AN EXCERPT FROM:
ONCE THERE WAS A WAR

JOHN STEINBECK

John Steinbeck dispatches from World War II, filed for the New York Herald Tribune in 1943, vividly capture the human side of war. Writing from England in the midst of the London Blitz, North Africa, and Italy, Steinbeck focuses on the people as opposed to the battles. It was first published in book form in 1958.

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December 3, 1943—The units of the naval task force made their rendezvous at sea and dusk and made up their formation and set off at calculated speed to be at the island of Ventotene at moonset. Their mission was to capture the island and to take the German radar which was there. The moon was very large and it was not desirable that the people on the island should know what force was coming against them, consequently the attack was not to be attempted until the darkness came. The force spread out in its traveling formation and moved slowly over the calm sea.

On a destroyer of the force, the paratroopers who were to make the assault sat on the deck and watched the moon. They seemed a little uneasy. After being trained to drop in from the sky their first action was to be a seagoing one. Perhaps their sense of fitness was outraged.

All along the Italian coast the air force was raiding. The naval force could see the flares parachuting down and the burst of explosives and the lines of tracers off to the right. But the coast was kept too busy for anyone to bother with the little naval force heading northward.

The timing was exact. The moon turned very red before it set, and just as it set the high hump of the island showed against its face. And the moment it had set the darkness was thick so that you could not see the man standing at your shoulder. There were no lights on the island at all. The island had been blacked out for three years. When the naval force had taken its positions a small boat equipped with a loudspeaker crept in

toward the beach. From five hundred yards off shore it beamed its loudspeaker on the darkened town and a terrible voice called its proclamation.

"Italians," it said, "you must now surrender. We have come in force. Your German ally has deserted you. You have fifteen minutes to surrender. Display three white lights for surrender. This will be repeated once more." The announcement was made once more—"... three white lights for surrender." And then the night was silent.

On the bridge of a destroyer the officers peered at the darkness in the direction of the island. At the ship's rails the men looked off into the darkness. The executive officer kept looking at his wrist watch and the night was so dark that the illuminated dial could be seen six feet away. Gun control had the firing data ready. The guns of the whole force were trained on the island. And the minutes went slowly. No one wanted to fire on the town, to turn the concentrated destruction of high explosive on the dark island. But the minutes dragged interminably on, ten—eleven—twelve. The green, glowing hands moved on the face of the wrist watch. The captain spoke a word into his phone, and there was a rustle and the door of the plotting room opened for a moment and then closed.

And then, as the minute hand crawled over fourteen minutes, three white rockets went up from the island. They flowed upward and curved lazily over and fell back. And then, not content, three more went up. The captain sighed with relief and spoke again into his phone. And the whole ship seemed to relax.

In the wardroom the commodore of the task force sat at the head of the table. He was dressed in khaki, his shirt open at the throat and his sleeves rolled up. He wore a helmet, and a tommy gun lay on the table in front of him. "I'll go in and take the surrender," he said, and he called the names of five men to go with him. "The paratroopers are to come in as soon as you can get them in the landing boat," he said to the executive officer. "Lower the whaleboat."

The deck was very dark. You had to feel your way along. The boat davits swung out as they always are in action, and now a crew was lowering the whaleboat. They held it at the deck level for the men to get in—a coxswain and an engineer were already in the boat. Five officers, armed with sub-machine guns clambered over the rail and settled themselves. Each man had a drum of bullets on his gun and each one wore a pouch which carried another drum. The boat lowered away, and just as it touched the water the engineer started the engine. The boat cast off and turned towards the shore. It was pretty much of a job of guess work because you could not see the shore. The commodore said, "We've got

to get in and disarm them before they change their minds. Can't tell what they'll do if we give them time." And he said to his men, "Don't take any chances. Open fire if anyone shows the slightest sign of resisting."

The boat slipped toward the dark shore, her motors muffled and quiet.

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December 6, 1943—There are times when the element of luck is so sharply involved in an action that a sense of dread sets in afterward. And such was the invasion of the island of Ventotene by five men in a whaleboat. They knew that there was a German radar crew on the island, but they did not know that it numbered eighty-seven men, all heavily armed, and moreover heavily armed with machine guns. They did not know that this crew had ammunition and food stores to last six weeks. All the men in the whaleboat did know was that the Italians had put up three white flares in the night as a token of surrender.

The main harbor of Ventotene is a narrow inlet that ends against a cliff like an amphitheater, and on this semicircular cliff the town stands high above the water. To the left of this inlet there is a pier and a little breakwater, unconnected with the land and designed to keep the swells from breaking on the pier, and finally to the left of the pier there is another inlet very like the true harbor, which, however, is no harbor at all.

The whaleboat with the five men in it approached the dark island and when it was close to the shore the commander shone a flashlight quickly and it showed a deep inlet. Naturally, he thought this was a harbor, and the little boat coasted easily into it. Then the light flashed on again and ranged about, only to discover that this was not the trues harbor at all but the false inlet.

The whaleboat put about and headed out again and soon it came to what looked like a sand bar stuck out of the water. And again the light flashed out, and it was seen that it was breakwater. Again the boat proceeded, but approximately ten minutes had been consumed in being slightly lost. The third try was successful and the little boat found the entrance of the true harbor and nosed into it. And just as the whaleboat put its head into the little harbor an explosion came from behind the breakwater, and there was the sound of running feet, and then from the top of the cliff there cam another big explosion, and then progressively back on the hill more and more blasts.

There was nothing to do but to go ahead. The whaleboat plunged into the pier and the five men leaped out. Behind the breakwater lay a German E-boat and beside her stood a German soldier. He had just thrown a potato-masher grenade at the E-boat to destroy

and sink her. One of the American officers ran at him, and with one motion the German ripped out his Luger pistol and tossed it in the water and then put both of his hands over his head. The lancing light of a powerful flashlight circled him. The officer who had taken him rushed him to the whaleboat and put him under guard of the boat's engineer.

Now a crowd of Italians came swarming down from the hill, crying, "Surrender, surrender!" And as they came they dropped their rifles on the ground, in a unholy heap. The commodore pointed to a place on the quay. "Stack them there," he said. "Get everything you have and stack it right there."

Now the landing was crisscrossed with lights. The five Americans stood side by side with their guns ready, while the Italian carabinieri brought their guns and put them in a pile. Everyone seemed to be confused and glad and frightened. The people wanted to crowd close to see the Americans and at the same time the ugly pig snouts of the tommy guns warned them back. It is not reassuring to be one of five men who are ostensibly holding a line against two hundred and fifty men, even if those men seem to have surrendered.

Every one of the Italians was talking. No one was listening. And no one wanted to listen. And then breaking through their ranks came a remarkable figure, a tall gray-haired old man dressed in pink pajamas. He stalked through the chattering, shouting ranks of the carabinieri and he said, "I speak English." Immediately the shouting stopped and the ring of faces showed intensely in the flashlight beams. "I have been a political prisoner here for three years," the old man said. From some reason he did not seem funny in his pink pajamas. He had a great dignity, even enough to offset his costume.

The commodore asked, "What were those explosions?"

"The Germans," the old man said. "There are eighty-seven of them. They were set up with machine guns to fire on you when you entered the harbor, but when you landed troops in the false harbor and when you landed more troops on the breakwater they thought they might be surrounded, so they retreated. They are dynamiting as they go."

"When we landed troops?" the commodore began, and then he shut himself off. "Oh, yes. I see," he said. "Yes, when we landed troops." One of the officers shivered and grinned at the commodore.

"I wish those paratroopers would come in about now," he said.

"I wouldn't mind it either," the commodore replied. And he went on to the old man with the pajamas. "Where will the Germans go?"

"They'll go to their radar station to destroy it. Then they have some entrenchments on the hill. I think they will try to hold them there. " And at that moment there came a large explosion and a fire started back on a hill, a fire large enough so that it illuminated the little dock and the entrance to the bay. "That will be the radar station now," the old man said. "They are very thorough. Too bad the troops you landed did not get there first."

"Yes," said the commodore, "isn't it?"

More Italians came down the hill then and deposited their arms. They seemed to be very glad to let them go. Apparently they had never loved their guns very much.

On the dock the five Americans stood uneasily and the safety catches were off their guns, and their eyes moved restlessly among the Italians. The firelight from the burning buildings high on the hill made deep shadow in back of the dock houses.

The commodore said softly, "I wish those paratroopers would get there. If Jerry finds out there are only five of us, I wouldn't give any odds on us".

And then there was a sound of a boat's motor and the commodore smiled with relief. The forty-three paratroopers were coming in to the shore. "Give them light, coxswain," the commodore called. "Show them where to come."

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December 6, 1943—The five men from the destroyer moved restlessly about the quay on the island of Ventotene which they had accidentally, and with five kinds of luck, captured. The paratroopers did not arrive. There was no sign from the destroyer standing off shore and minutes got to be hours. The dark town on the cliff became peopled with imaginary snipers and back on the hill where the Germans had retreated an occasional explosion roared as they blasted more installations. They did not know how many Americans there were, and there were eighty-seven. This was very largely in favor of the Americans, because if the Germans had known— It is not a nice thing to dwell on.

Your impulse when you are alone and not knowing when you are going to be fired on out of the dark is to keep moving, to pace restlessly about and to be very timid about getting a light of any kind behind you. This pacing about is probably the worst thing you can do. According to Bob Capa, who has been in more wars and closer to them than nearly anyone now living (and why he is living nobody knows), the thing to do is not to move at all. If you sit perfectly still in the dark, he argues, no one knows you are there. It is only by moving about that you give away your position. He also holds that under fire the best thing is to sit still until you know where the fire is coming from. This is a hard

thing to do but it must be correct, because Bob Capa is still alive. But every instinct is toward shuffling about and leaving the place where you are. But getting a light behind you is the worst. It seems to burn you in the back and in your mind's eye you can see what a beautiful target you are to someone in the dark, you and that great black shadow in front of you.

There probably is nothing in the world so elastic as subjective time. There is no way of knowing how long it took for those forty-three paratroopers to get ashore. It may have been half an hour and it might have been three hours. It felt to the five men ashore like three days. Probably it was about forty-five minutes. The dark, hostile island and the dark water gave no comfort. But after an interminable time there was a secret mutter of engines. Then out in the dark there was a flutter of light. The boat was asking for directions. One of the officers on the way got down on his stomach and leaned over the stone parapet and signaled back with his flashlight so that it could not be seen from the island. And at intervals he flashed his torch to guide the boat.

It came out of the dark abruptly: out of the pitch dark it slipped noiselessly and bumped gently against the quay. And it was one of those boats even the name of which the Navy will cut out if I put it in, but the important things was that there were forty-three paratroopers on board. They seem to flow over the side; they were very quiet. Their captain went to work instantly. He set out pickets before he had been one minute ashore, and they slipped away up the hill to guard the approaches to the harbor. Some crept up into the town, armed with their rifles and grenades, and they occupied the tops of buildings, and others went down to the beaches to watch the seaward approaches. Meanwhile a little gangplank was ashore, and the supplies were coming down onto the quay in the darkness.

In the middle of this work there was a growl of a plane overhead. The captain of paratroopers gave a curt order and the men took cover. The plane droned over, and as it got offshore again the destroyer burst into action. She flamed like a flowerpot at an old-fashioned Fourth of July fireworks exhibit. Her tracers spread like a fountain. And then she was dark again and the plane was gone.

The unloading continued until there was a pile of goods on the quay, rations in case and boxes of ammunition and machine guns and the light sleeping rolls of the paratroopers. They did not bring any luxuries with them. They never do. Food and ammunition are their main interests. They get along with very little else. But on Ventotene they brought water too, in those handled containers which are used for both water and

gasoline. For Ventotene has no water. In other times water barges came out from the mainland. The only local water is that caught in cisterns during the rainy months.

When the supplies were landed the three paratrooper officers and the naval officers gathered in a little stone building on the waterfront. And an electric lantern was on the floor and the doors and windows were shot so that no line of light could show out. The faces were lighted from below and they were strained faces, with the jaw muscles pulled tight. The maps were out again.

"I'm not going to throw my men against a bigger force in the dark," the captain of paratroopers said. "Jerry will be trenched by now. I'm not going to move until morning. We've got only half as many men and no artillery."

An officer said, "Maybe—maybe we could talk them out of it. Let's have some of the Italians in and see what we can do. The Jerry doesn't know how many men we have or how many ships. Let's think about that a little. It's just barely possible we could talk them out of it."

"How?" the captain asked.

"Well, would you let me go up with a white flag in the morning?"

"They'd bump you."

"Would you let me try?"

"Well—"

"Might save a lot of trouble—sir."

"We can't afford to lose officers."

"You won't lose me. Just give me a nod."

The captain looked at him for a long time and then he smiled thinly and his head dipped, almost imperceptibly.

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December 10, 1943—The lieutenant walked slowly up the hill toward the German positions. He carried his white flag over his head, and his white flag was a bath towel. As he walked he thought what a fool he was. He had really stuck his neck out. Last night when he had argued for the privilege of going up and trying to kid the Jerry into surrender he hadn't known it would be like this. He hadn't known how lonely and exposed he would be.

Forty paratroopers against eight-seven Jerrys, but Jerry didn't know that. The lieutenant also hoped Jerry wouldn't know his guts were turned to water. His feet sounded

loud on the path. It was early in the morning and the sun was not up yet. He hoped they could see his white flag. Maybe it would be invisible in this light. He kept in the open as much as possible as he climbed the hill.

He knew that the forty paratroopers were crawling and squirming behind him, keeping cover, getting into position so that if anything should go wrong they might attack and stand some chance of surprising the Jerry. He knew the fieldglasses of the captain would be in the German position, waiting for something to happen.

"If they shoot at you, flop and lie still," the captain had said. "We'll try to cover you and get you out."

The lieutenant knew that if he were hit and not killed he would hear the shot after he was hit, but if he were hit in the head he wouldn't hear of feel anything. He hoped, if it happened, it would happen that way. His feet seemed very heavy and clumsy. He looked down and saw the little stones on the path, and he wished he could get down on his knees so see what kind of stones they were. He had a positive hunger to get down out of line. His chest tingled almost as if he were preparing to receive the bullet. And his throat was as tight as it had been once when he tried to make a speech in college.

Step by step he drew nearer, and there was no sign from Jerry. The lieutenant wanted to look back to see whether any of the paratroopers were in sight, but he knew the Germans would have their fieldglasses on him, and they were close enough so that they could even see his expression.

It happened finally, quickly and naturally. He was passing a pile of rocks, when a deep voice shouted an order to him. There were three Germans, young-looking men, and they had their rifles trained on his stomach. He stopped and stared at them and they stared back. He wondered whether his eyes were as wide as theirs. They paused, and then a hoarse voice called up from up ahead. The Jerries stood up and they glanced quickly down the hill before they came out to him. And then the four marched on. It seemed a little silly to the lieutenant, like little boys marching up an alley to attack Connor's woodshed. And his bath towel on a stick seemed silly, too. He thought, Well, anyway, if they bump me our boys will get these three. In his mind's eye he could see helmeted Americans watching the little procession through their rifle sights.

Ahead was a small white stone building, but Jerry was too smart to be in the building. A trench started behind the building and led down to a hole almost like a shell hole.

Three officers faced him in the hole. They were dressed in dusty blue and they wore the beautiful high cap of the Luftwaffe, with silver eagles and swastikas. They were electronic engineers, a ground service for the German Air Force. They faced him without speaking, and his throat was so tight that for a moment he could not begin. All he could think of, was a green table; Jerry had three deuces showing and the lieutenant a pair of treys. He knew they had no more, but they didn't know what his hole card was. He only hope they wouldn't know, because all he had was that pair of treys.

The Oberleutnant regarded him closely and said nothing.

"Do you speak English?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes."

The lieutenant took a deep breath ad spoke the piece he had memorized. "The colonel's compliments, sir. I am ordered to demand your surrender." He notice the Oberleutnant's eyes involuntarily move toward the sea. The lieutenant lapsed out of his formality, as he had planned. "What's the good?" he said. "We'll just kill you all. We've got six hundred ashore and the cruisers are arching to take a shot at you. What's the good of it? You'd kill some of us and we'd kill all of you. Why don't you just stack your arms and come in?"

The Oberleutnant stared into his eyes. He had seen the same look over the green table. That what's-in-the-hole look. The look balanced: call or toss in, call or toss in. The pause was centuries long, and then at last, "What treatment will we receive?" the Oberleutnant asked.

"Prisoners of wars under the Convention of The Hague." The lieutenant was trying desperately to show nothing in his face. There was another long pause. The German breathed in deeply and his breath whistled in his nose.

"It is no dishonor to surrender to superior forces," he said.

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December 13, 1943—When the lieutenant went up to the Germans with his bath towel as a white flag, the captain of paratroopers, peeking through a crack between two buildings, watched him go. The men hidden below saw the lieutenant challenged, and then they saw him led behind the white stone building. The watching men hardly breathed then. They were waiting for the crack of a rifle shot that would mean the plan for kidding the Germans into surrender had failed. The time went slowly. Actually, it was only about

fifteen minutes. Then the lieutenant appeared again, and this time he was accompanied by three German officers.

The watchers saw him walk down to a clear place in the path and there pause and point to the ground. Then two of the officers retired behind the white building again. But in a moment they reappeared, and behind them came the German soldiers. They straggled down the path and, at the place that had been indicated, they piled their arms, their rifles and machine guns, and even their pistols. The captain, lying behind his stones, watched and counted. He tallied the whole eighty-seven men who were supposed to be there. He said to his lieutenant, "By God, he pulled it off!"

And now a little pageant developed. As the German marched down the path, American paratroopers materialized out of the ground beside them, until they were closely surrounded by an honor guard of about thirty men. The whole group swung down the path and into the little town that stood so high above the harbor of Ventotene.

Since Ventotene had been for hundreds of years an Italian prison island, there was no lack of place to put the prisoners. The top floor of what we would call a city hall was a big roomy jail, with four or five big cells. The column marched up the steps of the city hall and on up to the third floor, and then the Germans were split into three groups and one group was put into each of three cells, while the fourth cell was reserved for the officers. Then guards with tommy guns were posted at the doors of the cells, and the conquer was over.

The lieutenant who had carried the white flag sat down on the steps of the city hall a little shakily. The captain sat down beside him. "Any trouble?" the captain asked.

"No. It was too easy. I don't believe it yet." He lighted a cigarette, and his shaking hand nearly put out the match.

"Wonderful job," the captain said. "But what are we going to do with them?"

"Won't the ship be back tonight?"

"I hope so, but suppose they don't get back. We can't let anybody get any sleep until we get rid of these babies."

A trooper lounged near. "Those Jerry officers are raising hell," he said. "They want to see the commanding officers, sir."

The captain stood up. "Better come with me," he told the lieutenant. "How many men did you tell them we had?"

"Six hundred," the lieutenant said, "and I forget how many cruisers offshore."

The captain laughed. "One time I heard about an officer who marched fifteen men around a house until they looked like an army. Maybe we better do that with our forty."

At the door of the officers' cell the captain took out his pistol and handed it to one of the guards. "Leave the door open and keep your eyes on us all the time. If they make a suspicious move, shoot them!"

"Yes, sir," said the guard, and he unlocked and opened the heavy door.

The German officers were at the barred window, looking down on the deserted streets of the little town. They could see two lonely sentries in front of the building. The German Oberleutnant turned as the captain entered. "I demand to see the colonel," he said.

The captain swallowed. "Er—the colonel? Well, he is engaged."

For a long moment the German stared into the captain's eyes. Finally he said, "You are the commanding officer, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," the captain said.

"How many men have you?"

"We don't answer questions," the captain said stiffly.

The German's face was hard and disappointed. He said, "I don't think you have six hundred men. I think you have only a few more than thirty men."

The captain nodded solemny. He said, "We've mined the building. If there is any trouble—any trouble at all—we'll blow the whole mess of you to hell." He turned to leave the cell. "You'll be taken aboard ship soon now," he said over his shoulder.

Going down the stairs, the lieutenant said, "Have you really mined the building?"

The captain grinned at him. "Have we really got six hundred men?" he asked. And then he said, "Lord, I hope the destroyer gets in tonight to take these babies out. None of us is going to get any sleep until then."