

MY NOTABLE JOURNEY 2022

MAVIS ON A MISSION!

May 2022 saw Mavis (my 1961 MGA coupe) and me set off for Italy to try and trace places on the Prisoner of War escape route taken by my father. During autumn 1943 a faded and barely legible list had been scribbled on a tatty scrap of paper, and this was all I had to go on! My father (age 30) had been called up in 1939, posted to train with the Royal Artillery at Larkhill, before setting sail from Liverpool for North Africa. In June 1942 he was captured in the Battle of Gazala and, after a spell in hospital for treatment to a shrapnel wound, was flown to a so-called “transit” POW camp (PG 66 at Capua) near Naples. It was hot weather there, disease was rife, and the place was overcrowded, filthy and riddled with bed-bugs. There was minimal food, so the inmates treasured the Red Cross parcels. A diary of prison camp life is well described in a book by fellow inmate Dan Billany *‘The Cage’* which Longmans published in 1949. Sadly Dan never made it back to the UK. The publishers asked my father to comment on the accuracy of Dan’s account, so my research included visits to The Imperial War Museum in London, and poring over relevant War Diaries at the School of Royal Artillery when it was at Woolwich.

On 1st December 1942 my father was moved to PG 17 at Rezzanello, near Piacenza (there is an amusing description of the train journey in *‘The Cage’*). It was 9pm, dark and frosty when the men were transferred into buses which took them up a narrow, winding lane to their new prison. In complete contrast to the heat, disease and flies of Capua, this was a perishingly cold stone-walled turreted castle overlooking the plain of Lombardy through which flowed the River Po. The Alps were visible on clear days. The men rallied round to make the festive best of a very chilly Christmas. Italian guards laughed when prisoners slipped over on the icy footpaths. Then April 1943 saw them transferred to Fontanellato (PG 49) also in the Po valley, just west of Parma. From there, in September when the Italian Armistice was declared, my father and all the other 600 ‘jailbirds’ escaped. A 500-mile three-month trek on foot along the spine of the Apennines eventually brought my father to the Allied lines in December.



Mavis and I got off to an ignominious start! We spent a couple of days with the Devon & Cornwall MG club members at Bournemouth, so it was then only a short run to Portsmouth from where the spanking new Brittany Ferries ship ‘Salamanca’ set sail to Bilbao. My sat-nav is voiced by Wallace, with Gromit as his ‘dogged’ map-reader. I do have occasional arguments with Wallace, particularly when he urges me to not be “sheepish” and to make a “ewe” turn! But his clear vocals enable me to keep my eyes glued to the road, which is invaluable when you are a solo driver in the vehicle. Probably this error was my mistake, as I had chosen to ‘avoid motorways’! Anyway, I found myself in Port Solent where there was an attractive marina brimming with luxury yachts. It dawned on me that these would not offer the car-ferry facilities I required, so when I spotted a deserted cul-de-sac, I stopped to consult the road atlas. Within minutes a police car arrived out of which two fresh-faced young officers leaped and rushed over to me. Luckily their agitation subsided when they found their offender was an elderly female, in an elderly car, who was evidently incompetent at mastering modern map technology. They kindly re-set the sat-nav for me, with instructions that I would have to do a bit of motorway. As they sent me on my way with a cheerful



wave, I asked them why their double yellow lines were painted red? To my shame-faced horror I learned that I was outside a MOD facility where **no stopping at any time** is allowed!

The ensuing 'luxury cruise' ticked all the boxes: good weather, plenty of assistance from the cabin crew, a spotless large cabin, excellent meals included in the price, a quiet lounge with free refreshments 24/7, and above all a great crowd of passengers. Friday was a day of relaxation at sea, passing time with a grand crowd from the Bristol area who, with their variety of historic cars, were off to the classic car racing festival at Pau in southern France. I found time to compare the vital statistics of this ship with the one (the '*Andes*') in which my father had sailed, and the subsequent Chinese built ferry I took across the Mediterranean. In size and speed all three were remarkably similar: the notable difference was that *Andes* was not built as a ferry to carry vehicles, but as a luxury liner. When commandeered as a troopship she was made to cram in over 1000 troops for the six-week voyage round the southern tip of Africa and up the Red Sea.

A good night's sleep ensured I was fresh when the ferry docked at 8am in Bilbao on the Saturday. One of the Bristol party (in a Marcos) kindly directed me to the motorway (AP8/AP3) assuring me that I would find this route easy and scenic. He was right! My initial apprehension diminished and I gradually relaxed as we progressed over a smooth tarmac surface thankfully not over-crowded with traffic. The landscape was indeed beautiful, interspersed with well-lit tunnels and a goodly number of spectacular viaducts (all identifiable) which took me through to Donostia San Sebastian. The eight unmanned toll booths I encountered on the 188-mile route to my first overnight stop east of Pau caused me anxiety with my poor technical ability: I was terrified that the machine would "eat" my pre-paid payment card, added to which was the struggle of extracting myself from low-slung rhd Mavis and walking round her to the booth on the nearside. Only once was I successful in retrieving a ticket by using my folding grab-stick through the open passenger window!

After several circuits of a roundabout I eventually found my first hotel, with safe parking, and a washbasin which had a tap with a mind of its own. I spotted lizards and was intrigued by the 'egg boiling' machine at the breakfast buffet. Then Mavis and I headed east to Castres (170-miles) on Sunday, taking main roads (D classification) rather than the motorway. My early start meant I could hear church bells ringing as we passed through many small towns, and it was interesting to see folk dressed in their Sunday best setting off to attend Mass. I soon discovered that large towns had horrid speed bumps, whereas the smaller villages had chicanes, which Mavis happily nipped round! En route we enjoyed winding sweeping curves, then long straight tree-lined sections where Mavis could really open her throttle. We saw Limousin cattle, acres of vineyards, and snow-capped Pyrenees.

Pont du Gard, famous Roman viaduct →





On Monday we continued east from Castres to Nimes (about 180-miles on D-roads) followed by a Tuesday drive to Gap. This was punctuated with a visit to the renowned Pont du Gard (twinned with Cinzano!) to see the awesome Roman viaduct. Lots of amazing scenery, lots of climbing and lots of history ensued on this 150-mile stretch. We soared up the rural Col de l'Homme Mort (1213m) a twisty serpentine ascent which has been used in the Tour de France.

My excitement mounted with an early start on Wednesday as Italy was destination of the day. In order to avoid the big towns (eg. Turin) and motorways, I chose a far more complicated and longer route for the 200-miles to Tortona (just east of Alessandria). From Barcelonnette I headed for serious mountains on the border and crossed at the Colle della Maddalena (known as Col de Larche in France) where the only checkpoint appeared to be a few carabinieri in a layby some 10km along the spectacular well-surfaced road. They waved me onwards without stopping me. The enormity of the monstrous overhanging rocks which completely dwarfed us reminded me that from the second POW camp at Rezzanello these Alps had been visible to the prisoners, only damping any dismal prospect of escape to neutral Switzerland. The towering and uncompromising landscape heightened the feelings of despair, isolation and incarceration which pervaded those 1942 jailbirds: unsuccessful escape attempts had been made at the filthy Capua camp and culminated in the tragic deaths (by excitable, trigger-happy guards) of two men, and this shocking incident filled the remaining men with fear, horror and sadness.

My hotel in Tortona was easy to find and was evidently a popular dining choice with locals. The weather was very hot and sunny so it was good to sip a glass of local wine on the pretty floral and shaded veranda before supper.

I started early on Thursday morning to search for the POW camp at Rezzanello, some 50-miles east. I knew it was somewhere in 'the middle of nowhere' so Wallace faced a challenge! The route he took us became increasingly rural and climbed ever upwards; no traffic except the occasional lycra-clad serious cyclist. The scenery was superb with the young fresh greenery of Spring emerging and the sun shining on me with welcome warmth. I needed to remind myself that I was now enjoying 'poetic licence' because it had been cold, wet and wintry when my father was here, and he was aware of the ever-present danger of being re-captured or shot by the German scouts who were combing the area. I passed sunlit fields golden with ripening corn, the red poppies reminding me of the many men who never made it back to their homes and families.



I found the chilly castle which had housed the men over a freezing Christmas in 1943. To keep his sanity, my father had busied himself in those days of confinement by handwriting sheets of carols to enable a musical celebration which would make the Season of Goodwill as pleasing as possible in the circumstances. I found this gothic folly of a castle was entirely closed when I arrived, although I had been told it was now a boutique hotel, popular for weddings. But perhaps Covid had forced its closure. There was no mention on the plaque outside that it had ever been a Prisoner of War camp. Everywhere was deserted and I saw no-one, not even in the village,



Rezzanello Castle May 2022, erstwhile PG 17



Rezzanello Castle from the road above, May 2022



Leaving Rezzanello May 2022

Then it was a 60-mile drive north-east to the third prisoner camp at Fontanellato, from where my father and all the other inmates had escaped. I stayed for three nights at a pleasing B&B on the outskirts of the town and dined at a delightful restaurant within walking distance of it. There I couldn't help smiling at the hotel chairs, dressed with white overalls making them look like members of the Ku Klux Klan!



Sunday was the day to try and decipher the 'escape' route. This began by heading from Parma to Florence (which is 'Firenze' in Italian). South of Bologna my scenic drive somehow found us in a dead-end in an industrial carpark. Whilst I was having yet another argument with Wallace, a kind Italian, who spoke excellent English, came to the rescue! He was a motorcycle enthusiast and led me to the popular road favoured by riders of these machines. Well! It was a Sunday afternoon and I have never seen so many motorcyclists, many with a girl clinging on to her man for dear life as they got their thrills swinging their machines from side-to-side, their knees grazing the tarmac, round the sweeping curves of this road.

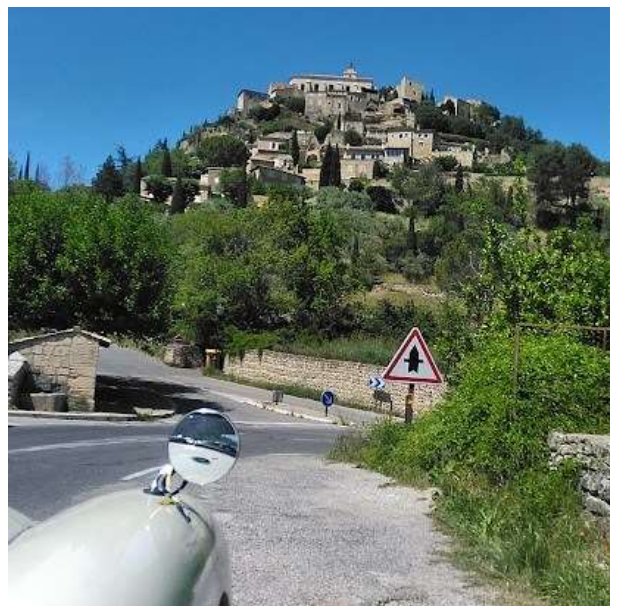
My arrival in Florence was met with catastrophe as my booked hotel appeared to be closed completely. With no success at raising any response from this 'dead' place I decided to drive on south-east, in the direction of my next stop and hope to find somewhere else to sleep en route. I don't like night driving (mainly because I want to see the scenery) so when dusk fell I parked up in a convenient large layby somewhere near Poppi and Bibbiena. Needless to say, any hope of snoozing in the cramped cockpit of Mavis was nigh impossible! At midnight, when all traffic had dwindled, I decided to press on and, because the darkness of night precluded any landscape viewing, to tackle the dual-carriageway E45 which I discovered had a dreadful pot-hole surface!

It wasn't long before I noticed a red light at the base of Mavis's speedometer dial. Panic obsessed me! What was wrong? Was she low on oil? Eventually I found a place where I could safely pull off the dual-carriageway. I found my torch and the glovebox MGA Handbook which illustrated the dashboard controls. What a relief! The red light was signifying that Mavis's headlights were on Full Beam: I must have accidentally pressed the switch, which is located in the footwell, when I stopped earlier for my doze!

So it was Monday morning when I reached Citta di Castello, a beautiful town through, or near to which, my father had hiked.

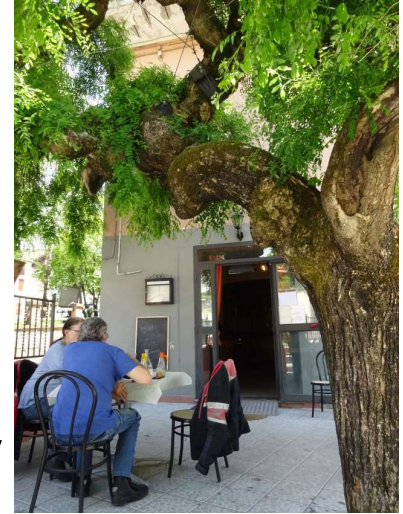


The following day we went further south, exploring the terrain and places on my father's scrawny map. As I climbed and descended hill after hill I concluded that no doubt my father got thoroughly fed up when, having reached the summit of one hill, he found another, and yet another, still ahead. His note records that he sang the American children's rhyme "Polly Wolly Doodle All The Day" as they marched.

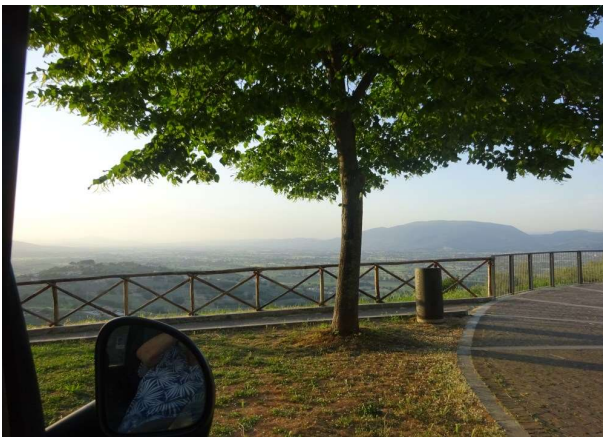




Lunch stop in Pellegrino Parmenese with amazing tree



I reached the hilltop town of Monte Falco which had been recommended to me by MG Italian folk. There I was treated to fabulous hospitality from Fabio, the hotel proprietor and a music lover (he had worked with The Beatles).



← View of Umbria from Montefalco

Street in Montefalco →



Wednesday was my farewell to Italy as we boarded the Grimaldi Lines ferry from just north of Rome. This shipped us across the Mediterranean to Barcelona and proved an 'interesting' experience! Although I was at the head of the queue to board, somehow I ended up being the last to drive into the ship's gaping jaws. I was ushered up a steep metal ramp and squeezed into a

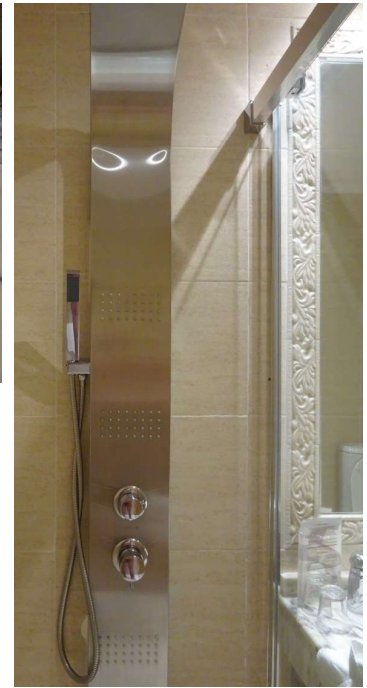
spot surrounded by giant articulated lorries. So cramped was the vehicle deck that I had to compress myself sideways between countless artics to reach to reach the passenger deck. By that time, everyone else had gone to bed and everywhere was closed. It was like a morgue. I wanted to cry!

Happily Thursday cheered me as I met so many lovely people and the ship's crew excelled in rendering assistance. Although it didn't seem so at the time, the funniest bit was the disembarkation! Two porters were assigned to escort me and my luggage to Mavis, who was hidden somewhere amongst the 200+ enormous artics. After a long and squashy sideways slog between the rammed-together lorries, we found her, and I was directed to reverse her down the 45-degree metal ramp. I had had enough! A John McEnroe moment engulfed me: "You cannot be

serious” I protested. Italian confusion ensued but produced no result. So I resorted to adopting Dame Maggie Smith’s tactic (Lady Hester in ‘Tea with Mussolini’) and flatly refused! This brought about more typical Italian excitement and agitation from the deck staff. The situation was resolved when I was put in charge of the foot-brake while various deckhands pushed, pulled and steered us (through Mavis’s open window) safely down to the street level tarmac exit. Then there was much amusement and cheering as they finally waved us goodbye!

A night in Barcelona was followed by roughly tracing the Camino de Santiago on our way to Santander. I was disappointed at the expensive Parador in Lleida which had no restaurant, but the next stop (Tuleda) was better.

My final (and cheapest) sleep-over was in the university area of Burgos where there were good places to eat and plenty of activity. The ‘ensuite’ included a novel shower so exciting that I showered more than once!



Burgos—hotel shower, wash basin & university students!

Then what should have been a straightforward run to Santander nearly met with disaster because foolishly I had not packed into Mavis my many Spanish paper maps. I had been relying on Google Maps and the online Michelin route planner. This is fine WHEN you can get a signal but, in my search for the tiny resort of Barcena Mayor, I got hopelessly lost . Wallace took me across country somewhere after leaving Aguilar de Campoo and the Internet connection failed! To this day I have no idea where I was, apart from being lost on a mountain top! The dangerous situation in which I found myself was only rectified by my reversing Mavis for some half-a-mile down a very narrow, steep and twisty, shingle farm track which had a sheer rock face on one side and a fatal precipice to death on the other. What a total idiot I was! Lesson learned: ALWAYS take paper maps if you plan to leave the motorways!





At the end of my pilgrimage Mavis had clocked up 3000 miles, though it felt like more than 5000 as most of the driving was quite demanding and not simply cruising along a dual-carriageway or motorway. The highlights for me were the many splendid and interesting people I met on our travels, and the joy in proving that Mavis could achieve all that I threw at her without once falling short.



Beth Corbett

14th December 2022