AT HIS MAJESTY'S EXPENSE

by

ROWLAND PARKER

Transcribed by Ian Sanderson

FOREWORD

Soldiers on active service were forbidden – I suppose they still are forbidden – to keep personal diaries; a regulation designed to prevent the enemy from gaining useful information if the diary and its author should be captured. I was never in danger of being captured and rarely in possession of information which might have been of use to the enemy. His reconnaissance aircraft could tell him far more than I knew. However, recognising the common sense reasons for the regulation and because the regulation existed I obeyed it. How, then, could I write this "war diary"? For that is what this book looks like and what, in a sense it is.

In the course of my 39 months service abroad – I confidently use the word "service", for they also serve who only stand and wait, as somebody once said – I wrote more than three hundred letters to my wife. Thanks to that splendid organisation the Army Post Office they were all delivered. Thanks to my wife they were all kept and arranged in chronological order. In a sense this is her book rather than mine. Let me hasten to add that these letters, even those which the Official Censor did not look at, did not contain anything which might have been useful to the enemy. They told of people and places seen, of trivial incidences, and of personal impressions. When I returned home, with my memories still fresh, it was an easy matter to reconstruct a "diary" from my letters, and to write it as though it were written from day to day. The form which it took then is the form in which I present it now, with a few minor alterations. I wrote it for fun; also, I think, because I have always found satisfaction in writing and reading what I know to be true.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since my war was fought and won. New generations have come along, for whom the war is not even a memory; a legend, perhaps; something to read about in books. It is largely for them that I have decided to make public this very personal chronicle. They probably think that war is all fighting, glory, intelligence, bravery; some of them, I know, think that the war is all excitement. They know nothing of the boredom, the frustration, the discomforts, the simple pleasures, the warm comradeships of soldiering – though they think they know everything about the futility of war. This book may teach them something. To the older generation, my generation, it will perhaps bring back memories of experiences similar to mine, of old friendships long forgotten, of strangely happy times.

To many of us, the war meant an unique opportunity to see new lands and peoples, and it is precisely that aspect which predominates in "my diary". What it would cost me now, as a tourist, to see what I saw then of North Africa, Italy and the Middle East, I dare not contemplate. I saw it all at His Majesty's expense. To him, to his Government and to his taxpayers, I am and shall always be grateful.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICA BOUND

1943

Jan 20th.

At last! After more than two months of waiting and wondering, we are really on our way! Up at 4.30 this morning, we mustered all ranks and caught a special train taking us direct from Comrie to Glasgow. Lorries conveyed us from the station to the King George Dock, where we were quickly embarked on the "Dunnottar Castle", a fine ship of some 15,000 tons. Though still tied to the quay, our technical departure is indicated by the change of our address to A.P.O. 4330. It will be a long time before any replies are received to the many letters sent off today.

Jan23rd.

The ship cast off during the night and moved slowly down the Clyde to drop anchor off Gourock, where the rest of the convoy has been assembling for the past few days; dozens of ships, all of fair size. We have become quite accustomed to life on board, which is on the whole very comfortable in spite of the overcrowding; with 3,000 troops on board there obviously is not much room to move about. Amongst the attractions are unlimited supplies of chocolate, sweets, razor blades, soap, tobacco at sixpence an ounce, and, above all, marvellous meals. Three meals a day, each of four courses! The quantity and quality of the food is such that, if the civilian populace knew about it, they would all want to come on this trip, even if they knew their destination – which we do not.

Jan24th.

When we looked out this morning the anchorage was deserted. The convoy had sailed, and left us behind! It seems that there was some trouble in the engine-room, and there was the possibility that the ship might not sail at all. By late afternoon, however, repairs had been effected, and we slipped away, gliding smoothly down the Firth of Clyde as the daylight faded. Our last glimpse of land was the northernmost tip of Ireland as we turned and headed due west into the Atlantic. Full steam ahead now, to baffle enemy submarines which might be lying in wait for just such a straggler as us.

That night the Atlantic rollers made their presence felt. Attendance at dinner was far from complete. It was to get much thinner before the voyage was over. The next morning we were mighty pleased to find ourselves forming part of the convoy, having caught up with it during the night. It was now possible to see the full extent of our company. There were 60

ships in all, arranged in four lines ahead. Our escort consisted of a screen of destroyers way out in front, two aircraft carriers in the middle of the bunch and a cruiser hovering around. The constant zig zagging, a routine anti-sub precaution, gave us a different view of things every hour or so.

There was very little to do on board. Meals and boat-drill cut up the day into routine slices. In the afternoon there was P.T. on the boat-deck, but that soon became impossible because of the weather, and our only exercise was walking round and round the deck. As the ship's Education Officer, I was kept busier than most of the officers on board, giving an occasional lecture to which nobody listened, and continuing my French lessons. I did a lot of reading, and we always had the radio to give us the B.B.C. news. Most of the men spent much of the time playing cards in their bunks. We spent hours leaning on the rail, watching the other ships in the convoy. The launching of a Swordfish from the deck of one of the carriers was a momentous event for us. Its landing, on that tiny steel square pitching and rolling in the midst of those great grey waters, must have been much more than momentous for the pilot.

Frequently at night I would leave my stuffy cabin, which I shared with seven other officers, and go to lean on the after rail, where I could watch the phosphorescent glow of the water thrashed by the screws. This glow, we were told, was visible from the air at a height of several thousand feet. But we had little to fear from night-flying aircraft. Not out there in the Atlantic. The possibility of attack by submarines was so great and so constant that nobody talked about it. Everybody simply carried out the regulation drill and obeyed the routine orders designed to make the best of a bad job if it should happen. Blackout precautions were of course, rigidly enforced; no smoking on deck; no lights of any kind. It was a matter of endless wonder to me that those huge ships could steam all night in pitch darkness, constantly changing course, rocked and buffeted by enormous waves, and yet keep perfect convoy order. I thought it must be possible only by fantastic mathematical calculation and synchronisation, until one of the ship's officers told me that they did it by simply keeping an eye on the ship in front! It seems that they could <u>see</u> the ship in front. I couldn't!

Of course no radio messages were sent from the ship. All communication was by Aldis Lamp signalling. Our signallers derived a lot of amusement from the interpretation of some of the messages, and had the honour of doing a spell of duty up on the bridge now and then.

The weather was only what is to be expected in the North Atlantic in mid-winter, we ran into a gale on the second day out, and high seas and mountainous waves were our lot for five and a half days. As we approached Gibraltar the wind abated and the sun appeared, strangely high in the sky. Off Gibraltar the convoy split, the larger part of it and nearly all the escort continuing south whilst our section went through the Straits, which we passed in darkness.

It was something of a relief to be in the calm water of the Mediterranean. The weather changed, too, and for two days we zig-zagged about a pale green sea under a clear blue sky. For the whole of one day the snow-clad peaks of the Sierra Nevada were visible to the north and north-west, apparently suspended in mid-air. To the south the North African coast was clearly visible only a few miles away. There was no relaxation, however, as regards precaution. The preceding convoy had lost a ship off Oran. The following convoy, we learnt later, did likewise.

Feb 1st.

Excitement mounted as we approached the magnificent harbour of Algiers, backed by the glistening city stretching along the curve of the bay and up the steep slopes behind it. Excitement gave way to impatience as we waited hours to get off the boat. By mid-afternoon we were all ashore, and soon installed in our temporary home as "guests" of the local G.O.R (Gun Operations Room). We are living in a new school building on a hill above the town; very crowded, very difficult to feed and wash, but better, we think, than one of the transit camps. The local French residents are most friendly and helpful in every way.

Feb 5th.

Algiers is a most attractive city to the eye; much less so to the nose! The houses rise up in terraces at all angles, all brightly coloured and set within trees, palm-trees predominating. It is in the main a French city, but there is a large Arab population, and one section, the Kasbah, is wholly Arab. This latter section is out of bounds to troops. Everywhere one goes there are swarms of very dirty little Arabs begging for pennies or chocolate or anything which one cares to give them. Food is scarce, and poverty everywhere apparent. We are able to obtain unlimited quantities of oranges, lemons, dates and figs at reasonable prices.

We are settling down nicely, though we do not expect to be here for very long. There are two classrooms, one above the other. We three officers sleep and dine in one corner of the lower room; the office is another corner; the kitchen another corner; the two sergeants sleep in the remaining corner; the middle of the room is the dining-room. The men sleep in the upper room. The inevitable gang of small boys have attached themselves to us. They cannot go to school because all schools are requisitioned and all teachers on active service But they are learning English all day long, and enjoying it.

Commodities are scarce. Some, such as soap, are non-existent. Eggs are plentiful, selling to the troops at sixpence each. Local wines are plentiful and cheap – and nasty.

Feb 8th.

Spent much of the day tramping the city from one administrative department to another seeking information and instructions about our move. Very warm work. By tea-time I was more than ready for a shower-bath. This consists in standing in the lavatory whilst an assistant pours a bucket of cold water over you. Primitive, but effective.

Our vehicles, all but one have arrived, along with the rest of the men. They have had a frightful voyage; rough seas, one submarine attack and three attacks by aircraft, with many casualties. They were lucky to arrive at all.

Feb 11th.

The vehicles are at last off the boat and safely in our hands. The time-wasting at the docks is infuriating to one as yet unaccustomed to the Arab tempo of working. I am kept busy with general organisation, Major B having gone forward on reconnaissance. My biggest worry is the stoves on which we have to rely completely for our cooking. They are an inferior imitation of the famous Primus; designed to burn paraffin, a commodity which does not exist here. They constantly fail to function because the petrol which we have to use in them is very dirty, leaving a thick carbon deposit when it burns. The cooks lose patience with them – who wouldn't? Yesterday I toured the town, taxing my own patience and my French vocabulary to the limit, trying to secure a few spare parts and a spanner to dismantle the wretched stoves.

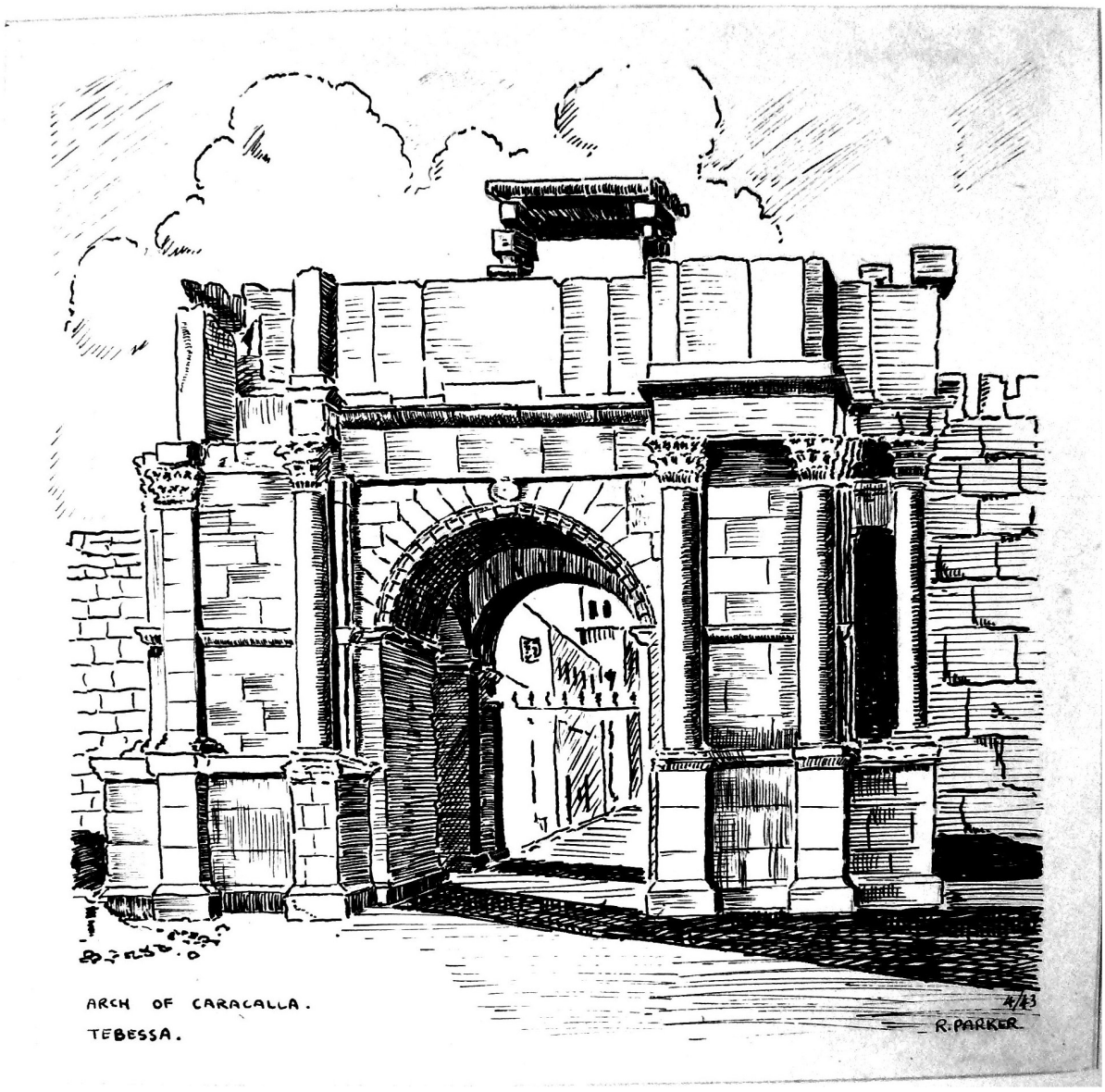
Feb 18th.

We left Algiers six days ago. I brought the vehicles and about a third of the men by road to Tebessa, some 500 miles nearer to the fighting area. The first day's travelling was most enjoyable, for the weather was fine and warm, and the road runs through some amazing scenery. About 30 kilometres from Algiers we left the coastal plain and entered a deep sandstone gorge which takes the road up on to the inland plateau, from the top of which one has a fine view of a clump of the Middle Atlas mountains rising to 8,000 feet and covered in snow. We camped that night in a deserted school on the edge of a small village. The next two days were bitterly cold and dull, with a sprinkling of snow. Our road ran straight and level across the plateau, with never a tree or bush in sight, relieved only by clusters of wretched hovels every ten kilometres or so, and a small town at about every sixty kilometres. Bare forbidding mountains formed the horizon on all sides. It was hard to believe that this reddish-grey country would be a green ocean of corn in two months time, yet the Arabs were everywhere putting in the seed, their oxen and primitive implements standing out starkly in this seeming wilderness.

We spent the second night at Constantine. The name, and glimpses of ancient buildings, reminded us that we were in what had once been a rich province of the Roman Empire. I would have liked to explore the city at leisure, if leisure there had been. The next day we reached Tebessa, where Major B was waiting for us. A day later Tony and the train-party arrived, cursing me good-humouredly for having lightened their baggage by taking their greatcoats by road. They had spent three freezing nights in the train, which, being fired with wood, had hardly enough heat to raise steam, and certainly none to spare for warming passengers. However, they had been able to get out at frequent intervals and run around to warm up.

After two days of strenuous work we are settled down and in action, for the first time in 6 months. Tebessa is a railhead and vital supply-base guarded by two batteries of heavy A.A guns operating under our control. We are in an American zone, about equidistant from the 1st and 8th Armies, and rather nearer to Rommel's Afrika Korps than we would like to be. It is frightfully cold. Fortunately we have secured excellent billets, equipped with water supply, electric light and fireplaces. The supply of wood will soon be exhausted. Coal does not exist here; it never did. That explains the absence of trees and the uncertainty of trains reaching their destination. Being on American rations, we are feeding very well.

We have made liaison with the local French troops, who have been vainly trying to do what we have come to do. Their system of observation and reporting seems to have been devised for the Franco-Prussian war, and little modified since then. A net-work of ground observation-posts covers the area, linked by land-line to a control centre. The lines do not work because the Arabs keep pinching the wire to put to some more useful purpose, such as mending carts and ploughs. The information which does get through is usually several hours late, especially when it concerns aircraft movement, and in any case it is unintelligible to us because, instead of using a quadrilateral grid for reference, the French use a spiral grid, modelled on the layout of the Paris arrondissements. Moreover, most of their observation-posts have now been overrun by the enemy, for Rommel has made an armoured thrust to the Kasserine Pass, about 40 kilometres to the south-east of us. Our liaison, therefore, is largely of a social nature.



Feb 20th.

Went into action for the first time today. Two Me. 109s came over low, and the guns had a crack at them, without effect.

Rationing has been switched from U.S. to R.A.S.C, to our disadvantage. The British Army rations are perfectly adequate, but rather dull and meagre compared to the American opulence. There are ways and means of supplementing the rations, however, thanks to our French allies. Today I secured 10 bottles of wine 14 lbs. of oranges, two loaves of bread and several pounds of fresh meat in return for 8 tins of bully beef, two tins of cheese, a tin of margarine and some cigarettes. Money is of little consequence here.

Had a look at the town this morning; fascinating mixture of Roman and medieval; the modern element looks quite incongruous. There is a fine basilica and a triumphal arch, whilst inside the walled town are little narrow streets swarming with Arabs more picturesque than those in Algiers, and not much dirtier. In the market there was little on sale except endless piles of dates. They looked rather unappetising, being hard and dry, but we soon acquired a taste for them, and found that they were not only excellent food but also very good medicine.

Feb 22nd

Forty-eight hours of rain has converted the area to a sea of mud, pale sticky mud which clings to everything. The rain is welcome, though, for it means the end of winter. Soon we shall have warm weather, such as we had in Algiers. Tony and I went for a ramble into the surrounding country yesterday. It is very dull; stretches of poor arable land backed by bleak mountains, covered for the most part by stones and boulders. Rosemary grows everywhere in great profusion.

On our way back to billets we escaped death by a few feet. Bullets whistled past our heads, and staccato rattle came to our ears as we flung ourselves flat in the mud. Another burst followed, not quite so close. Satisfied that it was not an enemy patrol which had somehow penetrated this far, we made for the nearest gun-site and tore a regulation strip off the sergeant who had allowed his men to relieve the monotony by a little target practice with a Tommy gun.

Once more the ration-system has changed. We are now on the U.S. Army Field Ration, which consists of two tins per man per meal per day. One tin contains a very good meat and veg. stew which merely requires hotting up. The other contains biscuits, sweets, coffee and sugar. Stew for dinner is all right. I don't much mind having the same stew for supper. But stew for breakfast!!!

Feb 24th

A lovely sunny day. The mud is drying rapidly. Today we received the welcome news, via the B.B.C., that the enemy's thrust at Kasserine, having penetrated to Feriana, some 25 miles away, has been beaten back with heavy loss to the enemy. Our plan to retire into the hills will not have to be put into operation after all.

We shall soon need more wine, for we have evolved a way of making it drinkable. We warm it gently in a mess-tin for about half and hour, then add sugar and the juice of orange or

lemon, stirring it for the last few minutes with a sprig of rosemary. Like that it makes a delicious nightcap, and a very good remedy for a sore throat.

Feb 27th

War is a strenuous business. This morning I went round the town trying to find the old lady who does our washing. When at last I found her, I learnt that she had not done the washing because she had no soap and no petrol for her stove. Back to billets to get soap and petrol for her. Then next door to make a contract with the good lady there to do our laundry next week. Then a visit to the French officers to barter cigarettes and margarine for wine, bread and potatoes. Followed two hours of sawing and chopping wood, then the return of the saw, along with the gift of a packet of cigarettes to ensure that it will be available again when wanted. The bribe was nearly rendered ineffectual by my tendering a packet of "Chelsea", which, along with "Camel", are the most despised of American cigarettes. Even the Arabs are learning to distinguish between real cigarettes and these awful things.

Tony and I went up into the hills to the east of the town to look for a suitable radar-site. We got so interested in the strange and beautiful plants now springing up everywhere, and in looking for fossils, flints and Roman relics, that we did not go very far, and, not surprisingly, failed to find a site.

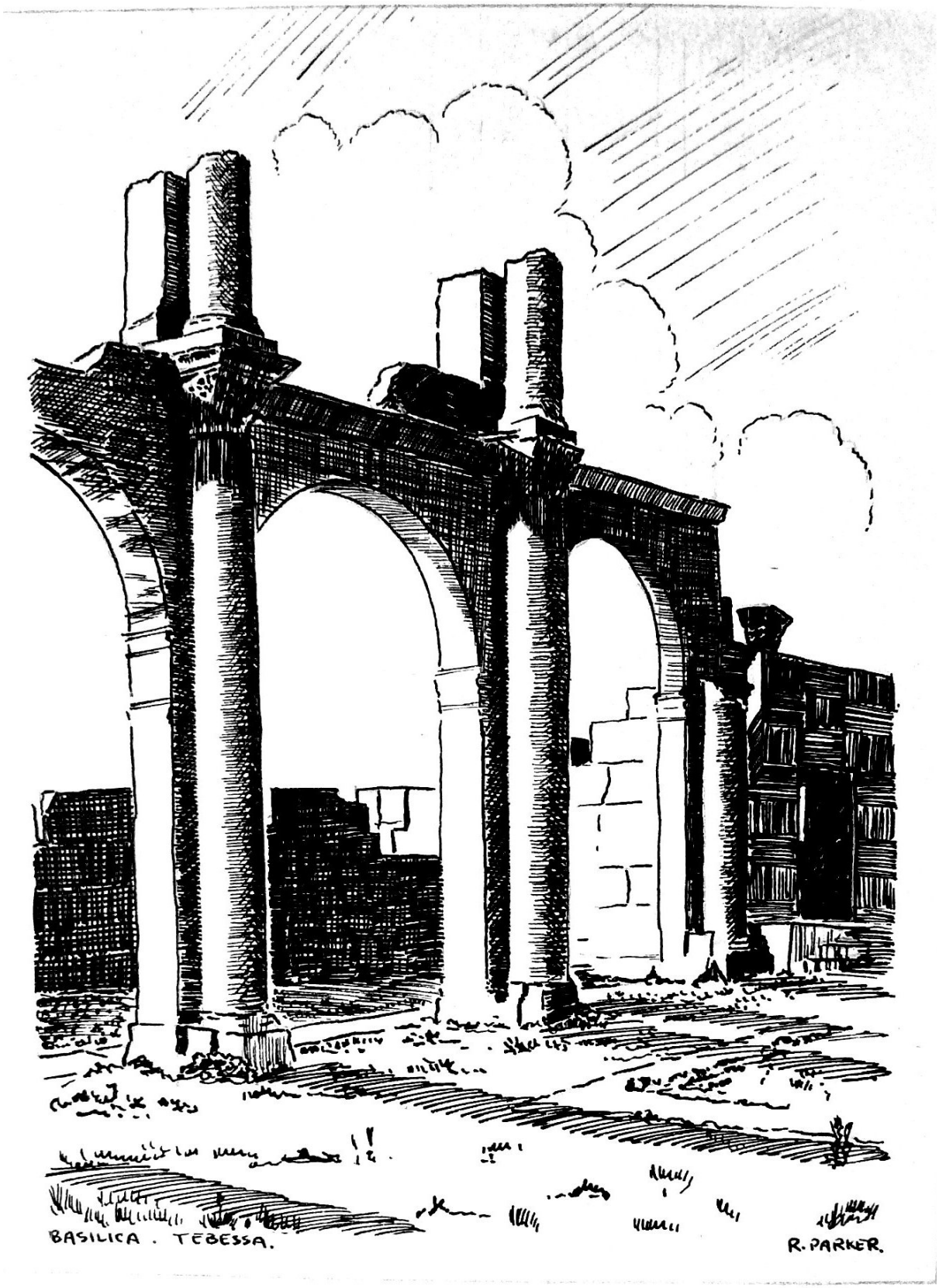
Mar. 2nd A visit to the nearest D.A.D.O.S dump at Souk Ahras, 80 miles away, yesterday resulted in a welcome increase in our essential supplies, including two extra blankets per man and a stock of razor blades, soap, etc. for the canteen. There is a rumour current among the French that 100,000 British troops have invaded the Continent. Which continent?

Mar 3rd

A man came along this morning from the municipal electricity department. He was very agitated because we had run a lead from the main, by-passing the meter, in order to fix up a light and radio in the N.C.O.s quarters. The mains supply is so low and intermittent, however, that a radio cannot be operated from it. So, ignoring the lead, the N.C.O.s were using some of our large stock of batteries, to keep them in condition and supply their power. When he saw this, the man accused us of charging our batteries from the mains. He failed to see any humour in my remark that it was more likely that his mains were being charged by our batteries.

I met a local Arab this morning who had served for fifteen years in the Army, mostly in France. He confirmed the impression I had already gained of the terrible poverty of the native populace, those who have not managed to get a job of a subordinate nature in the administration. The black market flourishes here as everywhere else; prices have increased fourfold for commodities of necessity. The wages of a ganger in charge of a team of labourers, which is the highest post that an Arab workman can obtain, amount to 30/- a month. A labourer gets half that amount.

Sensation was caused here today by the arrival of 50 French girls in uniform to act as typists and telephonists for the French General Staff. Well, that is what the French say they are for. The natives and the British troops have a different explanation.



Mar 5th

The men are showing signs of boredom. They begin to think about shops, cafes, cinemas, etc.

The first batch of mail arrived from home today; a dozen letters for the whole unit.

Mar 6th

Last night the monotony of life was rudely disturbed. A corporal of the R.E.M.E, staying with us temporarily, went to use the lavatory, which consists basically of a hole in a concrete floor. Not having met this type of convenience before, and bewildered at finding no seat, and literally in the dark, George struck a match to what was what. Major C. had paid a visit a few minutes previously, and had not flushed the thing as there was no water available just then. He had left a few pieces of paper in the trap which closed the hole. Corporal George dropped his lighted match on this paper – and there was a terrific explosion! Out jumped George with his trouser at half-mast, propelled by he knew not what invisible force. A second later there was another, more violent explosion. A five-gallon can of petrol had been standing on the concrete slab beside the loo. Now the concrete slab was no longer there. The petrol fell in the gaping hole and added fuel to the already raging inferno. When we arrived on the scene there was George, dazed and speechless, but alive, thank God! Using fire-extinguishers and shovelling earth on the flames, we put out the blaze in ten minutes. We then a unique opportunity to study this system of sanitation at unpleasantly close quarters. The cabinet was built directly over a large cess-pit, with no air vent, no opening at all except the trap in the middle of the floor. A goodly quantity of marsh-gas had been generated, and George had ignited it with his match. Everybody thought it was a huge joke, but when the next morning we saw in daylight the full extent of the damage, we felt thankful that a tragedy had been avoided, if only by pure chance.

Mar.8th.

We are now officially 52 A.A. Brigade G.O.R., B.N.A.F.

Rain is still the main feature of the climate. When the sun shines it is gloriously hot, but it has rained fully half the time we have been here. Everywhere is mud, mud, mud.

Mar. 12th.

Yesterday I had my first bath since leaving Algiers a month ago. A hot bath at that. I went with a party of men to Youks les Bains, a village about 15 miles to the west of Tebessa, where there are some natural hot springs which have been in use since Roman times. There are ample Roman remains in the vicinity of the baths, indicating a once thriving settlement. Now there is only the rough building erected over the springs; the modern village is about a mile away. There are two baths, each capable of holding six men at a time, leaving room to

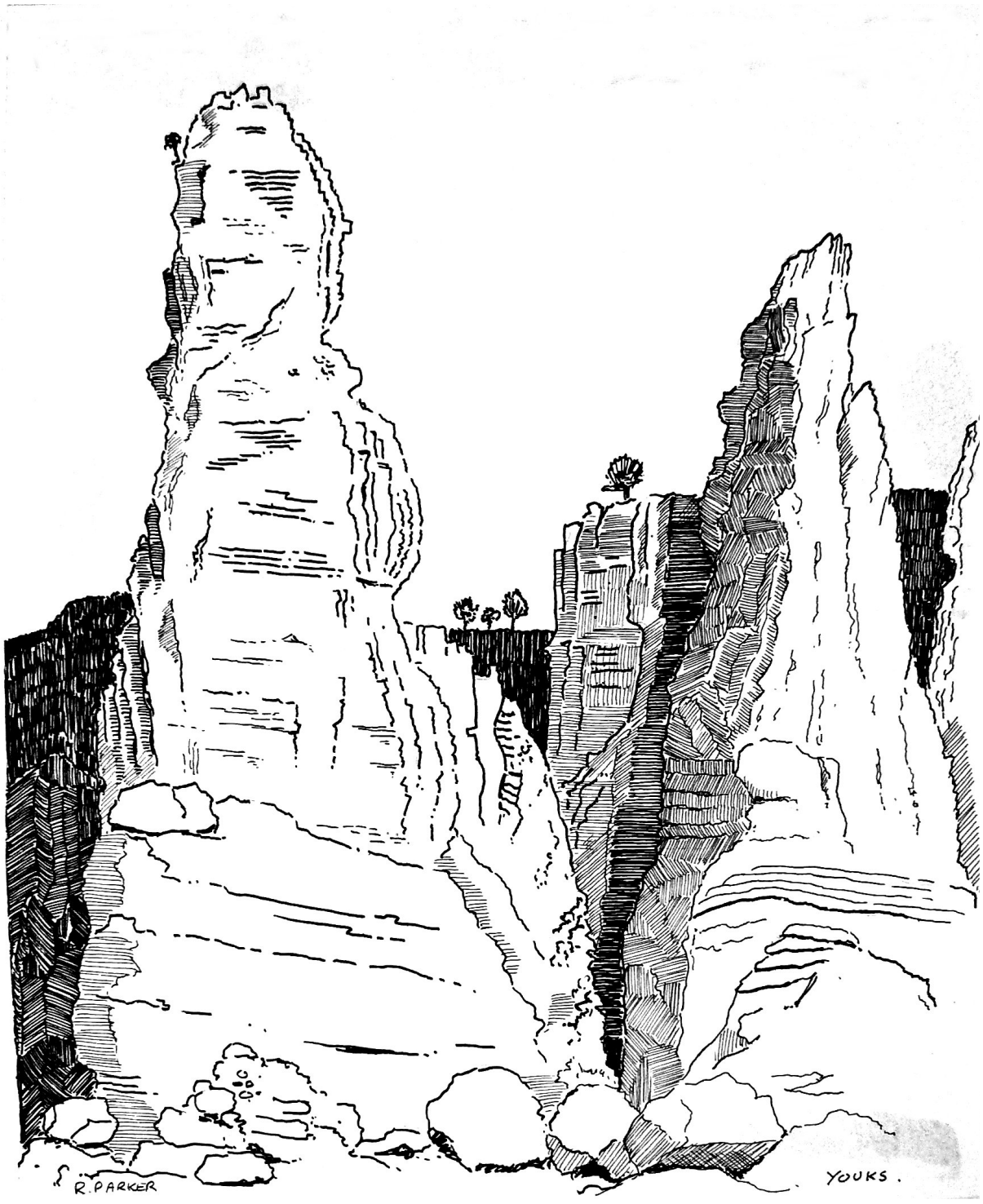
splash about. Clear warm water gushes from a huge tap, heated somewhere in the bowels of the earth.

Our old pal the Junkers 88 came over again this morning, for the fifth time. He broke his routine habit by coming before breakfast instead of at noon, but kept to his usual course and height, about 25,000 feet. By the time we had roused the guns he was out of range, but he sportingly came back to take some more pictures, and we put a few rounds on his tail without effect.

Mar.14th.

This morning we attended a church service in the ruins of the Basilica, the ancient Christian church built on the site of the grave of St. Crispina, martyred in 304 A.D. The church was in fact a magnificent cathedral, and incorporated a hostel to accommodate the many pilgrims who came to worship at St. Crispina's shrine, also stables for their horses. Its consecration was presided over by the great St. Augustine, then Bishop of Hippo (modern Bone), in 404 A.D. It was partially destroyed about 50 years later by the Vandals, and the destruction carried a stage further by the Moslems in the middle of the seventh century. A certain amount of restoration has been done recently by French antiquarian societies, and time has dealt kindly with the massive remains, as always in these semi-desert climes. Since about 500 A.D. there has been, so far as is known, no worship on this site until this morning, when about 200 British and American soldiers gathered amid the broken pillars and blocks of stone, wide open to the blue sky above, with a magnificent view of the green plain and rugged mountains beyond, to perform the simple Army service, led by a regimental padre. On the spot where stood the high altar of ancient days was placed a small wooden table covered with an army blanket, over which was a bright blue cloth embroidered with a cross of gold.

The only discordant note was struck by an American press photographer who hopped about like a monkey and shot the proceedings from every conceivable angle.



Mar.18th.

The men enjoy rambling and exploring as much as I do. The other day we went to Youks to explore a delightful gorge which terminates abruptly in a cluster of huge crags and rocky cliffs rising to some 300ft. Gazing upwards at the foot of the crags, where a clear stream bubbles out from a dark hole, one has the impression of looking at a mighty crumbling cathedral. As the sunlight reveals the various colours, strata and fissures in the rocks, a truly amazing effect is produced. The stream, despite its mysterious origin, is a jolly little stream, icy cold and crystal clear. We sat on the boulders beneath the fig trees and dangled our feet in

a pool, the bed of which was bright yellow. Further down the valley is an Arab village which has probably not changed at all in a thousand years. The natives are very shy and suspicious of strangers. With its masses of fruit trees in blossom, green grass in profusion, hives of bees and herds of funny little goats clambering all over the place, that valley is the most inviting corner of Africa I have yet seen.

Mar.23rd.

The sun has shone for the last few days. Though cold at night, it is so hot during the day that we shed nearly all our clothes. The natives think we are mad. I spend several hours a day sawing and chopping wood, having acquired about two tons of pine trunks by highly complicated but wholly legitimate means. Much of our wood-chopping has been on behalf of an aged French couple living next door. We borrowed their saw, and had it stolen, so decided that the least we could do was to saw their wood for them. At first they were reluctant to let us do it, because they had contracted with some Arabs to do it. They had bought ten quintals of wood, as the Arabs knew, and they said the Arabs would demand payment for chopping ten quintals, even if there was only half that amount to be chopped. Subsequent events proved the old couple to be quite right in their fears, so we told the Arabs to go to blazes, and sawed and chopped the whole lot ourselves.

We are aware that there is a war going on somewhere. Tanks roar along the road eastwards day and night. Squadrons of bombers with fighter escort roar overhead. Prisoners arrive in a steady stream to swell the crowd behind barbed-wire just down the road.

Our latest pet is a small tortoise which Tony found the other day. We have painted the First Army shield on his shell, and call him Eisenhower, with no intent of disrespect.

Mar.26th.

On another visit to Youks for a bath we took with us a little Arab boy who lives nearby. Ten years old, his name is Djillali; the men call him Charley. A few weeks ago he cut his foot; since he runs about all day barefooted in mud or dust, it is not surprising that the wound became badly festered. We took him to the U.S. hospital at Youks several times to have the wound dressed, and so averted the loss of his foot which at one time seemed inevitable. Since then he has attached himself to us with the devotion of a small dog. He is astonishingly bright, able to speak and write both French and Arabic, and by now a fair amount of English also. He is of constant use to us as an interpreter. His delight, when he jumped into the bath, knew no bounds. He jumped up and down and shrieked in ecstasy. We had to lift him out forcibly when it was time to go.

Eisenhower is becoming quite tame, and very excited now that we have found a companion for him. We think the companion is a lady tortoise. Developments are awaited with interest. Yesterday Eisenhower galloped all round the yard. Today he is resting.

Mar 30th

Had a party in the Mess last night with two American officers as guests; very nice fellows.

We were right about the other tortoise. It was very interesting and instructive.

April 4th

The countryside is rapidly changing its appearance. The plain looks fresh and green as the corn grows higher. Whole areas are a resplendent mass of flowers, marigolds predominating. Bird's nests are common, most noticeable being those of the storks which are to be seen in clusters wherever there is a group of tall trees.

April 8th

Instead of mud there is now dust everywhere. A strong cool wind picks it up and carries it all over the place. We eat dust, sleep in it, wash in it and smoke it.

April 10th

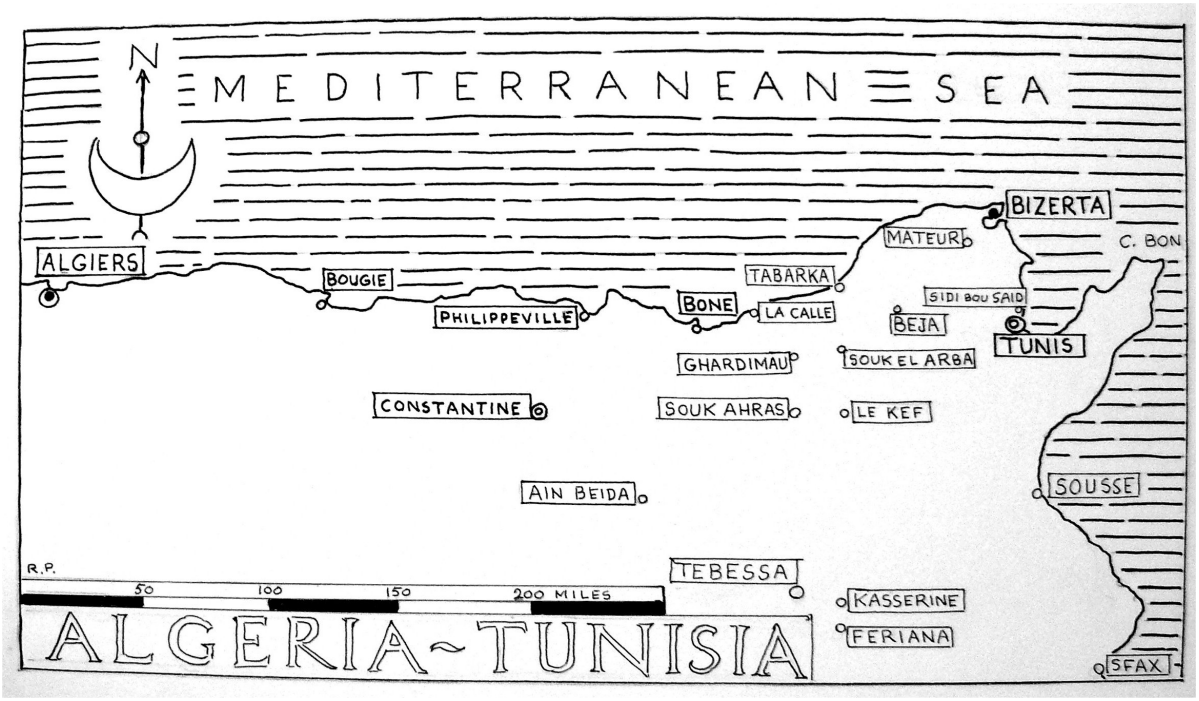
Alec and his party have at last turned up with the missing W/T vehicle, providing us with some work to do for a few days.

We have had our third anti-typhus injection, rather less painful than the previous two.

April 12th

Yesterday a party of us went to one of the valleys in the hills to the south. It is a gorge with steep rocky sides covered with trees and shrubs, along the bottom of which runs a little stream tumbling over rocks and forming deep pools of clear cool water. We bathed in one of these pools, splashing about naked like a lot of schoolboys. We went there again this afternoon, when the weather was even hotter and the water more delightful. After sunbathing on the rocks we walked up the river for a mile or so, then scrambled up the steep side of the gorge and returned through the pine-woods. We are not doing much to win the war, but at least we are keeping fit. The Eighth Army is doing its job. Sousse was taken yesterday. Any moment now the First Army will do its job. Tunis and Bizerta are ripe for picking.


GROTTO NEAR VINI BOK COVE — VIS.
R. PARKER. 10/44.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ALGERIA-TUNISIA

Chapter Two

TUNISIA

April 15th

.Our turn to advance came yesterday. Up at 5 a.m., on the road by 6.30,we had somehow managed to squeeze all the men and equipment into the lorries. Major B. rode the motor-bike until it began to fall to pieces after about thirty miles, then we had to load it on to an already overladen truck. To the discomfort of overcrowding was added that of dust, a fine white dust which hangs in the air like fog. Every vehicle, of which there are thousands on this road to the ports, throws up its own dust cloud. It settles on clothing, face and hands, and sticks there, so that after an hour or so you look like a snow-man. During the journey we crossed into Tunisia, covered 100 miles and landed up about 50 miles behind the First Army front at a spot just north of Le Kef, where we encamped in a pine-wood just off the road.

Right next to us are our old friends of the R.A.S.C. whom we had not seen since last October. They have made us feel at home. The men are living in a large marquee, we four officers in two small tents, one of which is mess, office and store-room combined. We have electric light and radio, two amenities which we never lack, and are very comfortable. It is good to wake up in the morning feeling fresh and alive, and, before even getting out of bed, to see a magnificent view bathed in sunshine.

On the main road an endless stream of tanks, guns and lorries is pouring past on its way to the front. It has been going on for days. The end must be very near for Rommel and his lot; one feels almost sorry for them, in a way.

April 17th.

I made a 70 mile trip yesterday in quest of stores, mainly tentage, and another of 50 miles today. Not much pleasure in this travelling; too much traffic, and the roads are wearing out fast. We got mixed up with a convoy of Eighth Army tanks, and received a lot of cheers intended for the “Desert wolves” until our First Army sign was noticed. The heat is increasing to the point of becoming unbearable after noon, though it is still very cold at night. Insect life is waking up; several scorpions have been seen and killed; we saw our first snake a few days ago; and we are about to launch a campaign against mosquitoes and malaria. We now have seven tortoises, the smallest being a tiny little chap no bigger than a penny. I have seen several rare and beautiful birds, including a cross-bill and a hoopoe. The insect freaks include grasshoppers four inches long and an ant 1½”. This district is a naturalist’s paradise.

April 20th.

Struck camp this morning and moved about 45 miles up the road, through Souk el Arba (Wednesday Market) and Souk el Khemis (Thursday Market) to a spot some seven miles north of Beja. As we came along we were amazed and delighted by the masses of brilliant colour in the landscape; whole fields and hillsides are covered in marigolds, carnations, poppies, convolvulus, thistles, irises, daisies and scores of other flowers, all of a bright colour, against a backcloth of rich green. I wish I could stop and paint.

We camped in an orchard of olive-trees surrounded by an enormous hedge of prickly pear, a sort of giant cactus with wicked spikes. This Arab farm has been deserted by its owner, and was occupied prior to our arrival by our own troops, previous to which, only a few weeks ago, it was in enemy hands. Piles of mines and ammunition have been left about the place. It is not very healthy. The farmhouse, which we are not using, is purely Arab in design, very solidly built, consisting of a series of low rooms constructed round an inner courtyard, with no windows at all in the outer walls. A defensive fortress, giving defence not so much against man as against the elements. The surrounding country is one huge expanse of cornfields, fields of wheat, barley and rye, already in ear and looking very well.

April21st.

My curiosity led me through a large bed of nettles at the back of the farm this evening. When I removed my anklets at bedtime a dark brown cloud arose from each, and I spent the next two hours killing fleas. I killed 74 fleas on my person, clothing and bedding before I got tired and fell asleep. In the morning I discovered that there had been 75 fleas, and that the 75th flea had not slept.

Earlier in the evening we had a spot of excitement concerning another sort of animal. On my return from neighbouring gun-sites I was informed by an excited gunner that a party of men had found and cornered a wild boar. Off I dashed, loaded revolver in hand, to be in at the kill. On reaching the spot, about a mile away, I learned that the boar had escaped. Several men, including the cooks armed with knives and axes, were still in pursuit. One of them returned to report that the boar had again been seen, with two young ones this time. The rest of the party, hot and disappointed, came back after about an hour. When I questioned them for more details, I began to have my suspicions about this wild boar. My suspicions were confirmed almost at once by the arrival of a very angry man on horseback. He was the owner of a nearby farm, a French colonial, and he wanted to know what the devil we thought we were doing, chasing his prize sow all over the countryside! Amid the voluble torrent of words, I was able to pick out references to bandits, brigands, litigation, compensation, and the like. Fortunately for us, the Arab boy who had been minding the pigs, fearful of the consequences of his neglect, made an error. Asked to identify the brigands whom he saw chasing the sow, he picked on a man who, I was quick to point out, had been on guard-duty for the past two hours. The cooks meanwhile kept well out of sight. The farmer vented his wrath then on the unhappy boy, and went away, on my suggestion, to interview a neighbouring American unit. He evidently made some impression there, for soon afterwards three American officers arrived in a Jeep and a cloud of dust and demanded to know what the hell we meant by accusing them of stealing pigs.

April 22nd.

I called the cooks together early this morning, commended their zeal in trying to secure for us a supply of fresh pork, and explained briefly the outstanding differences between a wild boar and a tame but terrified sow.

April 26th.

The fleas at the farm were just too much for us. One laddie, a Scot, whose blood was evidently to their liking, was being eaten as he slept. Two days ago we moved forward about five miles into open country. We are now camped in an old graveyard, the nearest thing to a field that we could find, without actually camping in a standing crop of corn, as many units have done. Artillery shells are bursting on the ridges to the north-east of us, about five miles away.

April 27th

After three nights sleeping in the open or beneath vehicles, we are now more comfortable, having at last got our bivouac tents. These are small ridge tents which just hold two men lying down. They are very light, can be erected in a few minutes and have mosquito-proof curtains. Before getting into bed, however, one has to remove an assorted collection of beetles, snails, ants, etc. Every square foot of this country swarms with insects and strange animals. The other day I encountered a crab in the middle of the road. Today one of the men caught a beautiful green lizard, about fifteen inches long.

We are fairly busy now, being operational once more, though not quite sure what our guns are supposed to be protecting. My main concern is the preparation of maps and apparatus to be used at Bizerta, which we now know for certain to be our objective.

May 1st

The enemy still has a sting in his tail. Two Me. 109s dive bombed and machine-gunned a tank concentration half a mile distant yesterday. Then three FW 190s came stooging around, very low. Every gun in the area opened up, after they had gone.

May 4th

Mateur has been taken; our forces are only 12 miles from Bizerta. We no longer hear the guns.

I went for a stroll today and watched a team of four oxen being used to reap a crop of hay.

May 6th

Yesterday at breakfast a message arrived from Brigade H.Q. It was in cypher. Having no key to the cypher, we had to send to the nearest R.H.Q. to get the message decoded. It was an order to prepare to move immediately. We got busy on the job of dismantling and packing; Major B. went off to Bde. H.Q. for further instructions. On the way there he had a crash, skinned his arm badly and burst a tyre. He did not return until mid-afternoon. We were all ready to move when a truck arrived from Brigade Signals H.Q. to collect a radio. Getting this one item meant half unpacking one of the vehicles, and held us up for an hour. We eventually got away at 4pm.

Moving our outfit is rather more difficult than it sounds, and much more difficult than Brigade H.Q. realises. We are "mobile", it is true, but the word is misleading. We have 42 men, a huge amount of stores in the way of radios, batteries, line equipment, etc., and only four vehicles to carry the lot. We manage it by packing right up to the roof, hanging things on the sides and underneath, and putting at least four men on top of each vehicle in addition to those inside. It has one advantage in that we can always pick out our own vehicles on a crowded road, but its very unpleasant for the roof passengers on the dusty stretches.

Always on the look-out for supplementary transport, we had picked up, at the Arab Farm, an abandoned Humber. The engine was out of action, but it had four wheels, and we had a tow-rope. My truck was towing the Humber, with four men on board. After a few miles on the road, as we were descending a steep hill, I was startled to see a car wheel flash past us. The Humber now had only three wheels. The men were shaken, but unhurt. We ditched the Humber and carried on, leaving two men behind to guard the cargo. After a few more miles one of the men lost his helmet, and we had to turn back half a mile to find it. Then my hat flew off and sailed down-wind, involving another delay. Soon afterwards we were halted again by frantic shouts from the rear. One of the tents, part of our bulky cargo, had caught fire. Whilst the men tugged frantically at ropes and wire and sought to remove the 20 gallons of petrol which we were carrying, I beat the flames with my hands. A passing lorry driver came to the rescue with his fire-extinguisher and finished off the job. One tent badly burnt; a few blisters on my hands; it might have been much worse.

Having imposed a strict ban on smoking, we continued. A few miles further on Alec, riding the motor-bike, got a puncture in his back tyre. We pumped it up and carried on. Once more the tyre went flat. We abandoned the bike, to be collected later. At sunset we had covered about 50 miles and had passed Sedjenane, but were nowhere near our destination. So we decided to bivouac for the night, choosing a spot by a stream at the edge of a wood. The stream was the abode of thousands of bull-frogs which croaked loudly all night and kept us awake until after midnight, when Alec arrived with the men and stores stranded on the road. Quite a day!

Up at 5 a.m. this morning, packed up again, and moved on. The road soon took on the appearance of a battle-field. Every few yards there was a shell crater, the wreck of a burnt out tank or vehicle, a small cluster of freshly dug graves, each surmounted by a black or white wooden cross and a helmet, a pile of shells or shell-cases, evidence of the grim fight along this road. The First Army has had a mean role to play in this great military drama; they have had to advance through terrain which gave no scope for brilliant manoeuvre, along a road which is nothing but one long series of natural ambushes, every bend of which had to be fought, and taken at terrific cost. We do not begrudge the Eighth Army their glory and the lion's share of the limelight, but let it be remembered that the First Army was also there.

At every bend there are craters where mines have been exploded, piles of neutralised mines by the roadside, neat holes in the road from which the mines have been lifted – we hoped. Several times we were held up whilst the Sappers exploded mines ahead of us. They make a hell of a bang.

At 9.30 a.m. we reached Sidi bou Zitouna, about eight miles from Mateur. We are said to be just within enemy artillery range, so have to dig trenches in which to take cover if need be. The digging operations brought to light many scorpions and a few snakes. It is a wonder that more was not turned up, for we are encamped once more in an ancient graveyard. Somebody's artillery is making a lot of noise not far away.

May 9th

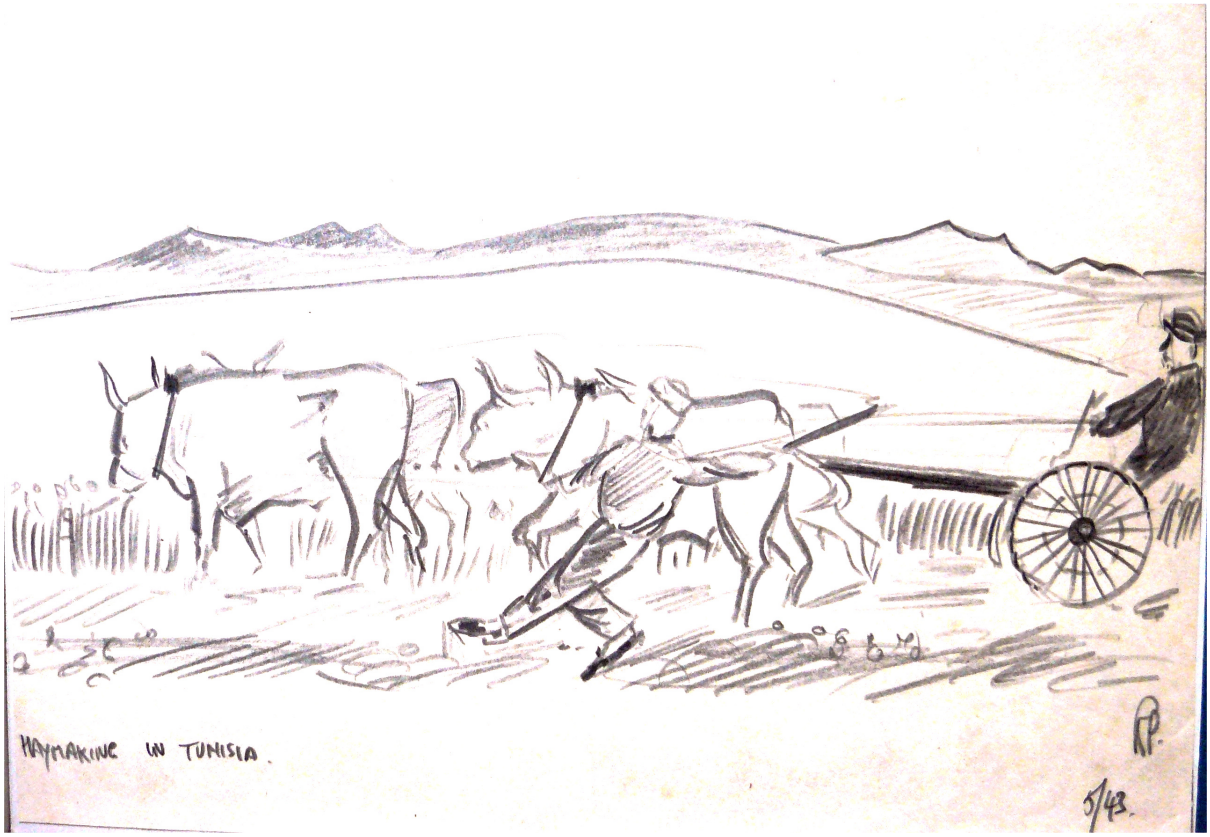
It has rained most of the time we have been here. It was raining heavily and pitch dark when at 4 a.m. we got orders to move. Sleepy incredulous men were roused from their tents, gear packed, a breakfast of sorts hastily consumed, and we proceeded to get the vehicles on the road. The overloaded Austin became bogged down in the mud, taking an hour of frantic effort to get it clear.

At Mateur we encountered lots of German prisoners who had just been brought in. A number of Italians surrendered to us, but we had no room and no time for them; we indicated to them that they could go on walking. After Mateur the road became less and less crowded. Beyond Ferryville we had it all to ourselves, and revelled in the glory conferred upon us by a cheering populace who rushed out to see us go by. Apart from a few abandoned guns, and one solitary dead German by the roadside, there was no sign of a battle. The road was not even mined, fortunately. At Sidi Ahmed airfield a dozen Ju.52 transports, some intact, were strewn around. And so we came to Bizerta. Major B., Alec and six men had gone ahead in the W/T truck to reconnoitre. At the edge of the town we came upon the truck halted beside the road, the occupants crouched in a ditch. It seems that they had been bowling merrily along when, a quarter of a mile ahead, they had come under fire from an enemy gun on the far side of the Goulet, a range of some 2000 yards. About a dozen rounds had been fired, but only one had hit the truck, and little damage was done apart from burst tyres. They beat a hasty retreat, lacking any means of retaliation.

Shells were still bursting uncomfortably near, so we all turned round and took cover in an olive grove a mile further back. We discovered later that one of our L.A.A. batteries had continued their advance and had taken up their positions under fire, returning the fire with interest. They were the first allied troops to enter the town, apart from a recce. party the previous night. I don't suppose that it was intended that A.A. troops should capture the final objective in this way.

An order had been issued stopping all entry until the enemy artillery on the south side of the lake has been silenced, but that order did not reach us until several hours later. We withdrew still further out, and ate a much-needed lunch by the road-side. Then Brigade H.Q. arrived, and we were ordered to move in again. Once more we parked in our olive grove. I had a shave and a nap in the sunshine. About tea-time it was decided that we should postpone our triumphal entry, as the Americans had moved up some heavy artillery and a duel was about to commence.

So we retreated to ten miles out, found a pleasant farm hidden away in the hills, and camped among the vineyards and cornfields. The local inhabitants were not quite sure whether we were German, French, Italian, American or British. When they learned our identity they showed great enthusiasm, hoisted the French flag and told us where some Italians were in hiding. We did not feel like capturing any Italians just then. We had captured Bizerta; that was enough for one day. Anyway, it was supper-time. We told the French to go and capture the Italians themselves. That night we slept beneath the stars.



May 10th.

This morning we rejoined Brigade H.Q. and drove into Bizerta at top speed. The artillery duel had not been necessary. By late afternoon we had established our position, and a few hours later we were in action. My hands are blistered from digging. We hold a magnificent position on the very edge of the town, overlooking the bay and the harbor.

May. 12th.

The guns are lively. One enemy plane has been shot down; several Beaufighters have had a sharp reminder that this is a G.D.A. i.e. a Gun Defended Area, into which al1 aircraft, friendly or otherwise, enter at their own risk.

This morning I took a party of a dozen men down to the beach less than a mile away. We stripped naked and plunged into the green-blue waters of the Med. This first bathe was sheer joy. Words cannot express the sensation of purification and balm which it brought to dirty bodies and overwrought minds.

May 13th.

Unconditional surrender of the remaining enemy forces announced today; over 200,000 prisoners. The North African victory is complete.

Now it is our turn. We have played no part in the victory; we had no part to p1ay. Our role only begins when the victory is won.

Chapter Three

G.O.R. BIZERTA.

May. l4th.

Today we moved into the house, in whose grounds we have been camping and operating. It gives us more comfort and better protection from shell splinters.

Most exciting incident so far has been the arrest of two Algerian soldiers who were going systematically through the nearby Arab village demanding money and threatening violence to the natives on the grounds of alleged collaboration with the enemy. We saved the life and possessions of one man, who is now quite willing to become our slave. I wonder who started this nonsense about collaboration. Ordinary people, like these Tunisians, have no choice but to collaborate with the occupying power; they had collaborated with the Germans; now they would collaborate with us.

May 17th.

After a month under canvas it is rather strange to have brick walls about us again. There is no glass in any of the windows, and the doors do not close, but the house is ideal in this hot weather. Anti-malaria precautions are strictly enforced; at night our beds are draped in long white nets. We are wearing tropical kit -- K.D. (Khaki drill) as it is called officially - and can get our knees brown at last. Bathing is now a regular daily feature for those not on duty. We have spent practically no money for two months, and not likely to yet awhile; the nearest shops are in Tunis.

May.21st.

Got away from work for a while and went by car with the Brigade I.0. to have a look at the country south of the lake, having crossed the Chenal by ferry. The country is wild and barren, not very interesting; littered with thousands of tanks and vehicles abandoned by the enemy. We found a lovely sandy cove where we bathed and had a picnic lunch, undeterred by the presence of a beached steamer with dead bodies on board and a yellow flag hanging limply from the yard as a warning of typhus.

Sight-seeing in Bizerta is out of the question. What was once a picturesque town is now little more than a mass of rubble. There is hardly a single building which does not bear the marks of bombing, whilst half the houses have been wholly destroyed. The “precision bombing” of the U.S. Air Force was a bit wide of the target at times; not all the time, however. They did destroy the harbour installations. And what the Allies left undestroyed, the Germans destroyed before they left. They rendered the inner harbour unusable by the simple expedient of blocking the Chenal with three scuttled ships. The removal of these latter has begun; it involves a lot of explosive.

May 26th.

Several enemy aircraft made a half-hearted attack at 4 a.m. The first one in, a Ju.88, was engaged by one site with one salvo and brought down; the best bit of shooting ever. A

Beaufighter bagged another. The rest turned tail. No damage done. We have shaken the enemy's morale.

I fired my revolver for the first time the other day; killed a 3-foot snake with one shot at a range of two feet!

June 1st.

Life is pleasant, despite insect-bites and flies. I am busy drawing a new plotting map and helping with preparations for the transfer of the Ops. Room to the house, which has been reinforced with huge baulks of timber and protected by a wall of sandbags.

Two enemy raids in the last week. Seven aircraft shot down; four one night, three the next.

June 11th.

Now that the weather is really hot, flies swarm about the place in millions.

We take all possible precautions, such as keeping food covered, making the latrines fly-proof, boiling all water before drinking, disinfecting everything, spraying everything with insecticide. But still we get sores and stomach upsets.

June 14th.

By way of a change we went for our daily bathe to the northern coast about ten miles away. It was terrifically hot in the valley leading down to the beach, but a warm breeze was blowing across the sand; a lovely creamy-yellow sand so delightful to lie on. The water was an incredible mixture of blues and greens; so warm; so clean. We shouted and yelped and laughed in sheer enjoyment.

June 17th.

Had a trip to Tunis today with Major. B. and a party of men. Quite enjoyed the 40-mi1e journey, in spite of bumpy roads, dust and American drivers. Not much of interest on the way, except the contrast in harvesting methods, now in full swing. In one place the Arabs were cutting their corn with sickles and threshing it by driving oxen round and round the threshing-floor, just as they did when the Romans were masters here. On the next farm two combine-harvesters were at work!

On reaching Tunis I walked around for an hour in the hope of doing some shopping. My wants were limited to a pipe, a book and a present of some kind to send home to my wife. What a hope! There are shops in Tunis, sure enough; thousands of shops. Three out of every four are closed, bolted and barred. Of the rest, more than half are empty. Those which are open, regardless of what kind of shop it is supposed to be, all sell the same things: silver rings, worth about 9d., selling at £1; silver brooches, worth perhaps 2/6, selling at £3; sandwiches of dry bread, tomato and cucumber, selling at 2½d. and doubtless worth it if you are very hungry; lemonade at 6d. a glass, with heaven knows how many germs included free; sandals made of rag and straw, worth nothing and costing 4/-; and, finally, odd articles of fancy clothing and a few atrocious pictures. The Kasbah and souks, the only part of the city with any character, are out of bounds to troops. The modern Tunis has no attractions whatever. It smells abominably. The “marvellous” women which the men raved about on a previous visit turned out to be a lot of painted prostitutes, no doubt plying a thriving trade.

In the afternoon the Major and I with two of the men went to have a look at Carthage and other places on the coast to the north, where the scenery is very pleasant. We had a bathe, in a roughish sea, which almost ended in tragedy. I was so engrossed in my enjoyment of the freshness and clean warmth of the water that I failed to notice that an undertow was carrying me rapidly out to sea. Only my constant practice of the past month, and a determination not

to end my life in such a ridiculous manner, enabled me to keep going until I reached a ledge of rock where I could regain my breath before coming ashore in easy stages.

On the way back to Bizerta we were held up to allow H.M. the King to go by on his way to the villa where he was staying the night before the victory Parade in Tunis tomorrow. To us it was just another convoy, with staff-cars and hordes of Military Police. There was a mild thrill at seeing the Royal Standard fluttering on the bonnet of a car, and having a glimpse of a rather bored-looking officer inside. We saluted, of course. He was probably as anxious about his supper as we were about ours.

June 24th.

We are all getting very brown. My own tan is enriched by liberal anointing with olive oil, a precious commodity supplied by our Arab friend “Chunky”. His wife does the laundry for us, and he is reluctant to accept any payment, because of the service we rendered him. So we supply him with plenty of soap and an occasional tin of bully beef or pilchards. Chunky junior, a little boy of twelve years, practically lives with us, and is of great service to us in a score of ways.

June 26th.

Over 70 enemy aircraft attacked a convoy to the east of us today; attack broken up by our fighters, who shot down seven of the raiders.

June 29th.

The enemy is keenly interested in what goes on here; keeps coming to have a look, and an occasional attempt to stop what is going on. Being on night duty inevitably means a night of duty; no use even trying to get any sleep. I have got into the habit of sleeping only two nights out of three, and restoring jaded spirits by a bathe and a long rest on the beach.

July 2nd.

Relations with the R.A.F. are getting a bit strained, which is a pity. It seems we keep putting a few rounds on the tail of the Beaufighters - not deliberately, of course. but this in an I.A.Z. - Inner Artillery Zone - absolutely forbidden to all aircraft after dark. It is not always possible for a pilot to know exactly where he is; or for the gunners to know exactly what their target is. Electronic gadgets are all very fine, but they sometimes fail to work.

July 4th.

Went to see the M.O. to have my ears washed out; too much bathing. Great chunks of wax and dirt were removed. I can now hear so well that the sound of someone writing a letter disturbs me.

Last night a fighter chased his quarry into the I.A.Z. and made a kill. We kept our fingers off the triggers. Later we made desperate efforts to save a crippled Wellington; it crashed in a garden at Ferryville; all the crew were safe.

Had our first taste of the sirocco today; a hot dry wind blowing out from the Sahara laden with fine dust; most unpleasant.

July 6th.

The sirocco was at its worst today; at least, I hope this is its worst! The shade temperature rose to well over 100. Sweat rolled from every pore as we sat or lay gasping in the shade. The dust penetrates everywhere.

Early this morning we had our biggest and best raid so far; it lasted for an hour, providing a most thrilling spectacle. Very little damage was done. The guns shot down six enemy aircraft and the fighters bagged one.

Excitement grows as we see the preparations nearing completion for an invasion. We are not supposed to know what or where is to be invaded, but it can only be Sicily or Italy. Hundreds of ships and landing-craft are assembling in the lake and the Goulet; every yard of ground for miles around is swarming with American troops, guns and vehicles.

July 7th.

The Luftwaffe seems to be as interested in that concentration of shipping as we are. They had another go at it this evening, and lost five of their aircraft to our guns. One small ship was sunk. The guns and searchlights are doing a really magnificent job.

July 8th.

All day ships have been passing through the Chenal and out into the bay to form up for the move-off. At dusk the lake was empty. The invasion has begun.

July 11th.

We expect a slack time now, having very little under our wing. This place is beginning to pall on me. I find myself hating the dusty barren hills, the glaring white houses, the filthy natives whom I once thought picturesque, the flies, the smells, the heat. Our rations are not as good as we would wish. Maybe we are all a bit browned-off. Maybe it's a reaction from the excitement and activity of the last few weeks.

July 20th.

Last: Sunday morning we set out - Alec, Sgt. S., Driver W. and I - On what was for me the longest journey for many months, the object of which was to collect a generator from Bone. Leaving Bizerta behind us with some relief, we soon reached Ferryville, passing many P.O.W. cages, the most striking evidence of Allied victory. These cages are simply large camps of small tents, closely packed and surrounded by barbed wire. The inmates look very healthy and happy, and seem to require but little vigilance on the part of their guards. They are set to work on road-making, unloading ships, issuing rations and stores, generally relieving the Allies of hard work.

By dusty worn-out roads we came to Mateur, once attractive little town which now, like so many others, bears the ugly scars of battle on its white walls. Then along that grim road through Sedjenane to Djebel Abiod which saw our rapid advance in early May. It is changing already. Much of the scrap-iron and abandoned ammunition has been cleared away, salvaged for further use. Many of the gaping holes have been filled in. Nature is winning back the scene, as always. But it is still a wicked road. Again we were reminded of the frightful task which had confronted the unhonoured and unsung First Army. In one place lay ten burnt-out Bren-carriers, all within a quarter of a mile, testifying to the hopelessness of trying to rush a position. At lunch-time we halted off the road, seeking what shade the dusty trees had to offer, and enjoyed cold spam and grapefruit, with a mug of hot tea from the two-gallon flask which always accompanies such excursions.

The scenery gradually changed as we passed westwards into Algeria. It was still mainly of hills, but less rugged and more thickly wooded as we neared the coast. In many places the sand had blown in from the shore, a distance of several miles, to form enormous dunes of a bright orange colour which blended well with the dark green of the forests of oak. Not the English oak, but a small evergreen type which is cultivated for its bark. The bark is in fact cork, and the basis of a thriving industry. It is stripped from the trunk as high as the first branch, once every four years, and stacked in large piles to dry and weather before being processed.

We struck the coast road at Tabarka, a little fishing-village nestling in a cove, its tiny harbour protected by an islet of rock rising sheer from the sea about 150 yards from the beach. This islet, surmounted by the remains of an old castle which could doubtless tell many tales, if it could speak, of Barbary corsairs, piracy and slavery, reminds one of .St. Michael's Mount. Looking down on the scene from the high road along the cliffs; the strip of golden sand, the red-roofed villas snug amongst green trees and shrubs, the incredibly blue sea -- I could not help but think of summer holidays.

The cliff road soon became a mountain road. Looking back from time to time, we had magnificent views of the coast for many miles. The misty shape in the middle of the blue was the Island of Galite. Soon the view was narrowed by dense woods on each side of the road, and obscured by the thick clouds of dust which rose up from our wheels. The road surface got worse and worse. We decided that at all costs we would return by a different route. The noise of the lorry was drowned every now and then by a strange twittering-screeching sound which baffled me, until I realised that it was the song of the cicadas; thousands of the little devils sitting in the trees, rubbing their hind legs together. What for? Just sex.

After La Calle we left the coast and went along the fringe of the narrow coastal plain. There are several very attractive villages here, one in particular with storks perched on the little church and on every roof. At another place we saw a flock of more than twenty storks all together. The landscape takes on a more prosperous, more inhabited appearance. Apart from one large expanse which looked like a thousand-acre field of ripe corn until we were near enough to see that it was a dried-up lake, the district is wholly farms and vineyards. This is one of the big wine-producing areas of Algeria, and a pleasant sight it is to see the lush green vines in neat rows, their fruit just beginning to turn to a rich purple. It is sad to reflect that it will only produce a rather inferior red wine; but a bottle of that same wine would have been very welcome to us just then.

The other main crop is tobacco. Smallish fields of an equally pleasant though lighter green, looking very much like overgrown lettuces. The tobacco harvest has already begun. At every farm and house, in almost every field, are to be seen long rows of drying frames, on which the leaves are suspended to dry and mature in the sun, a process which in this climate takes about a week. The leaves change colour rapidly from bright green to a rich brown. One sees the whole range of colour on one frame -- an artist's subject if ever there was one.

At about 5 p.m. we reached Bone, a beautifully-situated little port on a wide bay backed by mountains. You could step out of the main street straight on to a ship. At this time of day we could arouse no interest in our affairs on the part of officialdom, so we went a few miles out of the town to enjoy the hospitality of the G.O.R., then retired early to sleep in the truck, with the sky for a roof. We needed little in the way of bedding except our mosquito-nets. As soon as the sun goes down, out come the little winged pests. The attack goes on all night. The last thing one hears before falling asleep is the high-pitched hum of the female anopheles eager for blood. This is one of the worst regions in Africa for malaria. In spite of all the care taken, or because insufficient care has been taken, thousands of cases have occurred. The worst feature of these insects is that, whilst they can breed and live where man cannot live, they prefer to frequent the places where man can best live.

Next morning we were up soon after sunrise. It was warm even then, with promise of a scorching day to come. After breakfast and a spell of shopping in Bone - where our purchases were limited to a dozen combs, some ink and two books - we headed southward, past Arab-laden carts, past groaning omnibuses, into the country of vine-clad slopes, white farmsteads and rows of palm-trees. Reaching the place where we had to collect our generator, we spent three hours in enquiries, form-filling and waiting in the blistering heat before it was finally lifted into the lorry by a gang of sweating, cursing Italians.

Away once more, still southward, with the Sirocco blowing in our faces. Soon the land of green was left behind, and the landscape became rocky, parched, forbidding, but more and more grandiose. I stood up in the back and removed my shirt in an effort to convert the

Sirocco into a cool breeze. I quickly cooked and turned several shades browner in a few hours. Every bit of metal became too hot to touch. I had a blister on my leg before I realised this. The scenery became wilder, the road more exciting, winding round the edge of steep precipices and wooded gorges, with wide views of mountains shimmering in the haze. For two hours we had the road to ourselves, when we ran into the middle of a big U.S. convoy. After getting almost clear of it we had a temporary breakdown and fell back into it. The journey ceased to be a joy-ride; it became a nightmare.

We reached Souk Ahras at about 5 p.m. This is no longer the bustling military metropolis that it was a few months ago. Not a brass-hat to be seen. It is once more a picturesque little market-town in the mountains. We stopped for a desperately needed drink – several, in fact - consisting of a mixture of red wine, orange-juice and iced water, and filled up our water-bottles before leaving. We then turned eastwards. The U.S. convoy was again encountered, and again shaken off. For several miles we climbed steadily, to a height of some 5000 feet. The road was one long succession of hairpin bends, clinging precariously to the side of the mountains, with always on one side a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. We were going along the top of the Medjerda Mountains, the road taking us first to one side then the other, with fantastic panoramic views either way. Mountains upon mountains, as far as the eye could see; hundreds of rocky peaks, bleak and barren for the most part, with a few sparse woods of stunted trees here and there. Only in the valleys was there a hint of living colour. The rest was scorched and crumbling in the heat. As the shadows lengthened the distant slopes took on a more romantic yet more frightening aspect.

For fifty miles this went on, fifty miles of mountains, with never a village or town, scarcely a house even, only here and there a small hut with its lonely inhabitants and their meagre flocks of sheep and goats. From time to time we glimpsed the river Medjerda, or rather its bed; for there was no river, only occasional pools of stagnant water, the remaining vestiges of a mighty torrent which will only come to life again with the rains of next winter. I have often noticed bridges and viaducts built hundreds of feet above what looks like a dry gully, illustrating the lesson learnt by engineers, namely that one must build not for the three hundred days in the year when no rain falls , but for the few days when it does rain.

At last the trees began to appear more green and more numerous, and the view ahead opened out to a broad valley with the river winding through it. A steep descent brought us to the little town of Ghardimaou, looking like the last outpost of civilisation. We stopped at the water-point to have our last meal before dark, and to have a wash. To peel off one's shirt and splash the body with cold water is one of the joys of life in this country. As we consumed our bully-beef, cold potatoes, bread and cheese and cold tea, a crowd of Arab children collected around us. Their fascinating roguish aspect did not hide the fact that they were half-starved. We gave them scraps of bread and meat, which they shared out amongst themselves and devoured with obvious relish. A full moon was due to appear at about 11 p.m., and we were still in a malarial area, so we decided to push on, rather than bivouac for the night.

I took the wheel for an hour or so. It was quite dark as we rattled through Souk el Arba and headed for Souk el Khemis. This stretch of road earned the name of "Messerschmitt Alley" from the frequency of enemy air-attacks on our convoys earlier in the year. Alec took over the driving; my eyes would not stay open. We met many U.S. trucks with headlights blazing, their drivers intent on sticking to the centre of the road. Beja looked ghostly in the starlight; lights in the windows told that the populace had returned; where from, I wouldn't know. From the brow of a hill above Medjez el Bab we were intrigued to see down in the valley a

long winding line of yellow lights. Another U.S. convoy, we thought. But it was too snake-like, and not moving. Then we realised that it was a grass fire. We had already seen several, and the aftermath of many more; by day all you see is a big cloud of white smoke rising slowly from a blackened area of scrub. By night you see only the long line of flame creeping steadily forward. Such fires are daily happenings; no one bothers much about them - they may even be started deliberately. They burn themselves out eventually and do little damage; may even do some good, by destroying some of the insects.

We bumped and rattled on in the moonlight. The generator seemed to be making frantic efforts to leap out of the truck. I had another spell of driving as we turned northwards, on a road which was first-class compared with those we had traversed all day. The air was pleasantly cool; but we were desperately tired.

On the last few miles into Bizerta we passed numerous carts laden with goods and humanity, evidently on their way to market; they carried no lights; doubtless they put their trust in Allah, and Allah kept my eyes skinned. At long last, somewhere around 3.30 a.m., we rumbled through the familiar gap in the prickly-pear hedge which is our front gate We had done 420 miles in 42 hours. After a long cool drink of lime juice, we staggered to our beds.

July 3rd.

We have found a new spot for bathing; a rocky cove near Cap Bizerte, some five miles northward up the coast. It has the great advantage that one can dive from the rocks into deep water; also that we are not troubled by the presence of American nurses. Not that we ever were troubled; only bathing-trunks do not form part of our equipment, and the American men were getting agitated at the sight of our nudity. Jealousy, I suppose.

July 25th.

Came across a novel method of catching fish today. Two Arabs constitute a team; one equipped with a long line, the other with a large circular net about eighteen feet in diameter, weighted at the edge. On the end of the line is secured a female fish. The line is allowed to run as the female swims out to sea for 50 yards or so, then drawn slowly in to within a few yards of the water's edge. It is a fairly safe bet - the season of the year being what it is, and nature being what it is - that at least one male fish is closely following the female on the line. Intent on his own business, the male does not notice the second Arab with the net, until the latter has landed neatly over him, thrown with a speed and dexterity which all but a fish would admire intensely. The catch is flung on the sand, the female carefully disentangled from the net, and the team prepares for the next one. How they catch the female in the first instance, I do not know.

Aug. 7th.

A fairly heavy raid in the early hours of this morning came as a surprise. Being on duty as broadcaster to the Navy, I did not see much of the fun, but it was a good show; we shot down two. No damage done.

Aug. 12th.

Spitfires bagged an F W 190; came down in the sea five miles out.

Aug 16th.

An eclipse of the moon produced a sensational reaction on the part of the local inhabitants. For three hours they marched up and down the road in procession, ringing bells, banging tin cans and ceaselessly chanting a weird refrain at the top of their voices. The origin of such a ceremony must date back to primitive times. The explanation given to us by Chunky was that another moon was being born, and its birth had to be safeguarded against evil spirits.

Aug. 17th.

Soon after 9 p.m. we had the biggest raid of our career, by over 100 enemy aircraft, their target being shipping in the bay and lake. I was on duty, and so able to realise my ambition of handling a really big show. Everything went well; plenty of warning; smokescreen laid in good time; balloons up; Navy on their toes. For over an hour there was all hell let loose. It seemed as though some of the enemy pilots had been briefed to deal specifically with the defences. Bombs fell uncomfortably near to us; one scored a direct hit on the Bde. Signals billet and killed four men; another obliterated the transmitter and two men on the nearest gun-site. One of our men was seriously injured by a stray 20 m.m. shell - our first casualty. Some damage was done in the harbour, but no ships were hit. The enemy paid dearly; nine raiders shot down by the guns, six by the R.A.F. This success earned us our first mention on the B.B.C. news.

Aug. 19th.

Took a party of men to visit H.M.S. Abercromby, a new monitor sitting in the harbour. Her twin 16 inch guns are a marvel of engineering. The iced beer in to Wardroom is a marvel of refreshment, but fatal to my constitution, for I caught a dreadful chill.

Our stock is very high. The Navy and our U.S. allies have a good opinion of us, and even the Hun pays us ungrudging compliments. Rightly so, for we had another first-class show last night; shot down another six raiders, while the fighters got three. Today we were presented with the propeller of a Ju.88 as a souvenir.

Aug. 31st .

Am still trying to get rid of the worst cold of my life. Several of the men are in hospital with jaundice; many have boils and festering sores.

My favourite haunt of late has been the Kasbah, the purely native quarter of the town. It is officially out of bounds, and is utterly deserted save for one very old man, one small donkey, and millions of flies. The houses remain just as they were when hurriedly deserted, except that last-minute looters have combed the place and smashed things up, removing anything of value left behind. The streets are little narrow alleys, dead-ends in many cases. Every inch of wall, inside and out, is lime-washed in the colour which appealed most to the owner – blue, yellow, red, green, grey, mauve, orange. What a subject for a painter!

Sept. 6th.

Another raid this evening. Nine raiders destroyed, shared equally between guns and fighters. The odd “half” is a concession to Allied solidarity; nobody really cares who is credited with

what. When I spoke to the skipper of an L.C.T. in the harbour I learnt that he personally had shot down four of the raiders with his Oerlikon; and the skipper of another boat a bit further on had bagged another four; and yet another had bagged at least three. If I had continued along the line we should have had a record score of kills.

Sept. 9th.

After a few days suggestive of autumn, the Sirocco made an unexpected return today. It is hotter than ever.

The capitulation of Italy has caused great excitement. We are prepared to welcome numbers of Italian aircraft on the local airfields.

Sept. 11th.

Today we had the pleasure of seeing the bulk of the Italian navy - two battleships, five cruisers and several destroyers - steam past in line ahead on their way to Malta, escorted by units of the Mediterranean Fleet.

Sept. 23rd.

Had a visit from two young officers of “Abercromby”, back in port after a spell of exciting duty off Salerno, in the course of which she hit a mine.

Sept 28th.

We have had a day and night of violent thunderstorms. I was awakened at 3 a.m. in time to see two barrage-balloons struck by lightning. Not a balloon left in the sky today.

Oct. 4th

Rough seas have spoilt our bathing for a time. Solved the difficulty by discovering a new cove between Cap Blanc and another headland, sheltered from the wind, and not likely to be invaded by the Americans and their lady-friends.

Oct. 6th.

It has rained all day; very cold wind; everywhere is mud, mud, mud.

Oct. 8th.

Discovered a colony of bed-bugs in the top of my mosquito-net; big fat bugs, full of blood; my blood. They don't live there any more.

Oct. 15th.

I have had a very severe attack of diarrhoea; it has just about knocked: me out; have eaten nothing for a week; no sleep; very sore and worn out. The flies are worse than ever; millions and millions of the devils.

Oct. 19th.

Went to see the M.O.; took a few white powders; had a day in bed; fit again! Oct. 22nd.

Had my first flight in a plane today. The Bde.I.O. and I went up in a Boston from Sidi Ahmed. Once off the ground there was very little thrill in it. I sat in the rear-gunner's seat, minus guns, got cluttered up with parachute and target-towing gear, trying to remember the brief instructions given to me by the pilot as to what to do in an emergency, and despairing of hearing anything on the intercom system on account of the noise. My downward vision was restricted, but I could see plenty over the sides. In particular I could see the rivets on the sideboard wing working loose with the vibration. We were doing a calibration flight for the gun-sites, which meant flying straight and level on a triangular course for two hours. It was fun to see the countryside looking like a huge coloured map, but after half an hour the noise and discomfort began to get on my nerves, and I was very relieved when we landed. I'm glad I didn't join the R.A.F.

Oct.28th.

Back into battle-dress once more, a change amply justified by the cool weather; though we are still bathing almost every day; not really bathing - a sharp dash in, then a quick dash out.

Yesterday provided a novelty in the form of a waterspout, about ten miles out to sea. A huge black cloud had a long “tail” reaching down to the water - the otherway round actually - twisting spirally and moving very rapidly; it lasted about twelve minutes.

Most of the unit suffering from diarrhoea. The M.O. has made an inspection of the billets. Flies are to blame. There seems little that we can do.