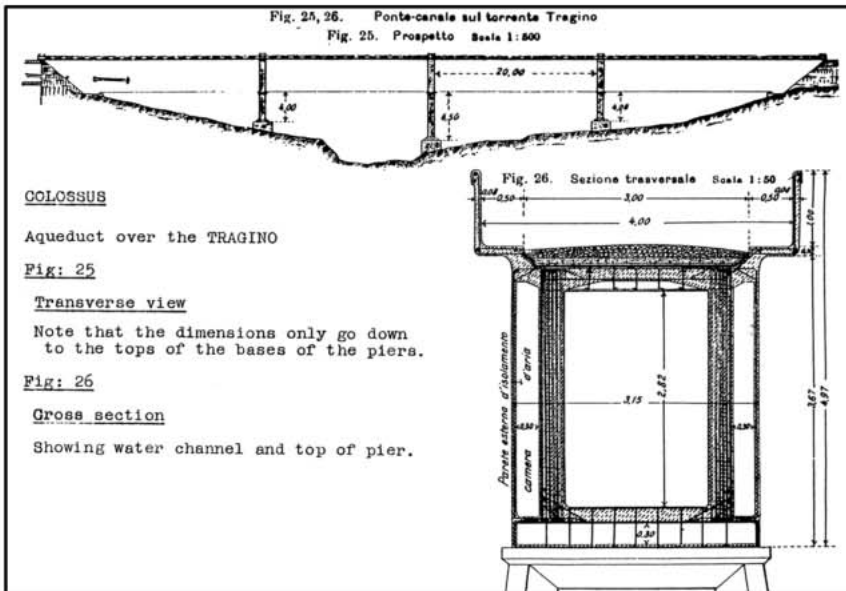
Then, in early January, a sudden whisper went round the camp. Something was about to happen. All at once, the requests for transfer stopped. The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Jackson, assembled the battalion at Cliffe House in Knutsford and informed them that a top-secret operation involving deep penetration into enemy territory was planned. He added that it was unlikely that any arrangements would be made for the 'extraction' of the 'survivors' and that, though those taking part would be wearing uniform, the enemy might well regard them as spies and treat them as such. He ended by calling for volunteers. Every officer and man of the 500 on parade stepped forward. To solve the problem, the CO asked the officers, chosen to take part, to each select five good men to go on the operation. Half were to belong to the Royal Engineers and half were to form a covering party during the demolition.

The chosen few were formed into a special unit, called 'X' Troop. Its commander was



'X' Troop included three men who could speak Italian. One was a regular member of 11th SAS: Private Nicol Nistri (*below left*). To protect his Italian background, he went on the operation under the more British-sounding name of 'John Tristan'. The two other interpreters had been attached especially for the operation. Right from the moment he joined them, the men of 'X' Troop looked upon Flight Lieutenant Ralph Lucky, RAF, as the 'mystery man' of the operation. They suspected that there was more to him than just being an attached interpreter. Even some of the officers thought that his inclusion was perhaps an attempt to get an agent into Italy. Before take-off for Malta, they noticed that he was on uncommonly friendly terms with Admiral Keyes, the Chief of Combined Operations; later, in Italian captivity, he would still act independently from the rest, seeking contacts with the Italians and securing privileges, as if he was planning a thing of his own. However, all these suspicions were unfounded. Prompted by the suppositions of the 'X' Troop veterans, we enquired with the SOE archives. The SOE Advisor of the Foreign Office replied to us that he had established that Lucky never had any connections with Special Operations whatsoever. 'X' Troop's third interpreter was an unlikely soldier if ever there was one: Fortunato Picchi (*below right*) was 42 years old and had been head waiter at the London Savoy. A naturalised Briton and avowed anti-fascist, he had given up his job and volunteered for duty in the British armed forces. It was while researching Lucky's background that we unexpectedly discovered that there had been an SOE man on the operation after all: Picchi. Recruited at the end of 1940, he was the first Italian to volunteer to return to Italy with SOE. His SOE report described him as 'non-politically minded, but anti-fascist. An idealist, an excellent worker and organiser who cannot allow failure. Wants above all things for everyone to be treated fairly. Is prepared to shine in all England's trials and has no desire to be treated in any way differently from an English soldier'. There was a query about his fitness, in view of his hotel background and age, but he was found to be 'quite fit and moderate in his habits'. Asked by Combined Operations on January 2, 1941, to supply two Italians for Operation 'Colossus', SOE in fact provided three for parachute training, but as planning for the raid evolved, it was decided to take only one. To protect his identity, Picchi was given the alias of a Free Frenchman, '3846154 Private Pierre Dupont'.





The Tragino aqueduct had first been suggested as a target to the British military authorities by the London engineering firm which had helped to build it in the late 1920s. However, in spite of this, exact information on the aqueduct and its construction was very scarce. These drawings came from an Italian engineering magazine. (Air Historical Branch)

Major T.A.G. Pritchard, 11th SAS' second-in-command. The engineer detail was under the command of Captain Gerry Daly with 2nd Lieutenant George Paterson as his assistant. The covering party would consist of three sections, led by Captain Christopher Lea, Lieutenant Anthony Deane-Drummond, and 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Jowett respectively.

Three interpreters were included. One, Private Nicol Nastri, of Italian background but a true Cockney, was an organic member of 11th SAS, but the other two were attached especially for the mission. Both were middle-aged men: one was an RAF officer, Flight Lieutenant Ralph Lucky of No. 311 Squadron; the other an Italian called Fortunato Picchi. Picchi was perhaps the most surprising member of 'X' Troop. Aged 42, in civilian life he had been head waiter at the banquet hall of the London Savoy Hotel. He had been interned as an alien at the beginning of the war. An avowed anti-Fascist, he had joined the Free Italians and volunteered for any job the British government might give him. To protect them from being regarded as traitors in case of capture, the two native Italians were given new identities: Nastri became Private 'John Tristan' and Picchi 'Private Pierre Dupont'.

As finally selected, 'X' Troop counted eight officers and 31 other ranks; seven officers and 29 men were scheduled to drop in the actual operation. One officer and two other ranks were held in reserve as replacements.

Moving from their billets at Knutsford to a special accommodation at Ringway itself, 'X' Troop immediately started a rigorous training programme. It lasted six weeks. Each morning, before breakfast, the men had a three-mile run, followed by thirty minutes P.T. After breakfast, they had a 15-mile march with full kit. During the day, they had aircraft or container drill, gun practice or lectures on withdrawal and escape. At night, they practised night drops.

A full-scale wooden mock-up of that part of the aqueduct to be attacked was erected in Tatton Park behind Tatton Hall, the country seat of Lord Egerton. Here the troops spent the afternoons and evenings training the attack and practising the demolition routine. Plans called for about half a ton of explosives to be placed against the aqueduct piers. In time, the engineers became so efficient that they could do it in just over half an hour.

Meanwhile, preparations were in progress for the air side of the operation. Wing Commander Sir Nigel Norman was made Operation Controller. The Air Ministry had originally decided to use Bombays for the raid, but after urgent representation by the Central Landing Establishment, this was changed and

eight of the latest Whitleys were made available. On January 15, eight Whitley V aircraft and crews belonging to Nos. 51 and 78 Squadrons arrived from RAF Dishford. Wing Commander J.B. ('Willie') Tait, DFC, was made the Attack Commander Air. In the brief time left before the operation, long-distance tanks and container release gear for the arms and explosive containers had to be fitted; also, training had to be given to the aircrews who came from bomber operations and had no experience in parachute dropping. A landscape model of the aqueduct and its surroundings was produced and used in planning the attack and training the aircrews. The model had been made by an RAF officer on the CLE staff, Mac Monnies, and was kept strictly out of bounds to all but a few in Group Captain Harvey's office.

Lieutenant Deane-Drummond had been chosen to travel to Malta by RAAF Sunderland flying boat in advance of the main party. He was to organise the arrangements for the raid there and carry the operation orders to Malta's Army, Navy and Air Force chiefs. He left Ringway for the Sunderland base at Plymouth on January 24, but due to the weather, he had to wait seven days before he could finally take off. Stopping overnight at Gibraltar, he finally arrived in Malta at dusk of February 1, eight days ahead of the main force.

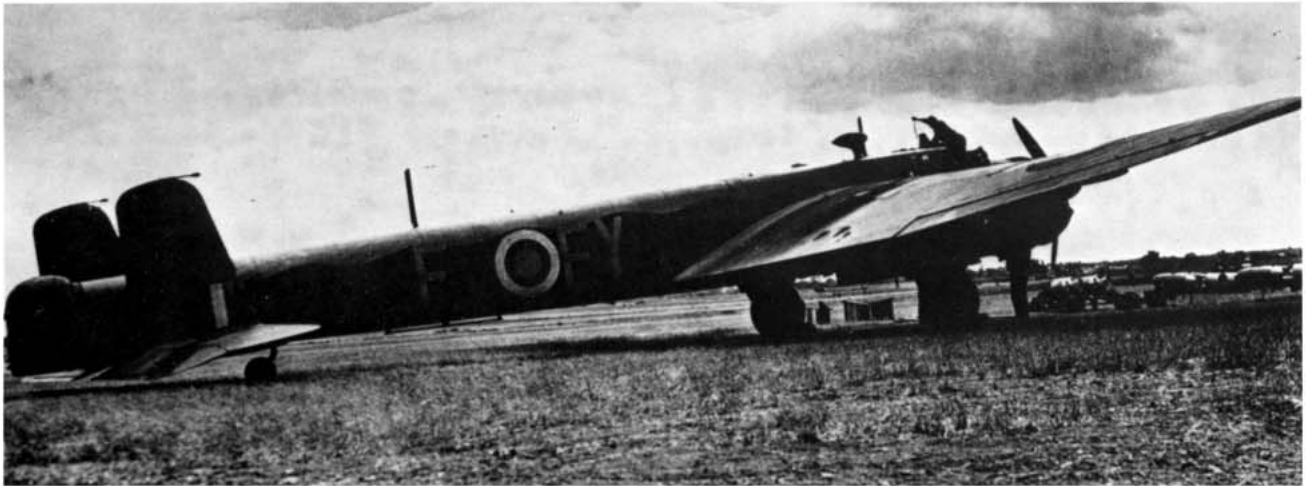
That same day, back in Britain, a dress rehearsal was staged with 'X' Troop 'hole-jumping' on the mock-up aqueduct in Tatton Park from the Whitleys. The exercise was a blatant fiasco. A cloudy night and a strong wind combined to make the dropping inaccurate. About half the aircraft dropped their loads in the wrong place, several men landing in high trees where they remained suspended by their parachutes until freed by the Knutsford Fire Brigade. Those that did land



Only one picture was available to the planners of the raid and this was in fact 13 years old, having been taken in 1928 when the aqueduct was being built. The huts in the foreground used by the construction team were no longer there at the time of the raid. (Airborne Forces Museum)



The same view today, looking north-west, with the town of Calitri just visible on the side of the mountain in the distance on the right.



correctly were dragged by their parachutes on landing, or had to chase their containers which were bowling along over the ground.

On February 2, the Whitleys flew to RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk, the take-off base for the operation, followed on the 4th by 'X' Troop in a special bus. Here the men were taught a correspondence code to be used in case they were captured.

By February 7, all was ready. Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, Chief of Combined Operations, came to see 'X' Troop off. They all paraded in a hangar together with the aircrew and some of the Whitleys. He spoke to everyone and ended with a short talk, saying: 'I know that you will tackle this job with determination and enthusiasm, and with a bit of luck I am sure you will pull it off. We shall be waiting to hear how you have got on, waiting to learn what British paratroopers can do. I decided that I just couldn't let you go without coming here to say goodbye to you.' He then drew himself up and saluted them. As he turned away, one trooper heard him whisper to himself: 'A pity, a damned pity.' Perhaps better than anyone else, Keyes knew that the chances of 'X' Troop getting back were very small indeed.

The eight planes left Mildenhall at 10.00 p.m. After a night flight of nearly 1,400 miles, much of it over occupied France, they arrived safely at Malta at 9.00 a.m. the following morning, landing at RAF Luqa. Deane-Drummond had arranged for accommodation at the old naval hospital of Lazaretto on Manuel Island. He had also drawn up the explosives and other stores needed for the operation.

On the 9th, all containers were repacked and repairs were carried out to aircraft damaged by flying rock from enemy bombing. The Governor of Malta, General Dobbie, visited the party. That same morning, Flying Officer A. Warburton, DSO, DFC (one of the pioneers of British photographic reconnaissance), flying a Glen Martin at 24,000 feet, obtained not only photographs of the target area, but a complete strip from the target to the coast. Hitherto there had been no up-to-date photographs of the aqueduct, the only available picture being a photo which showed the aqueduct under construction around 1928. Examination of the photographs showed, outlined clearly against the snow-covered ground, that there were not one but two aqueducts, of unequal size and about 250 yards apart. It was decided that the larger, eastern one would be the objective. The dropping area appeared suitable, without signs of defensive measures.

Meanwhile, arrangements were being made to bring back 'X' Troop after they had accomplished their task. The Admiralty ordered submarine HMS *Triumph* to be lying off the mouth of the River Sele — south of Salerno — on the night of February 15/16. Since the operation was due to take place on the

The eight Whitley Mark V bombers needed for Operation 'Colossus' came from Nos. 51 and 78 Squadrons from RAF Dishford. Wing Commander 'Willie' Tait, DFC, commanded the composite flight which was detached from bombing duties especially for the raid. This plane, 'E' for Edward, originated from No. 78 Squadron. It was flown by Pilot Officer Robinson, with Sergeant Hatcher as second pilot, Sergeant Nolan as navigator, Sergeant Diamond as wireless operator and Sergeant Gurmin as air gunner. During the actual operation, it in addition carried Wing Commander Nigel Norman, the observer for the Central Landing Establishment (CLE), and successfully dropped 2nd Lieutenant Paterson and his stick of five engineers on the target. (Courtesy of E. Gurmin)

10th/11th, this would give the parachute troops five days to reach the rendezvous on foot. This seemed feasible, for, although the country was mountainous, the distance to be traversed was not more than 60 miles. If no one showed up on the arranged night, the submarine would return a second time three

nights later, on the night of the 17th/18th. This would be the last rendezvous. Major Pritchard conferred with the commander of HMS *Triumph*, Lieutenant Commander W. J. Woods, in person to co-ordinate plans.

Final briefing for the operation took place at 4.00 p.m. on the 10th. For the first time,



Take-off base for the operation was RAF Luqa on Malta. As Lieutenant Deane-Drummond, together with an RAF maintenance crew of six men, had already been sent ahead to Malta by Sunderland to organise billets, the eight bombers carried 40 men on the flight from the UK to Malta: 35 of the 36 men scheduled to take part; the three reserves (2nd Lieutenant Davies, Corporal Rowe and Private Humphries — not to be confused with Private Humphrey who did take part); Wing Commander Norman; and Corporal Gray (an RAF fitter). Flight Lieutenant Bruce Williams of the CLE, in charge of parachutes, flew as part of one of the Whitley crews. At dawn on February 8, all eight Whitleys arrived in Malta, much to the surprise of the RAF who had expected one or two to fall by the wayside as had always happened on previous flights to the island. They had flown the 1,400 miles from England with a following wind and in a record time of 11 hours. Above: At RAF Luqa, Flight Lieutenant Walter Williams (second from left), pilot of 'W' for Willie, poses with his crew in front of their aircraft. (Airborne Forces Museum)

Pritchard briefed all ranks on the actual object and the hoped-for result of the operation. Up till this point, everybody had thought they were going to go to Abyssinia, and the men cheered when they heard that it was going to be Italy itself. As yet, only the officers were told the details of the pick-up plan. The troop was to split up into several parties and rendezvous at the same spot on the coast five days later. Light signals were arranged for bringing the submarine in, but routes would be left for the individual parties to work out for themselves.

Each of the six troop-carrying Whitleys would carry six men and four to six containers, the latter containing arms (either a Bren gun or three or four Thompson sub-machine guns), explosives, folding ladders, other equipment and food. In addition, each of the six planes would carry a 250lb bomb. The two supporting bombers would each have two 500lb and six 250lb bombs. The time schedule was for aircraft No. 1 to drop at 9.30 p.m., with other planes arriving at six minutes intervals. After the parachute drop, the six planes were to continue to Foggia and join in the diversion.

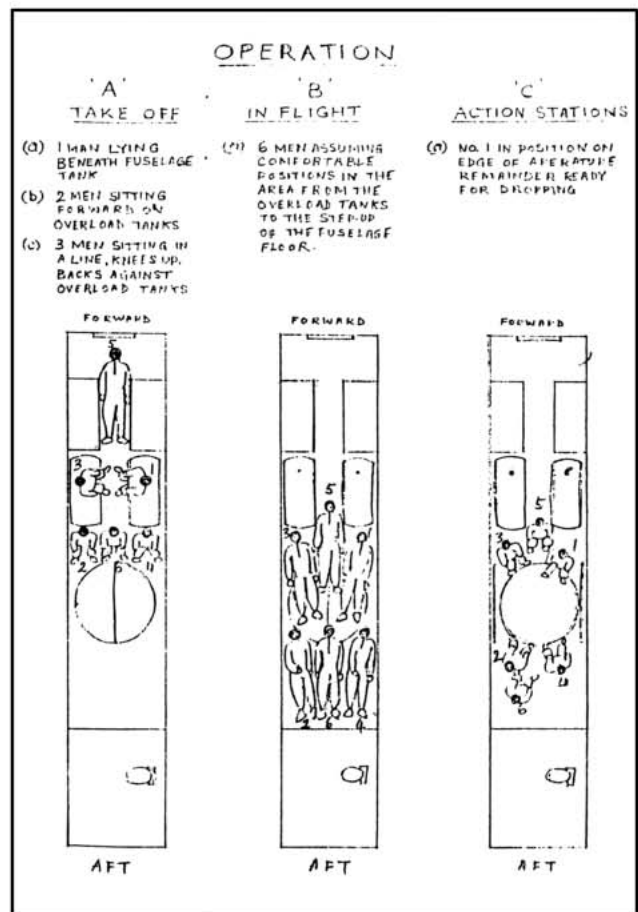
At 5.00 p.m., after some hot tea and hard-boiled eggs, the men put on their parachutes and took a truck to the waiting aeroplanes, singing their own special song, the refrain of which was 'Oh! What a surprise for the Duce, the Duce!' Before emplaning, Pritchard addressed the men on the runway. 'You are pioneers', he said, 'or guinea-pigs — and you can choose which word you prefer'. In high spirits, the men squeezed down the tunnel of the Whitleys.



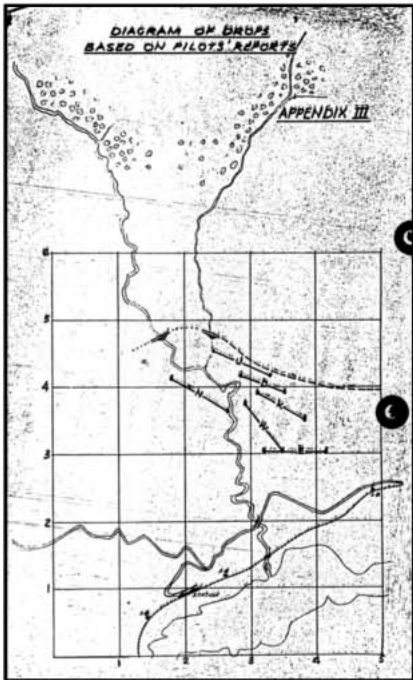
In retrospect, intelligence for the Tragino raid can only be called haphazard. It was only on Malta on the evening of February 8, less than a day before the raid was due, that it was discovered from aerial photographs taken that day that there were not one but two aqueducts spanning the Tragino valley. After careful study, it was decided that the larger, eastern one was the one to be attacked. Our photo, taken from the hillside to the west, shows both aqueducts, 200 yards apart and with the larger one in the background.



Left: 2nd Lieutenant George Paterson was the assistant engineer officer of 'X' Troop, the chief engineer officer being Captain Gerry Daly. Little did Paterson suspect, as he had his snapshot taken in front of one of the Whitleys on Malta, that, on the actual operation, Daly's stick would not be dropped in the right place and that the responsibility for the demolition of the aqueduct would come to rest solely on his shoulders. (Courtesy of G. R. Paterson) Right: The planning for the operation gave precise instructions how the



sticks of six men were to divide in the fuselage of the Whitleys during take-off, during the three-hour flight to the target and at 'action stations' respectively. As the plane carrying Captain Daly and five other engineers was about to take off, one of the men, a corporal, suddenly reported feeling sick. Not wanting a sick man on the operation, Daly ordered him off the plane. It was probably the last-minute nature of the drop-out which precluded any of the three reserves taking his place.



THE RAID

The first three aircraft, carrying the covering party, took off at 5.40 p.m. Ten minutes later the diversion flight of two aircraft left to attack Foggia. At 6.04 p.m., two of the three planes carrying the RE demolition party took off on time. The third aircraft, 'J' for Johnnie, with Captain Daly's stick on board, was supposed to lead the three RE planes and take off at 6.00 p.m. but was held up when one of his stick reported feeling sick at the last-minute. Daly ordered the man, a corporal, to leave the plane and it took off late, at 6.17 p.m., with only five paratroopers aboard.

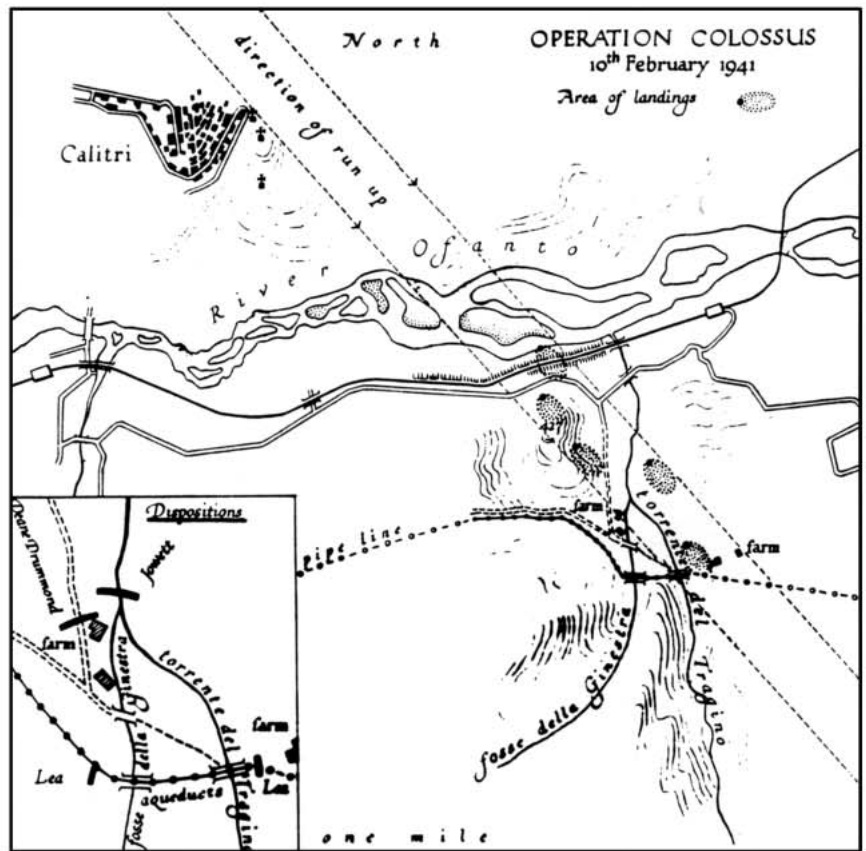
The flight was uneventful except for slight flak over Sicily. The weather was excellent and visibility extremely good. The aircraft crossed the Italian coast at 10,000 feet in a clear sky and, when the target was reached, the aqueduct was easily seen standing out sharply in the bright moonlight against the snow-capped ridges of the desolate Apennines.

The first plane to reach the dropping zone was aircraft No. 3, 'N' for Nuts, piloted by Sergeant Lashbrook and carrying Deane-Drummond's stick. After the '15 minutes to target' early warning call, the men had made ready to jump, but nothing happened until suddenly the rear gunner (he was in fact Flight Lieutenant Bruce Williams of the CLE who was accompanying the raid as an observer) came through from the tail shouting 'You are to drop in under a minute. Get cracking'. The intercom had failed at the last minute and for about ten seconds there was a pandemonium while the men wrestled with the exit doors in the floor. As the plane passed over the village of Calitri at 100 feet, the red light came on and, five seconds later, the green light. It was 9.42 p.m. The six men dropped through the hole, the containers — one with a Bren gun, one with four tommy-guns and two with explosive charges — being released between Nos. 3 and 4. The stick had been dropped rather low, from about 400 feet, which gave them some 15 seconds before touch-down. As he descended, Deane-Drummond saw the aqueduct, the mountains and the streams, exactly as he remembered them from the scale model, standing out clearly in the full moon. The lieutenant landed in a ploughed field on the side of a hill, across the Tragino stream from the planned DZ, but only about a 100 yards above the aqueduct.

Four of his men had landed nearby. Using the arranged password 'Heil Hitler!' and the reply 'Viva Duce!', they quickly assembled.

Left: The diagram of the five sticks that were dropped correctly, based on the pilots reports. The letters correspond with the plane letters. It shows that the first plane to arrive, 'N' for Nuts, dropped its stick on the far side of the Tragino stream. Above: The DZ was a sloping piece of open ground, rising to a high point called Hill 427. This is how it appears from the ground today, looking up the slope.

The tommy-gun canister was also only a few yards away and this was quickly opened. However, one man was missing: unknown to his comrades, Lance-Corporal Harry Boulter had crashed onto large boulders at the side of the Tragino and broken his ankle.



A map of the area drawn up by the Air Historical Branch in December 1942 with the notation that 'The point of aim for the parachutists was Hill 427. They came down in a good "pattern". The spot in each landing area marks the point of landing of the first man down from each aircraft.' Note the slight variation in drop pattern compared with the earlier diagram. The inset shows the defensive positions taken up by the infantry sections of Deane-Drummond, Jowett and Lea. (Air Historical Branch)

Not losing any time, Deane-Drummond ordered his section to divide into two parties. One, which included Picchi, was to clear some farmshacks just above where they had landed; the other, led by Sergeant Arthur Lawley, to clear the cottages on the other side of the Tragino some 150 yards from the aqueduct. All inhabitants were to be rounded up. The lieutenant himself would be at the aqueduct and all inhabitants found were to be brought there. As the men went their way, they looked at the sky uneasily. So far, none of the other planes had shown up.

Sergeant Lawley's party was just approaching the cottages, when a door opened and a man came out with a dog. Flattening themselves, the men saw him go into an outbuilding, then, after a few minutes, re-enter the house. They followed him, kicked the door open, and surprised a peasant family — two men, a woman and several children. By lowering his gun and holding out his hand, Lawley indicated that he wished no harm, and the family allowed themselves to be shepherded outside. With the family in the second house was an Italian soldier in uniform who, when Lawley stepped forward to shake hands with the elderly man, made a dive for a shot-gun standing against the wall. Lawley beat him to it and, although he spoke no Italian, his tone of voice and raised gun, left no doubt that he meant business if the soldier tried one more trick.

Altogether, the two parties collected some two dozen Italians, men, women and children, all civilians except for the one soldier. Docilely, they allowed themselves to be marched off to the aqueduct which Deane-Drummond, to his relief, had found unguarded.

It was now around 10.00 p.m. All the while, nothing had been heard of the other planes. It was difficult not to imagine that perhaps they had all lost their way and theirs was the only one to arrive. Deane-Drummond had dropped at 9.42 p.m., but it was not until about 10.15 that the buzzing of other planes was heard. When the flak opened up over Sicily, the other four aircraft had taken evasive action and flown off course for a time, resulting in a late arrival.

Down below, Deane-Drummond and his five men cheered inwardly as, one after the other, the planes came roaring in low, and the silver-white parachutes floated down peacefully in the cold moonlit night. Their Italian prisoners looked up too, awed by a spectacle they would never forget, with the children excitedly crying 'Angeli!, Angeli!'

Aircraft No. 1, 'K' for King, piloted by Wing Commander Tait, carried Pritchard, Lea, Lucky and three others. The jump itself went like clockwork, the major himself jumping first. Pritchard had wanted to land ahead of his men and it was a disappointment that his plane was in fact one of the last to come in. His stick also landed further away from the objective than any of the others, setting down almost a mile from it, near the River Ofanto. Pritchard himself actually landed on the pebbles at the side of the water. One of his sticks, Lance-Corporal Harry Pexton, landed in a 14-foot tree and only after considerable time managed to reach a branch and cut himself free. His stick together, Pritchard quickly set about retrieving his containers. One of the arms containers — with three Thompsons — had failed to drop, but, armed with the three guns from the second arms container and carrying the food canister and the ladder, the party set off towards the aqueduct, leaving only the heavy 40lb boxes of gun-cotton to be fetched later.

Circling around, Tait controlled the dropping of the other planes by W/T. Aircraft No. 2, 'W' for Willie, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Williams, carried Lieutenant Jowett's stick. First to drop was Sergeant Percy Clements. Sitting on the rim of the hole, Clements saw the green light flick on, then, as the plane rose steeply to evade a steep escarpment, revert to red; it went on and off and on again; Clements



The farm buildings near the aqueduct. The inhabitants of these were quickly rounded up by the parachutists, and the dozen or so male prisoners were put to work collecting containers and hauling the explosives from the DZ to the aqueduct. It was during this labour that one of the elder peasants suddenly exclaimed in a broad American accent: 'Are you guys English?' Quick as a flash, one of the troopers, a Cockney, retorted: 'No chum, we are Abyssinians on our way to Sunday School'. It turned out that the old man had been a bell hop at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York for several years.

launched himself forward, only to be grabbed and held by two of his comrades, as the green light changed to red again and the pilot circled to make a fresh approach. For an interminable five minutes, Clements dangled out of the hole, half in and half out of the plane, while his comrades grimly held on to him. At last, there was a clear green signal and they could let him go. Here again, one tommy-gun container failed to come off.

Aircraft No. 5, 'E' for Edward, flown by Pilot Officer Robinson and with Wing Commander Norman on board as observer, carried Lieutenant Paterson and five of his sappers. After three men had jumped, Paterson pressed the container release button. Nothing seemed to happen. Quickly despatching the other two men, he pressed the button again, but still the containers seemed to jam. He banged at it, but apparently without use. Time was up and he jumped, cursing the container

release mechanism. (The aircraft mission report shows that all six containers, five loaded with explosives and one with a ladder, did in fact come off on the fifth run over the DZ.) Paterson made a good landing in fairly deep mud. Lance-Corporal Doug Jones just missed a row of trees — only to land with a great splash in the middle of the Tragino stream. Wading and crawling, with the sodden chute a clinging weight on his shoulder, he made it to the bank.

Aircraft No. 6, 'D' for Don, skippered by Sergeant Holden, carried Sergeant Edward Durie and five other sappers and all made a good jump. All containers, five with explosives and one with a ladder, came off without problem. They caught up with one of the parachutists, but that did not affect that man's safe landing. By 10.45 p.m., five of the six aircraft had dropped their loads and were clear of the area.



The demolition of the aqueduct was hampered by two unwelcome surprises: first, Lieutenant Paterson discovered that the aqueduct's piers were not of brick as they had been led to expect, but of concrete; then, with some containers missing and others impossible to find, it became clear that the amount of explosive available was much smaller than anticipated: only 800lb instead of the expected 2,240lb.



As planned for the drop, the explosives for blowing up the aqueduct included 2,240lb of wet slabs of gun cotton in 160 boxes; 5 Cordtex drums, 111 primers, 36 detonators and 162 feet of safety fuse. The demolition equipment also included 40 charge boards, cordage, sheepshank and hooks (to be used for hanging the charges around the piers); 20 angle plates; 5 cable strops with tensioners; 5 pairs of ladders; 10 50-foot alpine strops; 10 windlass sticks; and one ball each of kite cord and spun yarn. For tools they had 5 hammers, 10 chisels, 5 entrenching tools and 5 hand-saws. All this, except the detonators which the men carried in their pockets, was put in 25 containers. Of these, five failed to come off the planes and several others could not be found. Forced to improvise, Paterson and his team of sappers attached 640lb of explosives to the westernmost pier and 160lb to the adjoining abutment and this sufficed to bring the bridge down. When the pier went up, the aqueduct broke in half, and water gushed out from two sides.



However, there was no sign of aircraft No. 4. After its delayed start, 'J' for Johnnie made a bad landfall in Italy and proceeded to follow the wrong river, searching in vain for the aqueduct, until it arrived at the Adriatic. The pilot, 2nd Lieutenant Hood, returned, finally located the dropping area around 11.15 p.m., one-and-a-half hours late, and then dropped Daly and his men two miles to the north-east in the next valley, too far away to be of any use. Furthermore, none of the plane's containers, five of which contained charges and one a ladder, came off. All this was a serious blow, for Daly was the senior RE officer responsible for setting the explosives, and the explosive charges could ill be missed.

Meanwhile, around the aqueduct, the other sticks were assembling. Moving to the objective, some men found Corporal Boulter, dragging himself painfully towards the bridge. They helped him to a grassy slope and, following orders, left him to his own devices while the raid got under way. When Pritchard arrived at the aqueduct, Deane-Drummond reported that he had found it unguarded and that he had rounded up all Italian civilians in the vicinity. He also reported the news that Captain Daly was missing.

As more men arrived, the covering party took up defensive positions. Lea's section held either side of the aqueduct; Jowett's section was across the Tragino, holding the sloping ground where Deane-Drummond had landed; Deane-Drummond's section was on the track from the cottages to the aqueduct.

Pritchard ordered the sappers to collect the containers. They were fairly widely scattered and the lights on some of them had gone out. Pritchard soon realised that carrying up all the explosives would clearly exhaust the men and take up far too much time, so he decided to use the dozen or so male Italian prisoners. The peasants had by then been locked inside one of the cottages. When the interpreters put the order to them, they commented that they would be very willing to oblige, for nothing ever happened in that part of the world and they would now have enough to talk about for the rest of their lives. Docile and obedient, they trudged off and began to comb the fields and hillsides under the watchful eyes of the British skymen. The hard work soon made them grumble and curse. (Ironically, most of these Italian civilians were later awarded medals for their 'gallant behaviour in the face of the enemy'!)

The only other sound in the night air was the barking of farm dogs. Suddenly, the infantry guards pricked up their ears. From the direction of Calitri came a lone figure on a bicycle, pedalling down the track to the farm buildings. Deane-Drummond pounced on him and took him in charge. He turned out to be the local

station-master, whose main worry upon capture was that he would lose his job for being absent from his station. But after Deane-Drummond had earnestly promised him a note explaining the reason for his absence, the man contentedly joined his compatriots in carrying the boxes.

In the absence of Daly, Pritchard ordered Paterson and such sappers as were available to carry out the demolition. Seeing the real thing for the first time, Paterson made a quick survey of the aqueduct. It was much the same as the models he had studied at Ringway — except that the centre pier was not at all low and squat as the models had suggested, but all of 30 foot high and with its feet resting in the centre of the water. However, that was not his only worry. From the details supplied by the London engineering firm, they had been led to believe that the aqueduct was made of brick, but ever since he had seen the air photographs at Malta, Paterson had feared that the piers might be of a sterner stuff. Taking a chisel and hammer, he broke the surface of one of the piers. It was reinforced concrete.

To make matters worse, with the five explosives containers missing with Daly's plane, the amount of explosive available was considerably smaller than had been planned. Also, not all of the 15 explosives containers that had

come down could be found and, so far, only 800lb of the expected 2,240lb had been recovered. (Previous accounts of the raid have invariably stated that the two containers which failed to come off other planes also contained explosives; both, however, were arms containers and their loss did not affect the amount of gun-cotton available.) It had been planned to blow up two of the three piers plus the abutment, but Paterson realised he had only enough explosive to demolish just one pier. He decided on the westernmost one, the one most easily reached from the farm track up which the explosive had to be hauled. He decided to place 640lb against the pier and 160lb against its abutment. The twelve sappers began stacking the gun-cotton against the concrete. Using a pair of Slingsby extendable ladders that had been dropped (one pair was missing with Daly's plane, three others could not be found), Lance-Corporal Doug Jones and others fixed a metal wire halfway up the pier to facilitate the stacking. The detonators, which the sappers had carried inside their shirts in tins lined with cotton wool, were inserted in the explosive and the long fuzes connected.

Earlier, Lieutenant Deane-Drummond had discovered a small concrete bridge, across a side stream of the Tragino, the Ginestra. It lay



The little bridge on the track between the farm buildings and the aqueduct which was discovered by Lieutenant Deane-Drummond and which he decided to blow up with the last load of explosives brought from the DZ. Officially, he did it because he judged it would hamper repair of the aqueduct, but inwardly — as he admitted years later — he also did it 'for the fun of the thing'.

about 130 yards from the aqueduct and carried the track from the farm buildings to the aqueduct. Figuring that its destruction would delay the repair of the aqueduct, Deane-Drummond waited until enough explosive had been carried up to the aqueduct, then stopped the last of the porters, who was carrying two 40lb boxes on his shoulders. Ordering Lance-Corporal Robert Watson and Sapper Alan Ross to place the charges, he sent a message to Pritchard explaining that he would blow the small bridge as soon as he heard the big bang.

About this time, there was another alarm, as the disturbing drone of an airplane was heard approaching in the distance. A heavily-loaded bomber flew directly over the aqueduct, too high for the men below to recognise whether it was Italian, German, or one of theirs. (It seems certain that this was the Whitley carrying Daly's party to the wrong valley.)

The charges in place, the Italians were shepherded back into the farm house near the little bridge. They were told that to leave the building would mean death, for a sentry with orders to shoot at sight had been posted outside the door. No such order was given, but the threat sufficed.

At 0.30 a.m., all was ready. Pritchard fired a single slab of gun cotton as a signal for all except the demolition party to withdraw to a safe position some 200 yards to the west, behind a small spur near the smaller aqueduct. As the echo of the warning signal echoed in the still air, Paterson lit a 60-second fuse and he and Pritchard hurriedly ran for cover behind an outcrop of rock. At the small bridge, Sapper Ross lit his fuse, and he and Deane-Drummond withdrew behind the cottages.

In their sheltered positions everyone waited, in great tension, for the two explosions. However, when the minute ran out, nothing happened. In their hurry, Pritchard and Paterson had forgotten to count the seconds so, after waiting what seemed almost two full minutes, they got up and cautiously walked

towards the aqueduct to examine the presumably faulty fuse. They had covered no more than a dozen yards when there was an ear-splitting crack, followed by a tremendous explosion, as the aqueduct went up in a cloud of flying concrete, iron rails and pieces of masonry.

Almost at the same moment, the little bridge went up too. The debris showered Deane-Drummond and Ross and crashed on to the roof of the farm buildings. The people inside panicked and one woman ran out with a baby in her arms. Deane-Drummond and Ross walked up to inspect 'their' bridge. It had been neatly cut and one end lay in the bed of the stream. Quickly, they joined the rest of the party at the assembly position.

Meanwhile, Pritchard and Paterson had picked themselves up and gone to inspect the main objective. The others impatiently awaited their return. They had been keyed up for this moment for the past six weeks and the thought of failure was almost unbearable. When the two returned, they were assailed by questions from all sides. Pritchard put up his hand, and everybody stopped talking. 'Listen', was all he said. Straining their ears, the men heard the sound of a great waterfall. Overjoyed at the success of their mission and oblivious to the fact that they were in enemy territory, everyone cheered and yapped wildly.

Running down to the aqueduct, the men took in the damage they had wrought. One pier had gone altogether. Another leaned at a crazy angle. Half the aqueduct was down. From square breaches in the concrete water runway, a rush of water was pouring down the Tragino valley, both from the western end, from which direction water was being pumped, and from the higher eastern end where the breach resulted in the water running back, to spill out over the debris and join the other flow.

It was now time to withdraw. For the first time, the news that a submarine would be awaiting them at the mouth of the Sele was

broken to the men. Thereupon Pritchard ordered the group to split up in three parties, each with two officers and about ten men, and each to make its way to the coast independently, moving by night and lying up during the day. This would give the party the best chance of getting to the coast undetected. Pritchard and Deane-Drummond would take one party, Jowett and Lucky another, and Lea and Paterson the third.

He also gave orders to lighten the loads. All the sapper equipment was abandoned. As the plan was to get to the rendezvous unseen and unheard, the Bren guns and most of the sub-machine guns were to be taken to bits and pushed into the mud. Each party would retain only one Thompson. This still left each man with a 30lb pack containing five day's rations and a mess tin, plus a .32 Colt or automatic pistol, Commando knife and two grenades. In addition, divided among them, they carried about 10 water bottles, 10 miniature Primus stoves and 10 petrol containers.

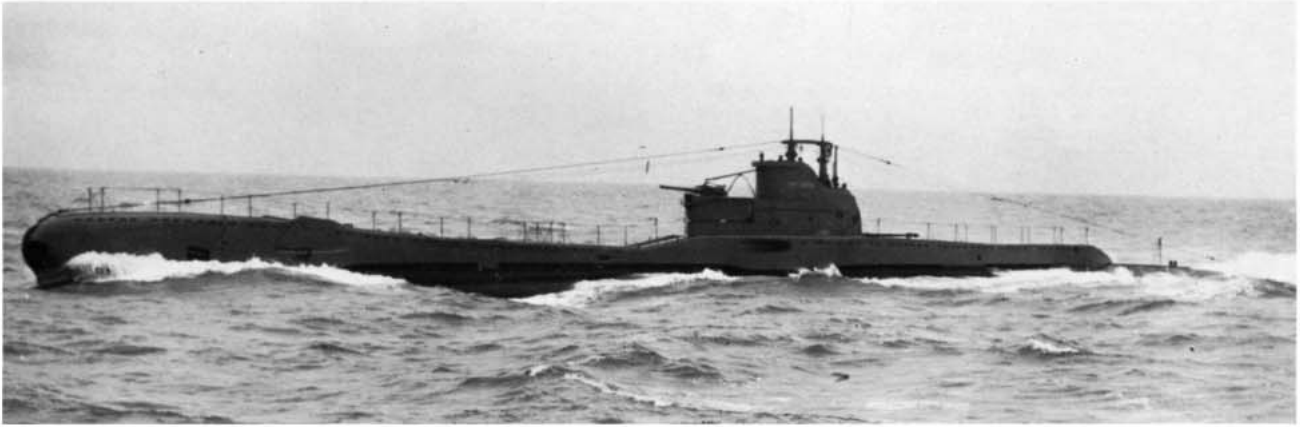
It was clear to all that Lance-Corporal Boulter would have to be left behind. Making him as comfortable as possible, Pritchard bound up his ankle with a damp cloth and a small splint, and left him a quantity of pain-killers, a map and a compass. Both men realised that Boulter would soon be taken prisoner and that he would be interrogated to find out more about the others. Pritchard told him to disclose only his rank, name and army number, then, as cheerful as he could muster, shook hands with him. Every man came to say goodbye to Boulter. They left him part of their chocolate and cigarette ration and, at Boulter's own request, a tommy-gun.

The interpreters returned to the farmhouse to repeat the order to the Italians to stay indoors, threatening that sentries were outside with orders to shoot to kill. It was then about 1.00 a.m. in the morning of Tuesday, February 11. The 29 men were ready to move off. They had five nights to cover the 60 miles to the coast.



The Tragino aqueduct as it appears today. The water runs in a hollow duct beneath a grass surface which allows it to be used also as a bridge. It was repaired within two-and-a-half days, and

reconnaissance photographs taken on February 12 — 36 hours after the raid — already seemed to show no damage which initially led the War Office to believe that the raid had misfired.



THE BID FOR ESCAPE

Pritchard's party left first. They had not gone far when Deane-Drummond ran back to say a final farewell to Boulter. Now all alone, Boulter watched the three groups toiling uphill until they disappeared over the crest. When his foot began to swell, he cut away his boot to ease the pain. Limping to a small farm hut, he dropped off to sleep.

Waking after dawn, he saw one of the Italians, the uniformed soldier, cautiously come out of the house, followed by others. When he saw the soldier mounting a bicycle and pedalling off towards Calitri, he fired a burst after him, but the man sped on. Realising he had given away his position, Boulter dragged himself uphill and hid behind a boulder. Soon, he saw two cars arrive with two carabinieri and several civilians with shot-guns, and later a truckload of Italian soldiers. Boulter held them off until he ran out of ammo. On capture, he was handcuffed and severely beaten up. He was made to hobble to Calitri and from there taken by car to Naples Central Prison. Only then was his fractured ankle treated. As expected, he was interrogated, the main questions being about the number and whereabouts of the other 'paracadutisti'. He disclosed nothing.

All three escape parties had made their way up the mountain behind the aqueduct. Alone, in a strange, desolate mountainous land, 2,000 feet above sea-level, in the cold February night, they struggled through snow and mud, forded little streams and clambered across impassable-looking ravines. The men soon learned to ignore the innumerable farm dogs, barking away in the darkness, but rousing nobody. Although they shared many similar experiences, each group had its own dramatic moments and the story of each is worth recounting.

Pritchard's party consisted of 11 men and included, amongst others, Deane-Drummond; Sergeant Lawley; Corporal Philip Julian; Lance-Corporals Doug Jones and Doug Henderson (who, in spite of Pritchard's order, had decided to hold on to his Bren gun and carried the heavy load across-country right to the end); and the two interpreters, Nastri and Picchi. Their plan was to follow the mountain ridge until they reached the Sele watershed. From there, they would make their way down the north side of the river valley towards the Mediterranean. Climbing the steep hill behind the aqueduct, they skirted the snow-line. Pritchard halted for a short rest after each three quarters of an hour. Impassable gorges, which had been impossible to detect from the valley below, forced them to make time-consuming detours. Fighting exhaustion, cold and fear, they struggled on until, at dawn, they reached a wooded ravine. Here they hid up for the day. They brewed sweet tea and tried to eat their boiled pieces of greasy pemmican, a ration developed for Arctic expeditions but which most men found nauseating. Consulting their maps, Pritchard and Deane-Drummond found that they were

HMS *Triumph* of the First Submarine Flotilla based at Malta was assigned the task of picking up the members of 'X' Troop near the mouth of the River Sele, south of Salerno on the western coast of Italy, five nights after the operation. (IWM)



The evacuation plan called for 'X' Troop to assemble at a spot close to the river mouth (above). A map and an aerial photograph were provided to pinpoint the RV point. Light signals were arranged to bring in the submarine. However, as it happened, one of the two diversionary bombers accompanying the raid, 'S' for Sugar, developed engine trouble and the pilot, Pilot Officer Jack Watherspoon, by an unbelievable coincidence, chose this very same area to crash-land his plane, and sent a coded message asking for the crew to be picked up. The Admiralty judged that this message had compromised the pick-up rendezvous and, not wanting to risk a valuable submarine, cancelled its mission. *Triumph* had already sailed, but was recalled at 8.30 p.m. on February 13. This harsh decision has since been severely criticised and, not unlogically, has led to conjectures that the Combined Operations planners never really expected that anyone of 'X' Troop would ever reach the rendezvous and had written them off beforehand.



After blowing up the aqueduct, 'X' Troop divided up in three escape parties, each with two officers and each to make its way to the submarine rendezvous on the coast, 60 miles to the west, by a separate route, cross-country and moving only at night. In the event, none of them made it. The first party, led by Pritchard and Deane-Drummond and consisting of 11 men, laid up for the day in a wooded valley (above) after a night of struggling through mud and snow, across gullies and mountain streams. They had toiled for hours and covered at least 15 miles, yet the map showed them they were only five miles closer to the coast.



through the deserted village unchallenged, but just past the last house a farm worker called out to them and started asking questions. Without stopping, Nastri explained that they were Austrian troops on manoeuvre and politely declined an offer to bring his men in for a meal at the man's house.

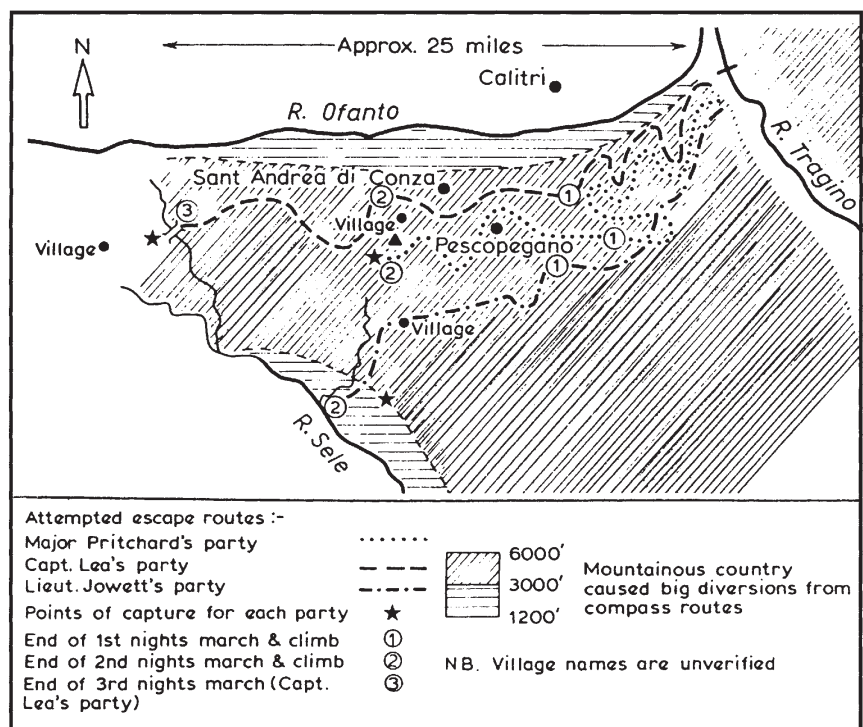
Aiming in the direction of the Sele mouth, they left the road and struck south-west. They had planned to spend daylight in a small copse half way up a hill. However, on reaching it, they found it sheltered a farmhouse which was not on the map. Dead-tired and utterly disappointed, the men collapsed. Their sweat-soaked clothes soon turned their bodies ice-cold. The map showed another small wood a little bit further on, on the summit of another hill, named the Cresta di Gallo — the Cock's Comb — overlooking the village of Teora. They pressed on up this mountain in search of the wood, until they found themselves trudging through the snow. On reaching the summit, they looked all around them, but there was not a single tree in sight. They could not believe it, until they discovered a large number of tree stumps in the ground — the whole

The next night, the going was as slow as before. Having slogged across country a little distance from but parallel to a road for some time, Pritchard decided they should risk taking the road to make up for lost time. They joined the road at this spot, just west of the village of Sant 'Andrea di Conza. Coming down the track in the foreground, the group turned left at the road. The bridge across the mountain stream which skirts the village is visible on the right.

near the village of San Lorenzo and that, although they must have slogged over 15 miles, they were only five miles closer to the coast. During the day, they saw a light spotter plane, flying low and clearly searching the area. Later, they heard some children play nearby with dogs, but these did not discover the men lying in the nearby scrub.

Next night, they crossed a stream (one man slipping from the stepping stones and falling in) and scaled a slippery cliff, the steep rise of which they had already noted with disgust during the day. On the crest, they used a road as their guide, marching parallel with, but about 400 yards from it. They skirted the villages of Pescopagano and Sant 'Andrea di Conza. As they were still well behind schedule and no one seemed to be using it, Pritchard decided to risk taking the main road, and from there on they made good progress. After marching uphill for some six miles, they came to a hilltop crossroads which formed the watershed of the Sele river, the highest point on their route to the coast. From now on, the way ran downhill, into the valley of the Sele. Suddenly, without warning, they came upon a hooded cart drawn by a pony trundling towards them from the opposite direction. Pritchard quickly ordered Private Nastri to march in front of the column, as if in command, and call the step in Italian. As they swung past the cart, Nastri cheerfully called 'Buon giorno' to the driver, a peasant woman in black dress, and she smiled and waved back. This was encouraging and, when shortly after they came upon a village, they repeated the same thing. The group marched

Now marching on good surface, the party picked up speed. Six miles further on, they reached this hilltop crossroads which was the highest point on their route. From here, the road led downhill into the Sele valley. It was at this crossroads that the party saw a pony-drawn cart coming towards them and Private Nastri, the Italian interpreter, marched them past it, calling the step in Italian. The Italian peasant woman, half-asleep at the reins, suspected nothing and the party escaped unchallenged.



The precise spots where the parties of Jowett and Lea were captured are unknown, the stars being only an indication.





At dawn of the second day, Pritchard's party found itself on top of the Cresta di Gallo, a barren hill above the village of Teora. Discovered by an Italian peasant who fled down the hill to give the warning, they soon found themselves in the amazing situation of being surrounded by a motley crowd of some 400 unarmed civilians, men, women and children who came up the hill excited and curious to see the foreign invaders. Far in the rear were some troops but, because of the women and children, Pritchard could not bring himself to start a fight and the party was forced to lay down their arms. 'I have never felt so ashamed before or since, that we should have surrendered to a lot of practically unarmed Italian peasants', wrote Lieutenant Deane-Drummond later. This picture was taken from the top of the Cresta di Gallo looking down on Teora.

wood had been felled. With dawn breaking, they went to earth, exhausted and shivering, some men sheltering in a small cave they had found, others huddling behind the tree stumps and some juniper bushes.

About 6.30 a.m., a peasant came up the hill with a donkey and, although he acted as if he had seen nothing, it was clear that he had spotted them, or at least their footsteps in the snow. Quickly, Pritchard sent Nastri after him with orders to tell him that they were German and Italian mountain troops on exercise. Nastri did as told, but returned unsatisfied with the result. Although the man had accepted his explanation, he seemed unwilling to talk to him and had hurried off down the track. Shortly after, two men armed with shot-guns, appeared on a ridge above them, then disappeared again.

Down in Teora village, the donkey man, considerably shaken, had reported the men in strange uniforms on the hill to the local carabinieri. Since the raid, the Italian authorities had given out warnings by radio and telephone that enemy parachutist saboteurs were on the loose and the civilian population was asked to keep a look-out for them. On receipt of the report, a call for troop assistance went out. Meanwhile, farmers armed with shot-guns encircled the ridge to keep watch on the reported enemy. Presently, cars and lorries began to arrive with more carabinieri and men from a mountain regiment.

Up on the hill, the British awaited developments. Pritchard had ordered all maps and papers to be burned and some sort of defensive circle to be set up. Corporal Henderson still had his Bren; there was the one tommy-gun; all had their pistols in one hand and a grenade in the other.

To their surprise, they saw not troops, but a large number of civilians coming up the hill. The excitement in the village had been such that the population had not waited for the troops to deploy. First spectators were a group of children, accompanied by a great many mongrel dogs. After them came the women, calling for their children to be careful. On their heels followed the civilian men of the village. Finally, last of all, came the troops and the carabinieri.

nothing. 'All right, Tony', said the major, 'you throw a grenade at those people on the right and I will throw mine over there.' With a sinking feeling, the lieutenant realised he could not do it. 'All right', he said. 'You win, Sir.'

Pritchard told his stunned men to surrender. Only one man reacted. Corporal Henderson made a break for it down the hillside, but, fired at by the farmers and chased by the carabinieri, he did not get very far. Now surrounded by Italian troops, Pritchard told his men to drop their pistols and grenades, but he himself could not do so with his own grenade, as he had already taken the pin out. A nervous Italian sergeant put his pistol at the major's temple, shouting at him to drop the grenade. Not until Nastri explained the matter to him, did the excitable sergeant lower his gun and order the crowd to one side so that Pritchard could hurl the grenade to a safe spot.

To their disbelief, all men were then handcuffed and chained together, every second man in addition being chained to a heavy iron ball. Only Pritchard was spared the humiliation. Carrying the iron balls between them, the group was then led downhill, spat at and derided by the civilians. On reaching Teora, they were lined up on the village square where two local dignitaries proceeded to address them, one calling them 'English desperadoes', and the other calling on the excited crowd to lynch them. The Italian sergeant, realising they were his prize, tried to keep order, but he only managed to hold back the crowd by having his men fire a volley over it.

The group was then locked up in the local carabinieri building. Later, an elderly Italian general came in who, in English, told Pritchard that, if they gave their word of honour not to escape, they could drive their own lorry to their next prison, escorted only by armed troops in cars in front and rear. The major declined, fearing it was an excuse to machine-gun them in the vehicle on the pretext of attempted escape. That evening, they were herded into a lorry, still chained and heavily guarded, and driven back eastwards to the railway station of Calitri, located in the valley below the town and not three miles from the destroyed aqueduct. Here they were placed in an evil-smelling waiting-room, again under guard.



Handcuffed and chained together, the men were then marched down to Teora where they were locked up in the local carabinieri police station. The original carabinieri building was destroyed in the earthquake of November 23, 1980, which laid the whole town in ruins, and the present one is a modern replacement.



The other two escape parties were also rounded up in the Sele valley. A few hours after Pritchard's party had surrendered and not two miles away, Lieutenant Jowett's party of seven was cornered on a river hillside by a superior force of armed peasants and carabinieri troops and, having killed two Italians in the ensuing gunfight before being forced to surrender, they very narrowly escaped being executed on the spot by the furious mob.

By then, the evening of February 12, the other parties were still on the loose. From the aqueduct, Captain Lea and Lieutenant Paterson had led their party on a route a little north of that of Pritchard. Their party of 11 included Sergeant John Walker; Corporals Derry Fletcher and Peter O'Brien; Lance-Corporals Watson, Pexton and Jim Maher; and Private Parker. They faced the same exhausting impossible conditions as the others and made no better progress. Lea called a halt every two hours. Scaling one ridge after the other, they pushed on, silent and automatically. Before dawn, they hid in a tree-covered ravine, falling asleep on a dry river bed. They woke up to find the water washing over them and had to grab their floating gear. They heard spotter planes and the sound of distant trucks.

Next night, their will-power kept them going and at dawn they found a good hiding place — a cleft in the rocks high on a mountain slope. About noon, they observed a shepherd boy with a flock of sheep and, from their hiding place, listened to him singing beautiful Italian songs. The third night, some men were so weary that they began lagging behind. Lea himself had to stop because his boots were ill-fitting. He had bought a pair of new mountain boots in Malta, but these now caused him agonising pain and he had to cut them open with his knife. To make better progress, he too decided they should risk marching on the road. Soon they had covered six miles and their spirits rose.

Unexpectedly, they came upon a stone bridge, skew across a river and with a sharp corner just beyond it. With drawn pistol, Lea went ahead to reconnoitre it. The road around the bend seemed empty and he waved his men on. Just as they were all on the bridge, there was a rush of feet from the darkness on either end and a mixed crowd of civilians, men and women, some of the men armed with shot-guns, interspersed with a few carabinieri, blocked the bridge. Like on Cresta di Gallo, the unarmed civilians faced Lea and his men with a serious dilemma. Lea tried shouting 'Deutsch... Deutsch', but the Italian sergeant in charge, pointing a bayoneted rifle at Lea's chest, replied with a yelled 'You speak big lie... You all Inglesi!' and it was clear that the game was up. They could not have been ambushed more effectively. Lea and Paterson later estimated that they were then still about 30 miles from the coast. Handcuffed and

chained, they were loaded on mule carts and, escorted by carabinieri and jeering villagers, transported to Calitri railway station. Here they met up with Pritchard's party, who had already spent the night there.

The party led by Lieutenant Jowett and Flight Lieutenant Lucky was the smallest: with Sergeant Clements, Corporal Grice and Sappers Ross, Struthers and Crawford it counted only seven men. Their route was to the south of the other two. Both Jowett and Ross had kept a sub-machine gun. Jowett, a wiry Canadian whose nickname was 'Killer', set a tough pace. At early light, they descended into a ravine, hoping to hide up. However, they found its bottom waterlogged and, with no time to look for a better place, had to spend the day lying in the chilly marsh.

That night, they came across a mountain road, which the map showed led to the Sele valley. Although Lucky disagreed with him, Jowett decided to take the road. Some time later, rounding a bend, they unexpectedly came upon a village. There was no real way around it, so they cautiously sneaked through its moonlit street. As they went along, dogs started up in a crescendo of barking, but none of the villagers came outside to inspect and they reached the far end of the village without seeing anyone. Not taking any more risks, they left the road again and followed a stream which the map showed fed into the Sele river. On reaching the river, they followed it, staying away from the valley road. Once, at a hairpin bend of the river, they took a short cut across country. Just before dawn, entering a fruit plantation to hide up, they suddenly came face to face with an Italian peasant farmworker. Jowett trained his gun on him, but the man flashed off in the darkness. Jowett went after him with his knife, but soon lost him among the trees. Certain that the man would betray their position, they moved off quickly. They came to a point where the river became wider and had some bush-covered islets in the stream which looked like a good hiding place. They waded across to one of them and settled down to rest. However, with daylight, they found that the leafless bushes did not at all shield them from view as much as hoped and they had no other option but to lie absolutely flat and still.

Around 11.00 a.m., a man appeared on the far bank with a dog. The animal had clearly picked up their scent, for it pointed its head at them and actually swam across, running and barking among them. The man called his dog back and made off fast but it was obvious that they had been spotted and would have to move again. As they waded back across, one trooper went under and, although two others managed to haul him to shallower water, he had lost the tommy-gun he was carrying. They climbed the riverside hill, finding cover in a patch of shrubs, and awaited developments.

Two hours later, they saw cars and trucks coming down the river road from both east and west. The columns halted directly below them and disgorged a crowd of some 100 armed civilians. A similar crowd was assembling the other side. They were surrounded.



Captain Lea's party of 11 held out only a little longer. It was cleverly ambushed while crossing a bridge on the third night. The exact places where Lea's and Jowett's parties were captured are not known and the pictures therefore do not purport to show the actual sites but serve only to illustrate the kind of terrain through which they had to struggle. In retrospect, the 'X' Troop escape parties never stood much chance of getting to the submarine RV on foot. The distance and the difficult terrain made it unlikely that they could make the deadline. At least one survivor thought afterwards that they would have done better to have stolen vehicles and driven to the coast.



After capture, all three parties were transported to the little railway station of Calitri, just a few miles away from the aqueduct they had destroyed. Put in the waiting-room under heavy guard, the 29 men languished here for two days, uncertain whether they would be regarded as spies, with the risk of being shot, or treated as ordinary prisoners-of-war.

More trucks arrived, this time with armed troops. With these firing over their heads, the peasant force began moving up the hill from both sides, spread out in lines abreast. As the first line topped the mound below them, Jowett loosed a few shots above their heads. When this did not halt the advance, he fired three aimed bursts. Three men, a carabinieri and two civilians, fell and the rest scurried down the hill. Jowett ordered a shift in position to a small copse a bit further down, telling the men to run down to it while he occupied the Italians. They all made it, except that Trooper Crawford was hit in the arm by an Italian bullet. They joined the fight with their pistols, but it was a lost battle. The Italian fire intensified and the copse was riddled with bullets. Jowett ordered the others to surrender but Sergeant Clements refused to give up without him. Only after the lieutenant agreed to come with them, did Clements rise and signal surrender with a handkerchief.

The Italians were in a foul mood. Jowett's bursts had killed two of them and several more had been wounded. A civilian, armed with a rifle, two pistols and with two crossed bandoliers across his chest, took charge and ordered the prisoners stripped to the waist. They were marched down the hill, lined up against an outcrop of rock and 20 men lined up facing them. With a shock, the Britons realised they were going to be executed. Lucky tried telling the Italian that they were now prisoners protected by the Geneva Convention, but the little man reacted by putting his pistol against Lucky's head, shouting that they were murderers and ex-convicts. Next, he began an excited speech, inciting the crowd to avenge the death of the two Italians and have no mercy on the British bandits. He raised his arm and the firing squad took aim. He was about to give the command when, from the right, a army officer on horseback appeared, at the gallop and shouting 'Militari!, Militari!' He halted between the firing party and the prisoners, leaped from his horse and with a gloved hand struck the bumptious Italian across both sides of the face. Next, he turned to the prisoners and explained, in English, that they were now safe in Army hands and would be treated as prisoners-of-war. Italian soldiers took charge of them, returned their clothes to them, and marched them off to the nearest village, two of them supporting the wounded Crawford. After a doctor had dressed Crawford's wound, they were locked up for the night.

Next morning, they were put on trucks and driven to Calitri, to join the other two parties in the railway station. They arrived not long after Lea's party had been brought in. It was now the morning of Thursday, February 13.

An Italian army general visited them, praising their bravery and reiterating that they would be treated as prisoners-of-war. Later, a group of Fascists blackshirts arrived who demanded they be handed over to them, but the carabinieri officer refused saying he only obeyed his general's orders.

At 10.00 a.m. on the 15th, a train arrived and, one hour after sunset, they arrived at Naples, where they were again chained together. On the platform, people gazed at the prisoners in strange uniforms, marching in step, erect and proud in spite of the iron balls.



On the 15th, the 29 men were transported by train to Naples and imprisoned in Naples Central Prison, a fortress-like structure on Via Nuova Poggioreale. Here, to their surprise, they found Lance-Corporal Boulter, whom they had left behind at the aqueduct with a broken ankle. A few days later, the last of 'X' Troop to evade capture, Captain Daly and his four men, were brought in here too. At the prison, the men were thoroughly questioned. Today, Naples Prison is still a top-security jail, with armed guards on the sentry-walk along the top of the wall. When Karel took this picture, he was immediately accosted by a plain-clothes man telling him that photography of the building was strictly forbidden.

The news that they were English 'paracadutisti' went round like a flash. Outside, lorries were waiting to take them to Naples Central Prison. Here, to their surprise, they found Private Boulter again, whom they had left behind at the aqueduct five days before.

Next day, the last five of 'X' Troop to evade captivity were also brought in. After their misdrop, Daly's party, which included Lance-Corporal Tomlin and sappers Davidson, Parker and Pryor, had started to climb the hill towards the next valley, hoping to reach the aqueduct in time to assist in its demolition. However, halfway up the hillside, they heard the roar of a big explosion and, knowing they were too late to be of use, they turned round and started their trek for the coast. They sheltered for the day in a wooden hut. Fortunately not to come across any farms or village, they escaped capture for three more nights. Only on the third day, holing up in a wood, did they venture out to a lonely farmhouse. Daly and one other man boldly approached a man and a woman standing outside and asked for food, but the Italians' only response was to hurry inside and lock all doors and windows.

By dawn of Saturday, February 15, the party of five was still 18 miles from the rendezvous point, hungry and extremely tired. As the submarine was due that night, they decided to make a dash for it and cover the remaining distance in daylight. However, at about midday, they ran into a company of Italian soldiers, taking a rest by the roadside. Trying to bluff their way out, Daly declared that they were a German aircrew whose plane had crashed and demanded a car, saying they had to be in Naples by 2.00 p.m. The officer in command was not convinced and, pulling open Daly's jumping-jacket, revealed his British captain's epaulette. Marched back to the nearest village, they were handcuffed and chained and taken by army truck to a prison in Naples, a civilian prison different from that to where the other parties had been taken. Locked alone in a cell, Daly escaped that same night, only to be recaptured when he tried to jump a train, missed his hold and was knocked out in the fall. Soon after, he and his men were reunited with the others at Naples Central Prison. For the first time since leaving Malta, all 35 members of 'X' Troop were in one place again.

OUR PARATROOPS STRIKE

Italy Says They Attacked Power Plant and Railways

TOMMY GUN FIGHT WITH POLICE DESCRIBED

BBRITISH parachute troops have been in action for the first time, according to news from Rome yesterday.

They were dropped, the Italians say, in two provinces of Southern Italy, with orders to attack roads and railways and to destroy hydro-electric power plant, but were all captured before they could do "serious damage."

They are described as wearing khaki overalls and Air Force caps, were armed with Tommy guns, automatic pistols, and had Italian money.

The War Office last night declined to make any comment on the Italian announcement.

The Italian war communique said the attacks were made in Calabria, the province in the toe of Italy, and Lucania, farther north, between the heel and the toe.

The communique said:

"During the night of February 10th-11th (Monday night) the enemy dropped detachments of parachutists in Calabria and Lucania. They were armed with machine-guns, hand grenades, and explosives.

Killed Two

"Their objects were to destroy our lines of communication and to damage the local hydro-electric power stations.

"Owing to the vigilance and prompt intervention of our defence units all the parachutists were captured before they were able to cause serious damage.

"In an engagement which took place one gendarme and one civilian were killed.

"It has not yet been decided whether to treat these British parachutists as prisoners or spies," Italian officials stated in Rome last night.

They declared that the men they claimed were British parachutists were dressed in khaki clothing and carried machine-guns, automatic pistols, Italian money, and had plenty of Italian lira.

Their purpose, the officials said, was to blow up railway junctions.

A fuller description of the rounding up of the parachutists given by the official Stefani agency last night said they landed between 10.30 p.m. on Monday and 2 a.m. on Tuesday.



Map showing the fast-flowing rivers of Lucania which supply the hydro-electric power. The crossed lines are railways.

Water Supply

The agency said: "The parachutists, who carried automatic arms and explosives, certainly intended to damage the regional water supply system, a magnificent achievement of the Fascist regime which made possible an agricultural revival throughout the district, together with railway lines, bridges, and roads.

"Having landed in a clearing surrounded by forests, the parachutists occupied some farms and immobilised the peasants.

"One parachutist who had broken a leg was left in one of these farms, where he was later arrested by guards.

Shouted "Duce"

"The British parachutists deceived the peasant farmers by shouting 'Duce,' and so inducing them to open their doors to them.

"After abandoning their injured companion the British made their way to the springs which feed the irrigation system, guiding themselves by means of maps with which they were provided.

"But the alarm had been given, and guards, co-operating with the military police and the military organisations of the Fascist Party, drew a cordon round the area.

"A search was instituted, making the position of the parachutists very precarious.

"Speedily surrounded they were unable to execute their plans and had to hide in woods to avoid capture.

Split Up

"To make capture more difficult they divided up into several groups, hoping that some at least would be able to break through the cordon and carry out a part of their plans.

"Their plan failed for while eleven parachutists were seized in one place seven others were arrested at the same time a mile or two away.

"The latter attempted to put up a resistance turning a Tommy gun on the patrol consisting of one guard, one police constable, and a shepherd who was guiding them over the mountain paths.

"Shots from the British officer's gun put the policeman and the shepherd out of action.

"The guard left alone defended himself with his rifle, forcing the parachutists to remain behind a rock until other guards, hearing the shots, came up.

"Seeing that all resistance was hopeless the parachutists surrendered.

"Captain Taken"

"Another group which had taken to the scrubland remained to be found. The search went on and the rest of the parachutists, including a captain, were seized without trouble.

War Office Silent

But Axis Will be Troubled

(FROM THE MILITARY MAN)

THE War Office last night declined to make any comment of any kind on the Italian communique which said that enemy parachutists had been captured while making an attempt to destroy hydro-electric works in Southern Italy.

If the Italian communique has stated the facts correctly it may be assumed that the parachutists were at large for a period during which they could have done an enormous amount of damage.

According to the enemy they were dropped during Monday night and the communique came out yesterday.

Works of the hydro-electric type are easily put out of commission and the Italian communique suggests that the parachutists were at liberty for a long time.

REACHED OBJECTIVES

It is also clear that the men must have reached their objective otherwise the enemy communique would not state the nature of the objective with such confidence, as there are many military objectives in Calabria and Lucania.

Apart from the big hydro-electric power station in Lucania there is the important train ferry service between Calabria and Sicily where the German bomber squadrons are based.

All supplies for them will pass along this train ferry and any damage done to the track, the terminus at the Calabrian end, or to the dumps which must be there, will hinder considerably the operations of the Luftwaffe.

Italy's greatest aqueduct, which supplies almost the whole of Southern Italy, is at Apulia, in Calabria.

SOME SUCCESS

Clearly, therefore, some success must have attended the attack, otherwise the enemy would not know the objectives.

The communique also admits damage was done but minimises it in the usual way.

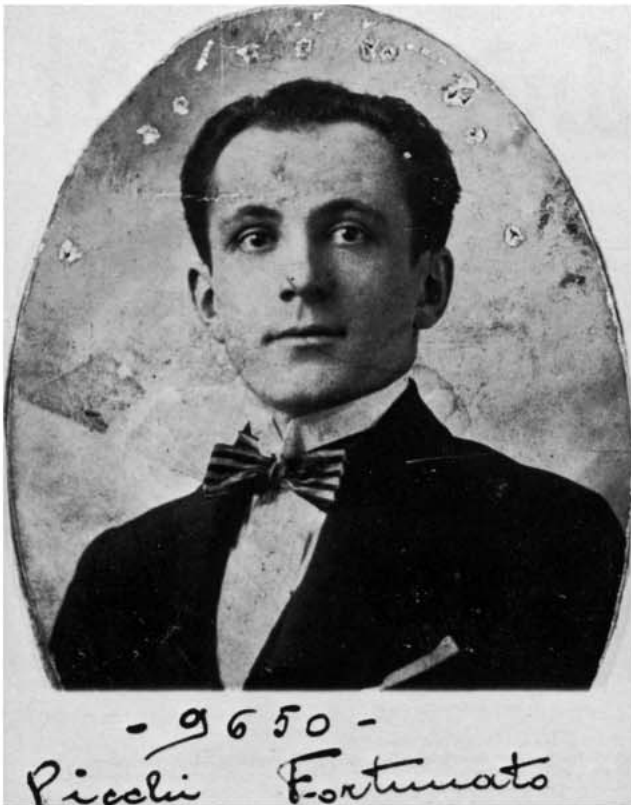
If these parachutists are British this would be the first hint that has been given to the public that such parachutists exist, and there is immense curiosity on the subject, but last night the War Office was entirely non-committal and would not even admit the existence of parachutists.

If, however, such a body does exist it will be an additional worry for both Mussolini and Hitler, for their many bases and invasion ports will be exposed to a fresh peril.

The British will be delighted to know that such a body exists and the enemy will be greatly perturbed.

At the time of writing, however, there is no information available for publication apart from the enemy's statement.

First news of the Tragino raid reached the British press on February 14, three days after the raid, when the Italian government issued a statement that British parachutists had landed in Italy. It dominated next day's headlines. (Courtesy of H. Tomlin)



In the aftermath of the raid, 'X' Troop lost one man: Picchi, the brave, little Italian volunteer. Captured with Pritchard's party on the second day after the raid, his fascist interrogators quickly found out that he was of Italian birth and soon weeded out his true identity. Tried as a spy, Picchi was executed on April 6, 1941. Exactly how quickly his identity was known is shown by the date stamped on the back of Picchi's portrait: February 17, 1941 — five days after his capture. The portrait is the original picture used in the inquest against Picchi and was provided by the Questura of Florence, his home town. Dating from before his emigration to Britain in 1929, it shows a very young Picchi. Later in the war, it was seized by the Allies and ended up in SOE files.

IN CAPTIVITY

As the men of 'X' Troop waited in their cells, morale was still high. Over the following days, each man was interrogated several times in turn. When asked for military information, the men delighted in giving fancy answers. One man, when asked what type of plane had dropped them, said 'A Guinness Two-Three'. Another answered the same question with 'A Heinz 57'. Each questioning ended with the threat that next day at 6.00 a.m. they would all be shot. The execution promise was repeated so often that the men began to look upon it as a farce.

However, to one of them, it was no joke. Fortunato Picchi, the little Italian volunteer, was very afraid that he would be found out, both as an Italian and a civilian. Although a naturalised Briton, he was sure the Fascists would regard him as an Italian and thus a traitor. The others tried to cheer him up and told him to stick to his story that he was a Free Frenchman. Yet, very Italian in looks and his English not quite perfect, Picchi never stood a chance. After a long interview, he came back to his cell very dejected. All through the night, Lance-Corporal Jones tried to comfort him. Next morning, the Italians came and took Picchi away. Tried as a traitor, he was executed seven weeks later, on Palm Sunday, April 6, 1941.

After Picchi had gone, the interrogators turned their attention to the other Italian-looking interpreter, Private Nastri. Contrary to poor Picchi, he had lived in London from childhood, spoke a real Cockney accent, and was able to stick to his guns that he was John Tristan, a British subject and soldier. However, his escape was still a narrow one. The Italians cleverly discovered the name Nastri in his pseudonym, and even confronted him with an aunt of his who lived near Naples. Fortunately, she had enough sense to deny knowing him, and Nastri was let off the hook.

Lucky, the third interpreter, being so obviously British in appearance and demeanour, was never accused of being Italian. Speaking the language, he managed to secure several privileges and was even allowed to leave the jail under escort to buy shaving kit and new underclothes for the prisoners.

Savoy's Picchi dies for us

Express Staff Reporter

FREE Italians in London mourned last night their first casualty of the war, Fortunato Picchi, forty-seven-year-old ex-assistant banqueting manager of the Savoy Hotel—a hero in dress clothes.

For it has been established that the Italian whose bald head, fringed with black hair, had bobbed to most European and American celebrities was the Fortunato Picchi the Duce claims to have shot as a traitor.

The notice of his death, published yesterday, read:—

Picchi: On Palm Sunday, 1941, Fortunato Picchi sacrificed his life for the cause of freedom. A brave man of high ideals. Until the day breaks, dear.—F. R.I.P.

It was, on Palm Sunday (April 6) that the Italians said they shot Picchi. An official statement from Rome alleged he was taken prisoner with the British paratroops who recently landed in Southern Italy.

RECOGNISED

It was said he was recognised and denounced after the paratroops had committed acts of sabotage in the Calabrian region.

Last night Mrs. C. Lantieri, of Sussex-gardens, W., English-born wife of a British descendant of an Italian family, told me the story of the ex-waiter who became so of the English in outlook that, according to Rome, he chose to die fighting his own country rather than keep a job that was sometimes worth £40 a week.

He came to live with her family twenty years ago. As a sergeant in the Italian army in the last war he had been wounded alongside the British in Salonika.

He was a genial little man, with a blue-bearded chin faintly

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WAITER HERO SHOT

→ FROM PAGE ONE

remnant of Mussolini's. His two passions were watching Arsenal play on Saturday afternoons and exercising his Alsatian dog Bitty most mornings in Hyde Park.

Not for fourteen years had he been back to Italy. His only links with the country remained the picture of blue skies in his room and gifts to poor members of the anti-Fascist group.

When Italy declared war on Britain he said his country had been "sold to the Hun."

But he was interned, and sent to the Isle of Man. There he led the anti-Fascist group.

For six months he wrote letters to Mrs. Lantieri, telling how he had converted other internees, always ending, "I do not belong here. He proved that on his release. He felt that a dress coat would link his broad shoulders. He wanted a more active part in the war."

Said Mrs. Lantieri: "He did not tell me what his job was, but I did not suggest he had volunteered for anything dangerous in going to Italy he must have realised he was taking his life in his hands."

"We want to have a memorial to him. And we think the best idea is to create a fund to buy a

Spirits, or part of one. That will give other Italians here a chance to hit back at the Fascist.

"I inserted his obituary notice. The 'F' is for Florence, my Christian name."

"My late husband and I came to look on Mr. Picchi as a soul. He became so Fascist that we gave him the name of Wilfred."

From Italian reports it can be inferred that our men sabotaged vital railway communications and Italian war effort. This is supported by indications of considerable disruption of communications in South Italy.

FORTUNATO PICCHI
Came up a job that was some-
times worth £40 a week.

He Died for Freedom

A brief announcement in the Times records the death "For the cause of freedom" of an Italian who was executed by the Fascists as a traitor.

"Picchi.—On Palm Sunday, 1941 for the cause of freedom, a brave man of high ideals. Until the day breaks, dear.—F"

Picchi was stated by Rome to have been taken prisoner with the British paratroops who landed recently in Italy. He was middle-aged, 5ft. 6in. in height, and was associated with an Anti-Fascist group of Italians in

PICCHI.—On Palm Sunday, 1941, FORTUNATO PICCHI sacrificed his life for the cause of freedom. A brave man of high ideals. Until the day breaks, dear.—F. R.I.P.

Picchi died without his comrades in 'X' Troop ever knowing his SOE background. They did, however, already learn about his death while still in PoW camp, from Italian newspapers. Picchi's sacrifice was also reported in several newspapers in Britain.



Shortly after, the six officer prisoners were separated from the others and moved to an Italian Air Force detention building on Naples aerodrome, where the accommodation and food was much better. The base commander, a Colonel Montalba, treated them with consideration and even interfered with the prison governor when he learned that the men at the jail were being fingerprinted and photographed.

A fortnight later, on February 28, the whole group of 34 was moved yet again. After a thorough search, in which much of the escape money, maps and tiny compasses with which they had been issued in Britain were found, the officers and men were all put on a train. A long journey through wild and mountainous countryside ended at Sulmona, a valley town in the Abruzzi mountains. After a five-mile march in drenching rain, which made them

On February 28, the prisoners minus Picchi were transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp near Sulmona, Campo di Concentramento 78, deep in the Apennine mountains.

feel fresh but their guards miserable, they came to the Campo di Concentramento 78 PoW camp.

For two months, the 'X' Troop prisoners were isolated in two walled-off compounds within the camp, one for the officers and one for the men, and especially constructed for them. Halfway through, the American military attaché from Rome, Colonel Fiske, was allowed to visit them and he put pressure on the Italians to treat the parachutists as ordinary prisoners-of-war. Finally, they were let into the main part of the camp, the men joining the 800-odd other prisoners, and the officers

going to the smaller officers' compound at the top of the camp.

'X' Troop soon settled down into the usual prisoner-of-war routine, with its boredom, petty guards, roll-calls and Red Cross parcels. They were shocked and depressed when they learned from an Italian newspaper of the execution of Picchi. After a few months, food rations were cut down to near-starvation diet and hunger became the main worry. In their letters home they were able to send some information by using the code learned at Mildenhall. In return they received maps, money and messages hidden in food parcels.

Today, the former PoW camp is a recruit-training centre of the Italian Army, known as Base Logistica de Fonte d'Amore. A modern building next to it houses a police academy.









ESCAPES

The men of 'X' Troop found that, on average, the animo for escapes among their fellow prisoners was not very great. Here again, they showed that they were of a different brand. Pritchard soon set up an escape committee, and he was the leading spirit behind many plans. Although not all attempts were successful, all officers of 'X' Troop made at least one escape attempt. Lea and Deane-Drummond made an daring attempt on the night of December 8/9, disguised as electricians and using a makeshift ladder. Jumping down the other side of the wall, Lea was hit in the leg by a sentry and only Deane-Drummond got away. He almost made it to Switzerland. While he was away, Lucky escaped across the wall with a ladder too, but did not get very far before being recaptured. As punishment, Pritchard, Paterson, Lucky and Deane-Drummond were sent to Campo 27, a special camp for dangerous prisoners in a monastery near Pisa. In June 1942, Deane-Drummond made a second successful escape from a hospital in Florence and managed to reach Switzerland. Thus he became the first member of 'X' Troop to return to Britain.

Meanwhile, back at Sulmona, Jowett had escaped too. Helped over the wall by Sergeants Clements and Lawley, he managed one train journey towards Switzerland, but was recaptured while changing to another train. For their part, the sergeants and men of 'X' Troop worked on a tunnel for three

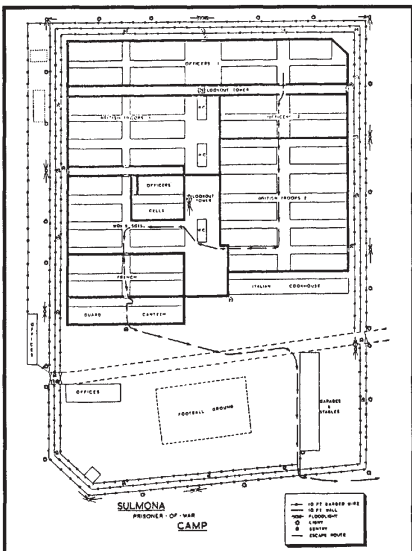
Left: Shortly after arriving at Sulmona, the 'X' Troop prisoners were visited by a representative of the International Red Cross who came to check how they were being treated and took this picture in the Other Ranks compound. The group photo includes five of the crew of Whitley 'S' for Sugar, the one bomber that was shot down on the raid. Back row, from left: Lance-Corporal Jim Maher, Sergeant John Walker, Sergeant Observer Harry Meddings (RAF), Lance-Corporal Doug Jones, Corporal Philip Julian, Lance-Corporal Harry Tomlin, Sapper Glyn Pryor, Lance-Corporal Harry Pexton, Sapper David Struthers, Corporal J. Grice, Sergeant Arthur Lawley, Sergeant Pilot Fred Southam (RAF), Lance-Corporal Douglas Henderson. Middle row, from left: Sapper R. Davidson, Private James Parker, Lance-Corporal Robert Watson, Sapper Alan Ross, Green (RAF — not on Operation 'Colossus'), Sergeant Edward Durie, Sergeant Percy Clements, Private Albert Samuels, Sapper Owen Phillips, Private Ernest Humphrey. Bottom row, from left: Sergeant Joe Shutt, Corporal Peter O'Brien, Sergeant Eric Hodges (RAF), Sergeant Basil Albon (RAF), Private Nicol Natri, Corporal Derry Fletcher and Sapper A. Parker. Missing from the picture, apart from the officers, are Lance-Corporal Harry Boulter and Driver 'Jock' Crawford. Both men were in hospital, Boulter with a broken ankle and Crawford with an arm wound sustained during the gunfight of Jowett's escape party with its Italian captors. (Airborne Forces Museum) *Right:* Karel took this comparison shot of Italian Army trucks parked in front of the old huts through a side gate of the Fonte d'Amore compound. Later, when talking to the officer in charge at the main gate, he was told photography was prohibited although, rather incongruously, there was no objection to the taking of pictures from the mountain overlooking the compound!

months and it had already progressed some 172 feet when it was discovered.

With the Italian capitulation in September 1943, the camp was without guards for a few days and several prisoners took the chance to flee before the Germans arrived to take over. Sergeants Clements and Lawley, after a gruelling four-weeks' march south through the mountains, reached Allied lines on October 13. Lance-Corporal Boulter joined a group of Italian partisans and fought with them for nine

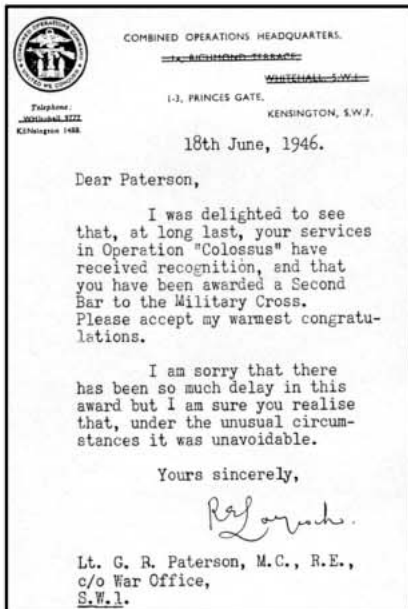
months before being recaptured and imprisoned in Germany.

Soon after they occupied Italy, the Germans started transporting PoWs from Italy to camps in Germany. During the transport, Lieutenant Paterson jumped his train, joined Italian partisans and fought with them with distinction before escaping to Switzerland. At SOE's request, he later returned for a second tour with the guerillas. The rest of 'X' Troop remained in German captivity until the war's end.



The spot where Captain Lea and Lieutenant Deane-Drummond made their escape attempt in the evening of December 8, 1941. Due to the change in ground level at this point, there was a break in the three wire fences outside the wall. Posing as electricians (their escape route is indicated on the camp plan) and pretending to replace a bulb on the light pole here with a makeshift ladder, the two men climbed up the wall, unscrewed the bulb and, using the cross wall as a bridge, inched across the wire fences. They

made it to the other side but, when they tried to pull the ladder across, the nearest sentry became suspicious and opened fire. Both men jumped down, Lea being hit in the leg and unable to continue (he was in hospital for two weeks), but Deane-Drummond managing to get away. On the loose for three days, he made it to within a few miles of the Swiss border before being recaptured by an Italian patrol. Deane-Drummond eventually did escape from Italy in June 1942.



RESULTS

So what was the result of Operation 'Colossus', Britain's first paratroop raid? Strategically, the destruction of the Tragino aqueduct had very little effect on the war either in Albania or North Africa. The aqueduct was repaired within two-and-a-half days, well before the local reservoirs were dry. The side effects in Italy itself, however, were immense. Alarm and consternation spread across the whole of Italy, and it was quite some time before the Italians were sure that they had rounded up all parachutists. To counter public unrest, the Italian propaganda tried to make light of the raid, calling it 'a complete failure', but in official circles, the raid was considered to have introduced a serious new threat to the country. Stringent air raid and anti-parachute precautions were announced. Extra guards were posted at strategic objects and the whole district around Monte Vulture was barred to neutrals.

On February 14, the Italian official agency Stefani issued a statement that British paratroops had landed, admitting that 'a certain amount of damage was done' but claiming that all raiders had been rounded up. The sensational news was widely reported in the British press, although the War Office refused to confirm it or even admit the existence of paratroops. Only on the 20th, under pressure from the publicity, did it release a short, guarded report about the raid.

The War Office's caution was understandable since exact news of the raid's results was initially very difficult to obtain. Reconnaissance photographs taken on February 12, 36 hours after the raid, did not show any damage to either of the two aqueducts and, for quite some time, it was assumed that 'X' Troop had failed to accomplish its mission. Nobody could really explain the failure and, in his report of February 13, Wing Commander Norman put forward that either the raid had been expected and the entire troop been overwhelmed immediately on landing, or that the aqueduct had proved to be of an entirely different design and could not be destroyed with the equipment at hand. First indications that the raid had been successful after all came on February 24, through diplomatic channels, from the US attaché in Rome, who then later secured permission to actually speak to the parachutists at Sulmona. Details of this latter conversation arrived on March 14 through the correspondent of the *Chicago Daily News* who had just been expelled from Rome. Definite confirmation came only on October 4 through a coded message from Pritchard in one of his letters home. It was only when Deane-Drum-

mond arrived back in Britain in August 1942 that a more detailed account could be compiled. Important lessons were learned for future airborne operations. Prime among them was the necessity for earlier photographic reconnaissance of targets. Procedures for dropping on an objective at night had proved to take much longer than anticipated. The inadequacy of the container release gear and the need for better container design were realised. The news that the army possessed parachute troops attracted thousands of volunteers to the new arm. Thus, the 'Guinea-Pigs' laid the foundations for the much larger airborne operations later in the war.

In view of the courage involved in this daring and pioneering raid, it is surprising that only nine members of 'X' troop received awards for their part in it: Pritchard received the DSO; Paterson, Deane-Drummond, Lea and Jowett the MC; Clements, Lawley, Durie and Watson the MM. In addition, Daly, Maher and Nastri were mentioned in despatches. Boulter was also awarded the MM, but not for the raid but for his time with the Italian partisans. The awards could not be made while the men were still prisoners-of-war and, in the event, were not made until June 20, 1946. Lieutenant Paterson, who had led the actual demolition of the aqueduct, received this congratulatory letter (left) from Major-General R. E. Laycock, the Chief of Combined Operations 1943-1945. (Courtesy of G. R. Paterson) Above: In 1982, Norman Kershaw, who had flown as a wireless operator in the Whitley piloted by Flight Lieutenant Walter Williams (he stands on the left in the picture on page 12), and who is blind after a later wartime crash, visited the Airborne Forces Museum at Aldershot with his old skipper and some 'X' Troop veterans. Posing in front of the museum's Dakota are, from left: Phil Julian, Harry Pexton, Doug Jones, Norman Kershaw, Major G. Norton (the museum's curator), Walter Williams, Percy Clements and Jim Maher. (Airborne Forces Museum)



On March 17, 1990 — 'Tragino Day' — a reunion of 'X' Troop veterans was held at Ringway on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Parachute Regiment at which a scale model of the target of Britain's first-ever paratroop raid was presented to Manchester Airport. Lining up behind the model are, from left: Major-General Tony Deane-Drummond, Phil Julian, actor Richard Todd (who joined the Parachute Regiment much later — see *After the Battle* No. 5), Judge Christopher Lea, David Struthers, Harry Pexton and Percy Clements. (Airborne Forces Museum)