

Greek hospitality was offered in a blur of toasts – brandy, beer and wine. It was hard to believe there was a war on, except for the almost universal absence of young men. They discovered that retsina was only one of many wines made in Greece, most of which were very palatable. The beer turned out to be good too, and a hospitable Greek showed them how to float a tumbler of brandy in a glass of beer, “as chaser”.

They eventually stumbled down the steps into a lively looking taverna. Welcoming check-covered tables basked in lantern light under a vaulted pergola of young grape vine leaves, threaded through with tiny lights, like fireflies. The place was crowded with Greeks and foreigners.

“I need a drink,” slurred O’Rourke. “We’ve been walking for ages.”

“Waiter, a drink, my good man,” cried Anderson, “for these fine fellows, defenders of your eshtimable country and its beautiful ladies. Oh, hello Captain McKenzie.”

They turned to follow his gaze, meeting the unsmiling face of the nuggety little captain, veteran of the Great War and company

adjutant. Resplendent in kilt, tunic and tam o' shanter with plume, he cut a fine figure in his old regimental uniform.

"Hullo, boys. Out enjoying the sights and the hospitality I see," he said, nodding to them, unsmiling.

"We've been up the Acropolis, sir," slurred O'Rourke, genially waving his hand in its direction. "Standing in the very cradle of civilisation."

"We have been telling the locals of some of our customs, and repaying their hospitality," said Robertson, pushing his cap to the back of his head, and trying to hide a large wine stain on his shirt.

"I'll bet you have," said McKenzie. "Don't forget you're in uniform, boys, and representing your country."

A group of men rose from a nearby table. The surrounding patrons parted and hushed, as if by order. An immaculately suited individual said loudly, in thickly accented English, "You see," spreading his hand to encompass the locals who were backing away from him, "you Greeks have sadly misplaced your confidence if you expect this rabble to protect your miserable country. They have not even the courtesy to salute their own officers."

Rankin looked at the man, vaguely wondering where he had seen him before. The man continued, “You Greeks have seriously misread the position by listening to that warmonger Churchill. You should have accepted the Fuehrer’s proposal of peaceful protection and co-existence.”

“Is it not customary in your rabble that passes for an army of savages to salute your superior officers?” one of his companions asked. The speaker, tall, fair and wearing a monocle, shrugged his topcoat off to reveal his uniform tunic. There seemed to be plenty of medal ribbons. Rankin’s thoughts were fuzzily erratic: who wears a monocle these days? He fought to suppress a hiccough.

McKenzie stepped between the Germans and the five subalterns. “These officers will answer to me. I bid you goodnight, gentlemen.” Rankin noticed through the wine-clouded fog that McKenzie’s Scottish accent had thickened markedly. He hadn’t noticed that before, he marvelled. Two men in dark suits and wide-brimmed hats silently elbowed their way forward through the crowd, to stand a few paces behind the Germans.

“Pah! Hiding behind the skirts of this old man, who they do not consider worthy enough even to salute.”

Rankin felt the two on either side of him bristle and tense. McKenzie's hand, behind his back, urgently commanded them to be still. Rankin realised with a shock where he had seen the man before: he had been the man with the camera on the embassy balcony. Remembering the fingers appearing above the marching heads, he giggled. An elbow jabbed him in the ribs.

The tall officer with the monocle continued, addressing McKenzie, "The German Army was never defeated in the field in the last war, Captain, and it will not be defeated in this one. We soldiers were stabbed in the back by a weak government made up of communists and Jews. That will not happen again." Rankin noticed he pronounced "German" and "Jews" as if they began with "ch". He almost spat the word "Chews".

"I also served in the Great War, Colonel, and I can assure you the German Army was soundly defeated between March 1918, when your last-gasp offensive ran out of puff," McKenzie took a step forward, and snapped his fingers in the air, indicating the passing of something ephemeral, "and November, when you had to sue for peace to prevent the complete annihilation of your guilt-ridden military class." He was red of face and breathing hard. "Now, if

you'll excuse us." McKenzie had risen to his full five feet four. He began to turn away from the party of Germans and their Greek companions.

The German officer stood his ground, ramrod straight, hate written across his face. "I commanded machine guns at the end of the war, Captain. We continued to reap a bountiful harvest, right until the end." He hissed the words; not a soul stirred in the taverna.

McKenzie slowly turned on his heel, to face the colonel. "Machine-gunner, were ye? We had a technique for dealing with them." He took another half step forward, until he was standing almost chest to chest with the German officer, despite the disparity in height. "Push the point of the bayonet into the throat, here," he said, in a low, cold voice, indicating the notch at the bottom of the gap between the two collar bones, "and slide it as far as it will go. Quiet, no fuss, the man cannae cry out or thrash about, hardly leaves a mark; you can kill a man while his neighbour snores. And the next. And the next. Next morning the gun is manned by a crew of corpses. All except one. To convey his terror to the other crews."

The man recoiled, face pale. He wiped a bead of sweat from his upper lip.

“If you saw men killed that way, you were opposite the finest shock troops in the British Army, the New Zealand Division. You are lucky to be here.” McKenzie’s blazing eyes transfixed the German officer. No one dared even to breathe. The music had long-since stopped. “These men are their sons, Colonel. Underestimate them at your peril.”

The German officer took a step back, turned on his heel and stalked out of the taverna, his companions hurrying to keep up. Many of the Greek customers booed and jeered their two countrymen in the dark suits and hats, who ran after them.

McKenzie turned to the five subalterns and ushered them towards the exit. “Get away to your beds now, boys. You’ve a big day ahead of ye tomorrow.”

*

Rankin drank a bottle of water listening to the snores of the others, while doing his best to keep his head from spinning in the fummy fug of the tent. He had returned to camp exhilarated, but the infernal hard, black knot soon returned to the pit of his stomach.

Christopher Worth
The Rabbit Hunter

How would he react? Would the men follow his orders? Could he kill a man? He really had no idea. It was all bravado and posturing until it happened. Was it true what McKenzie had told the German officer? Had his father done that? Could he do that? He involuntarily shuddered in his blankets. Suddenly, it all seemed terrifyingly real.

Would he let the men down? That was the most terrifying fear of all...

For more info and where to purchase copies, visit:

www.therabbithunter.co.nz