

PM Daily

FIVE CENTS

JANUARY 7, 1941

Girl Reporter, Shelled, Tells How It Feels Betty Wason Cables of Being Caught in a Front-Line Barrage and In a Chicken Dinner Why She Lost Interest

Betty Wason, CBS correspondent in Athens and special correspondent for PM, knows what it feels like to be under shell fire both in England and Norway. She was the first to give us an eyewitness story of Norway's invasion. Here she tells of her experiences under shell fire in Albania.

By BETTY WASON
Special Correspondent

KORITZA, Jan. 7.—For a front line dugout this one is the neatest I have ever viewed. I am jotting down my notes in the light of a cheerful fire in an open hearth with the soft glowing kerosene lantern hanging from a beam. Heavy oak beams reinforce the ceiling, heavy posts surround the walls. Even a canvas chaise longue is provided for relaxation while shells burst overhead.

Don't be fooled by the light tone, though. I still am shivering from the experience of half an hour ago. Soon after dark this evening we arrived here, a few hundred yards from the front line. Eager to see everything, we set out with an escort who was investigating whether the Italians actually still "hold these hills."

We crept single file, carefully following in the steps of the soldiers. The moonlight whitened the road.

Suddenly a whizzing sounded close above our ears. Spontaneously dropping to the ground beside the road, we listened to a series of shells whistling above, each striking nearer. There was no time to be afraid then. Fear came later when we realized we had been the direct target of Italian guns. One of the shells hit a house 30 yards away. As soon as it got quiet we crept through the blackness.

Chicken Dinner and Shells

On the way back the barrage began again and we shot down into another shelter as cozy as this. During the next lull we

Betty Wason

crept out again and hurried toward the house where we had stopped originally. We found the firelight as cheerful as ever. Here we sat gaily quaffing cognac while the officer gave orders that his only chicken be killed and roasted for our benefit. We again heard roar of artillery, but were assured that it was Greek long range fire and that there was nothing to fear. Hardly were the words out when the crash sounded right outside the window. With one movement all dashed for the stairs, sliding through the narrow openings over dirt and sandbags into this cave where we are now relaxing. The officer still discusses the chicken dinner, but personally, I am no longer interested.

The soldiers laugh at our nervousness.

"Don't worry, this goes on all the time," they say reassuringly.

Certainly, well-constructed shelters are a comfort. The officer says all were constructed within a few days working at night time.

It was necessary to wait until nightfall before approaching this village. Skirting the roads, choosing by-paths and fields instead, we started across the valley in mid-afternoon, though we soon found the mud too much for us. Mud, thick, sticky mud, oozing, slimy mud, concealed beneath deceptive areas of grass, covered our ankles, spattered our coats. Finally, a soldier driving a horse cart, offered a lift which we accepted gladly. While awaiting darkness, the soldier suggested that we visit his village where we found eager crowds of Albanian urchins watching our arrival.

Soldiers crowded around us, begging for information about the war. They were only informed about what was happening in their sector. Soon we were invited to enter the dwelling, to have something to drink after climbing up muddy paths and jumping streams. The crowd followed us, including Albanian inhabitants of the village, among whom were five men who deserted the Italian Army and managed to reach here safely. **One of these told us many Albanians were fighting the Italian Army because of their wives.**

"This is the reason you find Albanians putting up a good fight," he said.

In the low ceilinged picturesque room where the fire burned brightly, cognac, sweets and raisins were pressed upon us by the soldiers who treated the occasion as a fete. They eagerly told war stories. Their favorite yarns were about aviators. One Greek aviator, according to them, bombed the Italian lines near here each morning, flying at a height of 200 feet in a tiny out-moded plane, and returning always without resistance. Only this morning, they said, a squadron of Greek planes dropped bombs inside the Italian lines, but not a single Italian fighter appeared. The previous day Italian aviators had spent 60 bombs on a pile of boards beside the road, apparently thinking they were guns.

One good looking soldier told how one night they attacked the enemy on a mountain side. They stuck up their bayonets, advanced with the cry: "Aera!" and the Italians fled in haste. They then took the Italian guns and pursued the enemy with their own equipment. The same soldier, after finishing this tale, gave an earnest philosophic discourse on why the Italians were losing.

No Passion to Fight

"They do not have the passion necessary to fight," he explained seriously.

He then told us he was from the Dodecanese Islands, spoke Italian so well that he served as interpreter for the prisoners. One of the other soldiers commented:

"He speaks so well, he must be half Italian."

Betty Wason

Quickly the Dodecanese retorted:

"No, I know who my father is," which brought forth jovial laughter from the others.

Most of them spoke pityingly about the Italians, said they felt sorry for them, and referred to the great numbers of their dead whose bodies cover the mountain tops. They told the story about one aged Greek priest who insisted that the dead must be buried. He went with only matches for light in the field where the dead lay and buried hundreds while shells whistled over his head.

Now while we sit in this subterranean den, the officer is discussing how best to proceed after leaving here. When the way seems clear, we must creep silently through the darkness to find a car which is to be provided especially for our safety. It is to drive along the road without headlights. Even then it is not known when the shells are likely to start volleying again. The officer who is a gallant, swashbuckling figure, proud of his excellent Parisian French, is delighted with the opportunity to play host at this strange outpost.

He says, "The duel is finished," waves his hand toward the sandbagged exit. We climb out, wondering how long the silence actually will last.

PM