PENGUIN BOOKS

THE FORTRESS

RALEIGH TREVELYAN

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A DIARY OF ANZIO AND AFTER

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex

AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

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First published by Collins 1956
Published in Penguin Books 1958

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Hunt, Barnard & Co, Ltd
Aylesbury

For My Mother

AND IN MEMORY OF T. P. L.,
G. L. S., AND C. W. N.

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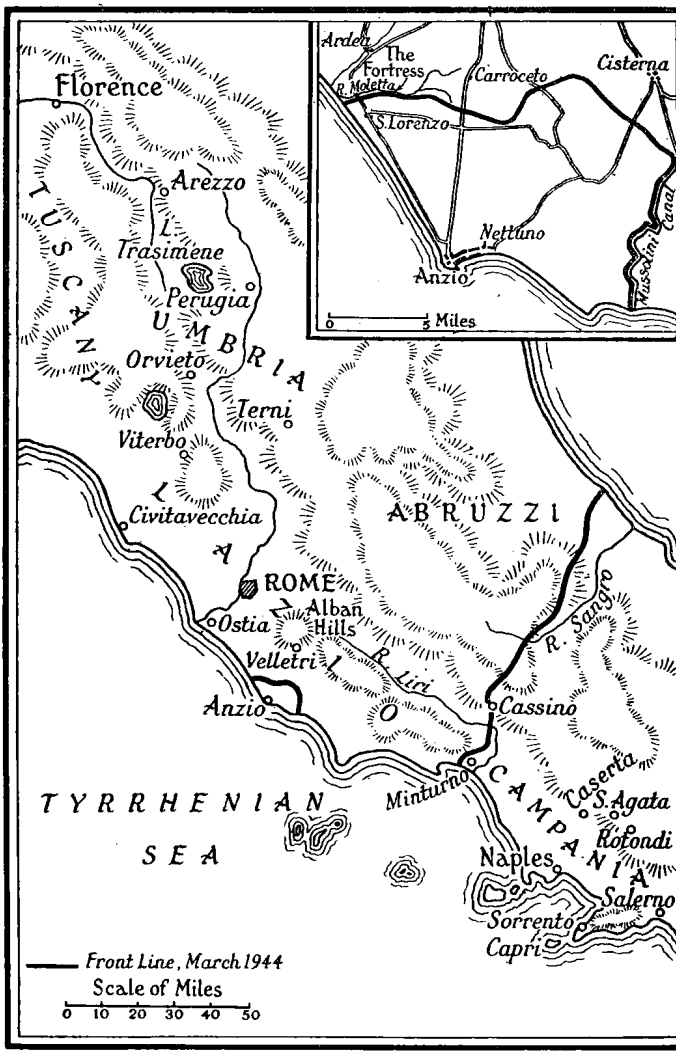
PART ONE

Anzio

The first landings at Anzio were on 22nd January, 1944. I was in Algiers at the time.

During February the Germans made a great effort to oust the Allies from the Beachhead. Losses on both sides were heavy, and the British and Americans were forced back to limits where there could be no further retreat. However, by 1st March it was obvious that the Germans had accepted the fact that they had failed, and their drive began rapidly to peter out.

On my arrival in Italy I had to join the battalion of another regiment, not my own. We were sent as reinforcements to Anzio on 2nd March, and within twenty-four hours were at a place nicknamed *The Fortress*, one of the key defensive positions in the Beachhead and the nearest to Rome. I was a subaltern, aged twenty, and had never before been in action.


Florence
Arezzo
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Perugia
UMBRIA
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Ostia
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Salerno
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Capri
ABRUZZI
R. Sangro
Ardea
The Fortress
R. Moletta
Carroceto
Cisterna
S. Lorenzo
Nettuno
Anzio
Mussolini Canal
0 5 Miles
Front Line, March 1944
Scale of Miles
0 10 20 30 40 50

THE FORTRESS

17th March

Two nights ago we returned from the Fortress. I am writing this in my sand-hole at B Echelon (how to translate B Echelon into ordinary language I don't know, but it means out of the line anyway). The sea is only a few hundred yards off, separated from us by high dunes massed over with tamarisks and umbrella pines. In the distance, towards the Alban Hills, we hear the desultory firing of heavy artillery, and sometimes a stray round goes rustling overhead. I have done practically nothing else but sleep since I came back. . . .

Our officers' mess is in the back of a three-tonner. Major Babworth and the rest sit there all day long, and most of the night, on overturned ration boxes playing cribbage and drinking rye whisky. Those damned fools have one-track minds; they aren't able to get away from shop. 'God, the Fortress was a picnic compared to the cemetery at Minturno,' etc., etc. Then they start off on How We Crossed the Catania Plain. As if I were interested. Yet I must write down what happened at the Fortress. . . .

Sergeant Chesterton had gone ahead earlier that evening and was ready to greet us when we arrived at our platoon area. I barely had the chance of exchanging more than a few words with the officer from whom I was taking over; he was obviously on edge and even in the starlight I could see huge pouches of weariness under his eyes. For my part, I was not yet accustomed to the racket of gunfire and of shells whizzing backwards and forwards, whilst my back and shoulders were still aching after the long march up. All the officer did in fact say to me was: 'Oh, hallo. Good show. You've arrived.' And then, when I started to question him about the direction of the enemy, Sergeant Chesterton at once cut in and said that he (Sergeant Chesterton) knew all the details and I was not to worry. With that, the officer forced a vague smile at me and hurried off to

catch up the rest of his platoon, who were already slithering down the muddy slope into the valley.

It turned out that the enemy was about seventy yards away. Until daylight came, I was not able to get a clear impression of the country around us. Bushes seemed to block the view everywhere, although the sergeant said that we had a clear field of fire of at least thirty yards. My trench, which I shared with Viner, my batman, was plumb in the centre of the platoon area, so close to the other trenches that I could call to each of my section commanders in a loud whisper.

We were to find ourselves on the edge of a small thickly wooded valley. (Most of the Beachhead apparently consists of flat grassland, through which these deep tangly valleys, or wadis as the men call them, run like fissures from some primeval earthquake.) Company Headquarters was behind us, down below; we had passed by it before reaching the platoon area – a sort of mud kraal, bolstered up with sandbags and surrounded by the white crosses of temporary graves.

One advantage of being so close to the Germans was that we were within the minimum range of their mortars. Snipers and hand grenades were the main worry, not counting shells falling short and airbursts. All night long the artillery and mortars of both sides kept up a non-stop barrage. The screeching and whirring of the shells over our heads might have been some furious gathering of witches on Walpurgis Night. Sometimes the explosions were close enough for us to see shreds of flames spurting upwards in the dark, and the shrapnel would come hissing at us on all sides. We grew to distinguish the sound of various guns, as if they were voices – some were alto, some bass, some grumbly, some like baying wolves, some as retchy as the cough of a tubercular in his last stages. But all these were more or less noises off; nearer to hand were the staccato *eugh-eugh* of two-inch mortars, the snarly spandau-ripple, the more deliberate bren-crackle, and the swift searing whine past of a single bullet, generally tracer and half-seen like a miniature comet. Often a corner of the sky would be illuminated with gaudy showers of multi-hued Very lights. . . . Although a small battle started up on the opposite side of the

wadi, and several grenades went off, we had a quietish time the first night at the Fortress and were hardly troubled at all by the Germans.

It had been raining a good deal for some days before our arrival, and this at first seemed to account for the heavy cloying smell everywhere, like fungus. I soon discovered that the smell mostly came from empty bully and 'conner' (or stew, Maconochie's) tins chucked unburied into the bushes. In addition, the previous platoon had been none too particular about the disposal of human excreta. . . .

There were about two inches of *café au lait* coloured water at the bottom of our trench, and so Viner and I had to sit hunched up on ration boxes, occasionally easing our joints by sticking out our feet on to each other's knees. Blankets had been used to line the trench, in order to stop the earth from falling in, but these had become so soggy that we had to avoid leaning against them. It was impossible to find a dry place where we could stand our tommy cookers for brewing up or heating the conner, so we had to construct a special platform of empty bren mags supported on broken bayonets.

Not long after dawn that first morning a man called Baxter, a sort of puffy-faced charwoman in battledress, came crawling over, eyes popping out. A dead Jerry, covered with a ground sheet, was in the next trench to his, he said, and neither his mate nor he could stand the thought of it. Sergeant Chesterton scoffed at him, and said that he might like to know that there were seven more dead Tedeschi (i.e. Jerries) strewn around the platoon area. Apparently two weeks previously these Jerries – in the sergeant's words – had come striding through the bushes, looking this way and that, wondering where the bloody hell to throw their grenades. 'But our brens were waiting and gave them the old what for. Now their pals won't be coming this way again in a hurry.'

I then realized the significance of certain bundles of blue-grey rags in the undergrowth ahead of us. Sergeant Chesterton ordered another fellow, a kosher butcher in civilian life ('He's used to dealing with dead meat'), to shovel some earth over Baxter's Jerry. The last platoon, I was told, had been too bomb-

happy to attempt to bury the corpses. Not that there had been any scruples about stripping them of watches and valuables; Sergeant Chesterton had already been out 'to have a dekko' and had found the ground littered with papers and the contents of the Jerries' wallets. It was with relish that he told me of the achievements of Pezner, the kosher butcher, who was reputed to have sucked rings from dead men's fingers. 'We'll have to nab a nice rich Tedesch for *you*,' he said, sizing up the watch that I had won once in a church fête raffle at home.

I came across another of these corpses when scouting about for a suitable place to dig a latrine. He had been an N.C.O. Looking at the drained waxy features of my first dead body, I felt only curiosity. His eyes were open and his teeth were like spillikins, too far apart. Lots of photographs, flabby from the rain, were lying in the mud beside him. I chose one to show to Sergeant Chesterton; it was of a group of men, smiling spillikin smiles and with naked torsos, perched in comradely attitudes on the back of a truck, probably in the Desert.

Every time I so much as glanced out of my dugout, my eyes were drawn involuntarily to the blue-grey bundles. The fungus-smell took on a new significance, and Baxter kept beefing about the corpse in his adjoining trench; so I decided to approach Major Babworth when I was on my next routine visit to Company H.Q. I suggested to him that we might carry the Jerries down on a stretcher, for burial somewhere. Major Babworth was merely irritated. 'What, pick 'em up when they're over two weeks gone? They'll crumble to bits at a touch. Far more useful to rig 'em up as scarecrows – scare-Jerries, rather.' And the pun so pleased him that he repeated it several times over. . . .

After light the artillery fire, and most enemy activity, would die down almost entirely. Day was therefore turned into night for the purpose of sleeping and we would take it in turns to have two hours' rest whilst the other member of the trench was on stag, or on guard. As soon as dusk came, all the excitements – patrols, etc. – started up, and so everyone had to keep on the alert from then until dawn. Viner was a terrible snorer, and we had constantly to wake him up in case he gave our