

7 EARLY WAR YEARS

As I have indicated, I tend to think of the start of the World War 2 period as being the 26th September 1938, and I have included in Chapter 4 a few diary notes I made at the time. I worked very hard at college and during my early army days, and I simply had no spare energy for diary writing. I have recorded something of my life at university and on early radar work in other chapters.

All this time my outlook on life was developing, as it does during one's teens and early twenties. Whilst she had control of such matters I was brought up by my mother as a church going 'Christian', and to this was added my early sympathy for the natural world. I actually subscribed to a monthly journal called 'The Nature Lover' from about 1934 to 1937, and read it avidly from cover to cover. During this period it is probably true that because I saw how unfairly the scales were balanced I would, had it been within my power, have happily disposed of mankind in favour of wildlife. As it was I had to content myself with being a vegetarian for three years and a pacifist for about a year.

Although, in this pre-war period I was as near to being a Christian *sensu strictu* as I have ever been, I did still have my reservations, particularly about the details of what I was increasingly seeing as the somewhat arcane mythology to which Christians are required to subscribe. When the time came for me to be confirmed, at about age 16, I held back, although all the others in my circle and of my age group proceeded to confirmation. I told Mr Fenn, the minister of my mother's church whom I greatly respected, that I did not feel mature enough to make a decision about such an important matter, and I would rather wait a few years. I had decided that if on reflection I opted to cast in my lot with the Christians, my view of the Christian message was that it was so uncompromising as to leave no alternative but to forgo worldly matters and become a missionary.

At about this time I had a number of what I can only describe as numinous experiences, usually involving still summer evenings at sunset. On these occasions I felt myself to be so totally part of the cosmos as to be indistinguishable from it, and my sense of selfhood diminished to a point at which I felt it immaterial whether I were to live or die. It was clear to me that this type of experience was the basis of religious sentiment, but what was not clear was how it linked in with any particular anthropomorphosed mythology.

Despite my reservations I joined the Student Christian Movement when I started at University College London in September 1938, and I strove to read Christian books from the Movement's library. I met a number of very earnest people, whom I can only describe as spiritually beautiful - and one or two were physically not too bad either. However, I became separated from my SCM friends when in autumn 1939 the Geology Department was evacuated to Aberystwyth and other departments elsewhere.

Meantime my scientific and technical education was proceeding apace and my views about the importance of the scientific method were hardening, until by the 8th of August 1943, whilst in the army at Dover I wrote down a few thoughts which put me at a position midway between agnostic and atheist, but still, somewhat desperately, seeking a useful rationale for living:

*Into this world and why not knowing
Nor whence, like water willy nilly flowing.
And out of it like wind along the waste,
I know not whither, willy nilly flowing..*

Each individual finds himself gradually, inexplicably, becoming conscious in a universe which he does not understand. Even if he invents a hypothesis to explain the existence of the universe at all, he will find that he can never fully understand the mechanism because his brain lacks the physical development to grasp its intricacies and subtleties

It is a particular advantage of the human brain that it can grasp abstractions. It can ask why. There is therefore a natural desire to ask ‘Why am I alive?’, and since living is often a painful process it becomes a matter of urgency that an answer should be found. Science can give us an idea of the mechanisms by which life arose from inorganic matter, and by which the earth arose from the sun, and the suns from the nebulae. How then, it is asked, did matter and space arise?

But this is a problem so fundamental and difficult for our terrestrial brains that we can find no answers. God may have created matter in the first place, but one thing scientific method can teach us is that if he did do so he is a very impersonal God, because everything which has happened since that initial creation bears a purely mechanistic interpretation. It is equally possible, as someone has suggested, that the universe is a puff of smoke in some larger existence of which we have no conception. It is most important for us to realise that just as our eyes are adapted to be conscious of a very limited band in the spectrum of electromagnetic rays, so our brains are conscious of a very limited range of ideas. To invent a supernatural explanation for things we do not understand is most unwise. The answer to the question ‘Why are we alive?’ therefore appears to be ‘We do not know, but the probability is that we just happened as the result of the blind working of natural forces, and there is no more reason in our living than there is in a stone falling.

A stone falls, we live. A stone’s fall ends, we die, our race dies. Our living has been as inevitable and as unpurposeful as has the fall of the stone. This answer to our question is unsatisfying because we desire to have an ultimate purpose in our lives to justify its unpleasantness. Unless we use scientific method life will inevitably remain as painful as at present. Emotional outlooks can admittedly be social (ie ‘good’) like Christianity, or antisocial (ie ‘bad’) like Naziism, but they all suffer from a refusal to face the facts and an endeavour to create a mystical purpose to living. As long as man continues to use emotional methods they will be liable to social disasters however well intentioned they may be, and ‘emotionalists’ are invariably well intentioned.

With the spread of education people realise more and more the unlikelihood of there being any ultimate purpose in life. This does not mean the individual is barred by reason from having a ‘human’ purpose. He may strive for the betterment of human society. Like ants and bees we are social animals with an inborn urge to help others and to help our community. Today our community is

all mankind. A man of reason will strive first to eradicate the causes of disunity among men, then to build up a better society, ie a society in which individuals are happier. Such striving indicates no particular 'nobility', but merely the following of an animal instinct which gives pleasure - the pleasure of helping others.

The mechanism of the better society is a matter of detail which will be sorted out easily enough when education has taught people its desirability. The question arises, however, of just how desirable is an orderly society which gives individuals the opportunity of free development unhampered by disease, drudgery, mental and physical slavery, ignorance and the like. Remember that in such a society a man has no further social ideal for which to strive - nothing to give further direction to his life. If a man under these ideal conditions is not happy, then there has been no point in devoting his life to their production.

Consider the things which make life worth living for its own sake. They may be summed up under the heading of Pleasure.

Which of these two men is the happier? A man with the pleasure of a mystical purpose living in a society which refuses to accept scientific method and therefore does not offer full scope for human development, or a man living in a reasonable society where he can indulge in the pleasure of emotion controlled by reason. It had better be the second, because with increasing education that is the way we are heading.

Most people fail to realise just how worth-while life is for its own sake, irrespective of any purpose, human or ultimate. They are blind, deaf and unfeeling, unable to appreciate much that the human brain is capable of appreciating. To get most emotional pleasure from life a person must be fully conscious of his existence and his surroundings. Education should bring out this consciousness.

This was the message I tried to get across to the few army officers I met who were willing to listen to me (there were one or two!). I was clearly of the opinion that education had the capacity to turn the average contemporary Englishman, in essence a biological machine seemingly programmed to be interested in not much beyond alcohol, sport and sex, into Robert Eden clones. Perhaps it has, and I was ahead of my times. Looking back from half a century later I certainly feel I attached too little weight to the mysteries of self consciousness and the sense of the numinous, not to mention the less mysterious complexities of human personalities. Here, though, is another essay written at about the same time from a rather different viewpoint:

"Every day more and more I realise the feebleness of our brains, or at least of my brain. I exist in a dream world with only brief periods of anything approaching real consciousness. Most of my daily tasks and contacts are carried out instinctively without any vivid realisation of their purpose or meaning, and at the end of the day, looking back, the events of the day have a quality of unreality. They will soon fade away and be forgotten. Even on days of rest from work I feel lacking in consciousness. Last Saturday, for example, I suddenly woke up to find myself in the Albert Hall - a place of unbelievable size - and I had scarcely

known I was there or how I got there, nor had I noticed the human splendour of my surroundings.

I suffer, too, from far more serious mental deficiencies. My brain can only appreciate things on a very limited plane. I just cannot conceive of a thousandth of a millionth of a second, and yet many things can happen in that time, nor can I conceive a thousand million years, and yet that is nothing to the life of the sun. Still less can I understand infinite time or space.

Talking about these things is not the same as understanding them. I cannot understand self consciousness. I am certain I did not mentally exist 22 years ago, nor shall I when my body is dead. Yet I am aware of myself as separate from the outside world - I am aware of an inner soul, although I realise that most of my emotions have mechanical explanations. But I cannot see how self consciousness could spring from chemical reactions however complex.

We may be a puff of smoke in a world beyond our comprehension. Worlds beyond imagination exist in drops of water. How limited is our range of consciousness! A brain designed to cope only with events on its own plane - with things about which it requires knowledge in the struggle for life. A defective power of logical reason, swayed by powerful emotions sometimes unsuspected. A feeble memory. We just struggle along blindly, knowing that the light is out of our grasp.

I have written elsewhere about my time at university and my early years in radar work, and then the chain of circumstances which led to a posting to East Africa. The move to East Africa was preceded by embarkation leave at home in Welwyn Garden City (24 September to 8 October 1943), during which period I acquired tropical kit, and a seemingly prolonged period of waiting at Bestwood Lodge near Nottingham (8 to 22 October).

Whilst at Bestwood Lodge I engaged in multiple time-filling activities, including walking (I discovered Bestwood Colliery nearby), reading (*Dombey and Son*, and *Five Victorians*), cinema going and dancing in Nottingham. I also managed to see the Carl Rosa Opera Company's production of *The Barber of Seville* on my last night before departing. A reference point in Nottingham became the Black Boy, of which I had previously heard in letters from Brenda.

On Thursday 21 October 1943 I was moved into Nottingham where I met a draft of 39 REME troops of whom I was required to take charge during the move overseas. The next night we were confined to barracks. In my last letter before moving I wrote:

I have been pottering around collecting documents today. This evening my men had a sort of final party, mainly to keep them together and so that they did not go and phone up friends. Anyhow the major O/C this place was there so I had to go and make a painful pretence at jollity. Not so successful if this drawing made by one of the men is anything like accurate.

Men are asses really you know. There are several I have met before in this crowd. Some from Dover and some from Northern Command.

It is a pitch black night, pouring with rain. What a night to leave!

We were loaded onto open backed lorries and trundled in convoy through the rain to a suburban Nottingham station. The whole of that night our train clanked its way in stops and starts to an unknown destination, but as the next dank day dawned we discovered ourselves stationary on a dockside on the Upper Clyde. Next to us was a large Dutch ship, the Ss Tegelburg, onto which we duly trooped.

I now found myself in a land which I described in my letters as 'flowing with milk and honey'. There were such exotic items as Brylcreem, razor blades, Drene Shampoo and pipes, all difficult to come by in wartime Britain. The troops were allocated to hammocks slung in the holds, but I was allocated with five other officers to a sumptuous first class cabin. It has to be said that the six of us were in a cabin intended for two, but we were by no means short of space.

With one exception my cabin mates were an agreeable bunch, from a mixed collection of army support units. The exception was a lieutenant from the Reconnaissance Corps, who fortunately spent most of his time carrying out reconnaissances elsewhere in the ship. He soon discovered we were on the way to East Africa via the Mediterranean.

During this voyage I was fortunate to be overtaken by a bout of diary keeping which provides a window on our trip:

Thursday 4 November 1943

It seems there is an embargo on keeping diaries, but how can I allow days like these to pass without some sort of record? We left Nottingham a fortnight ago today, but it feels as if ages have passed since then - probably because it has been an eventful fortnight full of new experiences.

On Thursday 21 October I left Bestwood Lodge, travelling with two others and stacks of luggage in an open utility truck - down the long drive with its avenue of trees for the last time, and through the streets of Nottingham's suburbs, busy with the everyday life of an English town and quite unheedful of the new life just about to start for us.

I stayed the night at the Nottingham detachment of the Mob Centre, a Victorian three-story house in Forest Road, about ten minutes walk from the town centre. On Thursday night I went to Nottingham's theatre and saw 'The Barber of Saville', by the Carl Rosa Opera Company. Can't say I enjoyed it very much. Am I beneath opera or is opera beneath me?

On Friday evening (22 October) the drafts I am conducting overseas had a sort of farewell social, arranged to keep them reasonably entertained whilst they were confined to barracks prior to departure. It was held in the NAAFI, which is in a large cellar. Cards and housey housey were played, beer was drunk and cigarettes were smoked. I was terribly bored, and had to submit to having the card games explained most unintelligibly by a sergeant. I never desire to play them. I was heartily glad when the evening was over, but the major O/C here

seemed to expect my presence so I had to stay. One of the lads made a drawing of me whilst I was enduring agonies of boredom - quite good, and I sent it home in my final letter from Nottingham.

At about 11.15pm I suppose, perhaps later, we donned greatcoats and full web equipment, and filed out of the NAAFI. One of the girls stood by the door and said goodbye to each man in turn. Good lass; it cheered us quite a bit. Not that anyone was downhearted, but one likes one's departure to be appreciated.

We piled into two covered 3-ton lorries in pouring rain. I sat next to the driver in the rear lorry, and we rumbled through the rain and darkness of Nottingham streets, following the tail light and the white faces peering from the leading lorry.

The train was a troop special at 1.10am. It stopped for us and left dead on time. I shared a compartment with two Staff Sergeants and one Craftsman. Couldn't be bothered to worry about going to officers' carriages farther forward. The O/C train was very sleepy and didn't seem to know what was going on. We stopped for tea at Carlisle, then shaved on the train, arriving at a plain goods station in Glasgow docks at about 10.30am.

We were 200 yards from the ship (Ss Tegelberg- a Dutch vessel), and soon aboard and settling in our new accommodation. Just a pang as one climbed the gangway into a very small hole in the side of a wall of steel. Once through that hole and the homeland is behind one for who knows how long. Never mind. It is quite homely inside very soon. Nothing like so grim and inhuman as it looked from the gangway.

Officers are in first class accommodation, but six to a cabin made to take two. Still, it is pleasant and not too crowded. Attached is a bathroom with two washbasins. Hot salt water is available in the bath and is not unpleasant.

On Monday 25 October we slipped our moorings, were backed out of the dock by tugs, and moved slowly down the Clyde. I believe it was in the morning. The Clyde was quite narrow at first, and its banks lined with factories, although there was a lot of open ground to the south. Everyone was on deck, and as we passed the factory workers crowded to the riverside and cheered, whilst wits on the ship exchanged remarks with those on shore. All the way down the Clyde were little knots of waving workers. One girl laughed as she lifted her skirt - it was very amusing and quite harmless. - causing the lads great entertainment. Farther down, the Clyde widened and the banks were lined with ship building yards - dozens of ships taking shape like toys.

We lay in the Clyde, just where it bends south, whilst a convoy formed up for two days. There were vast numbers of ships, but not all were to sail with us. Grey Scottish hills on all sides, with four waterways through them. We swung round with the tide and soon couldn't agree which was the entrance and which the way we had entered the anchorage. At night the ships had lights on bow, stern and mainmast; the aircraft carriers three red lights one above the other.

On the night of Wednesday 27 October the convoy departed from the anchorage and steamed down the Clyde, leaving the lights of the ships remaining at anchor behind us like a town on the water.

Next morning we were sailing west. we could see the hills of the Kintyre Peninsula and I believe Arran, misty to the north; Ireland to the south - a bare deeply dissected land of grey hills sloping to the sea from a general plateau height

That was the last of Britain, and then there was nothing but sea until the following Thursday. Cold greatcoat weather and a choppy sea at first, then a stronger wind and Atlantic rollers with flying spray and not a chance of lasting thirty seconds if we found ourselves in it. Not that anyone considered that very likely.

Then there was the great sea sickness, which laid me in my bunk very weary and rather woeful for two days, though I was not sick and did not miss a meal. How many suffering souls littered the decks, not caring to move or live at all - like the aftermath of a battle! Pale agonised faces and stench.

This passed away in due course. Sea calm, sun bright and warm. Still the convoy pursued its course - same speed and direction. Steady throb of engines never changing day or night, calm or storm.

At last we reached Gibraltar, on Thursday 4th November. First we saw the North African coast - dim and misty line of hills on the starboard bow. Then some of these hills extended along a considerable proportion of the skyline and we were making for a gap. The next time I was on deck we were going through the Straights with Spain to the port side and Spanish Morocco to the starboard. The general appearance of the countryside was similar in each case - barren, dusty looking, with rounded steep sided hills sweeping up from the sea and high mountains dim in the distance, the Atlas to the south and the Sierra Nevada to the north.

The coastline was quite clear, and my binoculars helped me see the white walls of Spanish farmhouses scattered on the lower slopes of the hills, with a few little windows showing. There were one or two small villages of the same white houses strung out along the sea shore, and a road was indicated by a straggling line of trees. The hills appeared bare except for large patches, chiefly towards their tops, of greenery - dull greenery. It was probably some sort of scrub, because occasional trees stood out well above it. Areas of yellow sand extended up the foothills in places, and in the steeper parts of the hills the sweep of contorted sedimentary strata could be clearly seen.

We encountered several small Spanish steamers, brightly painted and with the Spanish colours, yellow and brown, prominent on their sides. It was odd to see a countryside at peace and neutral shipping with neutral colours watching us - dull grey-painted passenger vessels with destroyers in escort steaming purposefully and unheedingly past the antique ships of neutral Spain.

As we moved through the Straights the convoy changed formation from being spread out over an area as broad as long to one in which the ships proceeded in two parallel lines. We were the leading vessel of the left hand line.

Then Gibraltar appeared - first we saw the summit of the rock with the sun shining brightly on it, then the full broadside view from the west. Such a dusty sunlit place! A small town of brown houses with few windows, climbing up the western face of the rock. A lighthouse on a projecting tip at the south. North of the rock, on the lowland joining it to Spain, were dock cranes and a jumble of shipping. The rock was be-splotched with patches of scrub, but there were no signs of the guns with which it is supposed to be bristling, and indeed very few signs of any military activity. It must be an arid life for the swarms of troops living like ants in the tunnels.

The point to the west of Algeciras Bay also has a lighthouse, and Algeciras itself was hidden in misty greyness. To the south of the Straights, Ceuta was clearly visible. It looked just as a Moroccan town should do - bare white and brown walls, some of the buildings many stories high. Some are doubtless hotels, but some looked like monasteries, and there is one isolated building of considerable size surrounded by a high stone wall. This is on a hillside above the town

Now the great sunset began. Thursday 4th November 1943 will live in the memory of many of the troops as the day of the most glorious of all sunsets. I know this for a fact because of my job as a censor on this ship. Gibraltar glowed a ruddy gold as we passed to the south. The mountainous Moroccan coast was golden to the west, merging eastwards to misty greyness.

The brilliance of the colouring in the sky was quite unlike anything English. Red merging into green and yellow, and then into the purest blue overhead and grey behind. Barred golden clouds lay thinly across the sky in a NW to SE direction, overhead and behind. The sea was blue with small bow waves curving away from the ship, but no white horses. Out of the sunset came of the long file of ships, silhouetted dark against the sky and stretching into the distance. It was indeed an evening to remember, and it came as the conclusion to a day of bright sunlight and the first sight of new lands. Meeting point of two continents and two oceans.

I begin to feel I am really enjoying this cruise and shall be sorry when it is over. Agreeable cabin companionship helps make life pleasant. It is great to live with people towards whom it is possible to behave naturally, instead of being subject to the continual restraint of living in a mess of RA clods. They have their right to their outlook and their conversation of course, but their company is not congenial to me and no effort on my part could make it so.

My cabin companions are Lt Drummond RASC, 2/Lt Osbourne RASC, 2/Lt Dell RASC, 2/Lt ? - can't remember his name although he is lying on his bunk near me now - a quiet lad of about 40 anyhow - plus a Lt of the Recce corps. Recce is a beer-drinking type, but the prevailing atmosphere of intelligence compels him to conform when he is present. Intelligence is not the right word - perhaps good sense would be more appropriate. Recce. is a great bringer of

news and rumours, but his reputation rather suffered from a spate of information which turned out to be incorrect.

Friday 5th November 1943 (extract from letter)

I haven't told you a great deal about my co-inhabitants of Cabin No 20. We are quite an amiable crowd really, and I even feel sufficiently at ease to sing on occasion, although I take care to restrict myself to such time when other people are not trying to write or read. I brought the Daily Express Community Song Book with me, and sing various songs from it. All within earshot are agreed that I am completely tone deaf, which is rather interesting and, I fear, conclusive.

2/Lt Osbourne has a different taste in songs to myself, having confined himself to crooning in an unctuous voice - about two dance tunes. He picks one of them and croons the first line repeatedly and indefinitely when he has no other occupation. Fortunately for my sanity he is usually occupied in sleeping. He is about 23 I suppose and quite a brainless young man, but very decent.

2/Lt O'Dell is a well meaning Communist, but without any real knowledge of Communism or ability to appreciate the finer points of any political programme. I suspect he is just well meaning. Anyhow, he was called before his OC at OCTU and warned to moderate his views, so he is a good sort of person to have about. He used to be a searchlight sergeant, when he taught his crew to sing the Red Flag in the still watches of the night, and was reported to his OC by a zealous Conservative RMO.

Apart from myself, Lt Drummond is undoubtedly the most sensible person in the cabin - another rabid Socialist. I find I am always the teacher in discussions though, and very rarely the learner. It is of course useful to have discussions because they help one clear up one's own ideas, but I do wish I could meet someone who could give me a few lines of thought, rather than just people whom I assist. I am well aware of the incompleteness, the utter inadequacy, of my own ideas, but people of superior intelligence to mine seem to exist only in university spheres.

My job as censor on this ship has quite convinced me of this. You will, however, be pleased to hear that today I came across quite a good letter. You will notice that I have studiously refrained from commenting on the cheapness of cigarettes and the abundance of chocolates, because I am tired of reading about those topics. I am accumulating razor blades (now have about 80 or 90 - no, probably over 100), Brylcream and Drene and toothpaste. I will try to send some Brylcream and Drene home when it is possible to send parcels. I expect the present state of abundance of these things is only temporary, because as you can probably imagine wherever troops go they descend on the land like a plague of locusts and soon wipe it clean of luxuries.

Food is really pretty lousy, but I suppose I must not grumble, because we pay no mess bills. We have to endure white bread, which for some reason the

troops like. However, we get plenty of butter (not marg), which I apply sufficiently thickly to smother the taste of the bread. I am afraid the diet is sadly lacking in vitamins B1, B2 and C. We shall probably end by getting scurvy.

We can buy condensed milk, and I have now reached a stage where the thought of either condensed milk or chocolate makes me quite green. I seem to have absolutely no self control. It's a good job I don't like cigarettes or beer, or otherwise I would be an incurable chain smoker and drunkard, but as it is there is fortunately no danger of that. As a matter of fact no alcohol is sold on this ship - probably just as well. Drummond and I usually have a lemonade before dinner, which is at 7.30pm.

I find time is not dragging at all. The day is very full with censoring, sunbathing, reading, writing and doing various odd jobs with the men, such as pay parade. It really is a very enjoyable holiday at present. The poor chaps are in the hold and rather cooped up. Ventilation is not too good and, when the hammocks are up, many seem to be impressed by the resemblance of the hold to a large sardine tin.

Saturday 6th November 1943

Warm and tending to rain today. We have now been sailing along the French North African coast for two days, but have not had much chance to see it at all well, even though we have been only a few miles offshore. The sun is shining from the land, when it shines, and it is rather misty.

We can see a rounded rugged coast, with a narrow coastal plain and backed by mountains shrouded in cloud. With my glasses I can sometimes see valleys etched into the hills, rather like the hills of Wales. A few trees on the skyline, large patches of scrub on the tops of hills. Fields are sometimes visible on the coastal plain, such as it is.

We have not recognised any towns and it is rather disappointing to pass so close to an interesting coast and be able to see so little of it. As I am writing I am having to endure Osbourne's wretched crooning - it will drive me mad if I have to put up with it much longer

This evening we had a little military excitement in the form of an attack by German torpedo planes. I suppose it lasted about half an hour, during which time the six of us stood in our cabin wearing tin hats and life jackets, and discussing the situation. We heard the rattle of machine gun bullets across the deck and numerous bangs. The ack ack of our ship opened up several times. It was interesting to note how calm everyone remained, although it was sometimes only by an obvious effort that the conversation continued through the approaching bumps.

Drummond and I were standing on the front of C deck when it all started - we saw tracer bullets going up from a destroyer to port, then a dull red glow moving in the dusk sky, which I believe was a damaged plane. We were later told that three planes were destroyed.

We were also told that one ship had been sunk and a destroyer had remained behind to pick up survivors. There was only one casualty on our own ship - a deck duty man who had been posted to ensure that all troops were below. He was said to have been under shelter but hit by a ricochet.

Sunday 7 November 1943.

(During the night the convoy split, half departing up the west coast of Italy - we kept going towards the eastern Med. German radio announced that half the ships in the convoy had been sunk in the course of an air attack, and they probably believed this to be the case.)

This morning found us quite close inshore and just off the peninsula jutting out to the west of Bizerta Bay. Rain is falling intermittently, and much of the view is blotted out by rain and mist. We can, however, see parts of the coast quite clearly, including shipping lying in Bizerta Bay. Bizerta itself visible as a grey indistinct mass of buildings with towers and chimneys rising from it. Farther on, a beached cargo ship, half out of the water, with the part which used to be under the water brown with rust.

There is a general plateau level at about 800ft, sometimes rising steeply from the sea, sometimes with a narrow coastal plain. The land appears to be terraced and cultivated, with large patches of green grass, wooded valleys and lines of trees, and also some patches of yellow sand extending from sea level to the hill tops in places. I have seen two small towns - windowless single story buildings with thin square towers of mosques and churches rising above them. One town was by the water's side, another in a fold in the foothills. At present we are approaching a rocky island, which we shall pass quite closely. Dim in the distance ahead lies what I believe to be the Cape Bon Peninsula.

Monday 8th November 1943

Cape Bon appeared yesterday as a whale shaped hill about 700ft high, sloping steeply to the sea, with a lighthouse on its tip about 100ft above sea level, and an observation tower on the top. We could see the waves breaking white against the base of the brown cliffs. Beyond this was a lowland. Graveyard of German legend of invincibility. Fog soon blotted out the whole scene.

About 4pm yesterday we passed the grey mountainous mass of Pantellaria, seeing what appeared to be the same view as that shown on the news reels of the naval bombardment of the island. But very grey and indistinct through the mist.

This morning we were surprised to see a coast line to our port side. The coast of Sicily. Sun shining on quite a large town by the water's edge. Of large houses crowded close together, looking like brown boxes pushing each other into the sea. The low hills around the town covered with fields and farms and what appeared to be basilicas.

Later the snow capped peak of Mt Etna appeared, trailing masses of cumulus clouds to the north and backed by a pale blue sky. To the north the toe of Italy - a brown barren hilly land with trees dotted here and there, sometimes in rows. No signs of habitation.

Wednesday 10 November 1943.

Last complete day of the first part of our voyage. A beautiful evening, like most of the evenings of the last few days. Brilliant moon high in the Egyptian sky. The sky light grey, almost blue, with barred clouds, fluffy and white running from east to west. The moon high in the southern sky and the black water glistening. Patches of flashing writhing silver - thick set over the side of the ship and dwindling into smaller rarer flashes farther out. Little wavelets criss crossed the brilliant patch and sometimes broke, leaving white patches of foam. The sky on the horizon almost pink, and a lighthouse winking slowly in the distance, somewhere on the delta of the Nile.

We passed Alexandria today. It seemed enormous and very clean and white, with the brilliant midday sun reflected from the walls of hundreds of many storied buildings crowding down to the water's edge. It is built on such low-lying ground that it appears to rise from the surface of the sea. Hotels, lighthouses, a few domes and several tall narrow minarets. An area of drifting smoke from what appeared to be slums. The harbour on the eastern side, with a forest of cranes visible. Farther east low buff cliffs with an RDF station.

A really beautiful day. Hot yet cooled by sea breezes to a pleasant temperature. It was grand to wear tropical dress and no underclothes

Sunday 14 November 1943

In Taufiq now, or however it is spelt. The main Cairo-Suez road runs NW - SE a hundred yards from where I am sitting.

On Thursday we entered Port Said. It was our first close-up view of the Middle East, and our first real view of land for three weeks. We came in off a long narrow breakwater of jumbled concrete blocks. Small fishing vessels passed - vessels with the enormous single sails peculiar to the East. The sea front to our starboard side was a sandy beach with a pleasant open built-up area behind. I particularly noticed a church with Ave Mari written in white on the roof. In the modern style. With really beautiful vertical lines. Modern church style at its best - not that I am an expert.

Thursday 18 November 1943

By pretty feeble candle light, or rather lamp light. Every now and again I have to shake the lamp to get the oil to the wick. Under canvas about three miles from Suez on the Cairo-Suez road. Five officers per tent and thirteen men.

There must be hundreds of tents in this Transit Camp, but we are lucky, because the tent which contains Drummond and myself is on the side of the camp.

To continue the narrative - We moved through Port Said docks to the mouth of the canal. On the way we passed a steamer coaling-up in the old way. On either side was a coal barge, with two gangways each. Natives ran up one gangway and down the other, carrying the coal in large wicker baskets. There were so many natives that the baskets were as thick as the buckets of a dredger, and the human chain looked something like a dredger. They were all dressed in the most indescribable rags - mere pieces of sacking over dirty bodies. I began to realise that life is cheap out here.

We remained at anchor for two days and disembarked on Saturday. Luggage barge was alongside frequently, and the native dock workers were our first close-up sight of the local population. A great mixture of types, mostly coloured, with obvious Arab, Egyptian and Negro elements. All, almost without exception, of splendid physique and faces which would probably be considered handsome in a different environment. They seemed a happy, simple, friendly crowd did these coast boys. We particularly noticed two lads, probably pure Egyptians, with most beautiful faces of the classic style and sparkling wide open eyes. These people are capable of the achievements of western races if brought up properly I feel sure. The pleasant climate probably reduces the desire to push forward though. Of course they got pennies and cigarettes - perhaps that explained their smiling faces. Children of the sun and water.

On Saturday we disembarked and boarded a grey train of steel plate coaches. the engine always had great difficulty in starting after frequent stops - it shuddered and produced violent sparks and usually had to make up to ten efforts before it finally got going.

What conditions for memoir writing - a lamp I continually have to shake, eyestrain, agonisingly uncomfortable position on my bed, and in momentary danger of knocking the inkwell over.

The fun started on the train. Everyone was looking out of course. Crowds of children and hawkers ran alongside offering fruit, "dirty photographs" and the everlasting wallets. The children mostly asked for "backsheesh", and got quite a bit. They certainly looked very charming. One Egyptian lad of the type generally considered "communistic" came along trying to exchange English for Egyptian money. The OC Train helped him out with a kick - rather unnecessary I thought, as he was going to leave anyhow. He seized a large stone and stood with it poised whilst he hurled out a torrent of Pidgin English - "Why you kick me? Me Egyptian. Me not Jew, not Greek, me Egyptian." It lasted some time. One felt one saw the spirit of the revolting Cairo students in the passionate fire of this young man. What it is to belong to a vast imperialism!

Began the journey south to Suez. First past green scrub land with palms. The canal separated from the rail by a very small canal for mile after mile. This to the left - to the right, mud flats. Arab hovels by the canal side - just flimsy grey mud walls and improvised roofs. Usually only about 3ft high - place for them to sleep. Then the desert - sand in all directions, and dust flying up in clouds from the track.

Ismalia was the halfway stop. Seemed quite a pleasant oasis rising sheer from the desert. At every halt were the hawkers and the children. Moonlit march from the detrainment point to the Transit Camp. Feeling like desert rats, dressed in shirt sleeve order with full web kit and arms. No right to feel like them, but we did.

Saturday 27 November 1943

In the Red Sea passing Mt Sinai now. A grey rocky arid mountain mass on the horizon on the port side.

On Thursday Drummond, Deight and I visited Cairo. We hitch hiked in on a heavy potato lorry, taking four hours over the journey and arriving in Cairo at about 1 o'clock. There must have been about 30 men perched on top of the sacs of potatoes on the lorry and its trailer. The 80 mile journey through the sun soaked desert seemed to pass quickly - gravel plains and low rounded hills covered with black pebbles, which made the desert appear black away from the sun and white towards it. A good straight tarmac road.

We entered Cairo through Heliopolis - beautiful buildings of finely carved yellow freestone, set amidst greenery. Surely the beauty spot of Cairo. Then to the town centre and dinner at Shepherd's. European streets and cars, with European men and women and ATS girls - quite a superficial resemblance to Oxford Street. American bars, cafes, bookshops, jewellers. But still the Arabs in their nightshirts and white turbans and the women dressed in black, some barefooted on the burning pavements, mainly without veils here, and mostly not very good looking. Also plenty of Europeanised Egyptians. Prices seemed higher than at Suez. Watches, for example, were about twice the Suez price, but the shopkeepers were just as anxious - over anxious - to sell their goods.

Shepherd's Hotel was a disappointment. Lunch was 6/-. Bad native service - we complained twice of the service - a fly in the cabbage, food not too good, I forget what it was. The waiter brought the wrong sweet. The dining room was gaudy and rather cheap looking. Stone alcoves painted into the walls, not carved. Heavy metal chandlers suspended from the roof around the room. We did not explore the hotel very thoroughly, but there seemed to be many wide high stone corridors.

After lunch I left the others for half an hour to find a decent bookshop in which to purchase a zoology textbook. Quite a frantic rush, but I found a suitable place and arrived back at Shepherd's just within the half hour.

We hired a native guide, in the usual Arab costume, who was waiting outside Shepherd's. He took us first to the Citadel, by taxi. This is up a not-particularly-steep hill, but we had to change our taxi because the engine of the first was not strong enough. Typical of Cairo taxi cabs today. Rattling ramshackle tubs for the most part - mainly very old American cars. They can apparently get plenty of petrol, but no tyres. Almost all tyres are worn down to the cord, and some have holes and tears which are sewn together with pieces of string. Driving is reckless in the extreme. The pedestrian's life is 100% in his own hands, not a 50-50 division of responsibility as in London. Natives escaped from us with their lives by narrow margins in two cases. As pedestrians we found the traffic being on the right hand side of the road an additional complication, and there is plenty of traffic.

We entered the massive stone walls of the Citadel and drove to the Alabaster Mosque. Entered an outer courtyard, at the entrance of which squatting natives fitted us up with large canvas sandals over our shoes. Then into the mosque itself - exquisitely beautiful building. No words can describe it, and I was so impressed by the grand beauty of the place that I scarcely noticed details in our few brief minutes there. There were five enormous domes overhead, the central one being larger than the others. A simple pulpit to the east, and when one spoke, even in a whisper, the voice boomed back solemnly from the roof. I can remember no details of the colouring and fine ornamentation. The walls were of marble cream alabaster. Sunlight streamed through small windows of coloured glass, and threw patches of colour on the walls. Hundreds of round electric globes were suspended about 15ft above the floor. This place impressed me more than any monastery I have seen.

Back into the courtyard and there, through iron trelliswork in the stone walls, we saw the pyramids in the distance. Just two of them, very faint and grey directly underneath the glowing sun. We went outside and stood looking over a low wall, with the city of Cairo spread out beneath our feet. White and clean, with hundreds of many storied buildings and a large square sided mosque immediately below us. Five pyramids were now distinctly visible. First sight of the Nile - just a distant gleaming line between trees and buildings. Life giver to the cradle of civilisation. We could only stay a few moments, as the guide wished to conduct us to the native bazaar.

Once there we left the taxi and walked along narrow dirty streets, unpaved and impassable to cars. Native goods overflowed from the shops into the thoroughfare. Houses rose high above us. We were led into a scent shop, seated in comfortable modern chairs. A clean high class place it seemed. A native shopkeeper put little dabs of scent on our sleeves and hands. He tried about six, one after another. Then Drummond gathered courage to insist that we left. This psychological resistance test was repeated at an ornament shop. The place again quite high class, but the shop assistant most embarrassingly noisy and insistent. The policy seemed to be to confuse us mentally and then rush us into a purchase which we would be compelled to make in order to escape. The policy failed, however, and I am afraid the guide did not get his commission. What they did not realise was that we were practically penniless in any case. Some of the scents were pretty good. They must have cost a

good penny too, but it would be foolish to buy in ignorance of the real value of the goods.

Later we saw the sunset across the Nile. We stood on the east bank of the river near a bridge. The sky was ruddy behind a skyline fringe of palm trees and minarets, the water looked clean and flowed steadily. A glimpse of Cairo by night as we drove through it on the way back to camp. Shops all lit up, cafes open to the pavement, and pretty strong overhead illumination. But the street lamps were dimmed down with blue paint, and no neon signs. Our truck dumped us 13 miles from camp. We walked for 2.5 hours quite happily, singing quite a lot. The wilderness of the Red Sea area heard the UCL warcry for the first time in history I expect - historic moment. We got a lift for the last three miles. A well worth while day, but we needed weeks where we had hours.

28 November 1943

Memories of Suez Transit Camp November 14-26.

The camp. Arrival by moonlight in FSMO (presumably 'Field Service Marching Order' - Ed) with battledress trousers and shirt sleeves. We marched men from sidings to camp and shot 13 men into each (bell) tent. I had to wait three hours for my luggage to come on a later train. Slept with skirt of tent up, and woke in the small hours frozen stiff with an icy wind. Too tired to do anything about it though.

Drummond, 2/Lt Deight RE, 2/Lt Whiteman RE, and Lt Cook (Intelligence Corps) shared the tent with me. Deight well-meaning but too much of a buffoon to be a particularly pleasant tent mate. I dislike his projecting lower lip and horsy laugh after his inane buffooneries. He is keeping a very detailed journal of events and writes reams every day I believe. Only once was I driven from the tent by the ceaseless foolish banter to which he and Whiteman subjected Cook, known as 'Dad'. I was in extremes of concealed irritation many times though. Whiteman also well-meaning, rather colourless with a sickening girlish giggle. How to treat the well-meaning fool without offending him and without laying oneself open to his friendship? A very real problem under conditions like this. Cook about 45 I daresay. A widely travelled man - resident in Japan for two years, and fought in the Middle East in the last war. Level headed but not terribly bright. I would have expected more from a man of his experience. Still, he had little time to reveal himself, so busy was he in refuting banter in a most good-natured way - and apparently deliberately laying himself open to it. He believes East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet, and is all for ruthlessness with Japan. He also believes in the necessity for dignity in an officer - refused to sleep in the hold of the Salween. He has a right to a cabin as he was commissioned in World War I. There are many aspects of his character which I have never seen. I think he could be a charming companion in all probability. Drummond says he is mousy.

Meals in camp were very primitive affairs. We ate out of mess tins on wooden tables in a brick and concrete barn with a sort of thin straw sun roof. The roof was in disrepair, so plenty of flies got in and attempted to join in the meal with

us. Food was good solid stuff but rather monotonous, and cooked in a plain solid army fashion. Breakfast was always fat tinned bacon, bread and marg and marmalade, sometimes half a grapefruit. Lunch mainly bread, marg and jam. Dinner stew or mutton, cabbage and sweet potato. No delicacy about it and plenty of flies on it.

We slept on camp beds in the tents. A hard sandy floor and sand everywhere. My kit got into chaos early on owing to my duties, and kept in chaos later because I had four days painful stomach upset. I need abundant spare time to feel any strong inclination to keep my kit in order. It became dark about 6pm, after which the tent was lit by a lantern supplemented by candles, and we wrote on our knees - sitting on our beds. At 7.30pm an excellent dinner could be obtained for 3/- (15p - Ed) at the YWCA about a mile away. Native waiters in white robe and turban with a crimson sash - moving rapidly, silently and efficiently. Clean tablecloths, civilised cutlery etc, a very pleasant curtained dining room. Glorious soup, plenty of chicken, crab, or whatever the dish was, a pleasant sweet such as banana trifle and cream.

The YWCA is a first class modern hostel rising clean and sweet from the desert sands. A wide floodlit veranda with a border of red flowers. A large room with polished floor and abundant tables and armchairs. We sometimes sat there and read or wrote, but we did not often get the time to do so. It was run by women of course - they are doing a well worth while job. Very few girl visitors, mainly male officers.

The town of Suez lies about three miles to the SE of the camp. We used to hitch hike frequently to Suez and Tewfik - about two miles beyond, across a long sweeping causeway. the Suez Canal runs south on the other side of Tewfik, and there are cranes and docks on the other side. The canal waterfront in Tewfik is the pleasantest and most European part of the two towns. An officers' club is there, with stone veranda and big sun umbrellas; a tree lined promenade. Most of the trees are palms with tuft-like tops; plenty of large cacti; also trees looking rather like mountain ash, but with fleshy leaflets and large brown fruits like very large beans curled up in knots. Tewfik also has several decent shops - a Greek grocers, on quite Western lines. We bought some tins of biscuits and a tin of pears. Very expensive though. I wanted the biscuit tin for a parcel home. Also a French hairdressers run by a French girl but employing native barbers. They were quite gentle creatures after some of the violent haircuts I have had recently - by the Tegelburg ship's barber and in a primitive native barber's near the Transit Camp. Dirty books were on sale in the same shop.

Suez is quite a different place to Tewfik. Much more of a native town and very few European amenities. I believe it is quite well known as a pretty rotten hole. Most of the natives appear poor, dirty and ragged; men dressed in white robes and turban, usually dirty; women in black, often partly or completely veiled and with a gold ornament on top of the nose. Always the same sort of ornament - a sort of cylinder about an inch long, with two or three little raised rings round one end of it. The stench of some streets in the native quarter was considerable; flies everywhere, particularly on the food displayed

to attract the attention of passers by. I saw a child lying in the gutter eating something. Large areas of his face were covered by a black mass of flies. He really didn't seem to mind much - I guess he was used to them.

The air was so foul sometimes that I wondered how it was possible to breathe it and not catch some disease. I remember one memorable walk Drummond and I made through the native quarter in the gathering dusk. Walking amidst that strange turbulent mass of robed hostile humanity was quite unnerving, there being no love lost between the despised "Wogs" and the contemptuous Tommy. We have been warned of attacks. I felt quite glad we were armed. Still, they went about their Eastern ways quite peacefully, sat outside native cafes smoking their enormous pipes and looking solemn.

Most native shops lie open to the street - no windows or doors, just roofs and side walls. A very mixed crowd I imagine but mainly Arab, with Negro, Jewish and Greek elements as well. This is a mixture of East and West, and the result is bizarre to say the least. See the tar spraying machine working on the main road of Tewfik, black and hot, emitting clouds of poisonous smoke. Over it climb several dirty Arab workmen, draped in their foul rags, breathing the fumes all day under the broiling sun

Then there are the local motor buses. Drummond and I used one before we noticed they seem to be reserved for locals. Ramshackle tubs with large bulb horns, they date from the 1920s I suppose. The engine drivers never seem to have got over the novelty of the whistles on their trains, and delight to blow long continuous blasts. It seems that unless they show their importance in no uncertain a fashion, their train will never get through. The job of the civil administration appears to be a constant struggle to impose a semblance of order on a chaotic mass of turbulent humanity. Perhaps they have a system of morality amongst themselves, but it is quite legitimate to cheat the Tommy and steal from him whenever possible without detection. There were plenty of hawkers of stolen goods about, and most persistent. Even a firm initial refusal often had no effect. "Imshie!" seemed to work sometimes, but it also produced a dangerous glint of anger on occasion. What on earth can it mean? More than "Clear off!" I suspect. No wonder the Tommy grows abusive and the native resentful. Even the children were old in deceit. They looked normal enough children though. Surely capable of the achievements of any European, given a decent atmosphere in which to grow up. They have a struggle to keep their heads up in this morass.

After all, has Suez any justification for existing as a town but to suck the blood of the passing European? Stuck in the arid wilderness of the Red Sea. Perhaps its few palm trees denote an oasis which could result in some native industrial and commercial life independent of the Canal. Perhaps the natives are decent people - their sex conventions appear to be rigidly adhered to at any rate. I know so little of them; we do not mix. It is like oil and water shaken together. Some of the street scenes might have come straight from the Bible - cobblestones, mud, goats, children, nightshirts, flies, mud houses, eggs in wicker baskets, smells. What an environment for the birth of Christianity and our modern moral code! One feels that the individual does not matter much.

The people live and die like flies. They do their daily jobs like ants, unthinking, and there is a hard look in their faces.

The local troops are an odd looking crowd. They appear to have dozens of varieties of uniform, some similar to our own, others which might belong to a South American state. The Bank is guarded by a fellow in a ragged khaki pullover, leather belt, thin white trousers - not clean - and poor quality boots. He carries an antique carbine with fixed bayonet. I doubt if he is capable of using it. The local administration gives the impression of a state which is liable to be overthrown at any moment by a revolution. There is a middle class native section to the population - not very obvious, but present all the same. Natives dressed in Western clothes run the local Barclays Overseas Bank. They look very like other bank clerks - less conventional and tidy, though, and the bank looks quite capable of being robbed.

Thursday 2 December 1943

Coaling in Aden at the moment.

Last Friday we marched to Suez docks, starting at 7.30am. Four or five miles I daresay. Some of the chaps didn't feel too comfortable with their full equipment and packs. We got onto a lighter which chugged out into the bay. Couldn't find our ship at first. Chugged around for some time, enquiring of several ships - one appeared to be an exact replica of the Tegelburg. The native skipper was at his wits' end after a while and leant on his wheel with a look of amused despair on his face. He, too, liked to toot his whistle as frequently as possible. One of the lighters had only a feeble peep - I felt quite sorry for the skipper; it must have been a great grief to him.

Eventually the Salween appeared and we got aboard. A pleasant surprise to find ourselves billeted in the holds! It's turned out very well, though. Not uncomfortable, and I get quite a lot of opportunity for writing and reading, chiefly zoology. The conditions are really more favourable for this than they were on the Tegelburg. A dozen women are a nuisance. They are overwhelmed by attentions and are quite inaccessible. Just a female intrusion where females are irrelevant. Now we see strong men simper and giggle before them.

Down the Red Sea we saw land several times. First the Sinai Peninsula to our port side. Jagged grey mountains - inconceivable wilderness. Twice I saw the sun set red in the West over barren hilly coasts. A long glow like fire around a third of the horizon, then a band of yellow, then the stars. The sunset is the only red thing about the Red Sea.

Eleven rocky islands to our port side were our first sight of Asia. Steep sided, flat topped, barren. I suppose they belong to the Arab state marked green on my atlas.

Then on Wednesday morning we awoke to find ourselves steaming straight for the coast, and signs of Aden in the distance. What a coast! The shores of Hell must look very much the same. Blue sky and pitiless sun. Grey and brown

jagged hills, rather like slag heaps, with splotches of yellowish sand here and there. Aden itself clings to the base of a slaggy irregular mountain, with a deep valley running back in the centre of the town, if town it can be called. Arched two or three storied buildings line the waterfront. Little villas climb pathetically up the barren slopes - spick and span most of them look. We can see ancient brown-walled fortifications to our left as we lie off the town coaling. The town is on our starboard side. On the top of the mountain behind the town is a wireless station, reached by a zigzag track. Poor radio operators!

Now the ship is coaling - has been for thirty hours, and not finished yet. To the port side come coal barges laden with loose coal, which is shovelled into huge buckets and swung aboard by cranes. To the starboard come barges laden with sacks of coal which a chain of natives bump up some steps into the ship. Two natives stand on each step, and the sacks come up in a constant stream. These natives are small and do not look strong, but they have lithe well-made brown bodies and an arduous job. I feel I could easily deal with one in a scrap, but I certainly wouldn't like their job. They work in clouds of coal dust and their bodies are black with it - white eyes and teeth glint through. Most of them wear rags all over; some are bare to the waist. These are the inhabitants of Hell I suppose. Yet white men at home do the same work - probably even less healthy - the miners. They must be animals just the same. Even the old ones look lithe and healthy. Most of them are quite good looking under the dust - quite English type faces? Not much of a mixture of races here. Even in the pauses whilst they are begging they cannot raise the jollity of the Port Said boys. They shout, "Aowa, aowa" in their shrill voices and clap their hands to time

Monday 6 December 1943

Since last writing we have crossed the Gulf of Aden, rounded the horn of East Africa, and are now travelling south in the Indian Ocean.

Yesterday afternoon we saw the flat plateau of Italian Somaliland as we rounded the horn. Not so far off, but rather vaguely defined. To our port side several rugged barren islands. All coasts seem to be desert coasts. What a change it will be to see a genuine green land again!

Studying zoology pretty hard - have now read 230 pages since we left Suez. I have lost all count of time - every day is the same. Yesterday I thought it was 5th November for a bit. Interminable reading and lounging is getting rather trying, but those without the interest of a study feel it worse than I do.

We arrived in Kenya around 10-12 December 1943.