

Michael Wagner, obituary

MAJOR MICHAEL (Mick) WAGNER, who has died aged 99, made a daring escape from a PoW camp in Italy in 1943.

Towards the end of 1941, Wagner was captured between Benghazi and Agebadia, Libya, when his Company of the 1st Bn, The Welch Regiment, was overrun by German forces. He was interrogated at a German field headquarters where Rommel said, "For you the war is over".

He was sent to a camp at Padula, southern Italy, and subsequently transferred to a camp near Bologna. In September 1943, on the day of the Italian Armistice, the Germans took over the camp. Faced with being sent to Germany by train, Wagner and a few comrades concealed themselves in the roof space of their hut for two days while the barracks was being evacuated. At night, they had to sleep on concrete rafters less than a foot in width.

Wagner and two companions slipped under the wire of the perimeter fence and got away. With the help of Italian families and partisans they set off on a 250-mile trek south towards the Allied lines. Illness and winter weather in the Apennines delayed them but they acquired weapons as they progressed and harassed German patrols and fascist units on the way.

Eventually they were able to link up with a large group of escapees which had established radio contact with Allied forces south of the front line. In May 1944, about 130 of them were rescued by landing craft from the coast just south of the Tenna River and were able to rejoin the Allied forces. He was appointed MBE three months later.

Michael Stanley Wagner was born at Hampstead Garden Suburb on November 2 1917. He was educated at University College School and at Neuhausen, Switzerland, where he became fluent in German. In 1936, he became an articled clerk with Lybrand Ross Bros & Montgomery and joined the Territorial Army as a sapper in the Royal Engineers.

In August 1940, he was commissioned into the Welch Regiment and posted to the 1st/5th Bn at Newry, Northern Ireland. In May 1941, he sailed from the Clyde, bound for Suez, as part of a large convoy.

After rejoining the Allies in Italy, in June 1944 he returned to England and was posted to 21 Army Group HQ in Brussels. In Germany, he was sent to interview Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's widow in the hope that she would be able to provide information surrounding her husband's suicide.

After a final posting as acting CO of 636 Regiment RA near Antwerp, he was demobilised. He joined the Colonial Service and, in 1946, he was posted to Northern Rhodesia (now Republic of Zambia). Based at Isoka, a remote outstation near the Tanganyikan border, within six months he was the Acting District Commissioner for an area the size of Wales.

He served as District Commissioner in several districts and later as Under Secretary in Lusaka. After Northern Rhodesia became independent in 1964, he stayed on and served the Zambian Government in various ministries before returning to England in 1968.

He and his wife made many visits to Italy to seek out and thank the Italians who had helped him during his escape. He was an active supporter of the Monte San Martino Trust which was established to commemorate the sacrifices made by Italians in helping Allied servicemen during the war.

On returning to England he lived for nearly fifty years near Wincanton in Somerset. He worked for Tyndalls of Bristol and a boat builder. He also made and restored furniture. He enjoyed golf and skiing through to his early 80's and for many years he served on the local Parish Council.

Michael Wagner died on January 2. He married, in 1946, Nan Wilson who had just qualified as a doctor. She predeceased him and he is survived by their two daughters and a son.

