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Next morning he brought the former British consul in to the office to meet us. This I am sorry to say, proved to be wasted effort on his part. The gentleman concerned could do nothing for us. As we all knew he had lost consul status when France broke relations with Britain in June. Let me make it clear that the Polish consul made this move on his own initiative. The last thing we wanted to do was to embarrass anyone by our presence.

We had our mid-day meal, once again "on the slate", at the consul's (Polish) expense, thanked him for his efforts on our behalf and took our leave, after getting directions to the railway station. Lack of money was our main problem at this stage and the Poles couldn't help us out. Getting our food "on tick" indicated that they too had "cash-flow problems", as they say nowadays!

As we walked along the main street, bound for the station, we met two Czecho-slovaks, whom we had known in Marseilles and had left the Fort-st.-Jean, the previous week, bound for the Legion H.Q., at Sidi-Bel-Abbes. Like a lot more of their countrymen, they had left Czecho-slovakia, when the Germans occupied it, and fled to France. There they had enlisted in the Foreign Legion and now under the terms of the Armistice between Germany and France, nationals of occupied countries like Poland, Czecho-slovakia, were being demobilised and returned to civilian status.

A high proportion of those who fled from Central Europe at the time were Jews and like our new-found acquaintances, wanted to put as many miles between themselves and the Germans as they possibly could. Accordingly, when they were demobbed they had chosen their free-travel rail warrant, to take them to Casablanca, that being the nearest point, to their ultimate objective, the U.S.A. We learned that a group of about twenty of them were leaving that night on a train to Casablanca.

Arthur and I had "genned up" on the route by rail to 'Casa' as it was affectionately referred to by the Legionnaires back at Fort-st.-Jean. Most of them had done a spell there at one time or another during their service. We had learned that our worst obstacle on the journey would be at the border between Algeria and Morocco, at a town called Oujda. Despite the fact that both countries were French colonies, there was a strict check at Oujda, to prevent smuggling of one thing or another. We were told that all passengers had to leave the train and pass through a Customs' check point. On top of that, there was the inevitable check on "Pa-pers", before one was allowed to resume the journey to Casablanca, via Fez and Rabat, in another train.

Getting aboard the train at Oran did not present any difficulty to a pair of seasoned "Hobos" like ourselves and soon we were on our way for what would be an all-night journey. We had taken a note of the intermediate stations along the line and after the first stop at a town called Tlemcen, we were able to cut down on our hourly stints, of standing guard in the corridor, "keeping tabs" on the ticket inspector. From now on we would curtail it to just after the train had picked up fresh passengers, then the old routine as before. I am pleased to say that this system worked perfectly, until we had reached our destination at Casablanca!

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The train was well loaded with passengers , including a good quota of soldiers in uniform, many of them obviously newly demobbed from the French army now being "run down" in France itself. In the French conscript army set-up all reservists had to report back for military duty, in event of war, regardless of where they were living. During our "stint" in the Maginot Line, we had the services of two English-speaking French soldiers, to man our telephone exchange. Both of them had to give up jobs in America, to come back for military service in France, in September 1939.

The only town of interest to us, in the first part of the journey, was Sidi-Bel-Abbes, about 40 miles west of Oran, which as I have said earlier housed the headquarters of the French Foreign Legion, in those days. It was now "home" also to the contingent from Fort-st-Jean, from whom we had parted company some thirty hours earlier in Oran.

It was early morning but still dark, when the train reached the border town of Oujda and time for quick thinking on our part. As well as not having tickets for the journey, the only "papers" which we had, consisted of the ones we had forged to get us past the Germans on the way to Paris. Not very much good in Algeria.

As our carriage emptied, I looked out of our compartment window to see what lay on the opposite side of the tracks. It was almost too good to be true but there was a train in a siding with the engine already attached, with a side board on the coping of the carriage roof showing the magic word CASABLANCA!

Just then, the lights of the train we were on, went out and we went into the corridor to try the off-side carriage door. It was locked but that was the least of our problems just then. We lowered the sliding window and slithered down to the tracks, all in the next few seconds.

Conditions couldn't have been better, with both trains in darkness and all the activity concentrated on the Customs-check at the far end of the station. It was almost too easy to crouch low and get ourselves across to the empty train for Casablanca. Fortunately we found that the doors were unlocked and we were on board in a matter of seconds.

The train from Oran had been electric powered, but the one on this, the Moroccan side, was steam driven. We were thankful for this, because the noise of the steam from the safety-valve on the engine, covered any little noise we made, opening and closing doors.

We remained crouched down in the darkness, until we heard the first passengers come on board, only then did we rise and go into one of the still darkened compartments, to wait for the lights to come on.

The whole operation had taken the best part of an hour, but as the train pulled out of the station, I realised that we had overcome a major obstacle in comparatively easy fashion. The only "hardship" we had to suffer on these long train journeys, both in France itself and now in North Africa, was that we couldn't speak freely in English. Things were that bit easier between Oran and Casablanca, because we were in the company of those demobilised Poles and Czechs, who were conversing in their own languages. Providing that we didn't speak English to each other, we would be deemed to be of their class. Another thing which helped us along, was the fact that we didn't spend too much time in one place, due to our "allergy" to ticket inspectors!.

We arrived in Casablanca in the morning of the following day and once again it was like Marseilles, in that it was the end of the line, so that we didn't have to contend with a ticket-check, on arrival at the platform barrier. Thanks to the generosity of the Polish consul in Oran, we were still left with the price of a meal, before we got down to the job of looking for the American consulate.

The phone-book listed its location in the Boulevard D'Anfa, which a passer-by told me was only a ten-minute walk from where we were, near the city-centre.

Let me say right away that the "atmosphere", was noticeably friendlier from the word "go", thank goodness that it was in Oran that we had "been nasty" to the French Navy and not Casablanca!

At the American consulate, we were directed to a building on the other side of the avenue, in fact to what had been the British Consulate, until our break with Vichy France.

Here we found two Englishmen who had been in the fruit export business, and now under the protection of the Americans, were dealing with British interests. Both were over military age and explained that otherwise they would have been interned, like the rest of their younger British compatriots. This wasn't strictly the case as we were going to find out before long, but it was part of general advice to keep a low profile during our stay and all should be well.

Meanwhile we would get emergency pass-ports from the Americans and an allowance, to cover our weekly expenses, for board and lodging.

To give you some idea of the refugee traffic thro' Casablanca at this time we were able to get pass-port photos right away, from an Arab 'pavement' photographer, who was getting a good living, operating in the area which housed at least four consulates of different countries, in that suburb of the town.

Once equipped with our new pass-ports, (it made a change not having to make them ourselves) we headed for the town centre. I have already said that our friends in the Legion at Marseilles had sung the praises of "Casa" and they were proved to be right, when we got the chance to see it for ourselves. Most of the European part of the town had been built only in the last twenty to thirty years and from the outset it was apparent that next to France, the influence had come mainly from America, "just across the herring-pond". I saw the first multi-storey blocks of flats and offices, which I had previously seen, only in films.

The "Blanca" part of the town's name was seen in the light-coloured materials used in their buildings. The lay-out of the European part of the town, was a combination of the French, broad, tree-lined boulevards and the modern trend to build and lay out side streets, on the "block" system.

None of the multi's would have exceeded ten storeys and the combined effect was very pleasing to the eye.

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The most attractive feature in the Casablanca of 1940, was in the cost of living. We were able to get into a family-run hotel near the city centre, twin beds, bathroom attached for £2 a week. Food with two good meals per day, at a nearby restaurant, cost about the same amount per week. Breakfast consisted of a roll and coffee, at a self-service "Automat" bar, which was another sign of American influence on life in the town.

A far cry from our days, not so long ago in German hands, sleeping on the "deck", drinking their ersatz "sludge" and eating our own hard-tack biscuits. Try as I may to suppress it, that old feeling of resentment keeps rising to the surface, when I stop to think about it, as I have to do when writing this account. Most times I get consolation, in remembering how I put it over on them and of the occasions when I "took the Mickey" out of them!

Before I leave the subject of the cost of living in Casablanca, I must mention one aspect of it, which pleased me and many others. With so many refugees in the town it was only a matter of time before there would be shortages. As in Southern France, there was no question of food rationing at this time, but no doubt certain items could have been in short supply without us knowing about it. The French authorities usually down-to-earth in their attitudes, had their own way of dealing with profiteers and we began to see the odd shop-front boarded up, or shutter pulled down. Yellow posters printed in large type with the words "Ferme" pour Hausse Illicite", "closed for illegally raising prices", were liberally displayed, across the frontage of the shop.

Around the middle of our first week in the town we had a visit from an Englishman who told us that he was in business in Casablanca. He said that he would do his best to get some fresh clothing for us and sure enough he was back before the week-end with "new" second hand outfits for both of us. He advised us about our status with the French Police, in general terms if we didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother us. At the same time he told us that he would let us know in advance of any snap checks which the police had to make from time-to-time, to pick up "undesireable" aliens in the town. All we had to do was stay indoors when such a warning was given. Finally he assured us that moves were afoot to get us out of Casablanca but that this would take time because the necessary "papers" would have to come from Lisbon. I don't propose to give his real name, just let it be Mr. B. for the record.

Mr. B. would have been in his mid-forties and it was obvious that the internment rule hadn't been applied in his case. Later on two more British civilians would throw in their lot with us when we finally got away from Casablanca, both of them in the 30/40 age bracket. This would be a good point, to explain, that in our present location we were less than 200 miles from our objective of Gibraltar and in fact, when we had reached Rabat, the capital of Morocco, we were less than 150 miles south of Tangiers, just across the Straits from the Rock.

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More than that there was a good rail link between Casablanca and Tangiers, so what was the problem?. The answer to that is, the problem was the same as the one which existed back in France, namely General Franco's Spain. Although Tangiers itself was an International Settlement, it was surrounded by Spanish Morocco and to go by train ~~from~~ Casablanca, involved three checks on "papers" en route.

In the first place we wouldn't get an exit visa to leave French Morocco and secondly falling foul of the Spanish authorities en route, would probably, if anything be worse, than on the Spanish mainland. Anyway all of us on the loose in Casablanca, were still convinced that Spain would enter the war against us when the time was right, for them to do so.

In the weeks that passed, we did as we had been asked, and kept a very low profile.

Mr. B., contacted us to give the news that a "courier" who had been due to bring "papers" to us from Lisbon, had been switched to the Eastern Mediterranean, because of the war which had started in Greece and that would further delay our "rescue operation".

In the meantime we learned that the major, whom we had met in Marseilles had been arrested and was being held in custody, in a local barracks at Casablanca. Apparently he had been picked up, trying to "hitch a lift" on a fishing-vessel, from the port of Fedahla, a few miles north of Casablanca. Also being held in the same abrracks, was a sergeant-flight engineer, the only survivor of a crew of three, from a sea-plane from Gibraltar, which had been shot down by the, French, while on photo-reconnaissance of Casablanca harbour.

One other attempt to break out of the deadlock at Casablanca, involved trying to get away on a liner named the Masselia, which had been laid up in the harbour, since it brought the last French government out of France, prior to the surrender by the Vichy regime.

We learned that it would be leaving soon for the port of Martinique in the French West Indies, taking with it those men from Central Europe, whom, as I mentioned earlier, had been demobbed from the Foreign Legion. They included our travelling companions from Oran to Casablanca, and it was through them that we got the necessary information to plan our next move to get away aboard the liner. The whole idea of going to Martinique was that we would be only a stone's throw from the British island of St. Lucia, a long way round perhaps but anything was better than the present inaction!.

Our little "colony" in Casablanca, had by now reached a total of twelve, including myself. The plan was to get that number of blank demob. papers, and copy the official stamps needed at each stage of the demob. process. This entailed making a total of seven different stamps. The blank demob forms were no problem, a clerk in the local barracks rose to the occasion when "his palm was crossed with silver" Making the rubber stamps was down to Arthur but this time it was with the proper tools, a far cry from the razor-blade and rubber heel piece.

Proper stamp pads, with the correct colours of ink to match each stage in the demob procedure. One minor detail which we had to observe was to make the completed forms, creased and grubby, to be on par with those which had originated back in France. Money for all this came from Mr. B.

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Each of us had to have Central European nationality and a suitable name to go with it. Mine for example was Rudi Novak and I was a Hungarian. Again my Scottish accent suited the French speaking Hungarian, although heaven help me, if I had been confronted by a real native of that country. It wasn't like that at all, the whole thing would have been a bit of acting on my part and by the French official who would have been dealing with <sup>the</sup> matter.

The plan was that I would take the completed forms in bulk to this man and he in turn would issue the official exit visas from Casablanca. In the event things never got to that stage, because the liner sailed overnight, two days sooner than the date we had been given. One of our number, a member of the R.A.M.C., disappeared on the same day and it was assumed that he had got on board "under his own steam", probably with the help of the newly demobbed Legionnaires. This was in keeping with the best traditions of "the escapee fraternity", if you see a chance, above all, TAKE IT!

I doubt if any outsider knew for certain when the ship would go, because at this stage in the war, the Free French movement led by General De Gaulle, was becoming more active and there was always the possibility of the liner being seized by his forces, which included naval units.

After the departure of the liner, things fell rather flat and for the next few weeks, it was a case of keeping our heads down and hoping that something else would turn up. On the days when we were warned to stay indoors, we passed the time listening to the radio, or in sleeping. Apart from myself, none of the others spoke other than the basic elements of French. For them the enforced confinement was worse, at least I could pass the time, reading newspapers or books, the latter borrowed from the hotel owner.

As far as newspapers were concerned their content was VERY anti-British, and of course the so-called news was all German inspired, so much so that at times, even I began to wonder if the French and us had been on the same side in the war! Aware of that I was glad in a way that my companions DIDN'T understand what the papers were saying. In the same vein, as my earlier remarks about ALL French people not liking the British and vice-versa, what I read in those papers during those weeks showed me that there must have been a very strong lobby in favour of the Germans, when the war started. Now that Germany appeared to be winning they weren't wasting any time in coming into the open to show who they favoured. Fortunately the majority of French people were able to think for themselves and these people formed the bulk of the circle in which we were now living.

It was certainly a strange situation in which we found ourselves in Casablanca. It wasn't that the French authorities didn't know about us because all hotel-keepers in France and its colonies had to supply the police with details of their guests, on a day-to-day basis. No doubt Casablanca had its share of both pro and anti-British feeling and the latter camp would be swelled by the presence of a strong naval force in the harbour. We had no illusions about the French navy's feelings towards the British. All in all the situation was "so-so" or as the French would say "comme ci - comme ca"!

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One incident in particular brought that home to me. Our hotel had a garage on the ground floor and the owner ran a driving school whilst his wife looked after the hotel side of the business. One night there was a small fire in the garage and the hotel was evacuated as a precautionary measure. Going downstairs, I overheard a conversation, between an elderly lady and her daughter. "I told you that we shouldn't have come to an hotel with these English". The no doubt long-suffering daughter did her best to "shush" her mother, but the damage had been done. I went to the landlady next morning, told her what I had heard and put it to her, that our presence might be an embarrassment. "Well it wasn't to her or her husband" she assured me, BUT, she had to consider the feelings of the other guests etc. I moved out the following day to a cheaper but equally comfortable place on the edge of the Arab quarter, where I shared a room with a fellow-scot named Walter Young. I was careful to let the new landlady know why I had moved out of the previous place. She assured me that as far as she knew, none of her guests had an anti-British neurosis!

At long last we got the news for which we had been waiting "our ship was coming in".

All that we were told about it was that it would be from a neutral country and all that we would have to do would be to arrange some means of getting ourselves on board un-officially of course.

The first plan mooted, was that the ship, would anchor at some distance off-shore at a point north of Casablanca, and we would be ferried out to it, in it's small boat. This plan got to the stage where we located and priced a suitable out-board motor, as the small boat would only take six people at a time. The project did not get to the stage of buying the motor, as we considered that there were too many things which could go wrong, especially as the 'evacuation' would have to be done under cover of darkness.

Meanwhile the ship itself duly arrived in the harbour. It had brought in a cargo of sugar from Portugal, and was berthed near to the main entrance to the dockyard. The latter itself was ringed with a nine-foot high barbed wire fence, with concrete uprights. Along the top of the fence was a single copper wire on insulators, carrying either high-tension current, or low tension to power an alarm system.

The whole area was well-lit and patrolled by armed police. There were also armed guards on the naval squadron berthed in the northern end of the main dock.

Not far from where "our" ship was berthed, lay the new 35,000 ton un-completed battleship Jean Bart, which had been towed from Brest to save it from falling into German hands.

Three nights before our ship was due to leave, I decided to have a closer look at the fence, nearest to the point where our ship was berthed. Sure enough the wire on insulators along the top of the fence, stopped at a point, one hundred <sup>yards</sup> short of the main gate. Better still the wooden hut housing the guards at the gate, was facing away from the point where it would be easiest to get over the fence. I used the word guards, plural, because I could hear voices coming from the direction of the hut. Probably one of the foot-patrols in for a smoke and gossip. All the better for us I thought at the time!

Following a meeting with some of the others next day, it was decided that Walter Young and I would "blaze the trail" that night and send written details back to the others via the ship's captain, when he went ashore next morning, so that they could follow on the next night. That day we went about our daily routines as usual. Everyone had been warned not to give any indication, that they were moving out. Anything which couldn't be worn or carried in the pockets was to be left behind in the various "digs". In the event no-one let us down, everyone was too anxious to get home to make any mistake on the last lap.

Walter and I decided that around about nine o'clock in the evening would be the best time to "have a go". Leaving our hotel as if going for the usual night-cap, we made our way to the docks. Both of us were wearing heavy leather belts which we had "acquired" at Fort-st.-Jean, as I had seen a use for them, on my "recce" the previous evening.

Reaching the fence at the point where I had been on the night before, we looped our belts together then threw on loop over the end of one of the concrete uprights. The rest was easy just up and over! We made our way cautiously across the area between the fence and the quayside, where the boat was moored, using stacks of timber as cover. The first stop in our progress came when two sailors came ashore from a submarine, moored further along the quay and stopped to exchange greetings with the guard at the gate. We had only gone a few more yards when we really had to "freeze" behind a stack of timber, as an armed guard appeared in view about 30 yards away making for the entrance. I can only conclude that he must have been wearing rubber boots and it was a near thing! One of those occasions when you think that the sound of your heart thumping, will give you away. However it took only a matter of seconds, to cross the remaining open ground and soon we were on board, shaking hands with a smiling Portuguese sailor.

Space aboard was limited, as it was only a small coasting vessel but we did manage to squeeze two more into the crew's living quarters in the fore-cabin of the ship. In the morning I got some writing paper from the captain and wrote out details of how to get into the dockyard and aboard the ship based on our own experience. He in turn passed it on to one of our party, when he went ashore in the forenoon.

Altogether sixteen others came aboard by the same route in groups of two and three at a time. They included the major the R.A.F. man two civilians and two French men. The two civilians, both English, had been in touch with us throughout our stay in Casablanca, and in fact one of them had donated the jacket and trousers, which I wore during most of our stay in the town. In fact by the time we left both were virtually fellow members of the "gang".

Of the two one had been working as an executive of the Standard Oil Company of America, while the other was an accountant with the Bell Aircraft Corp. of America. Both were of military age and wanted to get home to "do their bit" in the war.

Of the two Frenchmen I couldn't be sure. They had been introduced to me by one of our number, something I was displeased about "for starters".



On the way down the gangway when we arrived in France in January 1940, we were greeted by a large poster with the message "Keep your bowels open and your mouth shut". Regretably one of our number hadn't heeded the last part of that message. The last person you want in the kind of predicament we were in was a "big mouth"

Of those two Frenchmen I had found one of them to be lying about his past. He told me that he had been attached to a British military formation in a particular place, when I knew for certain that the unit he named was never there. Needless to say I reported this to Naval Intelligence when we reached Gibraltar and I'm sure they would sort things out in their subsequent screening. Meanwhile for better or worse they would have to be taken out of Casablanca, whether we liked it or not, they knew too much to do otherwise.

Now that we were all aboard, the next thing to do, was to get us hidden from the inevitable check by the French police before we sailed. Just where do you hide eighteen fully-grown men, on a small coasting vessel. Well it was easier than you might think.

As I have said the boat had come in with a cargo of sugar which had been off-loaded in another part of the harbour. The vessel then moved across to the point where we had come aboard. This was in the lee of a grain elevator, where it was loaded with a full return cargo of maize to take back to Lisbon.

On a ship of this size the cargo hold runs from the very bow back as far as the engine room in the stern. With a "loose cargo" like maize it would fill every nook and cranny, coming as it was thro' a pipe from overhead.

Well if you were a French policeman, that is what you were supposed to think. The Portuguese besides being our oldest ally, showed themselves to be as "crafty" as we are.

They had "boxed off" the forepeak part of the hold by fixing wooden battens, from one side of the hull to the other. A tarpaulin had been draped across the battens and this prevented the maize from filling the space, which was to be our hideaway. Entrance/exit was via a hidden trapdoor in the deck, in the crew's sleeping quarters.

Next morning as the time neared for the ship to sail, we all took our places in what was to be a pretty uncomfortable "home" for the next three hours. The arranged signal for what might be termed "action stations", was three blows on the wooden deck above our heads. This meant that a Police/Customs search was imminent.

When the signal was given, one of our two civilians whispered to me that he had a bout of hiccups, no doubt because of the nervous tension in such a confined space. Naturally the place was in total darkness but we could imagine the look on his face, as he struggled to control the condition!

We learned later that the signal was given by a member of the crew who sat on a bottom bunk with his feet on a mat which covered the flush-fitting trap-door in the deck.

In about ten minutes, which seemed to be more like ten hours, we heard the ship's engine start up, followed by the sound of the forward mooring ropes being cast off. We felt the motion of the ship moving forward and to the right, as it moved towards the entrance to the harbour channel.