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## **ROME RISING: ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON**

By Merrill Hardy

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# ROME RISING

ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON



MERRILL HARDY

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# **ROME RISING – ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON – A NOVEL OF WW2**

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## Chapter 4 – Monty

Dieppe had been a severe blow to Churchill's concept of raiding and left a bad taste in his mouth for any cross-channel invasion in 1943. Even though he had been second in command of Dieppe ground forces, General Bernard Montgomery had made no secret of the fact that he felt the raid doomed from the start.

Post Dieppe, Monty was shuttled off to India to be put in charge of planning an offensive to capture Akyab Island off the Burma coast. Throwing himself into his new assignment, he put his entire effort into learning as much as he could about Burma and his new principal enemy.

Truth be told, he was not all that displeased to be sent back to the Far East despite the appearance of Churchill putting him in charge of another impossible no-win operation. British commanders in India knew him well and were willing to give him another chance. Some of them had also fallen under Churchill's rath – so, to them he fit right in.

\*\*\*

Throughout most of early 1942 The Imperial Japanese Army had embarrassed the Allies at every turn. Some progress had been made to halt their expansion efforts, but it looked like it was going to be a long war in the Pacific Theater, especially in Burma.

### 752 Tanks (4)

Following their stunning victory at Rabaul, Monty's opinion was sought on the best way to provide relief to Australian forces on the island of Timor. These troops were in danger of being completely overrun by the Japanese on an

island that was less than 400 miles from the Australian mainland and within bombing distance of Japanese controlled oil fields and refineries. Serious intervention had been suggested by the outspoken American Admiral King and help was needed with a well thought out answer needed to 'shut him up'. For he demanded an immediate response.

Having observed that American medium tanks were being sent by the hundreds to mainland Australia to deter invasion; he suggested:

“As many of these American tanks as possible should be included in a Timor offensive. I am firmly convinced that these American mediums are far superior to any Japanese tank when properly used.”

\*\*\*

As it turned out, Monty's recommendations paid handsome returns. The Japanese had pretty well secured the built-up parts of Timor and had made plans before their naval setbacks for extensive fortifications. But they didn't control all the jungle areas. Consequently, their infantry counter attacks against Timor's invasion forces ran smack into a large number of Grant and Lee medium tanks crewed by Australians.

With Rabaul disabled and Allied carriers roaming the area, Japanese troops on Timor found themselves in a perilous situation. Occupied to the east with Americans on Guadalcanal, Australians on New Guinea, and new perils in the seas south of Burma, Japanese efforts to reinforce Timor would prove too little and too late.

Once the main airfields were taken, Timorese native inhabitants and Australian commandos eliminated most of the remaining Japanese holdouts over the next few months. Securing Timor along with other Allied successes meant that Australia, to all intents and purposes had been saved.



Moreover, to the absolute delight of Admiral King, US Chief of Naval Operations, Timor was quickly being transformed into a powerful naval and air base from which to prosecute the war against Japanese shipping and industrial raw material targets.

Admiral King showed unrestrained delight as he made his case to General Marshall:

“We must not let this opportunity go to waste. We must press our advantage from the air and on the sea to the utmost and convince President Roosevelt and Churchill to cut the flow of Japanese resources, especially from the Dutch East Indies. Jap oil and aluminum sources should be our targets.”

### Burma Rice (5)

After this, Monty’s star rose in the Far East, especially among Australians. The idea of using heavier tanks in jungle warfare gained credibility. If this idea worked in Timor, why couldn’t it work in Burma or even New Guinea?

With capture of Timor along with other victories, Australians gradually accepted the idea that Japanese military forces were spread too thin to invade Australia. So why not release more of their American tanks, as Monty proposed to drive the Japanese completely out of Burma. Monty made his case to anyone who would listen on the importance of giving him what he wanted:

“It is quite simple; we must capture the entire country of Burma as soon as possible. We must not wait. If we do not people in India and China will starve, possibly in the millions. If we take Burma, Japs will starve and China will be saved. I believe Burma’s rice will be a deciding factor in who controls the Far East. Is this not worth any sacrifice?”

Along with hundreds of American medium tanks, Monty also requested a shipment of Churchill flame throwing tanks be sent to Burma for the proposed attack on Akyab Island. Based upon its perceived poor performance at Dieppe this tank had fallen out of favor. However, Monty was in a position to realize that it was the only tank in existence that might excel in jungle warfare. Churchill's namesake, just like him, had gotten an undeserved bad rap from Dieppe.

Monty's stance was based upon the Churchill's exceptional climbing ability. It could defeat obstacles like no other tank in the world. Monty also tried to get his hands on as many American and British 'terror' weapons, like white phosphorous and flame throwers, as he could.

He demanded more than the allocated one division for the Akyab offensive. He laid out to his staff and units under his command a common premise:

"We must never run from the Jap again; he should run from us. We must be tougher than he is. Their light infantry cannot stand against our tanks and firepower. When you engage him in combat kill him to the last man. Do not expect him to give up or surrender, it is not his nature. You must consider that in any combat situation one of you will die. Have confidence in your training; let it be him not you."

Once placed in charge, Monty insisted his Akyab Island offensive be given maximum support. He wanted it all, air support, naval support and all the troops and equipment he could get his hands on. No available advantage must be ignored.

There was currently no answer to Japanese fighters, but that did not deter him from continuing to look for suitable resolutions. As he even faced off with General Stillwell, another well-known Anglophobe.

“I hear you Americans are producing an effective anti-aircraft weapon mounted on an armored half-track. I believe this will prove most effective against both aircraft and Japanese troops.

I intend to request an immediate shipment of at least 40 of these vehicles. Besides, if you are going to send us Chinese troops don't you want to insure, they are given the best chance for success. In fact, more fast, heavily armed support vehicles are needed for our advances; moreover, we will not have to compete with Soviet lend-lease to acquire them.”

A lot was riding on this campaign and it must not fail. His support requests even included Wingate and his ‘Chindit’ guerrilla-based fighters. He needed these trained jungle fighters to infiltrate the attack route’s left flank to provide a warning of a sneak enemy counter attack from this quarter. Later, he planned to use them for an incursion proper into Burma.

He asked to be given the entire *50<sup>th</sup> tank brigade*, the only other concentration of allied tanks in the area. Together with *50<sup>th</sup> brigade* he also asked that General Slim’s Corps and at least one Chinese division be sent south with any and all sort of help Stillwell could give him.

All this was agreed to with some deliberation. To facilitate the transfer, *50<sup>th</sup> brigade* would leave its tanks in the north and travel south to receive all new American Grant tanks. Its tanks would be given to the Chinese to begin forming yet another new brigade.

Slim was perhaps the best Corps commander in the British Army and certainly had clocked the most hours in fighting the Japanese in Burma. After Slim arrived, he suggested a jungle flank attack around the foremost Japanese positions. Monty agreed, but insisted it be conducted in conjunction with his main attack on the fortified Japanese positions.

## King

Admiral King was so impressed with the way the war in the Pacific was going that he decided to make a tour and encourage all of the Allies to push harder while momentum was on their side. He saved a meeting with Monty as a last stop on this tour. He knew Roosevelt would ask first about efforts to save China by reopening their main supply road to China. He always suspected a hidden agenda when it came to any ‘Limey’, so he knew he had to ferret out what this Montgomery was about.

Knowledge of this meeting had spread through the uppers ranks of both American and British staffs. Many figured it could be a greater confrontation than had been witnessed between General Macarthur and King. Egos of both men were legends. Therefore, sparks were sure to fly between the Anglophobe Admiral and the Brit who sought to acquire every American asset he could lay his hands on to advance his agenda.

## Monty verses King

“So, you see Admiral King you correctly picked the targets of Rabaul and Timor, and I correctly picked Australians in American medium tanks as the means that achieved our success at Timor. Except for Midway, British and American cooperation has been our means to significant successes. Indeed, had Churchill loaned you the carrier you had asked for, you might not have lost *Yorktown* at Midway. Therefore, should we not analyze what materials or resources one is immediately lacking that the other can provide to accelerate our triumphs?

For our part we need the latest models of American fighter planes, with their pilots to defeat the Jap in Burma and China together with escorting your B-24 bombers. We also need to

destroy Jap shipping, aluminum and fuels supplies together with their associated manufacturing/mining facilities. This could be done by combining our bombers and submarines with yours to an even greater degree. Our available resources are not being properly used. If you agree, what are your additions to this list and what is next?"

"That pretty well covers it, Monty. Concentration of forces on priority strategic targets, superior weapons and overwhelming force. Therefore, I concur with your analysis, acquiring Burma rice and reopening the Burma supply road to get China back in the fight should be first priority. Sparing millions of civilian lives is the driver I was missing.

For our parallel effort, we need as many carriers and landing craft as we can put our hands on and we all need to do a 'gut check' and get on with it. Any untrained or cavalier sailors or troops need to sit in the rear and make room for properly trained warriors."

### China/Patton/Russia

"One other proposal that covers our long-term plans, Admiral King and this is perhaps the most controversial."

"Let's hear it."

"We have lost Murmansk and soon we will lose Vladivostok to winter ice. Your Russian flagged merchant ships will be idle. In preparation for opening the China road why not use these vessels to ship support and older American equipment to Hawaii? Perhaps as many as three trips could be made.

When I say support, I mean fast wheeled and tracked vehicles to help our tanks drive north through China to Japan

itself. Chiang wants an American division, why not give him an armored division and how about another field General, say Patton?”

“I see where you are going Monty, I could perhaps sell some of this to Marshall and Roosevelt. However, for the full plan you must take Burma.”

(4) Actual number of American Medium Tanks shipped to Australia early in the Pacific war

(5) Burma Rice played a very significant role in the Far East, both during WW2 and prior to it

## Chapter 5 – Encircling Japan

Stalin was in a difficult position with loss of the northern port of Murmansk combined with fighting taking place so near the oil center of Baku. He had been forced to ask for a net increase in lend lease supplies being shipped to the far eastern port of Vladivostok.

A sympathetic Roosevelt agreed to the shift, ordering:

“More west coast merchant vessels will immediately be shifted to flying a Russian flag and consigned to Vladivostok.”

One of his advisors promptly raised the concern:

“Mr. President, do Soviets have rail capacity sufficient to handle the increased flow of supplies to the west? What about Japanese bases in Alaska? Won't Vladivostok be iced over this winter.” Roosevelt replied:

“I will raise your rail capacity and ice concerns with Stalin, but we must act quickly and find work-a-rounds. Furthermore, Alaska is our problem, or rather King's problem.”

\*\*\*

Stalin soon assured Roosevelt that his advisors were mistaken and that the supplies would flow west without difficulty.

“Nevertheless, a few more locomotives and rail cars would help the situation. These supplies are needed for our winter offensives, we will do whatever it takes to make sure they arrive. However, after you take back your Alaskan bases, then consideration might be given to starting a supply buildup to be used by you and us in our future confrontation with the Japanese.”

When King heard about Stalin's remark, he immediately thought about a blockade of Japan proper. Calling select commanders and staff together he instructed them:

"We must not let this opportunity go to waste. We must get every sub in the water we can, this includes even obsolete models and all British vessels. We may have to create a few supply subs, like the Germans, but let's try and shut down their economy as soon as possible."

\*\*\*

Considering these new Soviet arrangements as a potential mechanism to take early revenge on the Japanese, Americans set about at once to overwhelm Stalin's minions with war material. When the amount of merchant traffic to Vladivostok more than tripled; Tojo lodged a complaint direct to Stalin. The Japanese were always a little uncomfortable with this merchant traffic to Vladivostok. They knew these ships came directly from the United States, flying Russian flags or not.

Stalin's ambassador was able to smooth over their concerns but made it plain:

"Soviet flagged merchant traffic is not to be interfered with. Regardless of the volume, any interference will be interpreted as an act of war."

Stalin realized that these rising tensions would likely lead to conflict with Japan earlier than they desired, but they may not have a choice and it was best to plan for this eventuality.

This made the Japanese uncomfortable, but they did not care to take on Russia in addition to America, China and British Empire forces. As they saw it Soviet threats were somewhat empty since they had their hands full with Hitler knocking on their western door. Anyway, Stalin probably had no choice but to increase this merchant traffic if Russia was to survive.



## Alaska

Fall of Murmansk had not only been devastating to Stalin, but it produced ripples throughout the Allied camp. However, it was Admiral King who was first to offer an immediate rejoinder, one which of course, fit exactly into his Pacific Agenda. Later he was surprised when he was asked to develop just such a plan.

After three days he made his proposal directly to Roosevelt and his staff chiefs:

“We are too deeply committed to the ongoing ‘Operation Torch’ and its possible aftermath to currently address Murmansk, but Soviet shortfalls must be made good if they are to survive the winter. I propose we immediately increase our shipments to them via the middle and Far East.

Moreover, we should negotiate to get Stalin to secretly supply the Chinese with untraceable captured German weapons and supplies. We may need increased Chinese military effort sooner than we ever thought possible.

To properly secure increased Far East marine shipments and allow direct air transport we should immediately repossess the Aleutians. An invasion force centered on battleship *Pennsylvania* accompanied by an escort carrier should be sufficient, causing no disruption to all other operations. Now that we have them on the ropes, we must exert pressure on Japan from all points of the compass.”

Approval was won for King’s Aleutian campaign and his altered supply plan with little decent and his staff issued operational orders 24 hours later. Glad to be back in the fight, *USS Pennsylvania* and her escort set sail almost immediately to assume a blocking position which was not too distant from the Russian convoy route.

With this action King's master plan for reconquering the Pacific was starting to take shape. He planned on using older battleships, including those repaired and returning to service from Pearl Harbor, together with escort carriers to begin eating away at the edges of the Japanese Empire. His fast Carriers and Battleships would be reserved for raids and invasions deep within the Japanese defensive perimeter.

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Intercepts of Japanese merchant radio traffic gave warning five days later to the *Pennsylvania* task force of a supply convoy headed to resupply their Aleutian forces. A Catalina flying boat spotted this weakly escorted convoy intending on sneaking by any blockading forces.

Looking at the situational map, the *Pennsylvania* Operational Officer informed his Captain:

"We have reports of dense fog entering the area, if we are going to take action we should do so immediately while we still have an exact fix on the Jap convoy."

"No, Commander, instead we will wait for the fog, close with the convoy and follow it with radar to its designation. We will then wait three hours until off-loading has commenced. Then we will hit them with everything we have got and immediately land our troops.

I believe we have a chance of attracting their troops out of their fortifications. I think they will fight in the open with everything they have to save their supplies. If they lose their supplies, they know they will not be able to holdout."

\*\*\*

Starving and cold Japanese garrison troops sluggishly but purposely made their way to the docks for the purpose of helping to unload cargo. None of them doubted they might not

personally survive winter, much less hold the islands without these supplies.

Suddenly the mist became alive with violent flashes. These flashes were immediately followed by explosions and destruction. Fear, normally, would take control in such a situation, but survival of these troops meant staying not fleeing. It was just as the Captain of the *Pennsylvania* predicted. The *Pennsylvania* and her escort stayed on station more than nine hours determined not to let even one box or drum of supplies or one moving soldier remain unfired upon.

### New Guinea

As part of King's overall plan, he decided to throw a bone to MacArthur as his forces were bogged down in New Guinea. After the *Pennsylvania's* successful recapture of the Alaska islands, an approved major operation was launched against hold out fortifications along New Guinea's coast.

King's fast battleships joined by just repaired fleet carrier *Enterprise* carried out a successful bombardment of Japanese defenses. This bombardment allowed the struggling Allied troops to finally overcome the defenders in just under two weeks.

Their progress placed both New Guinea and Rabaul squarely in the sights of the Allies and forced the Japanese to send reinforcements to the South Pacific. King's submarines and MacArthur's planes patiently waited. Very few of these reinforcements made it to their intended destinations.

### Tarawa

Next King's remaining Pacific carriers and what transports they could scrape together next hit the island of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands. This was his bone to Churchill. Since the Gilbert Islands were British possessions, but it also assured the

continued use of the two British Pacific Fleet carriers in their march to Japan.

Tarawa proved a tough nut to crack and Marine losses were high due to a shallow coral reef that surrounded the small island and prevented landing craft from getting close to the beach. Despite the losses, no one disagreed lessons were learned.

The stage was now set for Japanese reaction, which was not long in coming. They could ill afford to lose their defensive perimeter; any gap would be a disaster. Reinforcements and what naval forces they could scrape together headed for these trouble spots, but they realized at this stage they could ill afford to incur steep naval or aerial losses. Most reinforcement activities were now confined to the dead of night.

King had set the stage for Monty's invasion of Burma. A maximum effort just might succeed. King remarked to a trusted associate:

"I hope that 'Limey' is up to it. A lot is riding on his bravado. Our men have done their part. We will either have a new dawn to start 1943 or a long dark shadow will follow us the rest of the year."

### Soviet Deceit

Stalin noted with delight these Japanese setbacks at every turn. How much longer could they hold out? Perhaps it was time the Soviet Union considered taking some of the spoils. American M3 tanks were not helping much in defeating Germans and yet the Japanese could not stand up to them. Soviet tanks were better still; was this not the perfect time to take advantage of Japanese weaknesses in armored warfare?

During the fall and winter campaigns of 1942 Stalin's troops had begun using more American and British lend lease tanks. Soviet troops complained about their inadequate

armament and their lesser ability to navigate through Russian mud and snow. Losses by units manning lend lease tanks had sometimes been excessive high and their achievements markedly less impressive than those units equipped with T-34 tanks or KV tanks. T-34s these tanks were not.

However, a tank was still a tank. Moreover, lend lease trucks, planes, tanks and all the other valuable supplies gave Soviet military a great deal of flexibility.

Soon after Murmansk fell; Zhukov suggested to Stalin:

“Let us regulate American lend lease tanks to the far eastern theater. Our intelligence has confirmed that Japanese tank forces were still composed entirely of weakly armed and armored light tanks. Even American Stuart tanks overmatch most of these inadequate vehicles.

We can exchange T-34s with these vehicles for our winter offensives. German tanks and other military equipment captured earlier in the war can also be sent east on the returning trains with minimal effect on our logistical systems. Even earlier German tanks, antitank guns, etc. are a match for tanks fielded by the Japanese and are still useful in the hands of the Chinese Army. Each day we implement this plan we will grow stronger while the Japanese will have to trim their northern border forces in order to reinforce their southern forces.

Stalin took a couple of drags on his pipe then nodded in agreement:

“General Zhukov carry out this plan. As you say intelligence and our spies confirm that Japanese forces are becoming increasingly engaged fighting American and British Common Wealth naval, air and ground troops. Already our intelligence is certain that Japanese border troops are under strength. Having been drawn down to cover other needs;

everyday they are composed of less and less experienced and capable troops.

The wealth of North China is ripe for our picking, but to take on an additional front would not be wise at this time, still a future opportunity is in the offing. You do well to prepare for such a time. Just as the Americans and British are waiting on us to attrit the Germans, we must insist they do the same to Japanese. The sooner the better.”

## Chapter 12 – Killing Soviets and Saving Jews

When Gian was given the order to move his men and tanks north to Stalingrad, he drove immediately to meet face to face with Lutizo. After they secured a private area, he unloaded:

“Admiral, it is as if my men and I are being put at risk yet again to save Germans from the blunders of that manic Hitler. Heinz said during the time he was taken ill Hitler convinced himself he was the god of war and micromanaged their military with catastrophic results. When given the opportunity to take the advice of a proven military expert or an idiot, ‘The Greatest Warlord of all time’ choses the idiot.

I know we are doing much good work for our country here in Russia, but this is not what I signed up for. Despite what I have done in Russia, I think about what I have done for our war against the British. It was my idea of using nitrogen on Malta that sealed its fate and our first battery filled submarine sank four ships during its first combat sortie. So please do what you can to get us back to Africa and I will show everybody what my men and tanks (T-34s) are truly capable of doing.”

“We can’t do anything about this Gian, the Germans are desperate. However, it is time for you to wrap things up and start making plans to leave for Africa as soon as this business is concluded. We must constantly be on guard, so preform your usual good work one last time and leave. I have a plane for you and ships for your tanks and men.”

After leaving Lutizo, Gian was deep in thought. Faced with yet another difficult offensive situation, he felt that their string of deceptions had probably come to an end. Soviets were aware of his exploits and both sides were now on guard to the guise of using captured tanks.

Besides he reckoned it was time to fight under the Italian flag. With the poor weather conditions, they could not take a

chance on being shot at by Germans on the ground or attacked by German aircraft. The speed and mobility of their T-34 tanks was still superior to German tanks and thus they were likely to find themselves attacking alone anyway.

### Second Breaking of Stalingrad's Siege Ring

As Gian had predicted, that is just what happened and the weight of their attack drove the Soviets before them. This time they saw a different emotion on the faces of Soviet troops. Instead of surprise they saw fear. Repeated Soviet attempts to caution their troops not to be deceived by Italians in Russian tanks did not have the intended effect.

Instead, jittery Soviets troops saw Italian T-34s everywhere. Once word had spread Italian tanks were attacking, Soviet troops were more likely to retreat or even destroy one of their own T-34 tanks by accident. Zhukov was furious.

With steady access to captured T-34 tanks, Gian had been able to successfully combine some of the best characteristics of both German and Soviet operational styles. His tanks were followed into battle by a sizable contingent of Cossack, Italian and Romanian Cavalry, duplicating this successful Russian practice.

He knew Italians had been more aggressive and far more successful in winning over people of the Caucasus, Ukraine and Crimea to the Axis cause and took advantage of the opportunity to fill out his ranks. Unlike some Germans, they had gone out of their way to maintain good relations and incidents of partisan activity were almost unheard of in regions that they occupied.

Italians were more prone to use the argument of religion to motivate both their troops and Russian peoples than their German counterparts. They even repaired church buildings and



places of worship in the areas that they occupied. This enhanced recruitment efforts to form anti-Bolshevik Russian military units to fight 'Godless Communists'. One of the largest and best of these Cossack units thus formed had traveled north with Gian's tanks to take part in the second attempt to relieve Stalingrad.

Interestingly enough, through various means, greater acceptance of religious practices had transpired in both present and former Soviet Union areas. Germans had not taken as much of an active role as had Italians, but there had certainly been no efforts taken to discourage Ukrainians and others from again actively practicing their religion.

By the same token, since the invasion Stalin had stepped back from his religious persecution. It was even becoming more common for various religious organizations to sponsor military groups; fund raising to purchasing equipment for the war effort, even tanks.

### A Topic of Conversation

German commanders did not like Gian personally leading his tanks from the front. Stalin had a price on his head and he was the most decorated non-German, bar none. Once considered unthinkable, many Germans thought it fortunate if they found themselves under his command.

It was rumored that together with Lutizo these two had hatched the plan to capture the Black Sea coast and Caucasus months before the actual attack. Gian was also properly credited with his unique use of many weapons that he had acquired from battlefields and then distributed to Italian soldiers in Russia and Africa.

Despite all this acclaim, he desired above all things to return to fight in the Mediterranean against the British. His Regiment's successful Stalingrad attack would help provide

the argument to move even more Russian tanks to the African theater. Gian made it clear, with Lutizo's blessing, to whoever requested assistance:

"...the price of continued Italian assistance is even more access to Russian equipment, supplies and oil."

### Taking a Wrong Turn

Gian's recovery teams now insisted on first pick over any and all military paraphernalia that defeated Soviets left behind in their areas of operation. As they roamed Soviet rear areas above all Gian requested his teams:

"Be on the lookout for T-34 tank repair parts and repair facilities. These are more desirable than even fuel. We are becoming far too dependent on T-34 tanks to not be able to quickly repair broken down and battlefield damaged vehicles."

Therefore, the combat zone south of Stalingrad, which was littered with Soviet equipment, was picked over by expert Italian scavenger teams with an eye toward especially needed and desired items. Leading several teams even in the terrible cold was the infallible Sergeant Remus. One freezing day as he was supervising a team that was tagging and characterizing equipment a young corporal approached him.

"Sergeant I have found a village that meets your requirements. It was located behind the Soviet's former lines and it is close enough that we can claim it as our base for salvage operations. When we leave, Germans will move into the area. There are at least two hundred people there. It is located right here", pointing to a tiny dot on the unfolded map as he passed it to Remus.

"Your group is larger than we talked about, but it looks like it is in a good location, we may be able to risk it. Round

up a few of our Russian Jews to take with us, they may be able to convince some of these townspeople to leave. Of course, we can tell them that they can travel east and live again under Communism or they could travel south with us, but if they stay where they are it is a high likelihood their whole village will be liquidated.”

Remus wondered what the decision of the town’s people would be. They had never tried to save a whole town before. In the Caucasus region Italians achieved mixed success convincing Jews to leave their homes. However, even those villages where larger groups of Jews elected to remain were mostly convinced to practice their religion in secret and to remove obvious signs of a Jewish presence.

Many more moves and relocations were planned throughout spring 1943 and that was what Remus had in mind. If they could get these villagers further south, then perhaps, they could save them. Generally, Jewish men were the easiest to move for it was fairly easy to disguise them as prisoners of war used as laborers or ‘helpers’; a common German practice. Relocating women and children would be more difficult as they would have to be hidden amongst captured equipment as it was moved south.

Looking back on the last several months several thousand Jews had been moved out of ‘harms’ way. Resettlement of Jewish families was occurring all over the Mediterranean. Gian mused:

*If Hitler only knew that fuel, he supplied Italy was being used to save Jews, I wonder what would his reaction be?*

\*\*\*

Remus did not know how they were going to pull this off. Some three hundred Jewish souls (more than he estimated) had

elected to leave the village for a chance to begin a long journey to the Holy Land. This would be their most ambitious endeavor to date. Remus rounded up all the men he could, but they did not have enough trucks to retrieve all of the people who had elected to go. Some would have to walk.

The very old and very young who had difficulty walking long distances were put into trucks first. They would have to transit the less traveled forest roads to avoid having to answer any serious inquiries into their activities. Not long after they started, they elected to take a remote road that made a turn to the east to avoid contact with German or Romanian patrols.

They had not traveled far when they were struck by a mixed group of partisans and Soviet soldiers. Of thirty-one Italians and their Russian Jewish compatriots, five were killed and several wounded in the resulting firefight. The rest were forced to surrender, even though they knew what their fate might be; only Remus and one other Italian sergeant managed to escape.

After this engagement, the whole party was led by these Russians even deeper into the forest. This mixed Soviet group was commanded by a NKDV officer who wanted to immediately know what Italians were doing with these Soviet citizens.

There was of course a language problem, but he was able through various means to determine most of the story. Immediately, this NKDV officer knew that he had to get these Italian prisoners back to the Soviet authorities for a 'proper' interrogation. Their information was just too important.

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Remus and his cohort barely survived their escape on horseback, but finally made it back to a Romanian outpost. From there Remus made a bee line straight to see Gian who

was still in the area. After hearing Remus's story, he became very concerned.

Gian had gradually come to buy into Lutizo's resettlement program more and more. For somehow it seemed no matter how difficult the task, a way was always found to complete Remus's rescues. Up until now Remus had always been very discrete. However, this incident, if exposed, could spell the end of their risky pastimes.

Explicitly aware of what Himmler's thugs were capable of, Gian guessed that if their activities were exposed; they might all just quietly disappear some night. This of course would put a permanent end to their rescue efforts.

"Remus, we must immediately mount an expedition to find them. I will pull together as many trusted Italian and Cossack cavalry as I can lay my hands on, but we mustn't arouse too much attention."

### Finding the Truth

For his previous work with *Brandenbergers* and Gian in the Caucasus campaign Sergeant Alterberger, after training, had been made a Lieutenant. After his promotion he had been assigned as a German liaison officer in Gian's headquarters. Secretly he had been instructed to guard the Italian Major with his life. German commanders guessed that Alterberger would be accepted into Gian's inner circle without arousing suspicion and they were right.

Unable to speak Italian and a trusted former combat companion, Gian normally had no problem with his constant presence. As the war had progressed Gian's importance had grown, not only for his combat victories, but symbolically and politically as well. German commanders became very concerned about his personal safety; complications as a result

of his death at Soviet hands would be immense. For his part Alterberger was glad to have the duty and he began picking up as much Italian as he could, but without being overt about it.

### Enter Greta

After a weighty confrontation with Gian involving her brother during the Caucasus invasion, Greta had been hesitant to contact him personally. However, she kept up with his exploits as best she could and tried to get stationed as close to his location as possible. She had heard after this latest victory that Gian's armored group might be shipped to Africa.

She decided that before he left Russia now was the time to go and thank him for saving both her brother's life and her career. Obtaining permission, she made the hazardous journey on horseback which was the only mode of transportation she could obtain. She arrived at Gian's headquarters just before midday.

As she was waiting in one of the Russian homes occupied by Gian's staff for a chance to see him a familiar face walked in and immediately removed his heavy fur lined coat.

"Alterberger, is it you? I hardly recognized you as a Lieutenant."

"Yes, I have been promoted Greta. How are you? Well now look at you a nurse with the iron cross first class; now that makes you very recognizable and would turn a few heads I should think."

"You know as well as I do who is responsible for getting me this decoration instead of dismissed from the Army or perhaps even worse. What are you doing here?"

“I work here. I am the good major’s German liaison officer.”

“You, Alterberger, a liaison officer, now really? I would never imagine a man with your talents and experience in a desk job.”

“Well expect it or not, that is what I have been ordered to do. If you are waiting to see Gian, he is headed out and will probably not be back for some time. I would suggest you return at a later date. Now if you will excuse me I have other duties to attend to as well.”

“Is that so? Don’t forget I spent some time in combat with you, there is something else going on here. That is not the facial expression of a liaison officer going back to his quarters.”

“I cannot say. As I said Gian is leaving.”

“Gian is leaving and you are headed in the opposite direction and I’ll bet a month’s pay that your orders do not include letting Germany’s highest decorated foreign officer go off by himself. Tell me straight up, you know me, it will go no further.”

“Alright, last night he dismissed me after a visit by two Italians who looked like they were barely alive. After their visit, Gian told me he had some urgent Italian business to attend to early tomorrow and that it did not concern me. He ordered me to return to my quarters until I was sent for. As you already suspect I cannot let him be killed or captured, so I must find a way to tag along in secret.”

“I want to go with you. You know I will not hold you up.”

“Not on your life Greta, if he catches either of us it would be very bad indeed. No telling what has attracted his intensity to the degree it demanded his personal intervention.”

“Alterberger, do you really think you are going to shake me now; I have my own horse? I owe both of you and no matter what it is I swear secrecy on my life. If he needs help, it may require us both, I have not forgotten my Russian. Besides, getting Russian uniforms if we have to will be no problem.”

“I know arguing with you would do no good, you are a most stubborn woman, besides he may be only visiting a girlfriend. Furthermore, do you really think a real *Brandenberger* would not have Russian clothes stashed nearby - but let's don't get shot just yet? What we really need are a couple of hardened Russian ponies. I have the remaining necessary travel gear for just such a trip.”

### One Left Alive

Alterberger borrowed two horses and within an hour they had set off in pursuit of Gian. They were forced to stop every few miles to warm themselves and their horses. They prayed that they would not have to spend the night in the open in this weather during the dead of winter, but Alterberger was prepared for the worst. He and Greta were able to follow Gian's group by means of the clearly visible tank and horse tracks left in the snow.

Dressed in their heavy German coats and fur lined hats, few people gave them a second look; particularly sitting astride Russian ponies. They continued to follow Gian's trail as it led deeper and deeper into the forest. By late afternoon they began



to notice older tire tracks and footprints mixed in with Gian's tank and horse tracks. Just as the shadows began to lengthen, they came upon a horrific scene.

There were four burned out Italian trucks surrounded by dozens of what appeared to be dead civilians. Their bodies frozen in various grotesque positions. Alterberger carefully examined the scene looking for any sign of life while Greta watched the main path. Walking back to her location he reported:

“These were clearly Russian civilians. It looks like they were executed as a group (pointing toward the largest concentration of bodies, then sweeping his hand in an outward motion). Those nearer the forest areas tried to escape. There were a few men, but most are women and children. Back further up the road and mixed in with more dead civilians are a few Italians and what looks like Russian soldiers or perhaps partisans.”

Taking in this morbid scene spread before them, both were rendered speechless for the moment as in their minds eye they replayed the transpired event. It was during this reflection time that they heard an odd sound in the stillness of their horses' clouded breath.

It was a chattering noise ever so faint that was instantly recognizable. Moving ever so slowly, they traced its sound first to what looked like a woman's body about 200 feet away. It looked like she had just made it inside the woods before she was shot in the back. Both her arms were stretched before her with legs bend like she had attempted to jump.

There were no tracks in the snow leading away from the dead woman, but some eight to ten feet away they noticed damaged bushes. Underneath these snow-covered bushes they discovered a small boy who was close to freezing to death. It

was his chattering teeth that had drawn them to the dead woman.

Greta spoke first:

“I surmise that this boy had been carried by his mother into the woods as she ran. Apparently, just as she had been shot, she had managed to launch the boy into the bushes, leaving no footprints in the snow. Let’s get some more layers on him before he freezes to death”

Greta had been right in analysis. His mother’s dying instructions to this boy had been to “lay still, speak not a word”. This he had done for more than twenty-four hours.

Greta covered the boy in an additional layer and the three unlikely traveling companions continued their journey until they began to lose daylight. Greta decided that this might be the end of her journey, as she soon would probably need to return the boy to their encampment. But she would wait until tomorrow to decide.

They selected an off the road location that offered some protection from the wind and a chance to build a fire. The boy was given some food which he gladly accepted and then he spent a restless night sleeping between Greta and Alterberger. In the morning they decided to set off; once more following the Italians.

As they rode, they discussed what they had seen and what it meant. The boy sat on the horse in front of Greta, but said little despite Greta’s repeated questions in Russian. She learned only his first name, another victim of this terrible war, now apparently without home or family.

They had gotten a late start and had been on the trail less than an hour when they heard in the distance the unmistakable sound of a T-34 diesel engine. Having yet to figure out what was going on they dared not risk detection. With the sound of tank engines growing stronger, they quickly exited the main

trail into a wooded area where they hoped their tracks could not be seen.

Soon from their vantage point, mounted troops came into view. More than fifty mounted troops plus more riding on three T-34 tanks made their way past Greta and Alterberger's hideaway. All were heavily armed. *Not a group he would care to tangle with*, thought Alterberger. Greta held her hand over the boy's mouth, but it would prove an unnecessary precaution, excessive speaking was not the boy's problem. From his tank turret vantage point, Gian noticed barely visible horse tracks leading into the woods, but dismissed them as coming from some of his own men venturing off the main track to relieve themselves. Alterberger, Greta and the boy stayed in their hiding place some twenty minutes until they could no longer hear the tank engines. They then emerged from the woods and began to follow these Italians who appeared were now headed back the way they had come. What had transpired, Greta and Alterberger were still unsure?

Later, as they neared the scene of the massacre, Alterberger left Greta and the boy behind and continued on foot. It was as he suspected; Gian's men were moving the bodies as best as they could, given their frozen configurations. He could see what looked like a few of the bodies on the tanks under blankets.

They had moved the remaining bodies off the road and into the forest, attempting to cover them with bushes and trees pushed down by Gian's tanks. Burial was out of the question with the current ground conditions. It even looked like they were performing a memorial service of sorts. Finally, the Italians resumed their journey. Their three followers gave them about an hour and then again followed the clearly marked trail riding slowly through the massacre sight.

As they rode past, the boy finally broke down and started to cry. Alterberger and Greta were completely silent for the next couple of hours. The sun had broken through the clouds and their trip back seemed less cold, or maybe they were just getting accustomed to the harsh weather, but certainly not this harsher reality.

As they made their way back Greta finally figured out what she would do with the Russian boy. The boy still refused to engage in any talking except small talk about meals and such. Greta could not get him to open up about his parents and background. Although he passed for about six, Greta was able to determine that he was probably more like seven.

Even at this early age the child clearly possessed an iron will and a determination to obey the instructions that his dying mother had given him. To be able to hide in the freezing cold without being discovered just a few feet from his dead mother demanded a discipline beyond his years. After his one incident of crying, he never broke down again.

### Jacob

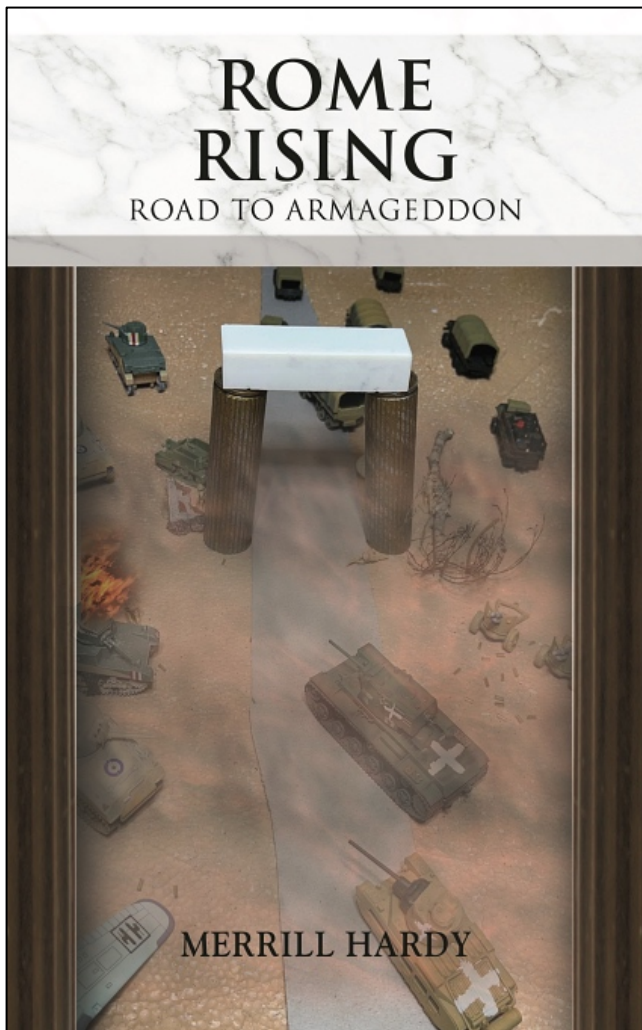
Jacob had been the brightest student in his class and he had been the apple of his parent's eye. Now he had to process information and emotions that were beyond the capacity of many adults. His mind had been like a sponge and he remembered nearly all of what he had been taught, especially Jewish Bible stories. A faithful dependence on God leading to survival during times of desperate struggles being a reoccurring theme.

Now he must put it together and understand how this knowledge could sustain and save him. Nothing was as clear as the last few days with his parents and every day and hour since their deaths. He remembered the name that his mother had given him and told him to repeat if he were asked by a

stranger. He wanted to open up and tell this kind lady everything, but he could tell she was not even Russian.

Jacob remembered every detail of the stories the village Rabbi had read. Was he about to undergo similar trials and hardships that he had heard about in these stories? Every hour took him farther and farther from his home. This travel time allowed Jacob time to sort out what had happened to him and think about what he must say and do.

He was not sure how he should react to certain situations, if in doubt he would just refuse to talk. *I will repeat the name mom told me to and not give any additional information to these strangers. I will not let others see me naked.* He wondered if he would ever see anyone again that was not a stranger and if he was to keep having nightmares of the incident in the woods.



*This work is a powerful, accurately crafted and entertaining alternative history novel of World War II. Readers encounter a deceptively just and benign unfolding new world order, differing from the strife filled planet inherited from WWII.*

## **ROME RISING: ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON**

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