

Excerpt from the memoirs of Werner Mork
90th Light Infantry Division



Werner Mork 1943

In the northern part of the island of Sardinia in September of 1943 the German “guests” left this isle in haste. In the south the Americans had landed without any problems or hardships. Then they did what we were not able to do, they disarmed the Italians and made them prisoners. All that within the framework of the cease-fire between the Allies and the Italians. Now the Yanks were the “guests” on the island. They then completed a good piece of work. They made the island free of malaria with the help of DDT, the powerful weapon against all sorts of pests, but above all of the Anopheles mosquito. In contrast to us, the Americans were no longer plagued by these creatures. The Yanks were spared that which pestered us and claimed so many victims. Our tactical goal, the island of Sardinia, was more greatly affected by the Anopheles mosquito than by the German sword that now had become so dull. Even though the malaria was eliminated and would not trouble us anymore, I still realized that I had no idea what was before me. The German sword in Sardinia had fallen into disuse, now Coca-Cola and chewing gum could bring a new salvation to the island.

As I made the withdrawal from Sardinia toward Corsica, I thought over the past months and my time as a soldier. Four years prior, in September of 1939 I enlisted. I wanted to be a soldier in combat. I wanted, as a German to contribute to 'Victory' and to take part in successful and victorious conquests. Now I no longer had any such designs, I took part in 'successful' retreats from Africa and now Sardinia. What was to become of me? I no longer expected good and uplifting experiences. I no longer looked forward to successes, conquests and new victories. We were only on the island for a short time. We did not have the pleasure of lingering for a while to settle down and relax, perhaps to stay here until the end of the war, in spite of the malaria. Now we were fleeing from our former allies and added to that the Americans were not only above us in the skies but also closing from our rear. Once again, a huge bill was coming due for an enormous loss of material, tanks, heavy guns, supplies and belongings. But there was also the loss of men to consider, not from malaria this time but from real hostilities. We were no longer safe.



La Maddalena, Sardinia today

In the crowded confusion of the harbor of la Maddalena I somehow managed to maneuver my baggage cart out of the long waiting lines and move toward the front. I did not like this mass of men and vehicles. This grouping was a splendid target for enemy attacks, and I thought about Tobruk where from high altitude the British flew their raids with such grim results. Therefore, it was my ambition to get to the next island as quickly as possible before the Yanks with their bomber squadrons turned the place into an inferno, despite our Flak cannons. Somehow, I managed to get to the fore and then I had the luck to get onto a ferry along with other passengers and vehicles. We got to the port at Bonifacio [Corsica] unharmed. In Bonifacio were gathered vehicles that would take us in a tight column toward the north to Bastia, the only large port and airfield in Corsica.



Bonifacio, Corsica today

From Bastia we would go on to the continent, to Italy, if everything worked out right. There were, however, certain difficult problems particularly in the ranks of our Division. That is to say in the ranks of the men who were supposed to be our leaders and who wanted to evacuate according to rank. Except for the road on the east coast of Corsica the rest of the island was held by the Corsican partisans and the Free French troops who landed in Ajaccio on the 13th and 14th of September 1943. They were now battling the German unit that found itself in their way. The unit was outnumbered and it was questionable how long they could keep the Corsicans and French from our escape route on the east road. The road was already under fire in several places, and it was becoming more and more perilous to make the trip. There were already the first casualties of men and vehicles that were blocking the road, making passage particularly ticklish. The fates of the dead and wounded were very grim. The

dead were left behind and only the walking wounded could be cared for and brought along with us. Many fell into the hands of the Corsicans and the French, and we were horrified to think what might happen to them.

Among all of these hardships there was a glimmer of light, or so it seemed at the time. We learned that on September 12th, 1943, German troops had freed Il Duce and that he intended to build a new fascist government in Italy. Even better than that, we also heard that a massive counterattack against the Americans around Salerno had put them in considerable distress. These reports awoke in us a feeling of optimism, we had a sliver of hope that things just might turn out for the better. Some of us began to think that we might have left Sardinia a little too soon. Perhaps we shouldn't have let the Itaker [slang term for Italians; Eyeties] buffalo us so quickly, but rather we should have mounted an initiative against these mousetrap hucksters. Unfortunately, this sort of thinking wasn't realistic. A withdrawal was the only way to prevent a massacre on the island. On the ground the Itaker outnumbered us and overhead there was the American Air Force, who then landed troops. All of that massed against us could only have led to a bloodbath. The 90th Division along with other units of the navy and air force had become a restless, doomed cohort. All of these wishful thoughts were mere fantasy. We turned our thoughts back to this very unpleasant retreat route and the thought that in spite of the attacks on it we might still be able to reach Bastia and from there get to the continent. The one protection we had was the artillery that fired on the hills along the escape route and caused the enemy to stop firing for long periods. We used these pauses to move our vehicles as quickly as possible as far as we could. By itself this cumbersome, harried column of vehicles was defenseless. With only small arms we could not undertake any substantial defense.

All of us who were proceeding toward Bastia were very happy and thankful to be under the powerful protection of the heavy artillery and we believed that we actually had a chance to get to Bastia without being mowed down. However, just outside of Bastia everything came to a halt. The reason was that our column began taking heavy artillery fire just outside the port area. The fire was coming from the barrels of German 88 mm cannons, but this time they were not under German command. Just a few days prior, the guns were in Italian hands. The Führer, Adolf Hitler, had a short while ago made a gift of these batteries to his friend Il Duce and Mr. Mussolini had placed them in Corsica to protect the city and port of Bastia. But now the Italians were not standing by the guns. Instead, it was the Free French under the command of a former SS-Unterscharführer (there was a SS unit in Corsica) who was from Lothringen and had gone over to the Free French and was now fighting against his ex-comrades. He blithely let fly with 'his' cannon. Now we no longer had the protection of the 88's, instead we had direct fire on our column from the same sort of cannons. This was a god-awful situation that was that was only topped-off by air-dropped leaflets ordering us to unconditionally surrender and telling us that there was no longer any way to escape this island. Then we heard over loudspeakers the voice of the ex-Unterscharführer who made known to us his deeds and his feelings.



German 88 mm flack cannons

This was no joy for us, and we cursed the blaggard who had betrayed his comrades. Then “our” 88's moved forward and what next transpired must have been unique in this war. A duel commenced between 88's that most certainly came out of the same good German factory. The exchange did not last long. “Our” batteries silenced the opposing guns, and the way was cleared to the port and to the airfield. Then it became clear that the port was totally unusable. The channel was blocked with scuttled ships. The rest of the boats in the port were not seaworthy, because with open valves none of the boats would go. The last hope of the Division was the airfield, a rather vague hope given the number of soldiers that needed transport. But it was the best hope we had since otherwise events would be dictated by our enemies.



Junker 52, nicknamed Auntie JU

The airfield in Bastia lay in a basin ringed by beautiful mountains. Only in the direction of the sea was it free from mountains, and that was the direction the aircraft would fly to the mainland, if they still could. On the airfield chaos prevailed mixed with a frantic bustle. On the ground sat waiting several brave “Tanten JU-52” [tr: Aunt JU, a common nickname for the Junker 52] aircraft that were ready to pack their cargo holds full of enlisted men. But overhead were the comrades from the neighboring postal code, the American fighter bombers. The Flak cannons fired like crazy, and it flashed and boomed all around us. There were some German ME-109 fighters, but when the “others” came they took off, but not to attack, but rather to take to the shadows and shelter of the mountains to circle around and land when the air attacks were over. That surprised us soldiers and we wondered what was going on, but the ME-109's had been ordered to escort the JU-52's on their flight over the sea and to protect them, so we believed. But I soon learned that this wasn't so much the case. When they were really needed, there were none that could help us.

Loading and take-off ran very slowly. Each asked himself if and how it would be possible not only to transport this huge group of soldiers, but also to get them safely to the mainland. Such questions must have also greatly occupied the Division Commander, Genreralleutnant Freiherr von Lungershausen. Above all was his “great concern” about where on the mainland his troops could be deposited. Only because of this did he use his authority over the senior Regiment Commander, to quickly fly off in the direction of Italy. He could do it, so he did it and got a seat in one of the planes. He did not want to be the last one on the island, but rather the first one on the mainland.

This “model behavior” immediately set a precedent on the airfield. Hardly was the Division Commander gone than the Regiment Commander who had taken over the Division gave command of the Division over to the senior Battalion Commander. He gave it in turn to the senior Company Chief and that was our beloved Chief, Oberleutnant Tschechow. He played the same game to his benefit by handing command to another Oberleutnant. So it was that at the end of this perfidious line of men the

Division stood under the command of subalterns. The lives of an entire Division were in play, but these men played another game, the game of their own safety. They were only after saving their own lives and getting to safety without a backward glance at the troops entrusted to them. We were only “things” to them. Wasn't there sometime and someplace a notion of trust and obligation given the officers regarding the men they commanded? That must have been a long time ago, now there was a new understanding of honor and trust! But unconditional obedience was expected from the rank-and-file troops, and it was enforced by all means, even weapons. Punishment went as far as the death penalty! Nevertheless, it must be said that a short time later these men had to pay for their notion of honor and trust. They did not come before a court martial, but rather before an ethics committee. The Freiherr Lungershausen was sentenced to prison and later he became Stadtkommandant of Leipzig or Dresden. The other men, who were so quick to get to the mainland, also received short jail terms. Our Chef eventually returned to us after a while.

This breakout of confusion engendered an idiotic problem with competence, and among all of it I had a very unusual experience. Through my concern for my baggage and getting a seat on a JU-52 and with very feeble excuses I eventually found myself before the latest “Commander” of the Division, and it turned out to be an Oberleutnant named “Mork!” It was probably a surprise for both of us. It soon became clear that these two “Morks” were related. In the city of Hamm there is a goldsmith and jeweler named Mork who has his shop in the northern part of the city. His father was a cousin of my grandfather, the elder Wilhelm Mork in Hamm on Ostenwall, the father of my father. Although complicated, we figured it out. And we, the two young Morks, meet each other on the airfield at Bastia. We both belonged to the 90th Division. In our short discussion he told me that he would see to it that during this impromptu reorganization of the Division I would come into it as the main office accountant with a rank of subordinate officer in this existing position. Next, he got me a seat on the next JU-52 that was ready for take-off, moving me ahead of several others, assuming that the plane would get off the ground. She took off and I was once again on board an airplane.

Later, on the mainland, I tried to get together with my relative, but it never happened because the opportunity did not present itself. Another reason was that I had fallen ill. It is possible that he fell during the intense fighting at Monte Cassino, because I could not contact him after the war either. There were a lot of things after the war that did not happen that one had hoped to do. It seems too bad today, but then there were many problems that prevented it. And now it is too late.



Loading a JU-52 during the evacuation

I had a seat on a JU-52 thanks entirely to my newly discovered relative. Once again something had happened to me that one can only call 'destiny,' if that is not too grandiloquent a term. But it is extraordinary what I experienced by chance that often saved my life like this instance, even when just a short time later it would look very much otherwise. In the plane it was packed. Only with great effort did the three overloaded JU-52's get off the ground. The planes made a formation wherein the middle plane was at a higher altitude than the two flanking planes. I was in the middle aircraft. The climbing ability of the overloaded planes was very limited, and we flew only a few hundred meters above the water.



P-38 Lightning fighter plane

It was near the island of Elba that these three aircraft were suddenly attacked by American Lightning [P-38] fighters. The attack came from the left and the Yanks came in at the same altitude as the two lower flying JU-52's. Both planes were hit and immediately fell into the sea. It was a wonder that the plane that I found myself in was not hit, and that was only because we were slightly higher than the others and not in the gun sights of the American fighters. It was another wonder that we were not attacked. The fighters would have had to make a turn to get into position and did not have the time or fuel to chance it. This was the opinion of our flight crew after we landed. They thought that the three American fighter planes were returning from a sortie and suddenly saw an opportunity present itself to take a shot at the formation but couldn't nab the third JU-52. And by a fluke I was on the third plane. Once again, I had incredibly good luck and was again safe by the skin of my teeth, instead of being downed in the Mediterranean I was able to land safely at the airport in Livorno. I was on the continent on solid ground. But those of us who came through safely walked the ground with shaky legs. The all-prevailing horror seized us hard in our very bones. The moment of fright that we experienced only

lasted seconds, but it hit us very hard. With our own eyes we saw the crash of the two other aircraft full of our comrades who left Bastia hale and hardy and now found their graves in the Mediterranean Sea. To see these planes crash was a horrible experience. Hopeful young men who believed that they had a good life before them, full of good cheer at having left Corsica and who believed that they would find safety on the continent; these are the young men who lost their young lives just minutes from landing in Livorno. We heard that several rescue boats left Elba, but we also heard that they found no survivors.

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See the translations of the rest of Werner Mork's Memoirs here:

<https://www.dansetzer.us/Mork/>