

9 KENYA. DEC 1943 - FEB 1944

14 Dec 1943 Arrived EAEME Depot, Karen, near Nairobi.
24 Dec. 1943 Moved to 41 AA Workshop Co, EAEME, Mombasa, then Likoni.
7 Feb 1944 Moved to Diego Suarez

The diary note of 6 December 1943, written aboard the Salween, turned out to be my last produced during the war years; thereafter I rely on my memories plus the numerous surviving letters to my parents, to my brother Richard and to Lucette.

By Tuesday 14 December I was writing from the EAEME (East Africa Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) Depot, having that morning collected a total of 14 letters from home, so must have arrived there the previous evening.

When the Salween edged into Mombasa docks, we found the first visible occupants of this strange hot land to be phlegmatic but efficient-looking white military police wearing tropical uniforms, shorts and peaked hats with red tops to them. They rapidly took it upon themselves to advise the assembled throng of new arrivals lining the ship's rails to throw their pith helmets into the harbour. Pith helmets, familiar in Boer War images, had it appeared gone out of fashion in Kenya well before 1943, but news of this had failed to reach those responsible for kitting out drafts leaving the UK. These pith helmets were effective headgear, and probably expensive, but cumbersome when one has to cart around one's entire wardrobe. There were quite a few floating in the harbour.

We transferred straight from the Salween to a troop train bound to Nairobi. (Letter of 16/12/43.) "On the coast it is very warm - a sort of open tropical bush - not the dense equatorial forest I had expected. There are large coconut plantations covering thousands of acres, with isolated native farms in clearings, each with its chicken, goats and children.

"The line winds and curves in a way quite unknown at home. The train almost ties itself in knots in places, and sometimes the gradient is so great that the speed drops to walking pace. There is a considerable climb from the coast to Nairobi, which is over 6000ft above sea level.

"As we climbed gradually upwards the character of the vegetation changed and we came into enormous grassy plains, where we saw huge herds of zebras - there must have been hundreds of them - about half a dozen giraffes, ostriches and numerous varieties of deer. I believe most of the area is a game reserve.

"As we entered Nairobi we got the impression that it was a mess of ugly shacks spreading out over a barren dusty plain, but it turned out that we entered by the back door, because most of the country around it is English woodland."

The EAEME Depot at Karen, about 12 miles from Nairobi, was a well laid out campus of more or less identical single story wooden huts set in grassland. Officers each had rooms about 10ft by 10ft, and African troops slept in rows on each side of undivided huts. Including permanent staff plus those passing through there were apt to be several hundred Europeans and over a thousand Africans in the camp at any one

time. It seemed to take an unconscionable period to process the paperwork of those passing through.

(Letter of 16/12/43.) "The mess waiter are negroes, very tall most of them. They wear flowing white robes, a tall red fez - about 9 inches tall - with a brass REME badge; and around their waists a red, white and yellow sash - the REME colours. They are bare footed. Like all the negroes they do not speak English, and do not seem inclined to take any action with regard to serving you until you bellow out the Swahili word for the dish required.

"The food is abundant and cooked in a fairly normal English manner. I eat enormous meals. There are usually four vegetables - spinach, cabbage, French beans and potato. Sweet is usually tinned fruit and a sort of cream. I ate so much tinned pear today that I felt quite ill afterwards.

The mess itself is quite English, but the periodicals are about six months old, and there are very rarely any papers."

(Letter of 17/12/43.) "My boy, who has nothing to do all day but wait on my pleasure, has just done a colossal pile of washing, which had accumulated over many weeks. He is rather bewildered by the absence of a charcoal iron, which is procurable here but which I have not yet had time to procure. I hope to settle his bewilderment before long, but I have been unable to explain the reason so far.

"When I am in my room he pops in about every half hour to see if I want anything. I have discovered that if I hold my mug out and say 'chai' he goes and fetches some tea.

"The last two evenings I have changed into service dress for dinner, which it is very unusual for me to do voluntarily. But I find it so jolly pleasant to feel smart again after feeling like a scruffy damp urchin on the ship for so long that I just cannot resist the temptation to do so occasionally. This seems to be a sure sign of mental decay.

"Talking of smartness - the native RSM here beats most I have seen, and his smashing salutes are most awe inspiring to the officer to whom they are directed. And yet, because of the colour bar, he is junior to the humblest British private.

"Some of the officers out here are anxious that the missionaries should be cleared out of East Africa, because they are weakening the colour bar which is the basis of social life. They think the natives are perfectly happy and contented in their subordinate position until they are educated. Note that I just record this without comment. The conversation of some of these officers disqualifies them from the right to hold an opinion on anything - probably I shall be just the same in four years or so, which many of them have been out here. Needless to say they are excellent officers.

"The row that goes on in the neighbouring cubicles in this hut is very annoying at times, and the triteness of the conversation --- . There is also quite a row going on outside at the moment - of a different sort though - produced by crickets and their relatives. It sounds just like a night on Pendower Breach."

“I have just discovered that most of the fruit we get in the mess is fresh - pineapple and sweet melon and banana with goat’s milk cream we had today. All cut into little pieces and quite ad lib. I took a huge pile needless to say. The pineapple is much nicer than the fresh stuff we used to get at home - it just melts in the mouth. I wish I could send some to you.”

“Today also we had three new vegetables in the mess - carrots, onion and cauliflower - all quite well cooked. Tomatoes grow out here. I would think they should do jolly well if properly looked after, but the only ones I have seen so far were very scruffy.”

You may be interested to hear that toupees are looked upon with the utmost scorn in this part of the world, and dubbed “Empire Builder Hats”. They are worn only by the unfortunate members of drafts new from England, who have to stick with them until they leave this place, when they are issued with slouch hats. My lads creep around most self consciously in them, but the RSM offered the consolation of pointing out that there aren’t any girls to see them. I wear my SD cap, shoes, long drill trousers and battle dress blouse in the morning. In the afternoon I remove the blouse and wear shirt sleeves.”

I am still fairly busy on general admin. I have also been roped in to make a daily check of the armoury. Yesterday I was a member of a Court of Enquiry, which meant I had to take down all the witnesses statements in writing, since I was the junior member. I am rather tired of all this. I didn’t come all the way to East Africa just to mess around on this sort of thing. I came chiefly in order to see the world, and I don’t intend to be balked.

“There are a large number of heavy insects flying around my light at the moment like a swarm of bombers, and occasionally one gets out of control and swoops past my head to the floor with a most disconcerting noise.”

(Letter of 19-12-1943) “There are three bookshops in Nairobi - all rather feeble, but one can’t expect too much. I had a marvellous lunch at a French restaurant in “Government Road”, which is the chief road of the town.

“I sat down opposite a red faced old buffer who immediately began talking - they do that here. He seemed to be a fairly important chap, who would have retired to England by now but for the war. He took me to the MacMillan Memorial Library, which is the chief library of Kenya I gather, and quite good considering. It has a reference library which includes most of the English poets, so I was able to look up a poem by Meredith for which I have been pining for some time. The curious thing is that neither in this library, nor in any of the bookshops, was I able to find a decent reference book on Kenya. Or a map worth calling a map.”

“I must tell you about the lunch I had on Friday - soup ad lib, and really smashing fish and salad with mayonnaise. According to the East Africa Standard, which I read at lunch, a serious food shortage is about to occur in East Africa, owing to the failure of the rains.

“It made scathing remarks about Europeans who sit gluttonising in restaurants whilst the people outside the door are about to be starved. It also stated that a very large

percentage of the food trade in the country is black market, including most of the stuff in restaurants. No one will take the food restrictions seriously.

“One rather amusing passage in the paper dealt with the reply of an official in the local legislature to a charge of racial prejudice against Indians. He said the Indians had only brought the charge because they had an inferiority complex, and were a pretty lousy crowd on the whole; and he passionately denied any racial prejudice. An indication of the political state of the country is that there was a letter from somebody asking for any local socialists to get in touch with him with a view to forming a Socialist party.

“Nairobi itself isn't a bad place, although it appears to be rather unpopular with people I have spoken to. It is reasonably clean and orderly, even the native quarters. Of course it is an 'English' town - of very different type to the towns in the vicinity of our transit camp.

“There are many large shops with European staff and buildings. The Indians seem to have a very big share in the smaller shops, and even some of the large ones. Prices seem to be higher than at home for most things, but not unreasonably so. There is a Barclays Overseas Bank and a National Bank of India, also an Army Field Cashier from whom I have obtained an advance pay book - a sort of cheque book with which I can draw on the Field Cashier wherever he may exist. There are also four cinemas in the usual vulgar style.

“On Saturday I visited the Coryndon Memorial Museum - a really first class place, about 1.5 miles out of town. Like all Nairobi public places it is contained in a magnificent pseudo Greek building, and I spent a very interesting two hours there.”

(Letter of 20-12-1943) “I have just eaten my lunch at my usual speed - like a hog which has been starving for a week. I am expecting I shall shortly be invalided out of the service as I shall have ruined my stomach.

“The Coryndon Museum has a really good reference collection of birds and flower paintings. Since there is no local book on either, it seems the only way of identifying them is to take a careful note of what they are like and then look them up in the museum collection when I get a chance.

“At the museum I met a Dr Leaky, who informed me that he was a great pal of Prof King's, and who was so certain I must have heard of him through Prof King that in the end I had to agree I had.

“Yesterday, Sunday, RSM Home, who was a Uganda resident before the war, took my lads and me out with one of the unit lorries to see some of the local big game. We travelled 50 miles I suppose, mainly over trackless grasslands, and no one seemed very worried about petrol. As a matter of fact we ran out of petrol just outside an RASC camp, so I just walked in and got some more from the OC.

“We started, in rain, by going into the Ngong Hills - they are low rounded hills with deep valleys and covered with open woodland and scrub at the bottom. We travelled on a rough mud track through these hills, and before long I noticed that the driver was not really driving at all in the normal sense of the word - he was just carrying out a

delicate skating operation over the mud. Shortly afterwards the lorry slid slowly and gracefully off the road, down a gentle incline, and came to rest with one wheel in mid-air over a ditch about ten feet deep.

“When we got to the top of the Ngong Hills we had a glimpse through drifting clouds of the Great Rift Valley - a text book geographer’s dream. It is about 140 miles wide here, and with a lake in the middle, and very steep slopes to east and west. The Ngong Hills form its eastern edge.

“The valley itself is of grassland with scattered trees, but we saw no game there - chiefly because of the wet and mist, which kept descending and trying to soak us”.

(Letter of 22 December 1943) “We decided it was too unpleasantly damp in the Ngong Hills, so we went down into the Great Plain to the SE of them - dry grass with evergreens at this time of year. There we saw quite a variety of big game - I don’t know their names very well, but I can remember wildebeest, a sort of buffalo, Thompson’s gazelle, and the usual giraffes, ostriches etc. We also saw a couple of eagles, a crowd of baboons and a number of really enormous birds which looked rather like heavy bombers.

“The wooded valleys of the Ngong Hills are teeming with small bird of every shape and colour. Many seem to be brilliantly coloured, and there is one particular bird about the size of a starling, with a long tail and pure white underneath. I believe it to be some sort of shrike.

“The plains are strewn with skulls and skeletons of game, and it was terrible torture to me to have to rattle past these things - and various flowers we passed - without stopping to investigate more thoroughly

“At lunch time we stopped and cooked some bacon and tea - at least a couple of askaris we brought for the purpose did the job - and we fed on that plus hunks of meat, sardines and cheese.

Mombasa

Soon after writing this letter I was on the move from the EAEME Transit Camp back to a ‘permanent’ posting on the coast, with 41 AA Workshop Coy, at Mombasa, where I arrived on 24 December 1943.

(Letter of 25 December 1943) “The mess I am in at present is a large villa with a veranda in front and cream coloured stone pillars. The whole scale of the place is massive, and mostly cream coloured. Outside is a luxuriant spread of greenery, and dimly through this green maze I can see the white walls of another villa on the other side of the road. Some of the trees have masses of big orange-red flowers hanging from them, and I have just seen a bird something like a large sparrow but with a tail six inches long and a feathered crest on top of its head.

“Mosquitoes are practically non-existent on this part of the coast, so no one bothers to use anti-mosquito ointment, but it is the done thing to sleep under a mosquito net at night. Naturally it is warmer under the net, but I found last night that I did not get superheated if I slept without my bedclothes.

“I brought my boy with me. He is not really trained at all, but he is jolly willing and quite bright. I have discovered he is a Christian. Christianity seems to be the best thing for these simple-minded people. I suspect that mentally they are quite on a par with Europeans, except that Europeans have been brought up to more self reliance and self assertion.”

Unusually, I found myself writing approvingly of most of the other officers in my new unit. The OC was a Major Eaton (“quite young and seems well educated”), the 2i/c a Captain Charles Bell, a non-drinking Rhodesian of about 46, studying for a radio exam. Charles Bell had his own car with him - “a 22hp affair with every conceivable luxury attachment, including a wireless which gets the African programme from London quite clearly”.

My Christmas breakfast comprised water melon and sugar followed by two fried eggs. (“rather unusual, because eggs aren’t too plentiful in Kenya I believe. Nor is butter, which we usually get for only two out of the three meals.”)

“Tonight there is a party for the men which I am inescapably obliged to attend. In order to save fuss I shall hold a glass of beer in my hand and I shall smile vaguely whilst rustic wits crack rustic jokes. I shall look at my watch every five minutes, and when everyone is too drunk to notice my absence I shall escape. Dreadful prospect.”

Mombasa “is not a bad town really. It has two bookshops - better than those in Nairobi. It also has a first class officers’ club - quite a young hotel - in which sit WRENS rendered dizzy by the attentions of numerous officers.”

On Christmas afternoon I went for a short walk down to the seashore - heat about the same as a hot English summer day. “The diversity of plant and bird life in even that short walk to a well tamed beach was very bewildering. Some bright yellow birds about the size of sparrows were well in evidence. There are abundant grasshoppers, which fly a few feet after they have hopped into the air. When you walk through the grass you are preceded by a constant swarm of these things. Ants are super abundant and super diverse.”

(Letter of Sunday 26 December) “Now those letters. I got them just before taking an African pay parade which lasted 3.5 hours. I had to read them in intervals when one squad was being marched away and another squad marched up. I sat at a table just inside a window, past which the Africans filed. I was surrounded by assistants - one man called their numbers, one checked their identity discs, one handed the money out of the window, and an RSM stood by me to pour forth the volume of invective which is considered necessary in such circumstances. All the others added to the invective, and in these surroundings I read your letters.”

By Tuesday 28 December I was delighted to have been moved out on detachment to Likoni, a few miles south of Mombasa. “I am the only officer here, so I have a room all to myself, and feed with a sergeant and staff sergeant in the “Sergeants’ Mess”. We occupy a pleasant little villa which the army has taken over. It is a single story affair, in the usual creamy pink colour with the usual balcony. I have a room about the same size as the dining room (at home), but ceiling about 12 ft high. Walls are plaster pink, floor of red tiles as in kitchen at home. There are a couple of “oak” doors and a couple of windows. Windows in this part of the world of course have no

glass, but wooden shutters like the shutter of the radiator of a car, which can be opened or closed.

“Now at last I am alone and can get down to some serious zoology. This looks like a perfect spot from my short experience of it. I wonder how long I shall be left here. Naturally I took care to carefully select the men I brought with me. Most of them, including the S/Sgt, are non-drinkers, two are university students, including Thain who has an MA, one is a keen naturalist, and one was in the NE coast RMD which I looked after for a while. A jolly decent bunch really, and we should have quite a good time. Such work as there is will not occupy anything like a full day, so we hope to get in plenty of bathing and bug hunting.

“There is a beach of fine white coral sand laid out on our doorstep, complete with palm trees leaning about erratically just as palm trees should lean. I went to look at this beach as it was getting dusk today. As I walked along hundreds of large winkle shells (I should say gastropods, but I say winkle in order to make myself intelligible) scampered away in front of me. Each contained a hermit crab of a beach variety, ie they were perfectly happy on the beach, where they roamed about looking for food. It was a most amusing sight - I thought at first they really were walking gastropods, and the idea seemed more than odd.

“We moved in only this morning, but this afternoon we had a bit of a drive round in our 15cwt truck. The roads are just earth tracks cutting through the bush, although occasionally they expand into tarred roads, sometimes degenerate into two ruts with grass growing between them. They are pretty dusty on the whole, although a short sharp storm of heavy rain laid most of the dust today.”

(Letter of 28 December 1943). “The bush itself consists of open woodland, with no large trees - plenty of bushes, palm trees and patches of scrub and coarse grass. The amazing thing is that although coconuts grow like daisies in this country, and one can see clusters of nuts at the tops of the trees, they do not seem to be sold in shops. The result is that I have had only about a cubic centimetre of coconut since I have been in Kenya. This is rapidly assuming the proportions of a major repression, there being no way of getting the things off the trees other than finding a native who can climb them.

“There are a number of native villages in the bush, inhabited by goats, incredible numbers of children, black robed women who always carry baskets or bundles on their heads, and vacant looking men usually dressed in blue or khaki shorts and shirt. I have seen no signs of any agriculture worthy of the name.

“The huts are usually white-plaster walled, with fragile thatched roofs - single room affairs. There are a few bigger isolated native farms out in the bush, usually pink in colour, often with a rickety sort of veranda - plenty of small rather scruffy chicken. There are a few tumble-down wooden shops in the villages, and at one I saw what looked suspiciously like a queue. I wonder if this is a reflection of the supposed food shortage? It seems hardly possible in a land teeming with goats and coconuts.

“It has been terribly hot today - the heat just came simmering over in waves this afternoon. Fortunately a dry heat. Also there is a sea breeze, but that too is warm - quite a gale this evening.

“I had a chance to observe a number of Indian families today. The Indians form the bulk of the Kenya middle class, as they seem to have almost a monopoly of the retail trade. These families I observed struck me as being just like English Victorian families transported into modern times - the women have no make-up, but wear “sweet” chaste expressions. Hubby is rather stern and frowning, although he is kind to the kiddies, which are numerous and of a complete range of sizes. The women wear long flowing robes of flower patterns mainly, and a few gold bangles.

“Most of the Indians I have spoken to seem quite decent guys, although they are reputed to be unscrupulous in business. I suspect that we have a vicious circle of hatred, arising from jealousy of the Indians’ commercial success and dislike of the fact that shopkeepers try to get a maximum profit - after all, it is their livelihood.

“Today I succeeded in buying a charcoal iron, after combing the whole of our base town (Mombasa) for one, and being told everywhere that they were quite unobtainable. It was quite a reasonable price too - only 8/6. I would willingly have given £2 for it, so scarce and so essential are they.

“I went to a party in the Sergeants’ Mess at base on Boxing Day and made myself conspicuous by being the only officer who refused either to tell a story or to sing solo. I probably made myself very unpopular by forgetting to laugh at the story told by the Deputy Director of Mechanical Engineering (DADME), who fixed me with a glare when he had finished. Wild horses will not drag me to another Sergeants’ Mess party, not if I get de-pipped in the process. After a while I went into the men’s canteen, where everyone was very drunk in a pleasant way, swaying slightly as they fervently sang sentimental songs. I arrived just in time to help swell the magnificent volume of their rendering of the Red Flag.”

(Letter of 31 December 1943). “Today for the first time I had a coconut. We were passing through a forest of coconut trees, but there seemed no way of getting at them, so in the end I stopped the truck and the driver asked a local child, who was looking after some cows and goats, to procure some. He produced a grass band, which he put round his feet in order to keep them close together. Then he looped his hands round the trunk of a coconut palm and shinned up caterpillar fashion, and threw down four coconuts. They were in green fibrous husks, which were terribly tough, and it took us a terrific struggle to cut these off - about half an hour’s hard work to get each coconut out. Then the milk of mine was a bit bitter, because my coconut was rather ripe. That of another one was very sweet, but the coconut itself was quite unripe. Actually the coconut of mine was very nice, but I soon satisfied myself; in fact more than satisfied myself, as usual. I gave what was left to my boy.

“These days I find it much too hot riding in the front seat of our truck, so I stand in the back, hanging onto one of the bars of the framework. I find this is a lot cooler and also a lot less bumpy, but it is necessary to keep a sharp look out for low branches across the road.

“This afternoon I walked out to sea about 1.5 miles across the reef. Actually I did not get right to the outer edge because I found I had come the wrong way to do that, but I got to the outer edge of the particular reef I was on. As a matter of fact I tried to do this yesterday, but I noticed that the tide was coming in, so I turned back in order to avoid getting wet.

“I found a lot of beautiful cowrie shells, just like the ones we have at home, hundreds of sea urchins of many varieties - all very prickly. And bright scarlet starfish, various things which looked like deflated footballs, and brittle stars; also sea cucumbers. I found several nice clean shells of dead sea urchins, and they are now reposing on my table alongside this letter. I hope to find large shells on the outer reef, which I intend to visit as soon as possible.

“This evening, and yesterday evening, I went for a short swim. Yesterday’s was the first swim I have had since Aberystwyth days. It was most beautifully warm. I made it a bath with the aid of that salt water soap we bought in London.

“One of my lads found a chameleon today. It was quite a large one, about a foot long with its tail uncurled, but it usually had part of it curled up like a watch spring. It was very scaly and angular in appearance - quite like a miniature dinosaur to look at. It had prominent ball and socket eyes which move about independently. This is the thing which has a tongue as long as its body, although we did not see its tongue. Its colour changes were amazingly rapid - each change took only about ten seconds, but its repertoire was rather less extensive than I had thought. All we could get out of it were: bright unspotted green, green with small yellow and black spots, sometimes with one or two bright yellow lines, dark green with large black irregular areas. It seemed to be restricted to shades of green for the most part.

“When we introduced it to our pet monkey a most amazing scene occurred. It flattened its body until only about a quarter of an inch wide and four inches deep, opened its mouth and hissed ferociously, and produced an enormous red-streaked pouch under its lower jaw. The unfortunate monkey must have thought it was a spook, because it whimpered and chattered - nearly went mad with desire to get away from it. Actually it appears to be quite harmless and very slow moving, but none of the natives will touch a chameleon. I took a photograph of one of my chaps holding it in his hand.

(Letter of 6 January 1944). “I have spent most of this morning paddling about in the pools of the coastal reef, watching the creatures brought in by the incoming tide. Many brilliantly coloured little fish - quite flashingly brilliant greens and yellows. I often go out there - I recently went four afternoons running - and each time I come across something new.

“I suspect that many zoologists would give a lot for a spell of duty near this reef. Just here it is quite broad - first is a sandy beach, then a stretch of coral reef with little pools, but more or less flat; then an area uncovered at very low tide, with larger pools and sandy ridges; then a broad flat area mainly covered with seaweed; then finally a jagged mass of fairly new coral with enormous deep pools full of quite a variety of small corals, coloured growths and weeds. Beyond this the reef suddenly drops into deep blackness, with a few signs of the ends of large seaweeds showing on the surface here and there - altogether not the sort of place I would care to bathe in.

“On Sunday I took my lads and an odd officer who happened to turn up out onto the reef and gave them short talks on the various creatures. It was really quite enjoyable, but rather annoying to have to wait while they expended their amazement on things which have already ceased to amaze me. This officer also insisted on calling sea cucumbers sea slugs, which are quite different things.

“I have evolved the following uniform for my wanderings on the reef: boots, hosetops and gaiters, bathing costume, bush jacket, peaked cap worn back to front. The boots to prevent damage from the numerous prickly sea urchins, and the jacket and cap to keep some of the sun off. The result of this arrangement is that my knees are a beautiful glamorous brown, my legs are quite white, and my thighs bright pink - quite a colour scheme really, but there is nobody to admire it other than a very occasional native fisherman.

“I have found one rather amusing gastropod. If you hold it upside down for a short time it reaches out an arm about two inches long, with a horny sort of dagger on the end of it, and swishes it through the air in the vicinity of its shell, for all the world like a Turk disembowelling somebody.”

A letter of 8 January 1944 to my mother explained my philosophy of war, which 55 years later I might modify slightly, but still do not feel I got it all that wrong:

“ Now I must have a word with you about this war, and this business of going overseas etc. It is a nuisance - considerably more than a nuisance - to us and to everyone. To many others much more than to us. I think it is due to the pitiful inadequacy of human nature, and I do not believe that human nature or the world will ever be perfect. There are many rights and wrongs on both sides, but it is chiefly an imperial struggle due to the inevitable trends of history, for which no man is responsible. Germans do their “duty” and we do our “duty”, but we are bound to win, so any effort and sacrifice is worth while to bring the end more rapidly. When there is only one force in the world, society will be able to develop and take advantage of modern techniques. I hope you will excuse this, but I want you to realise that I, at any rate, do not feel merely caught hopelessly in chaos just because there is no way out. This talk of democracy is twaddle - the average man is not fit for it (To this I would add a rider in 1998.). Tales of German cruelty are irrelevant. We shall need to be just as cruel to the Japs.” (Were, indeed, we not!)

Between the 6th and 8th of January I moved back from my idyllic location on the coast to a new officers mess in Mombasa. I think it must have been in Salim Road, the location of several photographs in my collection.

(Letter of 9 January) “It is the whole second and third floors of a brand new house built by somebody who knew what he was about and had plenty of cash. All the rooms are high and airy, with plenty of windows and tiled floors throughout. About half the second floor is an open air dance floor, so the rooms look out to this on one side and to balconies on the other. Both dance floor and balconies can be floodlit, so you can sit and read outside, or just sit in the moonlight. The only criticisms I can make are that: (1) there is no receptacle for soap in the bathroom, (2) the bath taps are at the end of the bath instead of in the middle where they can be reached, (3) the ceilings are traversed by unsightly electric wires because they apparently forgot to build them into the walls. It really is a comfortable place, though - such an atmosphere of tiles and cleanliness. It is reputed to be the best mess in town, and it is certainly the best I have been in, except for that at Dover.

(Letter of Tuesday 11 January 1944) “On Sunday afternoon I went for a ride in one of the unit utility trucks. To hire a utility it is 30 cents per mile (100 cents = 1 shilling),

and it is permitted to do 100 miles per month, not more than 40 per week. It took me the best part of Sunday afternoon to do 30 miles, partly over jungle tracks.

“First I went inland, along quite a good road, then climbing quite steeply, with many hairpin bends, until a low plateau is reached. Nothing but coconuts with numerous native huts dotted about underneath them in this direction; the huts largely made of dried leaves of coconut palms, although some had walls of white, yellow or pink plaster. The natives dress in the oddest combinations between European and native clothes - especially as it was Sunday and many of them are Christians.

“Anyhow I returned to the coast and went north. Visited a local bathing beach which I didn’t like at all as it was rather sea-weedy and too many bathers. Then I went through acres and acres of sisal plantations. Sisal is an enormous stiff grass, grows in separate bushes, leaves five or six feet long and three inches wide, flower stalks three inches through and ten or twelve feet high. One feels like the small variety of Gulliver.

“After this the road plunged into quite picturesque tropical forest. It cut through overhanging palm trees, which sometimes had stiff green branches leaning down to sweep the roof of the truck. Mixed up with them were trees like oaks, but with a thicker foliage of small very dark leaves. Beneath these trees was a semi-gloom. Ahead I could see the dusty track, bright blue sky behind the heads of the palm trees

“The rooms on the third floor are army additions to the flat roof of this place. Lath and plaster erections with roofs of split bamboo canes covered with canvas. Primitive but serviceable, and beautifully cool and windy. There is a cool shower which I am getting into the habit of using three times a day. The moon was full last night, and it was an incredible sight to see it rising behind the palm tree from my bedroom.”

On Monday 10th January (letter of 11th January) “The number of personal servants (in East Africa Command) was reduced from one per officer, one per two sergeants, and one per five ORs, to one per three officers, one per five sergeants, one per ten ORs. Not very popular, needless to say, although I think it’s based on a sound principle. Anyhow I lost my faithful Mwita, who was getting quite devoted to his bwana, and I now have to share a much less pleasant looking fellow with Captain Davidson and Griffiths. Still, as long as I get my washing done I shall not worry much about any extra attentions such as the regular daily cleaning which Mwita bestowed on the buttons of my useless greatcoat and service dress.”

(Letter of 16 January 1944) “In the cupboard on my desk a large wasp is constructing a nest. It is one of the peculiar tropical wasps which are liable to get their portraits in the National Geographical Magazine if they are not very careful. Its body and limbs are as thin as a pin, and there is a great brown blob of wasp at the tail end and at the front end. The rest of it is coloured bright yellow. Its nest is being constructed cell by cell out of mud, and it frequently lumbers past me carrying a capacity load of mud tightly clasped under its thorax.

“Another everyday pal of mine is the lizard, or rather several lizards. Practically every room in the mess has a couple which have elected to spend their lives upside down on the ceilings. These ceilings are just like ours at home, except that they are

twelve to fifteen feet high, and the lizards - four to five inches long - go romping about over them after moths.

“I must tell you about the native fruit market, if only to make your mouths water. It is similar to a London market, with its stalls and garbage and noise. Most of the vendors are Indians, and each stall is covered with masses of water melons, pineapples, bananas, oranges, and quite a variety of other things. The bananas and oranges are all green, the bananas in hundreds on enormous stalks.

“I and the mess secretary, Captain Davidson, gingerly picked our way through the coloured crowd. As Captain Davidson said, ‘West meets East without losing its dignity’. The possibility of West ever losing its dignity when in contact with East is too terrible to contemplate.

“In addition to the native market there are many fruit stalls scattered throughout the town, mainly laden with pineapples and bananas. These stalls are doing trade at almost any hour of the day and night. After dark they are lit by a lantern slung overhead. There is no doubt that the Indian tradesmen have worked hard to obtain their almost complete monopoly of East African retail trading.

“The trouble with pineapples is that they are too big to eat without ruining one’s digestion for some days, and once the things are open they will not keep. Also of course they require implements, and even with implements they cannot with propriety be dissected in company, as they exude large quantities of juice over everything including one’s face, hands and trousers. The only thing to do is to stick to the pineapple as served up in the mess, which is a great grief to me. I also manage about two bananas per meal, but I have not yet recovered an appetite for oranges. The East African oranges are rather bitter in any case. Every morning for breakfast we have paw paws with a squeeze of lemon, and sugar.”

(Letter of Thursday 20 January 1944) “I am likely to leave here fairly early in February” (for Madagascar), “although I believe my address will be the same. This is a pity in a way, because I am just beginning to get to know people here, and a new place is always rather a bore until the ice begins to thaw.

“On Monday four of the six officers in our mess were invited to dinner in the local United Women’s Services Club by two Wrens who are fairly well in with REME circles in this part of the world. The Major, Captain Bell, Griffiths and I went, and we had quite a pleasant evening. These girls were not particularly sensible, but very good natured, with the result that they radiated a distinct civilising influence. They seem to have survived the fact that there are about five officers to every Wren remarkably well.

“Then yesterday, Griffiths asked me to join him and two Wrens for dinner in the town. Well, one of them couldn’t turn up, so we were three, but it was a very pleasant evening all the same. We fed in the officers’ club and then sat and talked, and I performed the mean and despicable act of smoking several cigarettes.

“Now, Griffiths is a sensible sort of person, although I dislike his anti-Indian ideas, so we had quite an interesting conversation about things in general, and about Captain Davidson in particular. The Wren, Sheila, joined in with considerable anti-Davidson

fervour. Griffiths was a chemistry student at Cardiff, and went through Petersham with me, although I can only vaguely remember him from those days.

“I am perennially amazed every time Captain Davidson opens his mouth. He is about 45 and owns a large wireless business in Rhodesia. If he can be a commercial success I have high hopes of owning my millions before long. He is quite good natured, but much too fussy to be efficient, and believes he is the hub around which the universe revolves. My conversation with him consists mainly of non-committal grunts, and he is so pleased I do not pull his leg that he pours forth his silly soul on numerous occasions.

“It is generally possible to pick up the BBC General Overseas Service. There seem to be news bulletins at every hour of the day - it is homely to walk along the streets after dark, and hear, ‘This is London calling’ booming out from every open window. There is no blackout, and every house is brilliantly lit, every window wide open. The streets are clean and well groomed, the houses large, white and luxuriant. There are luxury hotels with floodlit verandas and a population of officers and women - in evening dress mainly. Then in a dark corner you hear a muttering noise, and if you peer into it you see three or four of the locals squatting in the gutter. Of course this is just our part of the town I am describing; the native quarters are another world.

“I am looking forward to my future job in a way. It is quite a responsible little job, well out of reach of any senior officers who may feel they might like to assert themselves, and it covers a vast area. It includes all types of REME work - MT, wireless, guns, radio etc. I shall probably be on this for six months to a year, after which I may return to this place.

“I am keen to see the social organisation of this new place, which I am told is quite different to that of Kenya. One thing I will say for British administration is that it does impose a good solid order on a place, even if the order is of a somewhat biased nature. I feel in danger of becoming an imperialist in some ways, but we must wait and see. A rookie of six weeks Empire experience is not really in a position to understand a social system laboriously built up on most difficult ground over a period of many years. One thing is obvious though - the basis of the system is the self-interest of its builders, whatever other incidental advantages may arise.”

(Letter of 23 January 1944) “Furious arguments arise in our mess from time to time, mainly on the subject of race, and they are marked by a complete lack of realisation of ignorance on the part of practically everyone, and an inability to avoid raising the voice; together of course with the usual difficulty of keeping to the point.

“They are, however, very instructive because they reveal the attitude of the average man to one of the world’s greatest problems; and as you will guess the attitude is emotional, quite uninformed and liable in the future as in the past to result in all these futile misunderstandings which are at present causing us beastly inconvenience. The Europeans and Indians in Kenya would joyfully have a civil war if they were not handicapped by the fact that total military power is in the hands of the Europeans. Both sides are right and wrong in some ways, but both are intolerant, aggressive and self interested.

“Today I went for a walk in the native bazaar of this town. I have been in many bazaars, but I doubt if I shall ever cease to be amazed at these melting pots of humanity. Almost every race under the sun was there - Africans, Indians, Chinese, Malays, half-casts. All have different religions, conventions and attitudes to life.

“You see there in the flesh the solemn Indian philosopher, sitting calm and unmoved in rags in the gutter. He may not be a philosopher, but he looks the part. Then there are handsome, well-built, black-bearded Indians with snow white turbans and clothes, complete with flashing eyes and sparkling teeth, who look capable of anything. Africans, with short fuzzy hair and often only half dressed, with a perpetual look of innocent childish amazement on their faces - they are the underdogs. Chinese and Indian children, standing quietly with great big wondering eyes - I wonder what it is like to be born into an unstable society with no roots of achievement. Muslim women wear a complete covering of black from head to foot, only occasionally raising their veils to spit into the gutter. Alongside them are others who wear practically nothing, and still others who wear European clothes and smoke cigarettes. Most of the more wealthy Indian women wear colourful and expensive robes, and many are good looking even in European terms. One of the chief grudges of the Europeans against the Indians is that their families are too large and they are prepared to work too hard.

“I forgot to mention the Arabs, with their scruffy moustaches, bent backs and dirty white night-shirts. On their festivals they come out in shirts and robes of every colour, gaudy ornamentation and scents which will effectively keep any European at a respectable distance. Native soldiers, solid hulky toughs in Aussie hats, never smiling and distinctly nasty types to meet when annoyed, but with the mentality of children because they come from almost untouched up-country villages.

“On Friday I went with the other officers and the REME Wrens to an ENSA show, and made myself rather conspicuous by departing half way through. I think I would rather listen to a knife grating a porcelain dish than a hot swing band; not that my musical taste is particularly well developed.”

(Letter of 30 January 1944) “In the afternoon I hired a utility and went for a very pleasant run south of Mombasa. I got onto a track which was just two deep ruts running through tropical bush and banana groves. Bits of coral sticking up in the ruts made going very rough, and I felt glad it was not my own car which was receiving the jolting this one got. After a while the road ended in a beach, with a European house nearby. I enquired of a person who was there if I was trespassing and was informed I was, but that the next house was empty, so it would be all right to go down to its beach.

“Well, the next house was about half a mile away. When I pulled up amidst clouds of dust I was overjoyed to find a number of low coconut trees, so I expended a great deal of energy, and very soon, with the acquisition of a good deal of dirt and perspiration, I had successfully stolen three coconuts. I had to decide which end to cut open to get at the milk, and as I chose the wrong end for my first effort I wasted about a quarter of an hour. The milk was very welcome when I got it though - rather bitter, but I was thirsty. This part of the beach was not too good, so I went back to the beach I used to bathe on when living in this part of the world. I had an enjoyable hour and a half roaming about on the reef and sitting in the luke warm water of its sandy pools.”

(Letter of 6 February 1944) “Last night Griffiths, Captain Bell and I went to a dance at the United Services Women’s Club, as a result of a general invitation to the mess by the two REME Wrens. I can’t say I particularly enjoyed it, although I did a fair amount of dancing. I am getting very tired of company which feels it must be amusing. Anyhow, I have allowed myself to be bullied into going picnicking with the same party this afternoon. There seems to be a general theory that as I shall not see any white girls for at least six months I should see as much of them as possible before I leave, and I cannot see any way of refuting this without causing offence. Actually I feel too warm to resist anyhow, but the thought of this picnic hangs like a dark shadow over my day off.

“Yesterday morning I went down to the fish market for the first time. This is a new quarter of the town for me, very rich in historical buildings and streets. A Portuguese fort, Arab watchtower, streets and scenes which have probably persisted unchanged for hundreds of years. The Arabs and Portuguese had a pretty fierce tussle on this coast in the early days of European exploration. It would be extremely interesting to explore these old places and dig up their history, but it would be a long business, because there are not a sufficient number of people interested for anyone to have bothered to provide guide books or access to these old buildings.

“The fish market is a roofed-in building with stone slabs on which the brightly coloured fish are laid out in little piles. Native and Indian fishermen squat behind the slabs and gesticulate as they discuss their wares in Swahili. From the side of the fish market one looks across an anchorage where there are dozens of Indian dhows - a forest of masts rising from wooden craft with high poops and axe shaped prows. The Aden dhows are supposed to be the best, and are quite distinctive. These wooden ships, which remind me of Elizabethan vessels, sail right across the Indian Ocean with the monsoon, plying a regular traffic between Kenya and India. On them hundreds of Indian immigrants are still pouring into Kenya, packed like cattle on the decks. Wherever you look out to sea along these coasts you are almost bound to see half a dozen of the single white sweeping sails of these dhows, framed between the blue sea and the sky. Many of the fish brought into the market are caught by natives who go out to the reef in canoes of hollowed tree trunks, then wade and spear the fish with harpoons.”

(Letter B of 6 February 1944) “I went picnicking and swimming this afternoon, and had a really most enjoyable time in spite of my fears of boredom. We, that is to say Griff, Charles Bell, I, and two Wrens - Brenda and Sheila - went to a beach about ten miles north of the town, splashed about in the water, lay on the sand, ate, and rested.

“This was my first visit to this beach, which is one of the best around here. The usual white coral sand, green-blue water, palm trees and cloudless sky. The beach was beautifully clean and quite steep, so we did not have to walk too far to get into a swimmable depth of water. Of course the water was lukewarm, so there was none of the screwing up of courage before entering water to be done as at home, and it was possible to stay in almost indefinitely. The coral sand is incredible stuff - made entirely of finely broken shells of wee tropical animals - some coral, foraminifera, particularly Numulites, and various other things. Above water level it is just a fine white dust, but down by the sea it can be seen to be crammed with these wee shells,

many quite undamaged, with here and there a brightly coloured one set against the general whiteness.

“We had quite a safari to get to this beach - along narrow tracks with clouds of reddish brown dust rising behind us, through uninhabited areas of low tropical scrub, with numerous varieties of palms waving their heads above it. We ate tomato and meat sandwiches, cream buns, Horlicks tablets, and afterwards had a drink at the Women’s’ Club. I still haven’t seen a snake, and am beginning to suspect that no such thing exists in Africa.

“I have collected my tailored tropical uniform, and it is very nice - cool and smart. I will tell you more in my next letter, which will be from a new country.”