

Gandesa - April 2, 1938

We were surrounded. We were assembled on a hill. It seemed hopeless - except that the Estado Mayor was with us. They've gotten us out of tough spots before. That was the general comment.

I was particularly aware of Dave Doran who seemed so calm and unperturbed - in complete control of the situation. He told us that on our discipline now depended a successful escape in the evening.

The fascists launched a wild - rather frightening - cavalry charge with waving swords. We held our fire until they were close and then shot them down.

There were no more cavalry charges but the fascists began to encircle us with tanks.

As soon as it was dark, we moved out.

We soon found that we had to split into small groups. I found myself with another American, Charles Keith, a Canadian, a Frenchman and a Spaniard.

We were working our way towards the Ebro and to the East, avoiding search patrols.

The Spaniard was a knowledgeable farmer and under his direction, we picked some edible plants. We also found some deserted shack wherein we found a place for a fire and we cooked a meal.

We filled our canteens with water from occasional streams and from time to time we encountered some farmers who gave us bread.

The five of us did not stay together. I don't recall the details. But first, the Frenchman was lost and then the Spaniard.

The three of us kept on our way until we reached the point where we thought that if we could evade the fascist guards, we would reach the Republican forces.

Here, Keith left us, saying that at this crucial point, he was sure that he could make it if he were alone.

Bill - the Canadian - and I went into the hills and succeeded in evading the fascist guards. Just as we were congratulating ourselves, we saw a fascist cavalry force on a hill directly across.

Both of us jumped down to get out of sight. We went in different directions and I never saw Bill again. But he made it. Bill was the last to arrive on the Republican side.

I kept on travelling up in the hills for days until I had to come down for food. Getting down was not that easy. I finally had to make a rather precipitous jump. I made it but my rifle dropped and broke. I then broke it up completely and continued down from the hills.

I went up to a house and told the farmer that I hadn't eaten for 3 days. "Possible comida?"

"Si, hombre, si" said the farmer and rushed me into his house. The old man was all alone. He had 2 sons who were in the Republican Army.

I still remember that meal. It was the best I ever had! It started with a raw egg and continued with hot soup, bread, sausages and wine. The old man then filled my canteen with wine. I then had to leave immediately for there were fascist patrols all around the place. There were grim reprisals by the fascists for the help that these people gave to the International Brigades on the retreat.

I had an aversion toward the hills at this time. I decided to avoid them - at least while it was dark. I used the road and every time I saw the light of a car, I would jump into the brush. I soon found that I could walk beneath the road without being visible from the road.

I walked along, making good time until I found myself walking into an Italian fascist Camp. I attempted to get out of sight around a hill but 2 officers standing near a car spotted me and called to me. I pretended to be deaf, motioned to my ears and tried to go on. However, one of the officers drew his gun and beckoned for me to approach. I did so and I heard one of the officers saying that I was a Spanish peasant and to let me go. I had 6 weeks growth of beard and I was wrapped in a blanket like a poncho.

Just then, the sun came out and it was hot! One of the officers sympathetically opened my blanket - and there was my uniform. They searched me, found my paybook and thought I was described as an officer. I decided this was no time to claim false honors and I pointed out to them that it was officers school.

I had gone to officers school in Terrazona but because of the fascist breakthrough, the school was broken up in a week and we went to the Front.

The officers laughed to find that I was no longer deaf. They were pleasant enough and assured me that I would soon be home. This was April 10, 1938.

They drove me to the Front, and for the first time, I saw what we were up against. There was a tremendous amount of military equipment - (from United States, France, England, Germany and Italy) - far beyond anything I had seen on the Republican side.

The Italian soldiers were quite friendly and seemed to be proud of the Italians in the International Brigades. They stated, "Garibaldi y Matteoti bien, eh?" There was a young Spanish soldier captured from the Listers who had a lot of literature with him including speeches by La Passionaria and Jose Diaz - general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party. Italian soldiers took the literature away from the young Spaniard and tore it up so that he would not be found with it.

I was taken to the Command Post where I was interviewed by a colonel. At first, there was an interpreter who claimed to know English but all I could make out was "I tella you." This "interpreter" told the colonel that I was not an American and did not speak English. The colonel did not buy that and sent for another interpreter.

"What mob are you from? I'm wise, see?"

"I'm from Chicago," he added. "This is just like the States when the cops get you. You've been caught."

It seems that this character was a fourth offender and was deported to Italy.

The colonel asked what battle I was in. Having noticed from road signs that we were near Tortosa - a considerable distance from Gandesa. I replied "Tortosa." He gave me a map and asked me to identify our positions. I told him I couldn't do that. They were all a bunch of hills to me.

I was then brought back and the two "English" speaking soldiers began to annoy me. I had an attractive looking watch that I bought in Bezier before entering Spain. The man from Chicago told me to give him the watch because I wouldn't need it. "Two O'Clock" he said. And the other one said, "He tella you - 'Two O'Clock'-dead."

However, the soldier guarding me chased them away. The others continued to be quite friendly.

A distinguished looking Italian captain showed up who spoke English with an Oxford accent.

The captain noticed the friendliness of the soldiers and asked me whether I was not surprised. Didn't I think that Italians were beasts?

"No," I replied. I never thought that Italians were beasts.

The captain then asked me what Brigade I was with.

I told him American Brigade.

The captain turned around to somebody writing things down and said, "15th Brigade."

"What battalion were you with?" was his next question.

"American Battalion."

The captain turned to the writer, "Lincoln-Washington Battalion."

"What is the name of your commander?"

"We called him Red."

"Milton Wolff," he said; and turning to me, "We call him 'El Lobo'."

After spending a night at the Front, I was taken by truck to Alcaniz and after spending a night there, I was taken to Saragossa. In Saragossa, I found 3 others from the U.S.A.: Charles Keith, Bob Steck and Claude Pringle. There were also 4 Englishmen.

The authorities asked me to make a statement on why I went to Spain. I was advised to say that I came to work. That seemed to me to be a betrayal. I stated that I came to Spain to help the Spanish Republic in its fight against fascism.

Early next morning, we were handcuffed and put on trucks. We thought that was the end. But at the Railroad Station, our handcuffs were removed and we were put on a train to Burgos.

From Burgos, we were put into a truck and arrived at San Pedro de Cardenas - April 14, 1938.

I spent more than 16 months in that fascist concentration camp.

Hy Wallach
Hy Wallach