

They were there: the story of World War II and how it came about

Curt Riess - 1944

from all over the world. I had achieved what some of my colleagues were kind enough to describe as the greatest newspaper "scoop" since the World War. It was later to win for me honorable mention for the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism.

OCTOBER 22, 1935: *The Five-Power Committee of the League debated the question of military sanctions against Italy. Sir Samuel Hoare told the House of Commons he thought they could be avoided, and that economic sanctions would suffice.*

NOVEMBER 11: *Italy warned the nations that she would retaliate in kind against sanctions.*

NOVEMBER 18: *The League applied economic sanctions against Italy.*

DECEMBER 7: *Foreign Minister Sir Samuel Hoare of Great Britain and Premier Laval of France agreed on a plan to dismember Ethiopia according to Italy's wishes. This plan aroused great popular opposition in England.*

DECEMBER 11-15: *The League disregarded the Hoare-Laval agreement, but postponed levying oil sanctions against Italy.*

JANUARY 3, 1936: *President Roosevelt, in a speech to Congress, denounced dictatorships and aggressors.*

APRIL 30: *The defense of Addis Ababa was abandoned. Haile Selassie fled.*

BADOGGIO ENTERS ADDIS ABABA

by Herbert L. Matthews

IT was two o'clock in the afternoon. The road made a huge curve in front of us, and about a mile away I could see a group of officers talking. The Marshal was giving his last orders. The mechanical units and the Eritreans were told to commence taking the city, which they entered fifteen minutes later. The troops who were to pour in after **Badoglio** were gathered from behind us and waited in readiness. Any idea of the Marshal entering like a conquering hero on horseback had long been abandoned. There was no time for pomp and circumstance, although I learned months later that a very heated controversy developed in the world Press as to whether he had ridden into the city on a white or a brown charger. He rode into the city in nothing more romantic than a Ford limousine.

A whole hour was spent in those preparations, and then the order came to go. Branca had cleverly prepared that last dash. At the start of it we

were a mile behind the Marshal and his staff. All the drivers had been warned to stick behind Branca as if we were tied together. It was a regular cross-country charge, but a completely successful one, and when the entrance to the capital was reached, our caravan was directly behind Badoglio's. He drove into the native quarter at four o'clock precisely, from which time the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa will date for future historians.

There was nothing spectacular about it—no shouting, no excitement, no cheering crowds, not the slightest ceremony. Yet it was one of the great moments of modern history, and it lacked no genuine element of drama and color. The setting was an imperial capital in ruins—buildings still burning, the stinking dead still lying about the streets, gutted houses and stores gaping blackly and emptily at us as we drove by. The men were a sullen and fearful lot, wondering what retribution Italy would take for the horrible orgy of the four previous days. But the women greeted the invaders with flowers and trilled their welcome in that curious, high flat note, which I first heard at Azbi, as I rode into the town a lonely and inadvertent conqueror.

And then there were the foreigners, happy at being delivered from a terrible danger. Whether purposely or not, the triumphal procession went by the British Legation, where barbed wire and trenches, the Sikh Guard and civilian volunteers had successfully defended the major part of the foreign colony. There were some hearty jeers from that direction, as we went past the gate. At one point a few dozen Ethiopians in uniform—policemen, we were told—saluted ostentatiously. No soldiers were in evidence, for military uniforms had been prudently hidden or burned before the Italians arrived. And so there was no surrender; just the passive occupation of a prostrate city.

It was a long drive to the Italian Legation, Badoglio's goal and his new headquarters. Although undefended during the pillaging, the natives, significantly enough, had not dared to touch it. There were enormous grounds, lovely gardens, and an attractive house set in a high, sheltered spot.

That was my goal, too—the point that knowingly, or unknowingly, I had been aiming at for seven long months: the end, for which I had left Nancie and the children, traveled by sea and air and land, suffered and rejoiced, through seemingly endless days. Yet I felt no exultation—only an unutterable weariness of flesh and spirit. My head ached dismally; my nerves were on edge; I cared for nothing but a little rest so that I could pull myself together and tell the greatest story since the World War ended.

It was not to be. Badoglio and his staff quickly entered the Legation, and the first thing the Marshal did was to send for us. He, at least, was glowingly happy. We stood around him in the reception room, as he talked. The words, alternately sarcastic and proud, put the seal on a great conquest.

"Following his great victories, the Negus has been obliged to flee from his capital. Following the defeats we received, we have arrived here. You have seen, in this march from Quoram to Addis, what tenacity and force

Italian soldiers are capable of. You have seen them work in the rain, make paths through mountains, drag trucks from the mud and across rivers—and all this with enthusiasm and vigor. Il Duce told me to reach Addis Ababa. I have been able to do so, because I have had the high honor to command Italian officers and soldiers. You have seen the welcome which the inhabitants gave us along the road. They feel themselves freed of the heaviest yoke. Now begins a new labor for us, as arduous as the war we won, to give civilization and progress to these people, through peace and tranquillity.”

He might have said more, but just then Pibe fell in a graceful faint at his feet, expressing in that eloquent way the weariness and emotion we all felt. Outside it was pouring rain again. Branca abruptly announced that we must give him our stories in half an hour, otherwise he could not guarantee us that they would arrive that evening. So I sat in the old Fiat, typewriter on my knees, my head throbbing painfully, and wrote five hundred words of grand climax to the Ethiopian War while the Italian flag was being hoisted over the Legation, and the rain poured down in buckets. And now let it pour, indeed! The war was over, and the greatest potential enemy of them all had been beaten, too.

I turned my copy in, disgusted that the masterpiece I had planned should have turned into those few, hastily written words, but too tired to care much. Ten thousand miles away, in the wireless receiving room of *The New York Times*, an operator felt through the air for messages from Addis Ababa. Here, he had it! Unfamiliar Italian words came over, from the wave-length that must have been the capital. Then his pencil flew over the paper before him:

“Times roma may fifth date addis ababa matthews era of independence that lasted since biblical times ended four this afternoon when Italians occupied addisababa stop newer empire founded by menlik received its quietus same time and new epoch history this ancient country begins stop this story being typed automobile wherein your correspondent came to addisababa with **badoglio**...”

And so he wrote, and so *The New York Times* alone of American newspapers had a special story from Addis Ababa the next morning, for all Branca's efforts proved in vain, and our dispatches were not delivered in Rome until five or six o'clock in the morning.

My assignment was all but over. Ten days more and Ethiopia ceased to become news. The war was ancient history, and the reading public turned indifferently away to new excitements. There were some mildly interesting stories during that time: descriptions of the ruined city, of the dead, interviews with members of the foreign colony, the restoration of order. The foreigners were bitter at the Emperor for having left the city so soon to its terrible fate: the railway to Jibuti reopened: Ras Seyoum submitted with native obsequiousness: an amusing storm in a teacup raged over diplomatic

privileges and immunities: the American Minister, Cornelius van H. Engert, and his family provided some excellent stories of bravery and charitableness in the face of great danger.

And so it went. On the ninth, Harrar was taken by Graziani, ending the remarkable southern campaign which had started at Mogadishu. On that same day Mussolini proclaimed the new empire, and Badoglio became the first Viceroy. We listened to the proclamation that night as it came four thousand miles through the air, stirring an emotion too deep for words in the officers and soldiers who listened with us. The proudest of them all, in our group, were Vittorio and Bruno Mussolini, the Duce's sons, and Count Ciano, his son-in-law, all of whom left the next morning for Rome.

Badoglio received us for the last group-interview on the day after he was made Viceroy. It was a pleasant talk of plans for the future, of that last dramatic dash for the capital, of nostalgia for the war that was already history. He had come through the ordeal strong, active, and immensely happy, and like all soldiers after the fight is over, he looked back wistfully upon the exciting days of combat which had passed forever.

"I want you all to go away from here," he told us, "with the memory of Italians as good soldiers who did their best for their country. And when, in future years, seated at your hearths with your families around you, you look back on the day of the taking of Addis Ababa, you will think of it—perhaps not with nostalgia—but at least as a pleasant recollection."

And how much more, I thought, how very much more!

On May 12 the victorious army marched proudly through the streets, reviewed by the Commander-in-Chief who had led them there. It was a conquerors' parade—the immemorial reward of all soldiers who have planted their flag in the heart of the enemy's country. The Italian tricolor was raised over the Imperial gibbi at nine in the morning while a cannon boomed twenty-one salutes. As the banner reached the top of the staff I could almost sense a thrill of pride and joy sweep over the rigid ranks, standing at attention, for that ceremony was the final, outward symbol of a new Roman Empire, after so many centuries of eclipse.

NOVEMBER 7, 1937: *Italy joined Germany and Japan in their pact against Communism, signing it in a ceremony at Rome.*

DECEMBER 7: *Italy withdrew from the League of Nations.*