

CAPERS IN SPAIN

by Jim McIlroy

Editor's note: A captain in the Field Artillery Reserves in 1941, and by 1944 a Lt. Col., Jim found himself in London with G-4, planning for Operation OVERLORD. Stricken with TB, almost wiped out when a V-2 rocket hit the hospital (the wing he wasn't in), evacuated to Walter Reed Hospital, he finally ended the war as an instructor at the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, with Brew Smith and Miller Gaffney as students. After building a small manufacturing company (forged steel valves and fittings) from a one plant operation in Pittsburgh to nine plants in the U. S. and Canada, Jim and his English wife of 22 years, Jean, moved to the dry, unpolluted air of Sedona, Arizona, in a small retirement community, where they swim, golf, hike, square dance, participate in a Great Decisions Discussion Group, and "travel extensively".

It was the summer of 1936, that I found myself "doing Paris" with two good friends — Bob McKinley, P '25 and Chuck Henderson P '32. On a year's leave of absence from Armstrong Cork, I had a reason for visiting Spain, where they had a large plant in Seville, so Bob and I headed for Spain via Biarritz by rail, agreeing to meet Chuck later in Rome. There had been vague reports of some unrest in Spain, but the U. S. Ambassador in Paris was stating that it was safe for Americans to travel there.

In Madrid we had a marvelous time, teaming up with two Bryn Mawr graduates and a Pedro Gamonal, twin brother of our Biarritz host. Together we sampled galleries, restaurants and night life, until the girls had to leave for the north. We then visited Toledo, Granada and the beautiful Alhambra, and Torremolinos, a then unspoiled lovely resort on the Mediterranean, where we could dive off a cliff right by our pension into twenty feet of crystal clear water.

But I wanted to go to Seville. Leaving Bob to enjoy Torremolinos, I took a local bus, loaded with families, goats and chickens, across the Sierra Nevada to Seville, having arranged

to meet Bob in Gibraltar in a week.

The manager of the Armstrong Cork plant was a Mr. Bachman and a Yale classmate of my boss, Dwight Armstrong. When I arrived at the plant the next morning, I was surprised to see sandbags around the windows and doors and a machine gun at the entrance. It was explained that these were precautions to guard against a take-over of the plant by the Communists, who were very strong in the district, in case of an uprising. This was Saturday, July 12, a day in history.

After touring the plant, and making a date for a bull fight and dinner afterwards with Mr. Bachman, I returned to the hotel, had lunch and took a siesta. About three I was suddenly awakened by an explosion and a series of artillery salvos. In the lobby there was incredible confusion, part of the front wall was down, there was smoke and dust, and people crying and screaming. With several other Americans and an Englishman (who had come to town to see his dentist), we huddled under a steel stairway, and tried to find out what was happening.

The story, pieced together later, was this: After the recent assassination of the prime minister, the leftist government in Madrid had suspended scheduled elections, the right wing opposition was in arms and General Francisco Franco, commander of the army in Spanish Morocco, had landed in force at Algeciras and



was marching north. Three other army units were converging on Madrid. Franco boasted that he had a "fifth column" in Madrid and would soon take the city (this was the origin of that term which has become a part of the language). That afternoon, Franco had entered Seville, reached the Plaza Nueva where our hotel was, and from the roof of which members of the Guardia Civil were firing on his troops. This brought out Franco's French 75's (of WW I vintage which we had trained with at Princeton ROTC), wreaking havoc on our hotel. At one point I had sent a waiter for a bottle of wine to calm a very frightened American lady. When he came across the lobby carrying the wine, there was another explosion and he was blown to bits. A young boy, badly wounded, lay screaming in the street not 50 yards from the hotel. One of the Americans, a Dr. Dan Easterly, and I went out to offer first aid, but the soldiers wouldn't let us go near. We appealed to an officer explaining that Dan was a doctor. In response, the officer took out his pistol and shot the boy in the head, explaining that he was going to die anyway. This was my first taste of war.

A call to Mr. Bachman revealed that he was barricaded in his office, but would call me in a few days. I never saw him again, and learned later that he had been killed shortly after talking with me. During the next days, as Franco was mopping up Seville, we were allowed freedom to go out. The phones were working and we sought ways to get out of the country. The American Consul was out of town, and the vice-consul not very helpful, saying, surprisingly, that we had been warned not to come. The British Consul offered more help and arranged for a bus from Gibraltar, but it was stopped and burned 20 miles from Seville. He then told us we would be taken out the next day by boat, from the American Consulate, which was on the Guadalquivir River, a mile away.

This called for a celebration, and we opened a bottle of wine and ate the rest of our food. At this time I saw an army sergeant, who had been very helpful to us, crossing the lobby and called to him to offer him my last pack of cigarettes as a goodwill gesture. He came over and I gave him the pack. A moment later I was slugged on the back of the head and pitched to the floor. There was the lieutenant who had shot the wounded boy glowering over me. He was red-faced with rage and shouting at me in Spanish, which I couldn't understand. Trying to be agreeable I kept saying, "Si, si señor," about the only Spanish I knew, which further infuriated him. I was sent to a room where they kept prisoners, being handled pretty roughly.

This "prison" was a holding place where the army played a sort of numbers game. Whenever they lost a man in the fighting, they took out a prisoner and shot him, not a comforting thought. Unable to converse with the other prisoners, I was at my lowest point.

About a half hour later the officer and two soldiers came back for me, and I knew then that I was finished. Surprisingly, he led me to the lobby and released me with an apology. I then got the whole story.

It seems that when I called the sergeant over to give him the cigarettes, he had been on his way to report to the lieutenant. This had enraged the officer, who slugged me. What he had been shouting at me was "What are you trying to do, countermand my orders?" Stupidly I had answered: "Si, si, señor." After they had taken me away, an old lady sitting nearby went over to the lieutenant and said something like this: "Young man, I am Señora _____, wife of General _____. I have never seen such behavior as you have shown to this American, and I shall report it to my husband." So that did it.

The next morning we walked the mile across town to the American consulate, embarked on the British destroyer Shamrock and headed down the river. Except for delay repairing a drawbridge that had been sabotaged, the trip was uneventful. Entering the Atlantic we followed the coast past Cadiz, which was in flames. We arrived in Gibraltar that evening, and I was very grateful to find a bed (actually a hammock on the roof) at the Old Sailors Home. It cost me a shilling.

Bob McKinley in the meantime was having his own problems, but managed eventually to get to Gibraltar, finishing the trip on another British destroyer. We took separate ships to Italy and finally caught up with each other in Rome.



It's now November 1942. I am a major in G-4, due to my Business School background, and stationed in London. U. S. forces have just landed in North Africa, Operation Torch. The allied command is pondering the best route for an invasion of Europe, and the Iberian Peninsula is a possibility. A mission is to be mounted to explore that feasibility.

Enter my superior, Colonel Allen. "Major McIlroy, I understand you've been to Spain, speak the language and know your way around."

"Well, I would hardly say that sir. I was in Spain in '36, got caught in the Civil War, later took a six week's Berlitz course in Washington, but I'm definitely not

fluent in the language, and, as far as knowing my way around, I know only a bit about Madrid and Seville, and a few places in between."

"Well, your 201 file says you're our man. Anyhow, you're the only one we have."

Thus began my second trip to Spain. The questions which needed answering were — Would the allies meet resistance (Spain was a member of the axis); or could they expect support; and could Portugal and Spain supply our North African troops, could the troops live off the land, or would we have to supply the population there. The supply side was our assignment. Also our mission was to buy up strategic materials to keep them out of the hands of the enemy (known as preemptive purchasing). I was masquerading as a mineralogist, dressed in civilian clothes and representing a fictitious American company. My superior on the mission was a Colonel Painter, an expert on quartermaster items, who was arriving from Washington with his team.

We flew from Bristol in a Dutch DC 3, which had escaped the Nazi invasion. We had to fly out over the Atlantic to avoid interception, and after four hours of head winds our fuel got so low that we had to turn back to Bristol. We then tried the next day and made it to Lisbon. There we learned enough about the Portuguese economy through contacts with various commercial sources to conclude that this country, although a friendly neutral, was desperately poor and could do little to help us.

In Madrid, from the Palace Hotel, we got down to work. Some of our British counterparts were old hands in Spain and immensely helpful. I teamed up with a genuine mineralogist who was busy negotiating with the Spanish Mining Syndicate to buy their output of mercury and wolfram. The former is an important ingredient in ammunition, and the latter a major source of tungsten. We drove to Granada to make a deal, came to an agreement, drank some wine and came away. I quietly reminded my companion, when we reached the street that he had forgotten his briefcase. "Don't

worry," he said, "that was intentional. You see there were 20 million pesetas in it." So I discovered how this kind of business was done.

Our investigation took us to Barcelona. We dined with the British Consul-general, a Mr. Noble, who turned out to be the brother of Ray Noble, the band-leader. His wife was Spanish. He had been able to obtain manifests of all the ships leaving the Mediterranean coast for Axis ports, thus revealing what supplies they were getting. We heard thrilling stories of smuggling downed Allied airmen out of France, Switzerland, even Germany, and of getting them across the Pyrenees to freedom and, in most cases, to fly again.

In Madrid, on New Year's Day all foreign embassy personnel were invited to Generalissimo Franco's reception at the Ritz ballroom. It was a very strange affair. British, American and French congregated at one end of the room, the Germans, Italians and Japanese at the other end, with the neutrals, mostly Spanish in the center. Thus direct confrontations were avoided.

Our final report recommended that we keep Spain as neutral as possible and not try to invade. Not only would supply problems be enormous, and lines of communication through a basically unfriendly country, but a new front at the Pyrenees would mean mountain warfare, for which our desert troops in Africa were not equipped or prepared.

We learned later that the Germans had a similar mission in Spain at the same time, to determine whether or not to occupy Spain and confront us at Gibraltar. It is interesting that they also decided to keep Spain "neutral".

A final tragic note learned on our return to London. The Dutch DC 3 that took us to Lisbon had been shot down on its return trip to London. On board was Leslie Howard, the movie actor. The Germans had been allowing fairly free passage in and out of Lisbon, but had been informed by one of their operatives that the plane would be carrying a VIP. The Casablanca conference was then being held and the Germans apparently assumed that the VIP was Winston Churchill.