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W. G. LINI - event 207.41-124.7

In May 1943 I was ordered as Commander to draw up the 502 "Jaeger" Btl., in the main with regard to my technical experience as an engineer. This Btl. was to be formed with the aid of all four Arms of the German Wehrmacht (Army, Luftwaffe, Navy and Waffen-SS). For a model, to standard of which was alas, unattainable owing to the difficult supplies problem in the 5th year of the war, we took the Brit. Commando Units under Lord MOUNTBATTEN and the famous Amer. U.S.S. units under Gen. BILL DUNCAN. The "Jaeger" Btl. 502 was to perform special tasks which could not be carried out by service-men with normal training. In July 1943 I had just managed to draw up 2 Companies of 150 men each. At this time, I began, acting on instruction, to probe and engineer and soldier the possibilities of the "pocket edition" weapons of the German Navy and Luftwaffe. In July 1943 I met an old acquaintance of mine in a Berlin hotel. We wanted to have a nice little chat about the good old times and were therefore in mufti. I had, of course, to keep in contact with my adjutant, Oberleutnant KARL RADL. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon I was called to the phone. Greatly excited my adjutant informed me that I had been hunted for more than an hour and could be found nowhere. An order had arrived that I was to travel by air to the Fuehrer's Hqs. in East Prussia immediately. I at once gave instruction for my uniform to be sent along, scraped together a few necessary toilet articles and drove off to the air-field. There I heard of the radio report from ~~the~~ that MUSSOLINI had been overthrown and arrested. The opinion was expressed that my unexpected first trip to the Hqs. was somehow linked up with this political sensation. The courier-plane was already waiting and I just had time to shout the alarm order for both my Companies to my adjutant. I had a marvelous flight which took me for the first time in my life over Rumania and East Prussia, and I racked my brains in vain in search of an explanation of this sudden call to the Fuehrer's Hqs. In any case, I was burning to see the highest military command of the German Reich with my own eyes. Dusk descended upon the sweeping stretches of East Prussia and the many lakes were reflecting the last rays of the sinking sun to the skies. Our plane landed on a small air-field near one of these lakes in the last gleam of day light. Here a car was awaiting me which drove me perhaps 10km and through several cardons of armed guards to the Fuehrer's Hqs. It was right in the middle of the forest, and all barracks and bunkers were so cleverly camouflaged as scarcely to be recognizable, in the gathering dusk. I was let into a well furnished wooden hut, the "tea house" as I later learned. Here I was introduced to Gen. GERT der Fallschirmjaeger STUBERT. I also met 5 other officers, a Lt. Col. and a Major of the Army, two parachute Majors and one Major of the Waffen-SS. I soon learned that these men were my unknown competitors for the task at hand. As Captain of the reserve I was the lowest in rank and the only reserve officer of all six present. After having a cup of coffee we were ordered by an adjutant to Adolf Hitler's presence. For me, and I believe the others as well, this was a momentous occasion, being presented to Germany's Statesman and Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht. I at least was immensely impressed by Adolf Hitler when seeing him for the first time. We were introduced and were required to outline

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EXEMPTIONS Section 3(b)

- (2)(A) Privacy
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in a few words our life history and military career. Then came the question "who has traveled abroad, especially in Italy?" I was the only one who could give the answer. Adolf Hitler now asked me a few specific questions, where I was born, when I had been in Italy and what impressions I had gathered there. Adolf Hitler now requested the remaining 5 officers to withdraw as he wished to continue his discussion with me alone. It so happened that I was chosen for the greatest and most dangerous task I ever encountered in my military career. Adolf Hitler informed me that he was firmly resolved not to leave his friend MUSSOLINI in the lurch and to prevent under all circumstances his extradition to the allies. Adolf Hitler outlined in a few precise words his train of ideas. MUSSOLINI was for him not only an ally or similar political convictions, but he also called him his one and only great friend. He added that MUSSOLINI was in his eyes "the last of the ancient Romans of the Caesarian Tradition." The thought of his imprisonment was unbearable and he regarded his rescue as an absolute duty as his friend. The difficulty of the task I fully realized when Adolf Hitler expressly gave orders that only 5 persons were to share the knowledge of the nature of this mission. He placed me under the command of Gen. Oberst STUBERT and, as a former member of the Luftwaffe I was assigned as paratrooper captain. Details I was to discuss with Gen. Oberst STUBERT. With these instructions I was discharged.

Further details were discussed with Gen. Oberst STUBERT. As a safe guard against further surprises the Fallschirmjaeger Korps was to be transferred in the next few days from the South of France to the area around Rome in order to secure under all circumstances the most important supply-base in Tunisia and Sicily. Adolf Hitler reckoned with the possibility of the newly formed government SALVEMINI quitting the Axis Powers. However, reports from the German Embassy in Rome and from the German counter-intelligence under Admiral GANAUSS gave quite a different version. I personally could at the time form no opinion of my own. I arranged with Gen. Oberst STUBERT to meet him next day in the morning to fly with him in a bee-line to Rome. 50 men of my "Jaeger" Btl. among these 10 officers and all men with a fair knowledge of Italian were to assemble the next morning on the Berlin air-field. It was now mid-night. A small office and a secretary were placed at my disposal and I put through a lightning-call to my Battalion in Friedenthal. There the men of my Staff were on tenderhooks awaiting my call. They of course wanted to know what the sudden ordering of their commander to the Fuhrer's HQs. exactly meant. When I gave a list of the officers over the phone who were to accompany me, there seemed something very like a revolt breaking out at the other end of the wire. Nobody wanted to stay behind and to continue the drawing-up of the Battalion. The greatest stir was caused by my instructions to have tropical parachute equipment ready for all men by the following morning. Most of my men were trained parachutists. The composition of arms and equipment necessitated a few further phone calls and it was almost 4 o'clock in the morning when the last phone-calls were through. I was given a small sleeping-bunk in one of the quarters and I could now turn over the entire problem in my mind. It was self evident that I had accepted a task which offered only a very small chance of success. How could MUSSOLINI's whereabouts be located and how could a successful rescue attempt be carried out? These thoughts kept me awake. The new surroundings and the unique experience I had made this last day jarring on my nerves. At 7:30 in the morning we were to take off for Rome. Sleep was impossible and I got up, sported myself to a shower-bath and felt like newly born. A good breakfast did away the last lurking doubts and my old optimism got the upper hand once more. A soldier must firmly believe in

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his success, then even the impossible is within his reach. The flight to Rome was a top-flight event. Magnificent weather accompanied us all the way. We passed over my native city Vienna, unobscured without making an intermediate landing, and I could therefore only in imagination say "farewell" to my wife and my little girl. Styria and Carinthia slipped away beneath us, countries in which I knew almost every road and which I would explain to my pilot. Croatia, Istria were now appearing beneath, old-time countries which had belonged to the former Austria-Hungarian Monarchy. Now the eternal blue of the Adriatic sailed up to us from below. Ships, like toy boats were cruising on the ever-moving wave crests. Schools of dolphins were playing in the sun-dappled sea. The artistic coast of Italy moved in sight beneath us. We had to gain altitude to keep clear of the towering Apennines. Well known roads and towns came into view and we at last reached the eternally young city of Rome. It was apparent that the success in southern Italy was at its peak. Our furthest calculations became unconsciously stifling. On the air-field of Praetoria di Mare the glare of the southern midday sun shined its full blast upon us. The air in unobscured clouds hid the Pontine Squares near at hand. After an hour's drive by car we reached the beautifully situated town, Frascati harboring the Supreme Hqs. of the German Forces in Italy. The rarified air of the hill ranges near Rome did us good. We had to sit down to a late lunch and were then filled with one desire, to throw off our clothes and to gather fresh strength.

In the evening I was introduced to Feldmarschall ~~XXXXXX~~, Supreme Commander of the German forces in Italy, and to his staff, as Generaloberst STUDENT's adjutant. The arrest and the disappearance of MÜSSOLINI was naturally much discussed at table. No one had the faintest idea that Generaloberst STUDENT and I were entrusted with locating the whereabouts of the Duke and with effecting his rescue. We were under strict order to let only five men into the secret. Generaloberst STUDENT and I were the first two, my adjutant who was on his way was to be the third, and two men were finally to be chosen from the German colony in Italy. Their knowledge of the country was to assist us in our task. In the next few days the 1st Fallschirmjägerkorps (2 Div) arrived by air in Rome. As always on occasion of such transports by air, they had suffered casualties and losses on their way in dog-fights with enemy fighters. News came through at last that my 50 men had safely landed in Praetoria di Mare and I went to see them at once. They had been linked up with a parachute battalion and were billeted near the air field. They were suffering severely from the intense heat. My arrival was always heartily acclaimed since I was in the habit of bringing along a few boxes of fresh fruit and followed the practice of assembling my men on the beach for the absolutely necessary routine duties. My adjutant Karl Radl was the only one I took with me to Frascati. I initiated him into the plan and he was gripped by enthusiasm at the insanity of the task. Realistic soldiers that we were, we did not conceal from one another our apprehensions as to the immense difficulties confronting us. However, as soldiers and optimists we believed in our mission and knew that, should even the merest possibility offer itself, we should take hold of it and do our duties as true soldiers. In an officer who was attached to the German Embassy in Rome, and in a German living for more than a decade in the capital, we found our help-mates number four and five. They also were let into the secret and served our cause with all their power and ability. RADL and I often visited Rome in uniform or in suit and made several acquaintances. We were day and night under way and battled with all our might against the inertia befalling all visitors in Italy

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during the hot summer months.

We had luck. In a restaurant we made friends with a fruit-merchant who invited us to call on him in Naples. The vanishing into thin air of MUSCOLINI was still topic number one, and nearly every one knew of this or that rumor concerning the locality of his confinement. But all clues proved to be a complete washout. Were these rumors spread intentionally or unintentionally?

We were invited to lunch by a familiar acquaintance of our fruit-merchant in an exquisite little town in the Bay of Naples. In the course of our conversation we gathered from an employee of his had a boy-friend on a convicts' isle in the bay which could just be seen from the beach. The girl, of course was firmly convinced that her lover was not getting enough leave, and they had consequently strung up a wire-where signal device in order to daily communicate their everlasting love to each other. It came about that the said girl received news to the effect that leave for the present would be out of the question, since a high personality had arrived on the isle, all controls tightened up and all leave stopped. Were we on the scent? We believed so. Our next steps were rendered extremely difficult by the simple fact that we could disclose to no one the exact reason for our curiosity. We made our report to the Fuehrer's Hqs., but met with no belief. The version of our report was too remote from all others sent to the Hqs. One evening I met in a club in Rome one of the many smart Italian Navy Officers. He spoke German fluently. MADL's knowledge of the lingo, as well as my own, was good enough for ordering a simple meal or for asking our way, but we were both not able to converse freely and fluently. This naval officer told us in strict confidence that he had just gone ashore from an Italian cruiser in La Spezia which had taken MUSCOLINI away from the convicts' isle in the Bay of Naples. It was not apparent that the Cabinet BABUCCIO, which answered all official inquiries as to the locality where MUSCOLINI was held with the stereotype assurance of his good health, without disclosing his whereabouts, was constantly moving him from one place to another, thus rendering the location of his whereabouts extremely difficult, if not impossible even. We took up this new scent without getting any results. The only thing we could go on was that the new internment place must evidently be accessible by waterway. Meanwhile we received reports from the small German garrisons in Sardinia which seemed rather strange. We decided to extend our investigations to both Sardinia and Corsica.

In the meantime the general position on the fronts had deteriorated rapidly. The Allies had made a successful landing in Sicily, and we had to send off one of our parachute divisions, to strengthen the front there. One day we received a new report. The Duce is in Sicily somewhere quite near the front lines. We left for Sicily immediately, only to find out on our arrival that the named place had just been taken by the Allies. A counter attack was to be launched within a few hours. It was successful, we were among the first to enter the place, only to find out that this report had been a fake. The Duce had never been near this blasted spot at all.

In Rome I became acquainted with the German naval liaison officer in St. Maddalena. This is one of the best Italian esports, and situated in the north-east of Sardinia. In St. Maddalena we were told of several islands, among others of the Ile di Pucco, as likely spots where MUSCOLINI was believed to be held.

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The German liaison officer informed us that the garrison had been strengthened on St. Maddalena by a "carabinieri" detachment, and that new stringent precautionary measures had been enforced within the entire seaport area. "Was the Duce in St. Maddalena? All direct questioning was impossible for security reasons. Only in a roundabout way we gathered from scraps of gossip, all in formation of value. I decided to place one of my Italian speaking officers at the disposal of the German liaison officer as interpreter. I instructed him to keep his eyes open and to mingle with the small fry among the Italian civilians and soldiers on St. Maddalena. He was to report to me daily by German radio-telephone. I myself flew to Sardinia on one occasion, took a look at the seaport, made an inspection trip in a motor-boat and took stock of the entire island. The Ile di Soccu is also a convicts' island and we cautiously moved up to it within a few hundred yards, as far as one was permitted to go, and I took a few snapshots of this place along with a few more of the seaport area St. Maddalena. It proved that a couple of white-painted Italian seaplanes were at anchor in the harbor. I cannot explain myself why exactly just this vision impressed itself so indelibly on my mind. I spoke with my officer who furnished me with quite a handful of interesting news. A certain part of the outward town area of St. Maddalena was particularly closely guarded, and he had gathered here and there that a personage of high standing was held there. He added without even treating the value of this information as for us that he had even heard it was the Duce himself. I told him that this piece of news would be of highest interest in German government circles and ordered him to keep on the track. I was resolved to make use of a slight but well known weakness of the Italians for my purpose. This weak spot was their passion for making a wager. I instructed my officer to call this some day on the Italian merchant from whom he had gathered this news. My officer was to arrange a little stag party, and on the occasion voice the opinion that KUBOUKINI was dead. If contradicted he was to suggest a wager. There was only one difficulty to overcome. This officer was a tee-totaler. I almost had to use force in persuading him to have some cognac in order to keep him up for the event. This ruse was successful beyond all expectation. My officer reported back that our merchant had accepted the wager and was ready to show him the Duce, if only from afar, adding that he was held prisoner in a strongly guarded villa outside St. Maddalena. From a vantage point in the harbor I carefully scrutinized the layout of the villa and returned to Rome to report to General West STUBENT. Having no accurate maps of the fortified area, I decided on 10 August 1943 to carry out a reconnaissance flight at a great altitude over the fortress and to make a few photographs. This 10th of August, a birthday, was to be in its truest sense my day of rebirth. In glorious weather we flew over the Mediterranean and landed on a small airfield in Sardinia for refueling. We took off a mile immediately and headed for the sea in order to gain the necessary altitude. I was lying in the fore of the completely glass enclosed cockpit at the gun, my maps and my camera beside me. A beautiful view presented itself. The blue sea was here and there interspersed with solitary rocks and a few small projecting islands. All of a sudden a report through the mike: "Two enemy fighters sighted." I heard a few burst of fire, some of them evidently from the rear machine gunner. I had no chance to join in the fight. We swerved and after a few minutes all was quiet again. I was so fascinated by the beautiful scenery as to quickly forget the brief encounter as well as experienced. I only noticed that our plane was rapidly losing height, and I asked my copilot why for the reason. I received no answer. Finally my head I saw only the contorted face of the pilot and I saw noticed that one of the twin air-screws was out of action.

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The surface of the sea was rushing toward us at a terrific speed. I just had time to take hold of the gunpistol and to hang on for dear life. A crash followed, the glass framework smashed to smithereens and water and the glass shatters closed over my head. Our plane had struck the surface hard and a loud crack of shatters for a few seconds. I suddenly felt a hand dragging at my collar and the same hand started to heave me up. We were under water and only a sort of air-bubble and remained in the upper reaches of the cockpit. I got a deep breath to get and a new realization I had been flying, being the smashed and crushed parts of the planes nose. I could hear a pin drop. The pilot, the second pilot and a wife was huddled together in the cockpit. We could hear nothing of the other two of our crew, the radio-operator and the co-pilot.

I gave orders to operate the emergency exit above the cockpit. The second pilot was the first man to get out of the wreckage, going to the surface in the same instant as the sands of a sunken submarine quit their hold. I saw the first two to float up, and after no time the first pilot. It is no easy matter to overcome the pressure of the water and to take along sufficient air for the upward journey. We were struggling some 15 to 30 feet under water. After we three had gained the surface, the plane bobbed up again for a few minutes. We at once went to the co-pilot and hunted for our missing companions. They were nowhere to be seen up by the crash until the excitement but managed to get free from the wreckage, while the pilot now managed to get his dinghy afloat when he had meanwhile drifted from the remnants of the plane. I swam up to the co-pilot, saved through the hole and saved my attached gear and compass. I had just got aboard again when the way of the plane tilted straight up and crashed forward in the same instant. About 400 to 500 meters and we saw a few rocks jutting out of the water and we went toward them. They were so close and slippery that we had difficulty in getting up. We had to hold on to each other and our nerves were feeling the solid ground under our feet once more. I alone of the party was injured. It was slippery by accident as far as the seawater had washed away the skin. I had a few glass-shivers sticking in my skin and, as a result of the crash, I had some other few ribs. We shot off distress-signals with our flare-pistol, were made out by an anti-aircraft cruiser and picked up. I left my companions and came off in a German speed-boat for the radio station in Corvara for the purpose of reporting our rescue. Since our missing plane would naturally be hunted for by our rescue service. I also had a talk with the commandant of Corvara in order to get a rough idea of the strength of the German troops at hand here. I toyed with the idea of a number of several thousand units being sent to the island. I got a nasty shock when arriving at Corvara. The German commandant had arrived from the Kuehner's camp for me to immediately prepare a parachute attack on a small island near there. According to reliable reports the base was held there. As we found out later this report was very wrong. It was used by the splendidly organized Italian intelligence. General von, the commander of the Italian intelligence service had purposefully launched this faked report in hope of letting us in the way, until we would be sent off as a wild goose chase. The commandant of Corvara decided to try and see to it, even if he might catch some of the German troops. He arrived a few days later at the Kuehner's camp. This line is a complete history and political leaders

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were gathered around Adolf Hitler, among others: Herman Goering, Mussolini, Doenitz, Ribbentrop, Keitel, and Jodl. I, as an absolutely unknown captain of the Luftwaffe, was called upon to report on the situation. My words must have been rather convincing, for Adolf Hitler retracted his given orders and asked me if I had any definite rescue plan in my mind for St. Mandrius. I outlined my scheme and found approval. The necessary orders were issued at once, and a speed-boat flotilla stationed in the Mediterranean as well as several units of troops in Corsica were placed under my command. Early next morning Generaloberst Stubbart and I returned by air to Rome. My thoughts were preoccupied with the planned enterprise. I perfectly understood that the actual success of this plan depended entirely on its "surprise" moment and that, above all, the most difficult part would be getting clear of the port with Mussolini. We made our preparations in all haste and reported "all ready" to the Fuehrer's Hqs. From here the start signal was given. On 27 August 1943 I embarked with a few hand-picked men in our speedboats and after a stormy passage we eventually reached the port St. Mandrius just before dark. I noticed at once, when sweeping into the harbor that only one of the mentioned planes was still at anchor. At the moment I paid scarcely any attention to the fact. In order to remain as inconspicuous as possible I went ashore dressed as a simple sailor, met my officer and went off with him in a final reconnaissance sortie. My officer assured me that all was as before. A tight cordon of double sentry posts and guards was drawn around the villa. We passed by at some distance and I paid special attention to the newly installed telephone lines. We eventually arrived at a house situated a little higher up, where we intended to purchase some fruit and from where we wanted to take a good look at "our" villa, still in the firm belief that we would start our dangerous venture early the next morning. A "carabinieri" sergeant passed our way by chance and we drew him into a conversation. As usual the inevitable Mussolini topic cropped up, and as usual, we declared we firmly believed the Duce to be dead. This assertion once more did the trick. The sergeant, now very loquacious, went upon convincing us that he himself had escorted the Duce to the harbor this very morning, and that the Duce had left Bardonia in the second and now missing seaplane. The cat was now out of the bag, as far as the missing plane was concerned. I subsequently found out that the Italian authorities had done a nice little piece of camouflage work by giving a faded "plane in distress" signal. This enlightenment came in the very nick of time. The very next morning we would have alighted on the empty, next our intentions would have been realized and we would have not even stood a dog's chance of carrying out our orders to a successful end. We had to begin all over again with our investigations. A seaplane, we knew, could only land on a water surface, and our special attention was therefore focussed on all ports. Here again fortune smiled upon us and our soldier's luck came to our aid. A few days later I accompanied Generaloberst STUBBART who was inspecting a seaplane squadron of the 1st Paratrooper Rifle Corps on the lake Trasimene. In the Commander of the Squadron I met an old Austrian friend and learned when chatting with him that on 28 August during an air-raid alarm a white seaplane had landed on the lake. Shortly afterward a Red Cross car left the seaplane base and had headed for Rome. At this time we had to check upon countless rumors. Some related that the Duce was interned in a sanatorium in Rome, others that he was held in a castle in Central Italy, and so forth. All these clues turned out to be

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false.

The situation in Italy was constantly deteriorating and the struggle for the island was drawing to a close. The unrest of the war-fatigued populace which had practically been at war for the last 10 years (Abyssinia), was increasing day by day. The allied bomber attacks on Rome, Naples and other cities had played an important part. The danger was drawing nearer and nearer of Badoglio's Cabinet negotiating separate peace terms and thus cutting off the German Armies in Southern Italy. But many influential German authorities still would not believe in this possibility. In these last days rumors had condensed that the Duce was now held in the Apennines. Many inquiries were made throughout this region by persons who never realized what exact reason their given task actually had. This information revealed more and more traces leading to the area of the Gran Sasso, the highest peak in the Apennine range. I even found it necessary to concoct a love story in order to gain my purpose. I invented a girl friend from Rome who had fled with her parents from the Capital in fear of the Allied bomber-attacks. I begged an Italian friend to hunt up this girl, whose exact address I unhappily did not possess, and who must be living somewhere near the Gran Sasso. I explained I wished to send her a love letter. Just this "reconnaissance", naturally performed quite unwittingly by the Italian, proved to be a full success. He informed me that the valley was entirely condensed off and that the hotel at the foot of the Gran Sasso had suffered the eviction of all its personnel, since the area was being used for training purposed by "Carabinieri" units. The telephone-line, the only way of access to the hotel, was also out of bounds for all traffic. Radio installations and fresh "Carabinieri" units pointed to increasing military activities in this area. It was also, he added, further more rumored that MUSSOLINI was held prisoner in this hotel. This rumor I believed to be true. I could not conceive of a more ideal spot for MUSSOLINI's imprisonment than this hotel, cut off completely from the rest of the world, situated more than 6000 feet above sea level and not even a roadway to link it up with the valley.

This hotel was newly built and the only thing I therefore could get hold of was a prospectus from a travelling bureau. The hotel was to be found on no maps. It was therefore absolutely necessary to take a few aerial photographs of the surroundings in order to have something to go on. The results of our inquiries had been currently reported to the Fuehrer's Hqs., including those which had induced us to give up our St. Maddalena plan. On the 6 September 1943 we received the order: "Prepare and carry out enterprise Duce as quickly as possible." On 8 September, together with my adjutant RAUL and the IO officer of the Parachute Rifle Btl., I took off for my reconnaissance flight. Seen from a height of 16000 feet, the Apennine range lay there in all its grandeur. Wild ravines and serrated crags presented themselves. We flew over the hotel and saw it was surrounded by the same wild scenery. Our aerial cameras were already in operation. Suddenly our large built-in stereo camera stopped working. We grabbed handcameras and, hanging half out of the plane, we took snapshot after snapshot. We then flew as far as Venice, turned and repeated the same procedure on our return flight. RAUL and I nearly froze our hands off while operating the camera. Just before reaching Rome, it must have been about noon, we saw squadron after squadron of Allied bombers flying over Frascati. They were pouring their

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deadly loads into our Supreme Hqs. The house itself, Villa Tusculum II had received 3 bomb hits. One of my officers had been killed, and three who had been buried alive were just being rescued. All our material and our kit was buried beneath the ruins. Despite the danger of "ducks" we salvaged all we could. The civilian population had suffered terrific losses, yet all available hands were helping in the salvage operations. I made off for the hospital, which was almost filled to the roof. I wanted to see some companions of mine but nearly all of them were in a dying condition. I went to the photographic center, only to find a pile of bricks. The snapshots we had made could not be developed properly. We at last found a makeshift photographic atelier rigged up in a tent which was in a position to develop a few rough prints for us. I outlined together with Radl our plan of action and presented it to Gen. Oberst. STUDENT. We wanted to land with gliders near the hotel and to overpower its garrison in a surprise attack. A strong detachment was simultaneously to creep up the valley (Avezzano), was to seize the Telephar-line station and to cover our retreat. At five in the afternoon a new surprise, we heard over the radio that the Government Badoglio had begged to the Allies for a separate peace-treaty and simultaneously declared war on Germany. The Allied bomber attack on the German Supreme Hqs. had therefore been a preparatory measure to this end. What mattered now was to keep a firm hold on the vital supply bases for the weak German units in the area of Rome, if all German Div's. fighting in the south were to be saved from finding themselves in a most precarious position. On the 8, 9, and 10 of September a brief spell of fighting ensued which ended with the disarming of the troops loyal to the King. Other Italian Det's. were willing to continue fighting on Germany's side and to go over to our lines. New German formations were approaching from the Southern Tyrol. Italy in its entirety, however, with the exception of the environs of Rome, were in the hands of Badoglio's troops. And amidst all this mix-up the preparations for our enterprise had to be carried on. Disagreements of a technical nature arose between Luftwaffe officers and myself for the reason that a landing of a parachute action from such an altitude was regarded as sheer madness. Such an undertaking had as yet never been planned, even less carried out. Losses of at least 80 per cent were predicted even for the landing itself. On 9 September a new blow. Allied radio reports claimed that MUSSOLINI had already been extradited by the Government Badoglio and had arrived in Africa on board a battleship. Was this report true or was it a ruse? None of us had seen MUSSOLINI in this mountain hotel. Our plan was based purely on surmise. It was impossible to start making fresh inquiries in the enemy occupied area, they would anyway only have aroused suspicion. We had to risk the venture in spite of all. Gen. Oberst. STUDENT approved of my plan after hearing my report, a Parachute Rifle Btl. was placed under my command which was to carry out the valley problem. Some of the best men picked from the best Parachute Rifle Company and a large number of my own men were to carry out the enterprise itself together with me. We had difficulties in getting hold at the Pratica airbase 12 normal gliders carrying 10 men each. Carefully weighing our chances my adjutant and I came to a disheartening result. We could only even give ourselves a very slight chance of success. But the order was there, and we soldiers must carry it out. I went to my men and lined them up. I told them I

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I was expecting in the next few days an order to undertake a most dangerous mission, and that we stood a damned small chance of "pulling it off" and of surviving. I could only promise them one thing and that was that I would constantly be with them and would do my utmost to bring this vitally important mission to a successful end. I only wanted to take volunteers with me and was greatly pleased when not even one of them wanted to stay behind. As soon as the fighting had stopped orders were given by Gen. Oberst. STUDENT to carry out the action on 12 September 1943, zero time 1400. He made one stipulation. Under no conditions whatever was a nose-dive landing to be attempted from these heights, in view of the air currents which were expected to be over the mountain range. All gliders were to attempt a smooth landing and observe all precautionary measures. The aerial photograph seemed to show up an apparently only slight declining slope which seemed suitable for our purpose, and to promise a half-way safe landing.

The 12 of September approached, the weather was grand. There were sufficiently large clouds in the sky which made an unnoticed approach possible. The IG officer of the Corps was the only person beside RAMM and myself who had seen the hotel and was to lead in a power driven plane the entire drive to their goal. The plan had set forth during the night in order to reach the valley of Arezzo by a roundabout route. It was necessary to strictly observe the given zero time. At noon the 12 gliders, the tow-planes and my 100 men were all assembled on the airfield Pratica di Mare and ready for action. The tension was high, as always on such occasions. Gen. Oberst. STUDENT spoke once more to the men to whom I had just outlined my plan of action. I myself was to use the third glider. I expressly gave orders, that come what may, no person was to open fire before I myself fired the opening shot. Should I be wounded or killed, then the first shot was to be given by one of the officers accompanying me. I realized that the Italian force would be stronger than ours (my reports had spoken of about 500 guards in and around the hotel) and our task could only be brought to a good end if the surprise moment was played up to the utmost. It was certain that no one expected an attack from the air and this was our one and only chance to "pull it off". Suddenly, approaching enemy bomber formations were reported, and shortly afterward the first bombs were already crashing around us. It was almost one o'clock and we had to take off at all costs in order to keep within our zero-hour schedule. The take-off was successful in spite of the fresh bombers, and I only learned later that 3 of our gliders were already put out of action during the take-off. After half an hour's flight the two planes ahead of us suddenly vanished. I was now forced to take the lead myself in spite of the fact that my glider offered only a very poor scope of vision. How we managed to find our goal I don't know to this very day. We were flying a height of perhaps 11,000 feet and I could see through a hole in the clouds the valley of Arezzo. The first detachments were already moving in. I glanced at my watch. Within a few minutes it was zero time. I gave the order: "Tighten crash harness". Through another gap in the clouds I could now see our aim, the hotel in the mountains. I gave the order to release the towables. My pilot, a young lieutenant and the best glider pilot in the Corps is already swinging off in a sharp curve in order to get his bearings and

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to find our landing slope. Almost at the same time we noticed that we were the victims of a grave error. The supposedly flat slope clearly showed a slant of at least 40 degrees and was therefore absolutely useless for our purpose. A brief decision, we had to act against the express order of Gen. Ugerst. ~~STUDENT~~. The only alternative to giving up and turning back was a crash-landing. I called to the pilot: "Crash landing as near to the hotel as possible." The glider was already tilting downward and we shot toward our goal at a terrific speed. This lasted just a few seconds. Then a crash, sounds of splintering, creaking and grinding, and a terrific jolt shook us from head to foot. We had landed airtight, and almost within some 50 feet of the hotel. We leapt from the wreckage and rushed toward the hotel. We yelled a "mani in alto" (stick 'em up) to the nearest guards. They stood rooted to the ground, completely dumbfounded. Not a rifle was lifted against us. The 9 of us rushed up to the hotel. An open door, it was the wire-less operating room. We pushed the operator aside, and a blow of a pistol butt put the apparatus out of action. Three things raced through my mind: "Would the taut nerves of my men stand the strain, would they start shooting, was the Duce here after all?" It was impossible to enter the hotel through the operator's room. We had to turn back. The man who was covering alone the entire action with the machine gun was lying there as cool as a cucumber behind his gun and was strictly observing the ordered fire discipline. We rushed along the walls of the hotel and suddenly came up against a terrace raised some 10 feet from the ground. I was the first to scramble up, my eyes swept over the hotel facade, and I now saw the well known head of the Duce framed in one of the windows on the first floor. Our venture had not been in vain! We now stood the chances of actually rescuing ~~MUSJUMANI~~. A few leaps brought us up to the front portal which was secured by machine guns. Our shouts "mani in alto" rang out. The "surprise moment" was still showing its effect. One of the officers and I managed to shove the machine guns aside and to jump over them, and with a few blows with the butts of our machine pistols we forced our entrance.

Inside we dashed up the stairs, found the right door the very first go and piled. ~~MUSJUMANI~~ and three Italian officers were in the room. These officers were bundled out and the officer accompanying me covered the door. As yet, not a shot had been fired. I rushed to the open windows and gave two of my sergeants a helping hand who had climbed up a lightning conductor. They clambered in and in time to see a second glider nosediving perhaps some 200 yards away. The pilot was my company commander who broke his foot in the landing process. The men jumped out and started moving up to the hotel. On the other side a third glider was also preparing to land. From this side further 9 men would soon arrive. I experienced the horrifying spectacle of seeing one or four further gliders preparing for a crash landing apparently swept away by an air current and hurled with terrific impact against the mountainside. We afterwards only found dead and wounded among the wreckage. The occupants of these last three planes were also now moving up, and at this moment the first snots were to be heard. Italian outpost stationed around the fissured and rugged plateau had opened fire. I dashed into the foyer of the hotel and demanded to speak with the commandant. A colonel appeared and I requested him to order immediate cessation of all useless resistance since their prisoner was already in my hands. I required him to surrender the hotel in order

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to prevent further bloodshed. We asked for a few minutes respite to consult 2 generals who were also present in the hotel. After a few minutes the fate of all concerned was decided. The hotel was surrendered without any further resistance. I now ordered all Italian soldiers to assemble in the foyer. Arms were to be left outside the door. All officers were to keep their arms and were to be regarded as superiors by their men as before. I well remember a very chivalrous gesture the Italian colonel made: he had a goblet with red wine and presented to me with the words; "For the victor". I now passed a few brief orders to my men through the window and could there-upon at last give my full attention to MUSSOLINI. I reported to him with the words, "Duce, the Fuehrer has sent me as a token of his loyal friendship." MUSSOLINI embraced me and assured that he had daily expected his extradition to the Allies, but that he would have put an end to his life before that. He had found friends among the officers of the guards. Thereafter I left the hotel. Saw to it that sentry posts were put on the line out, and finally got in contact with the valley detachment. They had taken the telephone station in the valley after a brief encounter. The telephone line was soon operating again and after a short time the first reinforcements arrived at the hotel.

Our rescue venture must now be completed by getting MUSSOLINI safely to Germany. To this end we had prearranged three possible means of getting away. The airfield Avezzano was situated at the summit of the valley and was held by the Italians, by Badoglio forces. This airfield was to be gained for a short time at a newly given zero-hour after successful completion of our rescue action. Three German planes were to land at a given signal, one of which was to be used by Duce and myself, while the others were to serve as decoys in case of possible pursuit. The second possibility was to take off in a "Storch" plane from the valley. A third and most dangerous possibility I had envisaged the landing of a storch plane near the hotel. This plane was thereupon to attempt to take off again. Our valley detachment was equipped with a radio transmitter and I had the following message sent to Rome "enterprise successful. Await new zero time for departure." Perhaps 10 minutes later I wanted to pass through the new zero time for the seizure of the Avezzano airfield. This message never got through. Our radio communications with Rome had broken down. I therefore had to take recourse to the second possibility. A Storch plane had landed in the valley and a suitable meadow had been found for taking off again. I gave orders for this plane to stand by, ready for departure. And was just on the point of leaving the hotel with MUSSOLINI when I was told that the plane had smashed its landing gear and was out of action. Now the last and most dangerous course was only left for us open. The "Storch", piloted by a captain who was a personal pilot of General Oberst. STIDENT, was already circling over the hotel. He shot up some flares as landing signals and cleared a make-shift landing space with the help of the Italians as well as we could. The ground surrounding the hotel was strewn with stone and pieces of rock. The landing was successful. I had a talk with the pilot and he declared that the take-off would be a most dangerous affair. When informed that I would accompany the Duce he declared that this would make the venture well-nigh impossible. I was compelled to make use of this last means of departure, fully realizing that I could not risk crossing a stretch of roughly 120 kilometers

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through enemy occupied territory with Duce on my hands. On the other hand, I could not risk letting MUSCOLINI start off alone since all responsibility would rest on my shoulders should a mis-hap occur. It was my wish to share this likely danger with the Duce and the pilot and either pull it off or to crash with them. I gave orders to my units to the effect that all arms and men were to be transported over the telepher-line to the valley. Our prisoners, soldiers as well as officer, were to remain in the hotel and were to have their freedom. Only the two Generals were to be taken along. The preparations for our take-off began. The runway, slanting down hill and with the wind blowing from the rear was swept clean of all rocks and stones as well as possible. We climbed into the machine, the engine roared and our take-off began. The plane simply refused to rise from the ground. We had almost reached the brink of the precipice when a ditch suddenly cut straight across our path. The plane topped over the ditch, bumped the ground on the other side and coasted over the brink. After a sheer drop of perhaps 1000 feet the pilot succeeded in gaining control over the plane and we seemed to be hanging suspended. The plane flew over the valley just above the ground and eventually reached the air base. I assured the Duce for his nerve; he must have clearly recognized the danger in our take-off and the likelihood of a crash, since he was an experienced pilot himself. After a few minutes he had commenced to explain the land scape abipping, army beneath us and to speak of his life. In Italia di Mare the three planes were awaiting us. We climbed into one of them and off we went to Germany.

I had decided to head for Vienna as first landing place. I had ordered observance of a strict R/F silence until reaching the German frontier so as not to give ourselves away to possible pursuers. We left Rome at about 5 AM. Over Carinthia weather conditions became very bad. We were flying through fog and rain. The operator tried to get radio bearings from Vienna, but could establish no communication whatever. Weather conditions were deteriorating further still and twilight was setting in. Judging by the time for the hour, we should be somewhere to the south of Vienna, but we had no ground visibility and had to fly at an altitude of 5000 feet to keep clear of the mountain ranges lying ahead. We were also running short of fuel. I was stretched out in the low cockpit and was endeavoring to get a glimpse of the ground beneath through very infrequent gaps in the banks of clouds. For some time already we had been circling round and it was by now almost dark. We would soon be compelled to make a forced landing. At this point I at least succeeded in getting a peep through the clouds and believed to make out a large water surface beneath. Were my calculations correct, this must be the Neusiedler Lake eastward of Vienna. I gave orders to dive through the clouds and we were in luck. It was the very lake I knew so well and we managed to gain the Danube, flying due north course of the river and by this means eventually reached the well known airport Aspern near Vienna. We landed on the airfield in complete darkness and with only a few drops of fuel left in the tanks. It was 9 o'clock by now. As we learned later, both accompanying planes had been forced to make an emergency landing and both planes had been heavily damaged. This circumstance eventually gave rise to the rumor that I also had made an emergency landing with the Duce. The night we spent in Hotel Bristol

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in Vienna. Several trunk calls were put through to the Fuehrer's Hqs. and I had the joy of also welcoming my wife at the hotel. She was greatly relieved after being without news from me for several weeks. Shortly before midnight I was decorated by a General Staff Colonel of the Army in the name of Adolf Hitler with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. The next day I flew with the Duce to Munich where we met his family which had on the 12 of September also been freed by a unit of my men from internment at a country seat. The next day we continued our flight to the Fuehrer's Hqs. in East Prussia. Adolf Hitler met us on the airfield. The meeting of both statesmen was most cordial. I had to report and give detailed account of our enterprise from beginning to end. Two days later I returned by air to Italy to fetch my men. As a reward we were given permission to cross Italy and the beautiful southern Tyrol in a motorized march to Innsbruck. I took all wounded fit for transport with me. From Innsbruck we continued our journey by train to Friedenthal. Finally we all were given our well-earned leave.