

11 EAST AFRICA AND ETHIOPIA 1945 TO 1946

In my letters I referred only briefly to the journey back from Diego to Mombasa on Wednesday 7th March. It was again by BOAC flying boat. This was a plane which flew fairly low, and the part of the trip I found interesting was that up the East African coast – “Vast areas of bush and palms with isolated villages and huts, interconnected by winding footpaths and tracks – really quite interminable; swamps and estuaries and islands, with the shadow of the plane moving over this toyland which used to be darkest Africa.”

The first thing I noticed about Mombasa was the standard of the shops. “After Diego, with its shops small, dirty and empty except for shoddy local produce, this is a fairyland. Large clean European stores and shops, even with European assistants in many of them, and every type of luxury on sale. Everything from food and patent medicines to shoes and dresses seems to be in abundance.” I compared myself to a country boy on his first visit to town, looking goggle eyed in every shop window. I wondered how it could come about that a British colony could be living so much better than the mother country in wartime. This did not prevent me letting myself go gastronomically, whilst complaining about the high prices, “everyone in Kenya being rich”. I instancing a glass of milk costing 6d (2.5p), milk shake and iced coffee 1s 3d (6.25p) each, fruit salad 1s 6p (7.5p).

I found myself back in the same 451 Radio Maintenance Holding Co mess as before leaving Mombasa for Diego, in fact back in the same room, still with the same minor structural (glass and lock) defects as when I had left it thirteen months earlier. Nearly all the faces had changed, though, but the earlier ones had mostly been replaced by familiars from Madagascar. Even Oruko, my boy in Madagascar, was there – “I was so startled to see him that I accidentally shook hands with him, part of my bad training in civilian circles in Madagascar. Fortunately no one saw. He was shaken to the depths of his soul.”

“It is unusual to find a colonial who exhibits any rationality when discussing the colour bar. The problem has lost all interest for me by constant repetition – East Africans will never change their views anyhow. It goes to the extent that white Seychelles girls, of whom there are many in Nairobi, are not admitted to Nairobi hotels because it is known there is colour in most Seychelles families, even if it does not show. The smallest trace of colour puts these unfortunate people outside the pale and the master race has developed a snobbishness and an accent which are trying to me.”

Fortunately the Commanding Officer, Major Bartlet, was an easy going individual rather like a benevolent uncle. His was the first East African mess I had encountered where there was no requirement to change into longs for dinner.

However, I was due for 34 days leave, and decided to head west to Uganda for a little exploring. The train journey to Nairobi took eighteen hours. Mattress, sheets, pillow and blanket were supplied, and when I boarded the train I went straight to bed at 9pm, sleeping soundly until 7am in the top bunk. By Tuesday 13 March I was writing, also from bed (at 11 am), in the Officers Club in Nairobi.

I renewed many acquaintances in Nairobi as well as in Mombasa, and spent a couple of days exploring the streets and shops. I visited the MacMillan Memorial Library. “The streets are full of Italian co-operators, not very hospitably treated by the local population, Polish women, and a sprinkling of foreign uniforms. The Italians look quite a smart crowd on the whole.”

The next leg of my journey took me to Kampala, again by train. I had booked into the Imperial Hotel for no longer than two days because of the extortionate daily price of 18s 6d (£0.925). (Letter of Sunday 17 March 1945) “Leaving Nairobi at 10.20am we climbed slowly up the edge of the Rift valley. About 8000ft up, this part of Kenya is chilly even in the present warm season. It is quite English – woods and fields and hedges, with modern villas and tarmac roads. The escarpment into the rift Valley is thickly wooded and very wild. The slope is steep, and from the top there is a magnificent view of the valley 3000ft below. As the train buzzed down that escarpment, almost on two wheels round the corners, I several times hoped that the brakes worked.

“The valley itself has a variety of vegetation, mainly dry, and over large tracts treeless and dusty – almost a desert. Lake Naivasha, a spot on the map but a large stretch of water in practice, looked pleasant in the distance. Lake Nakuru was distinguished by eddying clouds of soda dust round its dried up edges. It was a long warm journey across the valley and night fell as we left Nakuru.

“In the morning we woke up at Tororo, with Mount Elgin rising to no mean height to the north. From Tororo to Kampala is wooded country, the forest sometimes dense and apparently impenetrable, sometimes reduced to bushland by fires and native agriculture. All along the line were native beehive huts and groups of staring natives, largely clothes-less. It was just as darkest Africa should be, although the days when it could be called “darkest” have long since passed (!).

“At Jinja we crossed the Victoria Nile and saw the Rippon Falls by which the river leaves Lake Victoria. Junction of lake and river is a famous spot, although the falls themselves are small – their 20ft is dwarfed by the width of the river.

“Kampala is a pleasant little town in wooded country. Capital of Uganda and an obvious tourist centre. It has several large modern hotels and clean well groomed streets on the whole. The Imperial Hotel is comfortable. Its shining floors, windows and fittings appear most brilliant to my Madagascar eyes. One walks on soft carpet and a silent boy interprets one’s requirements without one being put to the trouble of uttering them.

“In the course of visiting the Kampala Red Cross shop in a search for ideas as to where to go next, I was invited to social visits by the two local ladies running it, both determined to do their bit for the war effort. As a result, on the Saturday evening I dined with a police Inspector and his wife, who were pleasant and most obliging. They ended the evening by taking me on a midnight tour of Kampala in their car. There was a good view of Kampala’s many lights, including its blue mercury arc lighting, from the hill surmounted by the cathedral.

“On the Sunday evening I went for an aperitif with a Mr and Mrs Parry. Mr Parry turned out to have both geology and geography degrees at University College London, where he had been a contemporary of Dr Chubb, one of my mentors. I spent a very pleasant two and a half hours with them and found them agreeable and intelligent people. Mr Parry is at present an Inspector of Schools in Kampala. He tended to go off into a Chubb-like mutter whenever he started talking about the peoples of the Far East, his speciality. I have also had long talks with several others of Uganda’s English population – they seem a very friendly crowd. Upper middle class and so respectable.

“Did you hear on the radio that Kampala had a fortnight’s rioting a few weeks back? Troops had to fire on mobs and eight Africans were killed. Most of these people were involved in the riots and had exciting experiences to relate. The rioters cut telephone wires and tried to erect barricades isolating Kampala, but were much too timid about the whole affair. It is interesting to note in this connection that semi-education is much farther advanced in Uganda than in the rest of East Africa. Nearly all the natives in the towns can speak English for example.

“Whilst I was in Kampala it had its most severe earth tremor for many years. It lasted about a minute and consisted of two main shocks. It really was quite alarming, and although it did no more damage than flaking plaster from the ceiling and spilling cups of tea, one had the uncomfortable feeling that it might get worse. The Imperial Hotel rocked and trembled and felt generally most unstable. Everyone went out into the open for fear it might get worse. As I was clad only in a towel, though, I decided that propriety came before safety, but I kept my eye on the window just in case. The Imperial Hotel is a very tough building, which on reflection I didn’t like much – more suitable for central London than central Africa. Also I found the lady hostess to be of a type not restful to me.

“On Monday 19th March I travelled by bus from Kampala to Jinja, partly to get some money, not obtainable in Kampala, and partly because I wished to experience travel in a native bus.”

(Letter of Tuesday 20th March) “Queuing for tickets in Kampala’s bus station were some interesting fellow travellers, with not a sign of having had any contact with western civilization. Small and semi-pygmoid I would say, clad in roughly cured skins wrapped around their bodies, carrying native grass baskets together with the onion shaped flasks which abound here. Fortunately the bus was divided into first and third class parts. Uganda, a protectorate and not a colony, has no colour bar, so whoever pays first travels first. I shared the compartment with four Indians.

“The journey - not uncomfortable - lasted three and a half hours. I had my first sight of Uganda’s rubber plantations, with the trees being milked in the classical way. Also lots of plantation of bananas and sugar cane, two staple crops. Cotton is Uganda’s great cash crop, but I have yet to see the cotton country.

“I am now installed in Jinja’s only hotel – the Ibis. It fronts onto Lake Victoria, and the Rippon Falls are a ten minute walk to the west, across a golf course. There is an old dear in charge – an energetic Victorian type. The hotel is clean and well run, built for a tropical lakeside location, with wooden verandas and pleasant shade trees. By

day the sun beats down on the surrounding lawns and by night thousands of insect flutter round the outside lamps, They are kept from the verandas by insect-proof shutters.

“I walked to the Rippon Falls yesterday evening and sat watching the native fishermen for a while. The volume of water pouring across the falls gives them an impressiveness out of all proportion to their 20 to 30 ft height. The pool below is full of fish, which periodically try to leap the falls. The natives fish with strings, a large hook and a piece of cotton wool. I saw one catch a fish about 18 inches long. There is a little concrete slab saying “Speke discovered the source of the Nile 18??”

“Tomorrow I am returning to Kampala, where I shall stay in the Palace Hotel this time. On Friday I am joining a military touring party to the Belgian Congo organised by the hospitality branch of the KWEO (Kenya Women’s Emergency Organisation). The party will be twelve strong and will travel by special bus, so there will be no need to stick to usual routes.

“There is one mistake I have made. I thought it was cool in the Eastern Highland of Africa, but on the contrary it is as hot as on the coast of Madagascar. Just west of Nairobi it is cool, but not here around Kampala.”

On Friday 23rd March I embarked on the KWEO bus tour which took us along the north west border of Lake Victoria, then inland to Mbarara and Kabala before passing into the NW corner of Rwanda, where we stayed at Gisenye on the NE shore of Lake Kivu. We then crossed into the Belgian Congo at Goma and turned north to Camp Ruindi, just south of the south end of Lake Edward. From here we continued north on the west side of Lake Edward to Lubero and Beni, before turning SE to Mutwanga, skirting round the south side of the Mountains of the Moon on the Congo-Uganda border. Finally north again to Fort Portal in western Uganda and 200 miles eastwards back to Kampala.

This was a round trip of some 1375 miles along corrugated dirt roads, travelling as fast as may be in a vehicle which consisted of an old bus body mounted on a new lorry chassis and with ex-aircraft seats. We had two adventurous but skilful African drivers and my head hit the roof of the bus only twice during the trip. The party consisted of 6 officers and 6 sergeants, but badges of rank were not worn. The senior man was an RAF doctor Squadron Leader, “a nice old stick” with whom I was apt to share a room at our various halts.

Much of SW Uganda is flat dry bushland with scattered native huts and dusty villages inhabited by staring crowds. The country becomes greener westwards, and after Kabale we found ourselves on twisting mountain roads.

(Letter of Tuesday 27 March) “Precipitous, almost vertical, drops on one side or the other caused much anxiety from time to time as the drivers seemed to be rather too fearless. Glimpses of magnificent views were sometimes spoilt by cloud and drizzle, but the outlook was often most beautiful. A novelty for me was a long drive through a bamboo forest. Mountain lakes, loch-like in their appearance, nestled well below us dimly seen through the mists. After a 205 mile journey we came down from the

mountains, 8000ft high at the highest point on the road, to Gisenye on Lake Kivu, with a colourful sunset over the dim blue hills on its far side.

“This was a pleasant introduction to a charming little village. With three hotels and a few score Belgian villas it is more of a holiday resort than anything else. It has gardens and shade trees along the lakeside road, flowers, birds and a temperate climate. We stayed at Hotel des Volcans, a not-too-good Belgian hotel where they did not-too-frequently sweep under the beds.

“There are two active volcanoes behind the hotel – Nyaramagya erupted in 1938, sending a lava flow into the lake, cutting off one of its corners and carrying away about a mile of the coast road. This lava is unweathered, hard, shiny and glassy with a rope-like surface.

“Pity Nyaramagya couldn’t stage an eruption for me – I have had an earthquake, just missed a riot, I would have liked to have added a volcanic eruption to my collection of experiences. It did the next best thing, though, by producing a bright red glow in the night sky, reflection of the red hot crater rocks against the clouds of steam.

“There are many extinct volcanoes in the vicinity – one has a crater lake just by the roadside – well below road level, and framed in a forested crater. The lake was a bright pea green – “Le Lac Vert”, aptly named.

“We visited a coffee factory on the lake shore and were presented with a packet of green coffee when we left – unground and of good quality. Factory workers are native women, fat and nearly naked, lying on the concrete floor sorting coffee. Since each produces one child per annum they each had their last four years’ production, still in need of motherly protection, climbing over them and sitting clothesless in the coffee on the floor. Good job it is roasted before consumption.

“On 28th March we arrived at Camp Ruindi at midday after a journey through the Albert Game Reserve. Overhead sun by day and full moon by night. The wooden hotel was situated in semi-desert, and sleeping accommodation was in white painted African-style roundhouses constructed of mud and with thatched roofs. Lighting was by hurricane lamps. In this area I noted around 200 buffalo and at least 100 elephants in groups of 20 or 30 – one group blocked our road for about twenty minutes because an earlier experience had made the driver fearful of insisting on his right of way.. Other animals were hippos, water buck, an animal our guide called a toopee, several varieties of antelope, wart hogs, two lions, baboons and vultures. We made several lengthy excursions in the reserve, including a 40 mile safari which involved getting up at 5.30am.

“The hippos really were huge. Their practice is to browse on lakeside grass during the early morning and return to the water when the sun gets up. They wander several miles from the lake and it was strange to see these huge things lumbering singly back to the water. In the water there must have been about fifty, packed like sardines and making a most terrific snorting and grunting noise.

“They were so close to the bank that we could have touched them had we been prepared to wade in shallow water and risk being swallowed by enormous mouths

with formidable rows of teeth. To see a hippo yawn is an amazing experience, and they do it fairly frequently.”

We stayed only one night in Camp Ruindi, then travelled by a forested hill road to Lubero, due west of Lake Edward. (Letter of Monday 3rd April) “At an elevation of around 8000ft this is a pleasantly cool Belgian village set in green hills. Much of western Uganda and the eastern fringes of the Congo have a nice climate, although it varies with the elevation.

“On the Thursday we were off to Mutwanga, via Beni. This was an eventful day. Beni has an ivory workshop which caused much excitement in our party - a lot of money was spent on ornaments of varying beauty. On the whole the accent was on the curious rather than the beautiful. Large collections of these things displayed on mantelpieces, as they were at Mutwanga Hotel, are quite hideous.

“At about two miles north of Beni we visited some pygmies. We went by bus, then left it and the road to plunge into a 1.5 mile path through dense tropical forest. Reeking with a proper jungle reek, and the path narrow and twisting amongst the trees. Half way along a tropical thunderstorm broke, too, which added to the realism of the effect. Fortunately I had foreseen this and carried a groundsheet to protect me, but most of the other got soaked.

“The path seemed interminable, but eventually we heard wild shrieks ahead and were joined by half a dozen pygmies all brandishing spears and whooping. They accompanied us the rest of the way, half ahead of the party and half behind, until we arrived at their village. This was set in a forest clearing, and both it and the forest were saturated by the rain, only just finishing.

“Never in all my travels have I seen such hovels. About 2.5 ft high dog kennels made of twigs and leaves – inferior even to the woods houses we made as children. Somehow they managed to have smoky fires inside, and they could just crawl in and wedge themselves between fire and growling curs.

“I suppose there were about 20 men and 20 women in the village – all without clothes except for the most diminutive of loin cloths. All very tiny of course. Their chief announced himself as “Meme mkubwa, which is Swahili for “I am the chief” or “I am big”, obviously the former in this case.

“I bought a pygmy bow and two arrows for five francs - 6d (2.5p). It is a nice little bow, about 2 ft 6 in long, with the string made of a piece of softened bamboo and the rest covered in black fur. One of the arrows has a metal head. The other is of plain wood and is of the type which they poison. The Doc bought three poisoned arrows, but the rest of us were a bit too fearful of accidents. Poisoned arrows have little practical use for us anyhow, although they seem to be the principal weapon of the pygmies

“Pygmies live by hunting and do no cultivation. If the Belgian authorities try to tax them or control them in any way they just decamp and disappear silently into the forest. A gift of salt, which we brought, was eagerly accepted by the females, who

dived into their houses to reappear with battered tin plates to take the gift. These tin plates were the only sign of civilisation we saw in this pygmy village.

“Ivory plus pygmies delayed us for a long time, and it was dark when we reached the River Semliki ferry. The Semliki joins Lakes Edward and Albert I believe. We very soon discovered that the ferry, equipped with poles to push it across, was firmly embedded on a wide sandbank, and the efforts of twenty natives had no effect when it was loaded with ourselves and the bus. So there was no alternative but to get into the river and push with the natives, which we did.

“A full moon and floating fires to scare off hippos provided the light for us, and we sweated and pushed and heaved for two and half hours in that wretched river. No Burmese jungle fighters ever did more. We were assured beforehand that there were no crocodiles in this river – why not, I do not know.

“We didn’t reach Mutwanga, at the foot of the steep western side of the Mountains of the Moon (or Ruenzori Mountains as they are more usually called) until 10pm, and the proprietor was very cross because we were late.. We stayed there for 2 nights, until 31st March. The mountains, generally cloud shrouded, provide a beautiful sight when they are visible. Capped with snow, they rise to 16700ft and are the third highest of Africa. That was the only pleasant aspect of our stay in this hotel. The manager was grumpy, the service was bad, and I had to share a room with three sergeants. I was inveigled into a ten mile walk to a local beauty spot, ‘the Caves’, which led me to the view that Belgian ideas of beauty are odd.

“On the 31st we crossed the frontier between the Congo and Uganda, and then the channel joining Lakes Edward and George. Our destination was the Kitchwamba Hotel situated on the escarpment overlooking both lakes. Here again we remained for two nights, until 2nd April. The Kitchwamba is a new hotel, opened during the last few months and built by the Uganda Bus Company for post-war tourist traffic. It is a most pleasant place, new, clean, beautiful view and excellent in every way. It is also cheap, only 10s6d (52.5p) per day.

“Perched right at the top of a steep escarpment, the hotel looks over a broad flat valley, with Lakes Edward and George and their connecting channel clearly visible. The plain is green and covered with little copses, woods and single trees arranged rather as in a park. This is the Lake George Game Reserve, and we saw quite a lot of elephant and smaller game. I felt as though I was in an aeroplane overlooking all this. On the far side, 50 miles away, the mountain mass of Ruenzori rises into its clouds, blue with the distance. It is one of those scenes which changes with every change of weather and light. I had a really lazy day, looked at the view, felt cool, wrote a long letter in French, read leisurely, and ate good food without having to wait half an hour between courses.

“Fort Portal was a shocking place and the 200 miles between there and Kampala was a strain for all of us. Thank heavens I shall never again sit in that jolty bus – but I am very glad to have made this tour.”

By Sunday 8th April I was back down on the coast after a 1000mile, 2 days and 2 nights, train journey which I described as quite restful and providing a good

opportunity for reading. I collected a record mail from my unit office – 35 letters, 8 papers and 1 parcel – and headed off for the remaining four days of my leave to a rest camp run by the navy at a location 4 or 5 miles away. I found it nice and quiet, plenty of tables for writing, not too many inhabitants and cool sea breezes.

One of the themes of letters written at about this time was my determination not to opt for a career in the colonies, and relief that circumstances had enabled me to inspect them before allowing geology to point me in their direction. Although I did not go into specifics, I indicated that I could list ten good reasons for my view. This being so I had come to the opinion that I would try for either the Geological Survey (GSGB) or academic life (or both). It was in April 1945 that I received my first letter from Dr Dunham, written at the instigation of my mother and making encouraging noises about the possibility of post-war work in the Geological Survey. It was posted with a 2.5d stamp and took six weeks to reach me by surface mail. In April, too, I was corresponding with Professor King, my old UCL mentor, now heading Geology at Cambridge.

When I returned to my unit in Mombasa on 12th March I was relieved to be posted to a small sub-unit – the Vehicle Assembly Unit – about two miles away, where I had a nice little room to myself in a new wooden hut, although I needed to return to my old mess for meals. The VAU received vehicles broken into components and packed into wooden crates (beautiful wood which we burnt, by the way) – its job was to get the vehicles assembled and on the road. My task was to act as Adjutant and generally cope with paperwork. It was quite a tolerable environment in that what I sought was a maximum of peace and quiet (implying an absence of noisy young officers) since I had suddenly become very studious, studying French, Zoology and Russian – also I was running numerous correspondences. I had become intolerant of what I called ‘chronophages’, wasters of time.

By mid April the climate was ameliorating. The hot season was nearly over and it had started raining periodically, sometimes heavily. There was usually a pleasant mixture of sun and cloud and rain.

(Letter of Saturday 21st April 1945) “I wonder if you have heard of DDT? It has appeared in the papers recently as a wartime discovery ranking with penicillin, but doesn’t seem to be quite as well known. If a room is sprayed with it, the room is said to be proof against insects for three months. My room was sprayed yesterday, and so far it seems to work. Ants, which are not particularly worried by a direct blast of Flit, don’t live long if they walk over my floor now, and all the spiders which inhabited the crannies of my room have vanished. There are corpses everywhere.

“Last night, whilst studying, I had the pleasure of being mosquito-free, a great boon. How long it will last I do not know, but it seems good so far. The ant problem here was rather bad, as there are literally hundreds of nests around the building – mainly huge black ants up to an inch long, who go in for elaborate excavations.

“Before the DDTing yesterday I found that a nest had transferred itself to one of my boxes, and had already got to the stage of having egg and flying ant production well organised. I turned out the box and its contents outside to air, and last night I found

the clothes still there – still covered with ants. So I brought them in and put them on my poisoned floor. In the morning all the ants were dead.

“I must sound very bloodthirsty for a former pro-insect humanitarian, but here it is definitely a case of survival of the fittest and I have proved to be too self interested for my humanitarian feelings. I suspect that mine is the problem of many idealists.”

(Letter of Thursday 3rd May 1945, to brother Richard) “I am rapidly becoming overwhelmed with the view that conversation with, and expression of ideas to, the average man is an unnecessary waste of energy. Experience seems to have taught me that the average man’s opinions are controlled by nothing more complex than his needs, but his creator has given him self-respect by blinding him to this, and thus exulting him out of the ranks of mere machines – in his own conception.”

(Letter of Tuesday 13th May 1945) “We had our VE celebration on Friday (9th May). The rain poured down as we marched our 3.5 miles dressed in our Sunday best and without coats. For a few minutes it would drizzle, then it would come down with the weight of a cloudburst, so that the noise of the band took on a gurgling component, then drizzle and more heavy rain – it was quite a nice walk and the longest distance I have been on foot for some time. The streets were lined about two deep with a silent and dejected and mainly African crowd as the interminable procession went by.”

(Letter of Thursday 28th May 1945) “We are rather suffering from a burst of mould growth on everything at present. My poor Sam Browne looked as though it had been on a garbage dump for about 20 years after a few days’ growth, and even my greatcoat is going mouldy. Ants, too, have been busy nesting in my kit again – one in a box and one in my washing kit. These nests always seem to be of huge ants, some with very large heads and prominent jaws.

“Another thing the rain has brought us is bullfrogs with voices like deep-throated machine guns. They can be heard from a considerable distance and they keep up their rattling roar for long periods. They abound in the deep puddles, almost little lakes, which flood the lower areas after a heavy rainfall. We had twelve inches in April, mainly in one or two showers. The local juveniles find these puddles, which to them are swimming pools, most exciting – very much like children in any other part of the world.”

By May/June 1945 I had become Unit Education and Welfare Officer, Mess Secretary, and officer in charge of a network of regimental funds. In the former capacity I discovered that I quite enjoyed delivering lectures, my main problem being: (letter of Wednesday 13th June) “I find it difficult to conceal that I am mentally superior to my audience and that I realise it.”

In the financial capacity I had problems with audits (Letter of Monday 18th June 1945) “Auditing accounts is a great ritual in this place, which takes many days of brain twisting, lengthy mess discussions etc. The form for the audit was invented by a genius who believed the best way of keeping young officers happy was to give them an insoluble problem around which to flex their brains.

“We have a new supply of DDT for spraying our rooms. Even now after the last do, and that was weeks ago, there are still no spiders in the corners. Ants soon started crawling over the floors with impunity – for one thing they are fairly tough, and for another the floor gets swept daily, so the DDT is swept away.”

(Letter of Friday 22nd June) “I never realised it could be quite so chilly at sea level in the tropics, nearly on the equator in fact. At present we need one, and sometimes two, blankets at night. A cold shower in the evening is a physical impossibility, and we are well away with our hot bath.

“We have had a long struggle with a chicken during the past week. There was one which insisted on laying its eggs amongst my socks in the bottom of my cupboard. One night it stayed in my room all night and created rather a mess, so I made vigorous efforts to keep it out, without success. It even got ferocious if we tried to eject it when twilight was coming on. Then one day we agreed to catch it and give it to an officer in a neighbouring camp who keeps chicken. He bought twenty about a month ago and so far none has produced eggs. He was particularly keen to have our chicken, but that very day we noticed it was missing.

“Shortly, our boy arrived grinning the broad and happy grin of a conscientious personal servant who has done his job well. He informed us he had divined we disliked this chicken and the sergeants would be eating it that night, the necessary preliminary steps having already been taken. Since then the sergeants have had chicken several nights running, and as fast as they eat them they stray in from the surrounding native village. As the major has taken a dislike to seeing chicken about the camp this has official approval.”

Life for me with EAEME in Mombasa continued without major incident until 26 July 1945. As Education and Welfare Officer I was busy with seminars for the troops, I arranged one dance which was voted very successful, with around 300 attendees, and I started a wall newspaper called “UNAKWISHAPATA”, Swaheli for “You’ve had it”. At the dance I was introduced to a WREN called Miss Eden, who curiously turned out to speak excellent French. (Up to the time of writing this in November 1998 I have so far met four non-Southampton Edens, and all four have been young ladies at the date of meeting – odd.) One of my long standing radio mechanics, Thain, went on a Swahili course and came top out of a class of 60.

I spent most of my spare time, when I was not engaged in letter writing, in swotting French, Zoology (at this time I did the earthworm and dogfish) and Russian. I also had shoes hand made for my mother, Lucette and Suzanne. Letters were beginning to flow between these three, via myself so that I could provide a translation. There were also introductory letters to and from Marcelle in France, at the time in considerable trouble due to a husband who eventually received 5 year hard labour for having been in the Petain police.

Early in July I found myself transferred from administrative duties back again to electronics, which involved a period of revision of my electronics notes, about which I was feeling distinctly rusty. This was a prelude to a visit to Mauritius to install a centimetric radar station on the top of Signal Mountain, overlooking the capital, Port Louis. See Chapter 8 for more about this exercise.

I travelled in an RAF plane, not too well provided with windows, and as luck would have it the trip from Kenya to Mauritius was made in two stages, with an overnight stop at Diego Suarez.

(Letter of Sunday 29th July 1945) “I managed to have a brief twelve hours with Lucette and the Leclerts, but it was a very pleasant twelve hours. When I walked into M Leclert’s office in the docks, his eyes nearly popped out with surprise, and he flung his arms round my neck and kissed both cheeks with great gusto. He was in a terrific hurry though, so I just waited to lay on one of his tugs to take me back to where I had to be the next morning (At the airfield on the far side of the harbour.). Then I went in search of a car to fetch Lucette.

“One or two minor snags occurred, in the way of punctures and lack of petrol, all fortunately discovered before I started, and I eventually reached chez Brun at about 5.30pm. It was then that I discovered I had virtually forgotten how to speak French. I was very surprised when everyone started to speak to me in this strange tongue, and for a while I was quite at a loss to reply.

“However, it didn’t take long to come back. Everyone had to be kissed, from Mme Brun down to the smallest and most reluctant child. At about 5.45 Lucette and I left for the coast again, and chez Leclert, where a lot more kissing had to be done. After a while I found it quite difficult to realise I had been away for five months, and as it took so little time and effort to get there it came to seem silly not to make a weekly visit in future.

“M Leclert produced his one and only bottle of champagne for the occasion, and I have the cork as a souvenir. It was a bottle just arrived from France. I have forgotten how the evening passed, but it was certainly very enjoyable. M Leclert left at about 1am to bring a tug round from the harbour to the bay onto which the Leclert house backs. As the tide was low we had to wade to the tug from the end of the jetty. Lucette was carried on the back of a native, but I preferred to wade myself. Then we had quite a long moonlit trip in the tug. On the other side M Leclert woke up some of his representatives in a native village to find a guide for me.

“They were a bit surprised to be woken up by M Leclert at about 2am. M Leclert and Lucette accompanied me for about two miles, and then I finished the journey with two guides, or rather, one guide and one porter.

“A very hectic twelve hours which involved breaking several regulations, but it was worth it. Mme Leclert supplied me with a package of six hard boiled eggs and some bread, butter and salt, for the following day – all of which came in very useful.”

The remainder of my letter of 28th July included a discussion of the ethnic origins of the 400,000 people (at that time) of Mauritius, and great rejoicing that the Labour Party had just won the General Election in the UK (“Almost overnight a victory has been won which means more to me than that other victory which took 5 years to win”)

I mentioned that from the top of Signal Mountain I had had my first sight of the mountains of Reunion, 120 miles away to the WSW.

In Port Louis I was allocated to the Officers' mess of the Pioneer Corps, but billeted in a rather dilapidated but waterproof house nearby. With the help of a small group of assistants led by a Staff Sergeant I spent each day pottering with the radar installation on the top of Signal Mountain. At weekends I visited the local museum amongst other places, and examined skeletons of the recently extinct dodo, also books about the history of Mauritius and Reunion.

(Letter of Sunday 6th August 1945) "Mauritius was occupied by the British in 1809, but even so the loyalties of the people are still mainly French to judge, I am told, by the relative flag-waving on Empire day (British) and Bastille Day (French). All the same I am told they prefer to remain in the British Empire at this stage of history, and object rather strongly to being called French. All very confusing.

"Mauritius is the island which I mentioned about six to eight months ago as having had a bad cyclone. There is still a lot of wreckage lying about, but things are back to normal in most respects. It was, I believe, the most destructive cyclone in this island's history of cyclones." I have since learnt that it was the second worst, second to that of 1892, when winds of 170mph were experienced during a half hour period.

Wednesday 5th August 1945 was VJ Day "Needless to say, Mauritius is celebrating. Gun salutes, searchlight, fireworks, processions, church bells, and almost every noise in the human repertoire have been used to express the feelings of this island's medley of population. I expect at home the excitement must be considerable."

(Letter of 18th August 1945) "One of the impressive features of VJ is that a searchlight has been laid right across the middle of the town at a very sharp peak which overlooks it, in such a way that the peak is just illuminated - apparently suspended in mid-air over one's head. It is about 1500ft high, but the ground rises to it very steeply from the coastal plain. " Although the heights do not agree too well, this peak must be Signal Mountain on which I was engaged in installing my radar station.

"Life here is nothing but a round of holidays – VJ days, week ends, bank holidays, follow one another in rapid succession. Now that I have a job which I wish to finish and depart this is rather a nuisance. However."

I eventually departed from Mauritius in an RAF plane on 31 August, leaving from an airfield in the centre of the island. Up and down drafts buffeted the plane spectacularly as it attempted to gain height, so that at times it seemed to be forced down to a wobbly level alarmingly close to the ground before it finally managed to properly get going.

As on the way out, the routine was to spend a night in Diego Suarez en route. On this occasion there was fortunately no available accommodation at the airport so I was taken to sleep in the town itself – in my old mess in fact. This relieved me of the need to get across the harbour by my private endeavours.

(Letter of Monday 3rd September 1945) "I arrived in the town at about 4pm. Changed, bathed and fetched Lucette from Joffreville – of course I was expected, although the day was not sure. We got down to Diego again at about 8pm and I

stayed until 2am. I couldn't stay much longer as the Leclerts, out of politeness, refused to go to bed without seeing me off, and I felt I should not keep them up too long. Also I had to get up again at 4.30am." I was introduced to a Colonel who had now become the local OC British Troops and a fishing pal of M Leclert. He promised his co-operation in helping Lucette and myself to get married in Madagascar, which we were now considering as an alternative to meeting up in France as had been our previous plan. "I had to drink a glass of whisky and smoke a cigarette in exchange."

"On 16th September I was able to announce my promotion to the rank of Captain as from 16th August, which came about due to repatriation of senior officers without any change in the war establishment.

"On 27th September I departed from Mombasa at slightly under 24 hours notice and arrived at the EAEME (East African Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) Depot at Karen, Nairobi, on 28th. It was the same camp as that to which we had been moved immediately on arriving in Kenya. I now became its Adjutant, with slightly over 24 hours to take the job over from my predecessor, although officially my appointment (including an extra 3/- per day on its account) was as from 3rd October."

(Letter of 29th September 1945) "As far as I can see my new job involves no work worth mentioning, but it does involve being a mine of knowledge. There are other officers who deal with finance, pay, documentation, indents – in fact with most of the things normally done by an adjutant. The main function of this place is to be the demobilisation of African troops – pleasant job. Satisfying in some ways, but I would rather it wasn't me doing it. However, the groups are rolling along, and 22 will soon be away from here."

"I was appreciative of the weather at Karen, which was cool enough to permit two hour walks in green woodlands, with the Ngong Hills visible through the gaps. Sunny, with blue skies and fleecy clouds, quite chilly in the mornings.

"As Adjutant I was required to wear a peaked cap, Sam Browne and boots, and in this capacity had the new experience of being called 'Sir' by some of the junior officers passing through the depot.

(Letter of Monday 8th October 1945) "Yesterday I went with five other officers of the permanent staff for a trip round the Ngong Hills. We went in a 15cwt truck, leaving here just after dinner. First of all we went straight to the top of the hills – to the same place from which we looked over the Rift Valley two years ago. We looked for a while, then went back a little, through a gap in the hills, down the escarpment into the Rift Valley itself. No one knew the road, and it got worse and worse, until it was scarcely a road at all, but just a jolty progress over boulders and clouds of dust between thorn bushes. The general outlook became very much what one would expect to see in a journey through one of the moon's craters.

"We ran into a herd of giraffes – 21 of them in all, and were able to get within 20 or 30 yards of the nearest. We were all coated thickly in dust when we got back at about 8pm."

(Letter of Sunday 21st October 1945) “Our normally placid life was faintly disturbed a few evenings ago. I and another officer (Capt Heath) were carrying out investigations into a robbery in the camp, and eventually an askari was chased into the African lines. The whole place burst into an uproar in the darkness as half-clad perspiring askaris armed with sticks surged round the place looking for the unfortunate suspect. I felt as if I was in the middle of a hostile camp in the Zulu Wars, except that these Zulus were only hostile to the robber.

“Eventually on the flimsiest of evidence one askari was dragged out of bed by torchlight and selected as the robber, whereupon he was seized and nearly slain. I and the other officer had to intervene forcibly. Fortunately the Africans soon drew off, but a Boer Staff Sergeant continued his lynching efforts, so that I had to try to physically stop him. In the process he punched me in the stomach.”

“I suppose I got the worst of the exchange, but by the time I was on my feet again both the alleged robber (minus all his front teeth) and the Boer Staff Sergeant (very annoyed) were securely locked up in the unit jail. Next day the alleged robber was released for lack of evidence, but in the ensuing Court Martial the Staff Sergeant was reduced to the ranks for striking a superior officer and also striking an African.

“There is a breed of people who do not mince their words about what they would like to do to Africans. I have a certain malicious pleasure in having been present when one of this breed put his words into action – especially after enduring these sorts of words in silence for two years on and off. After two years of stagnation I also enjoyed doing something energetic – it rather reminded me of Gower Street days.”

This episode was one example of the type of security problem which was endemic at the Karen Camp. The permanent staff officers like myself took elaborate steps to make their rooms as impregnable as possible - I had three locks on my door – but it was difficult to combat the prising off of the wooden slats of which the accommodation blocks were constructed.

In an effort to improve security the whole camp was surrounded by a double fence of barbed wire with overhangs at the top of each and a guard patrolling between them. It made the place look more like a prison camp than holding accommodating for askaris during the three weeks it took to get their documentation in order for release from the army.

Even these steps proved inadequate, as holes were not infrequently cut in the wire. The ultimate was an occasion when a truck was stolen by the simple expedient of crashing it through the barrier.

(Letter of Sunday 10th November 1945) “Yesterday I got onto a motor cycle and went to the Coryndon Museum. There I bought a book by Dr Leakey, a friend of Professor King, on Stone Age implements of Kenya. I intend to get to know this Dr Leakey. Possibly I could help him with his local excavations. I have discovered these are in the Rift Valley, at Olorgesailie, about 30-35 miles from here. The Rift Valley is virtually a vast and trackless (for the most part) desert, with thorn scrub, boulders, gorges cut by seasonal torrents and no human habitation. Also the tracks are impassable in damp weather and it is damp at present. It is not the sort of place to go

in a car by oneself, in case of breakdowns miles from anywhere, which makes studies rather difficult. I intend to try to organise something anyhow. The finds of flint-like implements and extinct animals at Olorgesailie have been colossal.

“I see that mail is no longer censored, so I can be as seditious as I like in my letters. The truth is that unless Europeans get out of this country they will be thrown out on the backs of their necks eventually, just as the natives of the Far East are trying to rid themselves of European domination.”

(Letter of Sunday 18th November 1945) “Karen is on the lower slopes of the Ngong Hills, not where they really become hills but nevertheless in such a position that all the land to the east is at a lower level. This gives it a cooler and less stuffy climate than Nairobi. It also enables one, on a fine day to see both Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro in the extreme distance.

“Mount Kenya is 120 miles away and Mount Kilimanjaro is 180 miles away, so the visibility must be good. Myself, I have never seen Kilimanjaro from here, although I have seen it from the railway. Mount Kenya I have seen however, and as it is very steep and snow-clad it makes a most impressive picture as it lies clear-cut on the horizon, its white peaks with flag-like clouds streaming from them. Both these mountains are about 20 000ft in height. Both were volcanic in origin and roughly contemporaneous with the rift.

“Locally the plateau is cut by streams and differential erosion due to rock variations, much as in Hertfordshire, producing a gently undulating countryside. Rocks around Karen are all volcanic, but well weathered and with deep soil. They poured out of the side of the Rift as it formed, in great lava sheets, with quiescent periods between sheets, and periods of showers of volcanic dust and ashes.

“The climate is English-summer-like. Temperature is rarely unpleasantly hot or cold. At night it is chilly, at midday now it is on the warm side, as this is the warm season. The northern winter is midsummer here, if it can be called such, and vice versa. Summer and winter are not sufficiently pronounced to be of importance though.

“The rains are the important seasonal phenomenon. The Little Rains are on now and last several weeks. In March there are about six weeks of Long Rains. Rains are however very variable. Sometimes they fail; often it rains during the so-called dry seasons. I daresay total rain is about 30ins and fairly well distributed throughout the year, producing a more or less permanently green countryside.

“The Rift Valley, being a rain shadow area, is almost a desert. The Ngong Hills are pretty damp. Vegetation at Karen couldn’t be more English – deciduous woods, meadows in the valleys, cultivated fields, grassland with cattle grazing and scattered trees. The trees, and even the grass, look English. The sky is usually partially clouded. Crops are more tropical – maize, coffee, bananas. The bananas don’t seem to ripen though. The Ngong Hills are grass covered, the forest probably having been burnt off for grazing.

“East of Nairobi are great flat grassy plains, at first with thorn bushes, but farther east with nothing but grass. This is a huge game reserve, populated by thousands of game

animals of all sorts. The Rift Valley is also a game reserve. At Karen one never sees game, but all the same one does not go out alone at night too far from habitations, because occasional lions and leopards wander right into the heart of Nairobi itself – about once a year that is, and the police perform heroic deeds to remove them. Three lions walked into Mombasa in March and killed four natives before they were shot.

“Karen is the name of a large residential district between Nairobi and the Ngong Hills. Each house is of about the three-bedroom type, but situated in vast lands of its own, and rarely visible from the road, so that one has the impression of being in pure countryside. Karen Camp is right on the edge of the residential district and about 12 miles from Nairobi.

“It is a hutted camp and is the EAEME depot for the East Africa Command. All incoming Europeans pass through here, and all EAEME Africans are released from the army from here. The camp holds about 1000 men, but numbers fluctuate considerably. Nine out of ten are Africans. Lucette calls them Zulus, spelt Zoulous. I must change the subject before I become subversive again (Last week I had to destroy a letter because on reflection I decided it was unnecessarily subversive.)

“I have just had my dinner. As I got up late and had a huge breakfast I didn’t feel much like dinner, but for psychological reasons, ie to convince myself I had dined, I had some cheese. The breakfast was pawpaw, shredded wheat (Canadian variety), egg, sausage and tomato, and marmalade. Sunday breakfasts here are good, even so I am always very late for them.

“I motorcycled in to the Coryndon Museum yesterday, to have a potter round amongst the local volcanic specimens and the flint implements of Stone Age men of 200 000 years ago. I have yet to fix a visit to “Leakey’s Camp” as it is called. It is at least 50 miles away, nearly 30 miles beyond our permitted radius. Leakey is working there now.”

(Letter of Sunday 25th November 1945). “This has been a busy week here. Too busy at times in fact, and I have had to do an average of 1.5 hours overtime per day in order to clear up the essential jobs. We have had a court martial, a murder and quite a number of robberies in addition to the normal events of the week.

“The murder wasn’t very exciting – just a drunken squabble between several askaris. Askaris in process of discharge are a most undisciplined and querulous crowd of potential hooligans. It will not be many years before reports of police firing on mobs come just as regularly from East Africa as they do from India at present. There are unfortunately two sides to the problem.

“We have had a considerable amount of rain recently, with plenty of mud in consequence, although it has all been on an English rather than an Indian scale. As a result the countryside has taken on a fresher shade of green, and everything is busy growing. There are even a few odd flowers here and there, although the great difference between here and home is still the lack of flowers. There is not a tenth of the number of wild flowers here. Still, it is a pleasant enough land.

“Nairobi is the centre of the world here. Between Nairobi and Mombasa there is a great stretch of nothingness as far as Europeans are concerned. There is a road, a railway and a telegraph line between the two, but the climate is dry and rather too warm, and the land infertile. Apart from a narrow coastal belt it is mainly covered with grass and scrub.

“Nairobi lies on the east fringe of the White Highlands. These border the Rift Valley and are considered the only areas really suitable for white settlement. Large areas are reserved exclusively for whites; others are native reserves.

“The European centre of Nairobi is well planned and well built, with broad roads and gardens, and impressive buildings. European stores provide all the shopping facilities one could normally desire. The whole place is streamlined and up to date, the roads full of luxury cars. Around the European centre are the native quarters, and even these appear to be planned and clean, although definitely native. The European residential area lies west of the town, the houses gradually becoming farther apart as one moves outwards. The town centre at night is an impressive sight with neon lights and palm trees, and massive buildings silhouetted against the sky. Some idea of its size is given by the fact that this is a three cinema town.

“Karen Camp is set amongst trees, some of its wooden huts being close together, others isolated. In the centre is a grass area used as a parade ground. I and most of the other permanent staff officers live in a centrally placed hut, where there is rather less risk of robberies than nearer the perimeter fence. This did not prevent my predecessor having his entire outfit stolen, but one result was that he then took steps to make his room - now my room - as burglar proof as possible. There are permanent lights at both front and back, and the door has three locks, including a chain and padlock installed by myself. My two curtains hang on nails at the corners of the windows. Each consists of half a sheet, which I tore in half only after deep thought. They are the only curtains in the officers’ sleeping quarters which cannot be seen through, so I feel justified.”

(Letter of Sunday 2nd December 1945). “This week has been hectic to say the least, and I have had much difficulty in keeping my head above water. I still have only my nostrils above, rather like a hippopotamus. A large draft of officers and other ranks has arrived from home for one thing. We have also had a number of robberies, our principal car has been smashed up in an accident, our murder investigations are continuing.

“Frequently when I am at the height of occupation, with half a dozen balls in the air at the same time, the CO enters and announces “Another hole was cut in the fence last night, and so-and-so has had all his kit stolen.

“This fence of ours is a strange affair. Five or six miles long, it is still not quite finished, and hundreds of men have spent hours of labour, months of labour in fact, constructing it. Now all that has to be done to get through it is to cut one strand of wire in each of its members (it is a double fence) with a pair of pincers. Its inward and outward overhangs make it look like a POW camp. The fence is intended as much to hinder egress as access, since a Mr Vincent, probably the most influential person in Kenya, owns half the surrounding area and dislikes having askaris

wandering on his land. He has already caused several COs of the Camp to be sacked on this account.

(Letter of Sunday 9th December 1945). "Last Sunday I wrote to Dr Leakey, the friend of Professor King and Curator of the Coryndon Museum. He is quite well known as a student of Stone Age times, where geology meets archaeology. I received his reply today. He says he will be very glad to show me his Olorgesailie excavations and also give me some voluntary work in the museum for evenings and weekends. "

(Letter of Tuesday 25th December 1945). "The highlight of the Christmas holiday as far as I am concerned was yesterday, when four of us went for a long trip down into the Rift Valley – officially we went on duty, to shoot deer etc for the askaris to eat at Christmas. Personally I didn't do any shooting – I drove the truck most of the time. It was a very enjoyable day, and we travelled about 120miles in all."

"We took a route new to me. First we went down a steep winding road through forests into the dry barren Rift Valley itself to a sister unit down there. The major i/C fixed us up with rifles, ammunition, his licence to shoot, and guides. Then we went straight out across the plains for about 30miles along a dirt track.

"We turned off the track and chased the unfortunate animals through lightly wooded grassland. In places the bushes were quite thickly spaced and it was a considerable job to manoeuvre a three ton lorry amongst them. Elsewhere there was nothing but short grass as flat as a billiard table. There were ravines and small hills to add diversity, and the background to the scene was a recently extinct volcano rising from the valley floor – Ol Longenot it is called.

"In all ten deer were shot, but some were shot at some distance from the truck, and could not be located when the truck was taken round to pick them up. Vultures had about ten minutes with one, and left it almost picked to the bone.

"Eventually five were brought back to camp – there were three congoni and two Thompson's gazelles. This morning the Africans ate them with great gusto, although they would have preferred a good deal more. "

(Letter of Sunday 30th December 1945). "On Christmas day we had the usual formal invitations to dinners and drinks between the Officers', Sergeants' and corporals' messes. On the whole it was a good deal less unpleasant than my last two Christmases in East Africa. I made myself Orderly Officer on Christmas day, mainly to provide an excuse for escaping periodically. This was quite a success.

"The chief social event was the Sergeants' dinner on Christmas day. To this were invited the officers and also a crowd of Polish girls from a Nairobi camp. There was lavish decoration and food, but the fact that the Polish girls were almost entirely without a knowledge of English rather threw a spanner in the works. They had also had their dinner already and thought they were going to a dance.

"On the whole there were sighs of relief when they departed, although they were quite nice girls. They hated the Russians with a hatred which boiled every time the word Russia was mentioned. Most had been in Russian concentration camps. "

(Letter of Tuesday 1st January 1946). “Last night I and three other officers failed to attend the Sergeants’ mess New Year celebration. At about 1.30am I heard a terrific row approaching, so I leapt out of bed and locked my door on the inside. The Commanding Officer was leading a crowd of drunken revellers to wish us a happy new year.

“They did their best to break my door down but failed, although it had to be refixed on its hinges this morning. They then turned their attentions to another room, and in that case they split the door clean in half and burst in. The officer concerned was in a furious rage and came within an inch of hitting the Commanding Officer, so I quickly exited my room to stand between them.

“Eventually the fuss blew over, and having shown myself (and the others having also come out by this time) we had to go and drink orangeade with drunken sergeants in their mess for about an hour. However, it was quite enjoyable and I suppose it was just as well we put in an appearance. “

My normal relations with this CO – a Major Bush – I considered to be entirely satisfactory. He was what I regarded as a liberal version of a regular army officer. Aged about 35, he had been a Lt Colonel for three years, but had dropped one rank in order to take command of a detachment due to move to Burma, a move which did not take place because of the end of the Japanese war. He had plenty of drive – perhaps a little too much, because he became very piqued with the powers that be when he could not get his way. In particular he was pathologically (and unsuccessfully) obsessed with getting a commission for a young Staff Sergeant who was a pal of his and with whom he spent most of his evenings. He was clearly a homosexual, but this was a matter to which at that time nobody found it necessary to make any reference.

(Letter of Saturday 5th January 1946). “I went to see Dr Leakey at the museum this week. He had an engagement soon after, so he asked me to visit his home the next day. When I arrived he asked me what my special interests were. I thought quickly and decided that I was particularly interested in vertebrate palaeontology. This, due to the fact that I had been reading about my rabbit's skull in bed the previous night. I seem to have decided right however, because he said there were good openings for vertebrate palaeontologists at home at present as vertebrate palaeontologists have specialised in dying off during the war years.

“Dr Leakey said he had plenty of vertebrate material already gathered for several papers. So starting next week I am going to work in the museum most evenings. I am seeing him again next Monday to make the necessary arrangements and to be shown the heaps of skeletons. Tomorrow I am going with a party he is taking to see his excavations at Olorgesailie. I gather it is a fairly distinguished party, including Elspeth Huxley amongst others.”

A post-script to this letter stated “Sunday evening – I had an enjoyable day at Olorgesailie. There were several local big-wigs in the party apart from Mrs Huxley – three of them were Sirs. They were rather stupid for the most part and spent a good deal of intellectual energy in thinking up stupid jokes. They gave me a very nice lunch, however, so I should not complain, and they also asked Dr Leakey all the

simple questions which I wouldn't have risked losing my geological reputation by asking."

This Olorgesailie visit was followed by another one on 20 January, when I led a party of 20 European troops to see the excavations, in the course of which visit I managed to take a useful series of photographs

(Letter of Monday 14th January 1946). "Yesterday evening I met Captain and Mrs Walford in a Nairobi hotel. Captain Walford was the camp commandant in Diego before he left to come here, and his wife was Lillian Payet, a friend of Lucette's. In Diego I didn't find either of them very interesting, but they seem to have improved considerably. We spent quite an enjoyable 2.5 hours of mixed French and English together.

"From them I learnt a good deal about the legal snags and difficulties of Franco/British marriages. For one thing Mrs Walford has no entry permit into Kenya and is liable to be ejected at any moment, although they hope this can be fixed as Captain Walford is a Colonial. For an Imperial there is no chance of having a wife here – not that I would want Lucette to come here anyhow. Mrs Walford is already bored stiff by sitting in hotels whilst hubby goes out to work. She can't speak a word of English and has not met a French person during her 14 days in Kenya."

By 27th January I was, however, actively seeking to organise the marriage of Lucette and myself. Not an easy matter when it was taking at least a month to get a reply to a letter to Diego, since all mail was now passing through Tananarive, the head office of the recently reorganised civilian postal services of Madagascar. Lucette was numbering her letters, and at least half of them were failing to arrive within three months.

By this time practically all British forces had been withdrawn from Diego, and only one permanent representative remained to complete tidying up of administrative loose ends. As it happened, he was a Sergeant Lamarque, a Mauritian who was the fiancé of Sabine, friend of Lucette's and neighbour of the Leclerts, and whom I knew quite well. My preference would have been to get married in Diego, but the virtual disappearance of a British military presence from what had now become a somewhat shambolically organised foreign country meant that despite the goodwill of Sergeant Lamarque there was little real chance of my getting there. Also I remained determined to avoid any exposure of Lucette to the social circles of the British army in Kenya. I therefore wanted her to travel to France with the Leclerts rather than via Kenya.

Since early December 1945 I had known, probably through the Leclerts, that under French wartime law it was possible for a member of the armed forces to be married by proxy. Whilst attempting to find out if this law applied to British soldiers as well as to the French soldiers for whom it was designed, we had taken some preliminary steps. Notably Lucette had been advised by a solicitor that it would be OK, and on 27th January I received a first document, which was a copy of her birth certificate. My parents had also obtained and forwarded copies of my own birth certificate.

On 28th January I went to see a Kenyan solicitor myself. He had no idea about the legalities, but said he would produce a formal looking statement to be signed by myself, indicating I wished to be married to Lucette by proxy and appointing Raymond Leclert to speak on my behalf. He duly produced this statement. It contained an error, describing me as Captain of the East Africa Mechanical Engineers, instead of the East Africa Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Because of a desire to cause no further delay I did not correct this error, which was destined in due course to appear unalterably on our marriage certificate. The statement was signed, stamped, and sent off. In the meantime my parents had sought legal advice in the UK, which was again inconclusive, but generally pessimistic about the possibilities of this route. Having done what I could, I was therefore left in considerable doubt as to the likely outcome.

On 6th February 1946 I informed my parents that I was about to be posted to Addis Ababa to join the British Military Mission to Ethiopia (BMME).

(Letter of Sunday 10th February 1946). “Phew. It’s warm today! Or perhaps part of my problem is that I have been chasing a swarm of locusts – clouds upon clouds of them fluttering along and alighting like a mat on the grass. It was interesting to cleave a path through the brown mat by running towards it. The swarm was accompanied by a flock of huge birds busy devouring its constituent individuals as rapidly as possible.

“I am more or less ready to leave for Addis, although I still have to pack. I have made lots of purchases of food and clothes, had my boxes repaired and generally got myself mobile. I have handed my job over to my successor, who officially becomes adjutant tomorrow.”

Early on Wednesday 13 February I departed from Karen en route to Addis Ababa.

(Letter of Thursday 14th February 1946). “I am writing from Nanuki, about 120 miles north of Nairobi and right alongside Mount Kenya. We came here by rail yesterday, and the road convoy will be leaving tomorrow. There are 8 officers, 12 other ranks and 132 Africans, so it will be a largish convoy. There will be 10 six ton Italian diesel trucks, each with a trailer, to carry us. They are loading up outside now with our heavy kit etc. The lorries make a horrible chugging noise like an aeroplane taking off, and the air is full of diesel fumes.

“It takes six days to reach Mogadishu in Italian Somaliland, and another six to reach Hargeisha, military centre of British Somaliland. After that I suppose it will take a few more days to reach Addis Ababa, but as far as I can make out I am the only person going as far as Addis, as the others drop off along the route. “

(Letter of Monday 25th February 1946). “The convoy is halted for midday food a few tens of miles from Hargeisha. The askaris are teasing some camels near my truck, causing them to make a roaring noise rather like that of a lion.

“For most of our journey we have been sleeping beneath the stars using our camp kit. We have rarely camped before dark, by which time we have been very dusty and tired, making letter writing rather difficult.

“We have covered about 1400 miles in 12 days – a slow rate of progress, but in part across a dry sandy terrain without roads. The countryside has been quite uniform – flat sandy desert, with large areas covered by apparently dead scrub.

“I think there must be a drought on, because these trees must obviously have had leaves at some time. A few still have small scruffy leaves protected by every conceivable shape of prickly – every tree is a mass of prickles. The exact nature of this dry and desolate scenery has depended on whether the subsoil is lava, limestone or red sandstone, and it has mostly been the latter.

“There were ten trucks in our convoy as far as Mogadishu, and eleven from there onwards – different ones. I have been travelling in the driving cab of a truck the whole way and have made myself quite comfortable there with blankets, cushions, drinks, food, books etc.

“We have stopped early this evening as we do not wish to enter Hargeisha in the dark. The distant noises come to my ears from people of at least five different tongues preparing their beds – English, Swahili, Italian, Somali, Urdu and others – and they mingle with the cries of birds and goats.

“Small herds of goat and camels wander over this semi-desert, the property of nomadic Somalis who somehow manage to keep alive in small numbers. Vast tracts are uninhabited though.

“Camels here are without the dignity to which their expression entitles them – they get eaten by these people, also they run away with the most absurd jangle of awkward legs when they are scared by the trucks.”

(Letter of Tuesday 26th February 1946). “I was awakened this morning by a gentle and steady plod-plod-plod, and when I looked up there was a long string of wood carrying camels silhouetted between me and the beginning of a brilliant tropical sunrise. The tail of each camel was tied to the head of the one behind. Each imitated the actions of the one in front, so as they moved past with occasional stops and restarts they looked rather like the trucks of a goods train shunting along.

”In the NFD (Northern Frontier District) of Kenya we most unexpectedly found ourselves in the Middle East – the town of Wajir has all the white walls, palms and Arab population which one associates with the Middle East and not at all with Kenya. There were several other little villages or townships of a similar nature along the route, at water points in the semi-desert. Bardera on the River Juba was perhaps the largest. We crossed the Juba by ferry. It was here that the Italians made their only real stand in Italian Somaliland.

”We had 36 hours in Mogadishu, during which time I covered the 5 miles between the Transit Camp and the town on three occasions – morning, afternoon and evening. In the morning I bought food, orange squash etc, and then quite accidentally I met Ken Drummond, whom I had known on the voyage on the way out to East Africa. He invited me to dinner in the evening.

"In the afternoon I bought stamps and visited the local museum. It was quite a good one. The curator was an old Italian who spoke no English, but we got along very well in French. He showed me around himself, unlocked some of his special treasures, and finally gave me a geological map of Abyssinia and a booklet about the museum. It was a pleasant hour and a half.

"The buying of stamps is a ritual which the sending of letters to Madagascar renders necessary. When I ask for stamps everyone looks at me as if either I am crazy or haven't heard that forced letters don't now require stamps.

"In the evening I dined with Ken and his 2i/c. We had a grand continental meal and then went for coffee on the veranda of another hotel, where a band was playing. It was all very like Diego, although the town is far larger and with far more Europeans than Diego. Mog has about 4000 Italians I believe. It looks just like an Italian town should look – large snow white blocks of buildings with very few windows.

"There are fascist triumphal arches and monuments with eagles everywhere in Italian Somaliland. Every milestone is a huge affair with an enormous fascia engraved so firmly that only dynamite could remove it. Nobody has bothered. Mog has no *raison d'être* except as a base for the invasion of Abyssinia. Magnificent military roads radiate from it in all directions in dead straight lines across the desert. We followed one such road which was tarmacked for 230 miles – in Kenya tarmac is unheard of except in towns, and Kenya is a much more fertile land than this place.

"I was very glad to meet Ken Drummond again. We had an enjoyable evening with sensible dinner table talk. As all my fellow officers on our convoy are huntin', shootin' and fishin' types – mainly in the Kings African Rifles (KAR) and the Somali Scouts – this evening was a rather special change.

"Hargeisha appears to be simply a military centre. There are, though, swarms of camels walking away from it, but what they are expecting to come to except 1,400 miles of nothing at all I do not know.

"Somaliland appears to be the home of the "fuzzy-wuzzies" who killed General Gordon years back. One sees them by the roadside, spears in hand. They are called "shiftas", and are regarded with great suspicion. Shiftas are the reason why trucks make this journey in convoys. They look rather grim, and in view of their grim environment I am not surprised. Somalis are not negroid – they look like black or dark brown Europeans. The local truck drivers are Arabs or Italians – the Italians mix quite freely with the more educated natives.

"The firm which owns the diesel trucks which carried us is called Behanis, Behani being an Arab owning 200 such trucks, who has amassed huge wealth by his transport operations in all this corner of Africa. He worked first for the Italian army, now for the British.

"I must tell you about the termite nests. Some must be at least 30ft high, made of red sand or grey lime sand. They are everywhere numerous, and in places give the desert the appearance of a ruined city. Termites, camels and desert just about sum up Somaliland.

"Dinner is just about due, and a good meal is much needed after days of (mainly) bully beef and biscuits. Even at Mog Transit Camp the dinner was cooked bully beef. En route I have had a private food supply of tinned milk, tinned grapefruit and tinned herring. Tinned milk mixed with lime juice makes a delicious drink, so delicious in the heat and dust that at times it proved difficult to avoid consuming enough to make myself feel sick.

(Letter of Thursday 28th February 1946). "I am writing from the veranda of the Ciao Hotel, Dire-Daua. We made a fast trip from Hargeisha yesterday (200 miles) by road. Today we are leaving by train for Addis Ababa. Yesterday's road was that followed by the South Africans when they occupied Dire-Daua in 1941, passing the sites of the battles at Mardar Pass and Harrar.

"The country is changed in every aspect from that of Somaliland – hilly and green, and the Abyssinians very obviously in charge. The work done by the Italians during their five years of occupation was colossal. They built magnificent roads, bridges, first class hotels, and blocks of shops which would not be out of place in London. Since the Italian defeat all this has to a large extent gone to ruin, but the Abyssinians are clearly trying hard. Harrar is a very ancient walled city. The native part is still confined within its painted mud walls, but the Italian development lies outside.

"We have begun to meet the Ethiopian army, looking rather French colonial, and Ethiopian officers. It is interesting to watch the reactions of my Kenya-inculcated companions to the lack of a colour bar. My opinion of British overseas behaviour sinks even lower. No wonder we are so unpopular in all the coloured countries. Dire-Daua still has a small British garrison from Somaliland, but once we are out of here we shall be in an entirely Abyssinian controlled area. The BMME is of course not an army, but a Mission."

(Letter of Saturday 2nd March 1946). "I arrived in Addis Ababa at about 4pm yesterday. I am to be Admin Officer of the Ethiopian army workshop, which is run by a Major Monk. As Captain Monk he was Transport Officer at the EAEME Depot at Karen for about six weeks and we always got on well together, so the set-up here will be satisfactory in that respect. He is a quiet and sensible person of about 35 – rather stout in a friendly sort of way.

"I am in a small mess with only three other officers, of whom one is Major Monk. The others seem reasonably quiet, which is my main requirement of them. The mess is a modern Italian building, probably intended to be used by officers – there are many all over Abyssinia, sorry – Ethiopia, and they are mainly going to ruin. It is an excellent building and I have the best room I have had in East Africa Command.

"I have already seen the famous Emperor. He sailed past in a car with a large entourage following him, when I was on my way to the post office this morning.

"Addis Ababa is at 7000ft, and therefore cool and quite green. The temperature is quite equitable, and today I have found it remarkably pleasant. The place is also perfectly healthy. Out of the window of the mess I can see nothing but masses of trees, a tarmac road, and a few brick houses. The grass is in fact brown at present and the rainy season is about due."

(Letter of Saturday 2nd March 1946 to RJ Eden). "Every private house here has an armed guard. I thought it strange that the hotel at Dire Dawa had a guard, but up here every building has one. The guards are civilians, and they operate with a round up the barrel and the safety catch off. Their aim is to shoot first.

"The British troops in Addis Ababa are scattered through the Ethiopian army units, acting as their backbone. The idea is that eventually they will all be withdrawn, the hope being that by then an adequate local backbone will have developed. There are three British officers running the army workshop, plus a number of British NCOs, and several Ethiopian officers supposedly under training.

"The cost of living in Addis Ababa is fantastic (haircut 5/- is one item; tin of bootpolish 3/- is another). My boy speaks a language previously unknown to man, and I certainly don't intend to learn it – he will need to learn English. "

(Letter of Friday 8th March 1946) "I WANT TO GET OUT OF THE ARMY. I am sick to death of the army. I am not interested in the "Imperial Army" of "The Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Haile Selassie I, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia." I wish him to Hell in fact. Nor am I interested in the British Imperial policy which leads to my enforced presence here. "

The Imperial policy appeared to be to keep a degree of covert control of the Ethiopian army in order hopefully to deal with the somewhat turbulent local tribes which could otherwise threaten incursions into neighbouring British colonies.

From Addis correspondence with Lucette proved difficult, with numerous gaps in the numbered letter sequences. In a letter received on 8th March, for example, I heard that Lucette had received no mail from me for six weeks prior to its dispatch. We had, however tried the experiment of writing via my parents in the UK. The links to Europe proved to be much better than the link from Diego to British East Africa, and we switched to this mode of communication, which proved more reliable and required about a fortnight's transit time each way.

(Letter of Sunday 10th March 1946) "On Friday night I and Capt Cleasby were invited by the local padre to go to a social mission in the town. This padre (Lieut Payne) is quite young and is in fact a missionary (aiming to convert the local black Jews) who has wangled his way out here by temporarily becoming a padre. He is rather like a juvenile Mr Fenn and is an exceptionally pleasant person.

"The party proved to be a great success. Besides Cleasby and myself and the padre, there were three NCOs and about 40 people connected with the mission – teachers, missionaries, nurses and families. They were all youngish, all very sincere and friendly in the best Christian tradition.

"I forgot to say they were all Americans, so I was talking with a marked American accent by the time the evening was over. None of them smoked or drank anything except coffee, so I felt surrounded by friendly souls for the first time since my army career began. Poor Cleasby is not a person who likes the pleasures of the world to excess, but he does like his cigarette, and he spent the first two hours wondering anxiously if someone would take the lead and light a cigarette. But no one did. The

evening consisted of supper, American party games, and hymns (American). I hope I shall be invited to the next one in about a month's time.

"The Ethiopian army is rather like the popular idea of the army of a South American state. It calls itself the "Imperial Army". It is slightly larger than a Division by our standards. Its function is internal security, as there are large areas of the country over which control is very light. Large armed bands still exist in remoter places, and I believe there are other claimants to the throne, although Haile Selassie more or less wiped out the family of the person from whom he grabbed the throne.

"We have two of our Ethiopian officers under arrest for theft at the moment, and one of my duties is to periodically check if they have yet escaped or not. "

(Letter of Sunday 10th March 1946 to RJ Eden) "The Abyssinians get very annoyed if they are not called Ethiopians. Abyssinia means "Divided States" it appears. The set-up is strange – this place is probably one of the few absolute monarchies surviving in the world today. There appears to be little national feeling amongst the people. One of their most striking characteristics is that they are very ugly – both men and women. They are the ugliest people I have met out here.

"I daresay the place is interesting, but I do not feel mentally disposed to be interested at the moment. Fortunately the climate is good and the place is healthy in spite of the absence of drains and lavatories in a town of 200 000 people."

(Letter of Tuesday 12th March 1946) "I am engaged in a very involved and lengthy investigation into a long series of minor thefts which is leading up to the court martial of one of our Ethiopian officers. Believe me, it is difficult trying to get a story out of an illiterate Ethiopian, and in this case there are many little stories making up the whole.

"I haven't yet discovered much about the local currency here. An Ethiopian dollar, worth 2/-, is the unit, but I do not know about its subdivisions. Prices are such that almost all are stated in dollars. The smaller coins have indecipherable Amharic figures written on them, and I believe there may be more than one version of them. East African currency is used quite freely alongside the local.

"I am getting on quite well with Cleasby, the local Pay Corps representative, who shares my room. Actually he belongs to some Scottish infantry regiment, and is seconded to the Pay Corps owing to lack of work for the infantry. "

(Letter of Tuesday 19th March 1946) "I believe I forgot to tell you at the time, but even though the French consulates in Nairobi – and London – were quite definite that proxy marriage could not occur, I sent Lucette the documents which seemed to be relevant. At Diego they had been fairly sure it was possible, and also Lucette is friendly with the wife of the local marriage-man. French officials will notoriously do almost anything if the inducement is sufficient.

"So yesterday an official telegram came from the British Liaison at Diego saying that the marriage would occur on 20th if permission of my commanding Officer was sent.

This telegram had been badly delayed, so I doubt if the permission, which went off yesterday, will arrive in time. Even so M Leclert may manage to fix things.

"So I may be married tomorrow. I would suspect the legality of it may be highly suspect to say the least, and I was certainly surprised to hear anything more about the matter. However, there it is.

"When Lucette travels to France I want her to go with the Leclerts, married or not, and first class if there are classes these days. I don't want her to come into contact with East Africa and I don't want her to have to travel alone as she would almost certainly have to do if she went official. She has no experience of travel and would certainly start off by having all her baggage stolen."

(Letter of Saturday 23rd March 1946) "The Archbishop of York, Dr Garbitt, is here at present on a tour of some sort, and he gave a sermon of Thursday. It was all very much formalised religion, but interesting as a sociological study. Dr Garbitt seems quite a nice old boy. Professor Abercrombie is also coming here in the near future to advise on the planning of Addis Ababa. We feel almost on the map.

"We are quite a small community in Addis – about 40 officers and 60 other ranks. Of the 40 officers not more than 25 are Lt colonels. Nobody does anything which can be described as working, except perhaps one or two of the general admin people. However most of those here are resigned to the fact that they are power-politics pawns, and all the UK government requires is their presence in this country.

"At the moment the Ethiopian army sports are on, and we are expected to be present for a good part of the time. So far I have only attended on one afternoon, but it was not very interesting. I was compelled to sit in the sun, not that it is all that hot here, being eaten by numerous flies, with only my programme as defence. However, it passed an afternoon away."

(Letter of Wednesday 27th March 1946) "On Sunday I had an afternoon and evening outing with the Padre. We visited the American mission for tea and also to enable the Padre to take part in a broadcast rehearsal, then to a church service at the Anglo-Ethiopian Club, in English. Most of the members of the congregation were missionaries – American, British and Swedish. Then to Radio Addis Ababa for the broadcast – the weekly service in English, plus hymns. About ten American missionaries gave it – highly American. I was invited to sing in the choir, but declined. Instead I sat in the room with them and watched proceedings. From the sermon by the principal missionary I gather that I shall inevitably be roasted in Hell, but I am afraid I am not too worried.

"Then we went for dinner with the local British C of E mission. They were all very kindly people, but you could see a slight look of pain cross their faces whenever the conversation drifted away from religion. Several of them explained how and when they were saved. They were certainly very fine people all the same, and their company infinitely preferable to that of the military.

"Last night the Ethiopian boys of our workshop had a drinking party. The General, about six Colonels, and of course unit officers including myself, were there. I

accidentally got sat next to the General. He is a kindly old soul, with very little intelligence and no conversation. Native food and drink were provided, but I fear they don't appeal much to me. There was a strong curry, which is eaten by taking it up in your fingers with a doughy sort of pancake. Also a horrible drink called tej, made by fermenting honey."

(Letter of Wednesday 3rd April 1946) "Three letters which I received on 30th March were date stamped Addis Ababa 16th March, so they have been lying in the Post Office here for 14 days. Very annoying, but probably just as well, because they were written when Lucette had received no mail from me for 2½ months – so I had later letters telling me that mail had arrived before those saying it had not done so.

"I went to see a football match yesterday and sat quite close to the "Conquering Lion of Judah". His efforts at pomp and dignity were a little pitiful, but he looks a nice little man, nothing like as black as his subjects incidentally. He was accompanied by a lap-dog which bit the legs of those he received."

(Letter of Wednesday 10th April 1946) "We had a pleasant weekend last weekend, in a Greek farm about 65 miles from here. It was in a pleasant wooded valley, with a large river, the Awash, at the bottom. The farm grows sugar cane, bananas, oranges, pawpaw etc and is run by two Greek ex-soldiers. All very pleasant and friendly - no one could have been more hospitable.

"The Greeks are friends of Major Hodgson, one of our party who invited the rest of us. This farm is right in the heart of Abyssinia as one imagines it should be. There are crocks in the river and wild pigs in the woods. There are also hot springs, which have been made into natural hot baths by the addition of a few stones and logs to dam the flow, and little rough huts built round them to afford privacy. "

(Letter of Friday 26th April 1946) "It is quite likely that I was married on the 10th April. In her last letter dated 5th April Lucette said she had received the telegram authorising my marriage and that everything was fixed for the 10th. She also said she was going to send a telegram to let me know either way. I have not received any telegram, however, but mail arrangements at this end are such that it is a standing miracle that anybody gets any mail at all, let alone telegrams. I have never heard of anyone receiving a telegram here. So unless the French authorities discovered at the last minute that this marriage is probably irregular, it has certainly occurred by now.

"I saw an interesting ceremony last week – presentation of a new flag to the Ethiopian army by the Emperor. This flag is to be carried by the Ethiopian contingent (33) which is leaving very shortly for the London Victory Parade. The ceremony included blessing by priests of the Coptic Church, and the flag was marched round the parade ground dozens of times. We had to stand for 1½ hours, and it nearly killed me.

"The lion on the top of the pole is not of gold, but of wood painted yellow. It was made in our workshops. It was about the sixth one fabricated before it was judged OK, and has been the main product of the workshops for the last month. Earlier versions were of brass and were too heavy for the flagpole to be lifted up again after dipping it in salute."

(Letter of Saturday 27th April 1946) "Thanks for a mysterious telegram dated 24th April, stating "Good wishes for your future happiness both. Mother and Dad." Thanks very much. I can only assume you have heard news of the proxy marriage of Lucette and myself which has not yet reached me. I can also only assume it has gone through, in which case I am naturally very pleased. I await the next mail for fuller information with some curiosity. Thanks for your good wishes in any case. (I in fact received confirmation of the proxy marriage in letters received on 4 May.)

"We are having a row with the Ethiopian government at present. It is considered to have insulted us, and we have orders to be "cold and indifferent" in dealings with Ethiopians. My hope is that we may be thrown out on the backs of our necks. "

(Letter of Friday 3rd May 1946) "I recently applied for a month's leave to go on the road convoy from Addis to Asmara and back. The answer was, would I be just as happy to go as 'technical' officer on duty with the convoy. I replied yes. Little do these people realise my ignorance of the innards of motor vehicles. However I have no doubt there will be tow ropes available if one breaks down. I shall be going on the convoy leaving here on about 8 June and getting back about 8 July. It goes to Asmara, then shuttles off to Gondar, and returns by the same route.

"The Rift Valley of Africa runs north to join the Gulf of Aden near Djibuti. The railway from Djibuti to Addis follows this Rift for a great part of its length. There are escarpments several thousands of feet high on each side. Addis itself is about forty miles west of its western escarpment, at a height of about 9000ft. Rocks are volcanic here, but towards the Rift limestone formations appear. Exposures are not good. There are a number of signs of recent volcanic activity, for example the hot springs to which I referred before. These are right at the foot of the western scarp, in the valley itself. There is also a well-shaped volcano visible from here, but I can't remember its name. It rises about 3000ft above plateau level, and is about forty miles away, more or less perched on the edge of the scarp and about SE from here I would think. Farther south volcanic activity has cluttered the Rift Valley, so that for some distance it is scarcely recognisable on the ground. "

(Letter of Sunday 2nd June 1946). "I am set to depart on the Addis to Asmara convoy on Wednesday. It takes a week to get there (600 miles), one week in Asmara and one week to get back. There are units with British officers all along the road, so each night should be spent in a mess. There will be at least four officers on the convoy – Majors Hodgson and Inglese, Captain Dunham and myself.

"The two majors are on an "intelligence" survey of the area, so they will tend to disappear from time to time and I am OC Convoy. Dunham came up from Nairobi with me and is an RASC Transport Officer. Major Hodgson is the one who took us to the Greek farm, so I know him well too, and Inglese is also a decent person.

"The convoy will have 15 trucks, all more or less full of Ethiopian troops, their wives and families. From Asmara we will bring back the month's Naafi rations amongst other things. We also have an armed guard just to persuade the locals to lay off, but they are rather scared of interfering with military vehicles, and there has never been any trouble in respect of convoys. Unlike the trip from Nairobi to here, the trucks are military ones – petrol, not deisel."

(Letter of Tuesday 11th June 1946, written from Asmara) "Here is a brief note on the events of the last week:

"Wednesday 5th. Departed Addis at about 10.45am with 15 trucks, Dunham and myself, a Medical Officer called Muir, Majors Hodgson and Inglese, two sergeants and a Greek vehicle mechanic. We were seen off by most of the officers of the Mission, including the General. The day's trip was over level grassy plains for about 80 miles to Debra Birhan, where we stopped for the night. There is a mess there with one British officer, but he was in Addis. He gave me the keys before we left, and we made ourselves comfortable, got the boys to cook a hot meal and went to bed early.

"Thursday 6th. This was a long trip – 180 miles to Dessie – so we got up at 5am and started soon after 6am. The country got rougher and rougher, and wilder and wilder. Everywhere along the roads were signs of the Italian retreat in 1941 – dozens of broken trucks pushed off the roads, and in places large dumps of them. Scrap iron is of no value here so it lies where it was left.

"About 20 miles out of Debra Birhan, we passed through the Mussolini Tunnel. This is about a quarter of a mile long and runs through the top of a mountain. On the other side the road comes out half way up a cliff, which it descends in steep bastioned zigzags. This part of the road is an incredible engineering feat, and is considered to be the most spectacular section.

"The view from the mouth of the tunnel is superb – jumbled masses of ragged mountains stretching away into the misty distance. Major Hodgson, widely travelled, thinks this the most spectacular view anywhere. I consider that the view from Joffreville beats it.

"The whole of the road is an amazing piece of Italian engineering. Most of the way it is tarmacked and carefully graded, even over the most difficult escarpments, and everywhere it is at least wide enough for two vehicles to pass. I had none of the anxious feelings that the truck might slip over the edge which I had during my Belgian Congo tour.

"In the area of the tunnel the road goes up to 12000ft, and there is an Alpine-like vegetation – short grass absolutely full of small flowers of every conceivable colour. The whole place was like a rock garden in full flower, and very pretty. Here for the first time I noticed the effects of exercise at altitude. I stopped the convoy just after we had passed through the tunnel and walked back to its mouth to look at an Italian war memorial there. It was no more than 50 yds but I walked fast and found myself quite exhausted when I got there.

"The whole mountain is in fact intended as a memorial, including the tunnel, the road down the cliff with its huge bastions, the monument at the tunnel entrance, and an enormous cross right at the top of the mountain. We did not notice the cross until we had gone about ten miles farther on. When we looked back we saw it there, perched against the skyline and looking rather shadowy against the clouds. It is apparently an iron lattice-work erection, and is visible for many miles.

"Dessie was intended to be a last ditch Italian stand, but it was very half hearted. To get to it we crossed a broad and fertile valley, climbed a steep escarpment by a zigzag road, and at the top was Dessie, buried in a deep hollow filled with fir trees amongst which were the houses of the town.

"We spent the night in a mess inhabited by two British officers both of whom were slightly insane, possibly due to their isolation. They kept us talking from 7pm to 11pm before offering dinner, which was a bit thick after our decidedly tiring day.

"At Dessie we discovered that one of the trucks had aboard a bottle of concentrated sulphuric acid, packed in a hessian cover, unlabelled and not on the loading list. A cork had dissolved and the acid poured out over bales of clothes and some tyres – damage perhaps £30. No 1 Court of Enquiry when we get back.

"**Friday 7th**. We travelled from Dessie to Alomata. Nothing very special – quite a variety of hills and mountains and plains, forest and grass and crudely cultivated fields. This type of scenery continues all the way almost to the borders of Eritrea, where the climate becomes much drier.

"At Alomata we checked our stores and found we were a box of rifles short. This caused quite a lot of anxiety, but I signalled back to Dessie and found that due to the stupidity of one of the sergeants this box had been offloaded there by mistake. Anyhow it is safe and we will collect it on the way back.

"**Saturday 8th**. We spent the day at Alomata. Checked up on vehicles, reloaded stores etc. It was a pleasant day, and there were some pleasant people in Alomata.

"**Sunday 9th**. We moved from Alomata to Quiha. This was the day of escarpments. There were three major escarpments to be climbed by winding roads with innumerable hairpin bends. Each one gave us huge views. Right in the middle of the steepest part of the first an Italian diesel truck and trailer were absolutely immovable stuck, well out from the nearside. We just squeezed our trucks past – one after the other. Had the road been six inches narrower we would have been stuck there still.

"**Monday 10th**. Quiha to Adigrat. Towards Adigrat the flat-topped hills formed by desert erosion began to be a feature of the landscape, and everything became drier and drier. Still plenty of valleys and escarpments.

"**Tuesday 11th**. Asmara is across the border from Adigrat and is several thousand feet up - as is the entire road - with a most pleasant equitable climate. Battledress is just necessary at night. Eritrea is pretty dry, but with wooded valleys here and there, and a certain amount of pasture and cultivation everywhere – by no means a complete desert."

(Letter of Tuesday 18th June 1946) "Our main job in Asmara has been the acquisition of Naafi supplies for BMME, of which we have purchased six truck loads. There was a slight difficulty when it was found that BMME owed Naafi £3000 and I hadn't been given any cash to bring. However, telegrams have more or less cleared up that problem.

"Asmara is very European and is the largest European town I have seen since leaving home – its European population is about three times that of Nairobi. There is, however, no museum or library, and all the cinemas bar one show only Italian films. The town is clean and well kept, and seems absolutely crammed with Italians with nothing to do except drink coffee. There are very few British troops here – hardly any in fact. We are, though, just an accepted part of the landscape as far as the Italians are concerned. There is in fact a fraternisation ban, apparently because the local brigadier does not like Italians, but it is justified on the grounds that our Sudanese native troops would not understand us fraternise with the late enemies.

"There are a lot of Bimbashas staying at the Transit Camp. These are the British officers of the Sudanese troops. The Bimbashas wear peculiar looking crowns and pips of a Lt Colonel, but their pay depends on their British army rank, which varies from Lieut to Major. The lower officer ranks are filled by Sudanese natives.

"The officers' quarters at the Transit Camp, and also the Officers' Club, are absolutely first rate. They are pre-war Italian army officers' base quarters. The buildings and furniture are magnificent. We have a room each, with two armchairs, bed, wardrobe, two tables. Each meal is up to first class hotel standards, and there is a most pleasant atmosphere. One just walks in, signs the book, and that's that. "

(Letter of Tuesday 2nd July 1946) "We are back in Addis after rather an eventful return trip. It took us eight days instead of the six anticipated. We had a most uncalled for number of breakdowns on the trip – one after the other. Then we had three accidents, of which two were minor and one rather serious – a Court of Enquiry is currently being held concerning the latter. It was caused by a British sergeant, who contrary to all instructions decided he could drive better than the official native driver, took the wheel, and drove the vehicle over a bridge.

"Our timing was as follows:

Thursday	Asmara to Adigrat
Friday	Adigrat to Quiha
Saturday	Quiha to three miles north of Alomata
Sunday	Alomata to Dessie
Monday	Day in Dessie
Tuesday	Dessie to half way between Dessie and Debra Sine
Wednesday	Stopped half way between Dessie and Debra Sine
Thursday	Half way between Dessie and Debra Sine to Debra Sine
Friday	Debra Sine to Addis

"This timing was forced on us partly by breakdowns and accidents, and partly by the fact that we were unable to travel after dark owing to the absence of lights on some of the vehicles. It involved us having to camp out on three nights. The first time was just short of Alomata.

"At the top of the escarpment I calculated we had three quarters of an hour of daylight left, which should have seen us to the bottom, where a nice dinner, bath and friends awaited us at Alomata. Three quarters of the way down, however, night fell with what can only be described as tropical suddenness. I looked at the winding curling road zigzagging down below, and I watched it fade from my view as night fell, and

the darker it got the more treacherous and steep it seemed to be. It seemed endless, and the hill seemed a cliff with precipitous drops everywhere.

”So I thought “I am due to be released from the army in Release Group 40. All the people in this convoy are going to be frightfully annoyed if I stop it only three miles from Alomata, so near to the foot of the escarpment. But I am in Group 40, and should a truck fall over the edge it would be my responsibility and could well delay my release.

”So I stopped the convoy and 120 people had the mixed pleasure of spending the night stuck like flies on the escarpment. It was not, in fact, unpleasant. We had all the required kit, food, boys and cooking apparatus. The only disadvantage was that we didn’t get a bath. A Colonel Barlow was with us as a passenger, and he decided to celebrate by getting drunk, which was a nuisance because his inability to stop talking became even worse, if possible, as he got more drunk. In the end, however, he went to sleep in the middle of a sentence, and Dunham and I (the only other British officers on the trip) were able to go to bed.

”Near Debra Sine we again had to camp out on the mountainside as darkness caught us before we could reach Debra Berhan. The boys made up the camp beds of Dunham and myself inside the back of a three ton truck, but as it was a fine starry night Colonel Barlow decided to sleep outside. I got into bed and went to sleep whilst Colonel Barlow was still talking. Dunham followed me, so in the end Colonel Barlow realised that only the mountain air was listening to him and he went to bed himself.

”At 2am we were awoken by one of the most violent strings of oaths I have ever heard. It was pouring with rain, absolutely coming down in sheets. Colonel Barlow was standing in his pyjamas struggling frantically to get his bed into the truck. It got caught on any and every obstruction, and each hindrance increased his fury. How he eventually got it in without breaking both the truck and the bed I do not know.

”In the morning there was a large puddle on the canvas roof of the truck, and just over his head was a hole about half an inch in diameter. The puddle was growing, and getting nearer and nearer to the hole, through which it was about to cascade. So I put my hand over the hole and pushed the canvas under the puddle to get rid of it. This caused the water to pour down the side of the canvas cover and into the truck at the bottom on one side. To stop this I had to push the canvas out on that side, but the three operations required three hands, so one had to be left undone. I took my hand away from the hole.

”Immediately a stream of icy water poured down the back of Colonel Barlow’s neck and over his bed. I don’t think I have laughed quite so much for a long time, especially as it really was jolly cold that morning – we were at nearly 12000ft.

”When we reached Debra Berhan we hadn’t washed or shaved for 2½ days, but we had a good stop for lunch there and sailed into Addis in style at about 7.30pm with one of our 19 trucks on tow. On the whole it was an interesting, if rather trying, trip.”

(Letter of Tuesday 23rd July 1946 to RJ Eden) ”Our Ethiopians who went to the UK for the Victory Parade were issued with battledress. They are so proud of it that now

they are back they wear it all the time. I should think they must be just about boiled alive in it. Out of my window I can see a party of them drilling now. Not that it is at present terribly hot for Africa. It rains every day, often with considerable violence, and that keeps the temperature well down, even though it is the northern summer. We have several ex-Indian army people here and they said that one recent rain/hailstorm, which nearly bent our roof, was very nearly up to Indian standards.”

(Letter of Tuesday 6th August 1946) ”As Monday was a holiday, Saturday was the last of the working days of my five years in the army. This morning I got all my clearance certificates, route forms, authorities to proceed etc, and am now more or less set to move tomorrow on the first leg of my return home – on the Asmara convoy. My route form is marked “via Nile Valley route”, so it looks as if I shall travel from Asmara up to the railhead, then by desert bus to Khartoum.

”Tonight I am giving a wee farewell dinner, which will start at 7pm and finish at 8.45pm to enable people to go to the cinema and myself to complete my packing. There will be Captain and Mrs Bubb, Captain Stevenson (my successor) and Captain Dunham plus the four members of the mess, so it will be very select and quiet. It is however the custom to do something of the sort before departing for release from the army, usually something a good deal more ambitious, so I did not feel I could depart without any ceremony at all, much as I would have liked to have done so. I dislike anything resembling parties. I have satisfied myself, however, by inviting those people I wished to invite and not those I should have invited.”

(Letter of Sunday 11th August 1946) ”I am writing from Adigrat. We have been making good time and keeping to schedule. Unless anything unforeseen happens tomorrow we shall do the trip Addis to Asmara in six days, which is unusual for these convoys. We have been most fortunate in having had very few breakdowns of any sort, which is a bit of a change from the last run I did in this part of the world. There are only twelve trucks this time, which makes the convoy a bit more manageable than the one I had, which had eighteen at times.

”I have been leading, and for most of the way we have proceeded in fine style, all the trucks travelling together with a neat 30 or 40 yards spacing between them. Dunham, who is convoy commander this time, has been travelling in the last truck in order to pick up any breakdowns.

”On the first two nights, at Debra Sine and Dessie, we slept in our trucks. In the first case this was due to lack of any accommodation, as we stopped out in the wilds. In the second case it was due to the building available already being overcrowded with officers who were there on an exercise which is being held chiefly for the purpose of being filmed. There have been with us a convoy medical officer plus a medical colonel and a colonel who ran the Jibouti to Addis railway until it was handed back to the French owners about a month ago. These last two are very mild and very anxious to be mere passengers.

”There are also four NCOs going home with me on release – two sergeant majors and two sergeants. One of the sergeant majors, Gardiner by name, is amongst the most dissipated-looking individuals I have ever seen – like a character straight out of the pages of a Dickens novel. I am the only officer on this draft to the UK.

"A very reverend and aged black-robed and white-bearded gentleman has just emerged from the room next to the one in which I am sleeping (I am writing at a table in an open veranda-corridor). He is clearly a priest of some sort, either Catholic or Coptic. He approached me and said in French, as though he fully expected a fluent knowledge of French from a British officer, "I am going to eat now, and will come back to sleep after."

"I replied "OK" in French, which pleased him greatly – as though he had felt it possible his plan might not have been acceptable to me.

"The countryside right from Addis to here is as green as a fresh pea at the moment. Less green here than at Addis, where the vegetation is just one damp riotous green tangle everywhere. Nevertheless it is very green even here, and I have no doubt it will be green right up to Asmara. Peasants who were ploughing patches of dusty brown desert on my last run now have healthy little crops of green corn, only six to nine inches high at present but probably at their greenest.

"Previously dry river beds contain running streams, of varying fullness depending on local recent rains. At Alomata there is a gap in the road where the Italians had been going to put a bridge if they had not been ejected too soon. There is a considerable river at this point and a deep ford. It is the only missing bridge out of hundreds – if not thousands – on the road. Frequently the river is so deep during the wet season that convoys have had to wait days for it to subside before they can pass. However, we were fortunate and sailed straight through.

"At Alomata there is a black French creole who is a driver in the Ethiopian army. He passes for an Ethiopian, although French is his mother tongue. He was at the same school as Lucette and Mme Leclert, ie the only French school in Diego. Lucette remembers him quite well, although he left Diego in haste ten years ago as he was being transported to prison for striking a corporal in the workshops in which I later worked..

"He is a very nice chap, but has just come out of jail for threatening to beat the pants off an Ethiopian officer, plus theft of petrol. He assured me it was all a gigantic mistake, but Dunham knows him quite well and tells me he was posted from Addis to Alomata because he is an incorrigible thief. "

(Letter of Tuesday 13th August 1946) Asmara. "I leave here by train at 5.10pm this Saturday 17th, and arrive at Agordat at 4.30am on Sunday 18th. A bus from Agordat to Tessini takes around 7 hours and a train departs from Tessini at 1.10pm on Sunday to arrive at Khartoum at 4.20 am next Tuesday (21st). This is Stage 2 of my trip.

"Stage 3 is Khartoum to Port Said as follows: Train to Wadi Halfa. River boat Wadi Halfa to Shelton. Rail Shelton to Port Said via Cairo. From here to Port Said takes ten days provided there are no hold-ups due to landslides and missed connections. As this is the wet season hold-ups are considered likely, but in any case I shall be in Port Said between 27 August and 4 September.

"You will perhaps have heard that there have been riots in Asmara. Things seem quiet enough just at present however, so don't worry about that. It's all part of this

beastly colonial question. The sooner we leave these horrible countries and let their inhabitants cut each other's throats to their hearts' content the better. Imperialism is a fashion which is rapidly becoming inconvenient as far as I can see. Why anyone should bother to be an Eritrean nationalist is beyond me. However. ”

(Letter of Saturday 31st August 1946) ”Cairo. I have been bogged down in Cairo for several days, but am due to leave at 7.30am tomorrow. I have more or less exhausted the possibilities of the place, including having walked miles and miles - and miles. (I did the pyramids and the Sphinx amongst other things) Nor has any Egyptian hawker nor guide profited by me one jot, in which I take a perverse pride; Nor taxi driver – so far. Tomorrow we go to Port Said, which we will reach at lunchtime, and board the “Durban Castle” at once. We shall take five days to reach Toulon as we are calling in at Greece on the way.”

This was my last letter from Africa, but diary notes indicate the following timing:

Sunday 1 st September	Departed Port Said 5pm
Tuesday 3 rd September	Arrived Piraeus 9.30am
Wednesday 4 th September	Departed Piraeus
Saturday 7 th September	Arrived Toulon

I had progressively run out of letter writing steam as this journey progressed. However, I vividly recollect the day the Durban Castle lay off Piraeus, which was about the hottest in my experience. We were unable to get ashore, and the metal hulk grilled in the sun until it gradually assumed the nature of an oven. We survived.

From Toulon I sped through France on what was called the “Medlock” route for transit of British troops returning to the UK from the Mediterranean area. Transport was per recently re-commissioned electric trains which travelled at high speed, swaying alarmingly and emitted showers of overhead sparks. The route led west of the Massif Central, the Rhône Valley route still not having been reopened following damage in the latter stages of the war. My train actually stopped at Montauban and I got out onto the platform. I knew Marcelle was there at the time, and Lucette was due to arrive there at some unspecified future date. In the circumstances there was no point in attempting to get off Medlock, as I had contemplated doing should Lucette have arrived earlier.

The letters from which the above notes were abstracted contain a great deal of speculation (which I have omitted) about likely dates and routes for the movement of myself and Lucette to Europe. Almost up until the event, there was much uncertainty concerning both of these.

I myself became booked for a three week army (Education and Welfare) music course in Nairobi prior to my departure to the UK. I was to have travelled by air to Nairobi for this, and thereafter returned to the UK by the same sea route as on the way out in 1943. I missed doing so on account of the delays to the return of my Asmara convoy in late June. Another route frequently used by those returning from Ethiopia was to travel to Aden via Eritrea, and thence by sea to Suez. The Nile Valley route which I actually followed had been opened up for regular use only a short time before I made

the journey, but was my preferred option to the Aden route, partly because - taking longer – I hoped it involved leaving Addis Ababa a little earlier.

I early decided that Lucette was to return to France with the Leclerts, who were long overdue for leave there. In theory, once she became Mrs Eden she became entitled to an official passage back to the UK under army aegis. This would almost certainly have involved her in travelling to Kenya on her own, where she would have had to hassle with the efficient but block-headed, non-French speaking, British military machine.

Various ships were moving from Madagascar to Toulon, and Raymond was canvassing the possibility of obtaining a passage as soon as the opportunity arose, so a number of dates were mentioned, the early ones being several months before I was due to travel. Then one, the “Ville de Strasbourg”, was actually due to be in Port Said at virtually the same time as I expected to pass through there myself. In the event the Leclerts plus Lucette travelled on the “Champoleon”, a couple of months after myself. This timing fitted well, because it enabled me to get adequately organised in the UK before they arrived.