

## 10 MADAGASCAR 07-02-44 to 07-03-45

My move from Mombasa to Diego Suarez was on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1944 and I was accompanied by Major Eaton, the head of 41 AA Workshop Coy. This trip - by BOAC Sunderland flying boat - was my first experience of air travel. I was to relieve Capt Bevan, in charge of a detachment providing EAEME workshop services to 15 (EA) Heavy Antiaircraft Regiment EAA. On account of possible problems with the army base censor I thought it prudent not to go into details of the flight in my letters at the time, but by a few weeks later had become emboldened:

(Letter of Saturday 26 February 1944) "We passed over many tropical islands, green with a billowy mass of tiny trees, each surrounded by yellow sandy beaches, shallow green water of the coral reefs, then deep blue sea. Most of them were rimmed with an area of brown water due to it being the rainy season in the West Indian Ocean. Some of the larger had patches of fresh green grass, quite a different colour to the darker forests. Here and there we saw a huddle of grass-roofed native huts, farming villages probably with little contact with the outer world. Once or twice we landed for refuelling" (at Dar Es Salaam and the Comores) and then the forests came closer and closer, until we saw palm trees and natives standing with upturned faces. The air in the plane became warmer and damper, and then for a few brief moments we were back in the tropics from the temperate zone.

"When I first saw our destination we were quite low down and banking steeply. Dirty brown streets and chicken-coop houses were pivoting round the wing tip in an apparently vertical direction. The wing tip appeared almost stationary and I wondered how it was possible for such a weight of metal to remain immobile at such an angle for so long. It seemed almost inevitable that we would slip sideways onto those streets. I had quite a job to prevent myself leaning in the necessary direction to assist in righting the plane."

There were other memorable aspects to the journey. These included the increasing surge of solid water rushing past the portholes as the plane gathered speed for the take-off, and the fierce skimming followed by the subsiding hot damp slowness as we settled down on landing. Another recollection is less agreeable but equally strong. For the last leg of the trip we were supplied with a package meal which included a boiled egg. I made the mistake of believing this to be hard, and succeeded in spilling its entire very liquid yellow yolk down the trousers of my brand new light-weight tropical uniform. I saw this as a most inappropriate start to the Madagascar episode of my career.

(Letter of Wednesday 9 February 1944) "This place is far from popular as a station, but as my tastes probably differ from those of a lot of other people. I see no reason why I should not have quite an enjoyable time here. It's a place where everything is pushed to extremes. When it rains, as it is doing at present, the heavens open and torrents of water pour through every gully. The mud tracks do their best to become quagmires, but are handicapped by the fact that the water soon soaks away into the

porous soil. The vegetation is bright green and very luxuriant, then when the dry season comes the place is a burning desert and it is necessary to wear goggles to keep the fine red dust out of one's eyes, as it is blown all over the place by a perpetual gale. Just now the clouds keep a good deal of the heat away and there is a pleasant English misty haze. It is very difficult to keep awake at midday though, and most people take an hour or so nap.

“Yesterday evening I was fortunate enough to be invited to one of the very rare parties which are possible in this place, as one of the officers who was invited was unable to go. It was thrown by a French family in the local town (Diego), and the entire conversation was in French. This family and several of their French guests were stranded in this place when France fell.” The party was in the house of Mr and Mme Rondo, whom I later discovered to live on the opposite side of the road to the Leclerts.)

“The party consisted of the head of the house (Mr Rondo) who was very quiet and sat in a corner drinking most of the time, Maman - a prim elderly French matron - all smiles and affability and stoutness, dressed in black and overflowing with energy, two daughters, one about 20 and one about 16. The 20-year old reminded me of a slightly more energetic Margaret Powers; the one about 16 was very grown up and quite an attractive girl. Her parents have an understanding with an elderly Frenchman who was there that she shall marry him - but they scarcely spoke the whole evening.

“Then there was a very pretty French girl of about 30 who looked and behaved just as a French girl should. Her husband very anxious to please everybody. (This was my first sight of Suzanne and Raymond Leclert). One or two other French civilians drifted in and out. Also there were two little girls of about 12, both of whom danced very well and one of whom was a first-class pianist (Monette Leclert and Françoise Rondo). None of these people spoke English except the fiancé of the younger daughter, with whom I had a long and difficult discussion on books and politics. He proved to be an ardent Free Frenchman. His English was far from fluent. With the others I had to cast my mind back to the dim and misty days of matric French, and really was quite amazed at how much of it I could still remember. “Quand je suis en Angleterre depuis six mois je vois Calais et France de Dovres.” (Groan!) ... they understood, and language was no real problem.

“The evening consisted mostly of dancing to the tune of a wee gramophone in a wee tiled courtyard affair. There were six of us there and those who did not dance sat and talked in a room adjacent to the wee dance floor. The geography of the house was quite different to that of an English house, and difficult to explain. This event started at about 7.30pm and went on to 2am, and during the whole of this time snacks and drinks were being passed round. Great dishes of little bits and pieces neatly arranged, each piece about one mouthful. For example, there were tomatoes with the tops cut off, the pips removed and the insides filled with egg. I didn't intend to drink anything, so I asked for orange. I thought it tasted a bit queer, but I had three before I realised it contained gin. Anyhow it was a most enjoyable and friendly evening. Madame played very vigorously on the piano, and one of the little girls (Françoise) played some

pieces by Schubert most beautifully - she was pale and red-headed and with the far away look of a genius.

“Afterwards we had half an hour’s extremely jolty ride in a car (back to our quarters at Cap Lazaret well outside the town). It is an evening I am unlikely to repeat , considering that these are about the only civilised people (in Diego). Perhaps that is an overstatement, but this is the only social contact the officers in this unit have, most of the locals being natives or half-and-half, mainly the latter I should think. It is quite incredible to drive through the streets and see the cosmopolitan crowd. Almost the most mixed bag of any town in the world, living in a dirty straggling township of wood and iron shacks. Of course there are respectable Western buildings, but they look forlorn and lost.

“The westernised black lasses are amazing. Fully togged in European clothes, cigarettes in mouth, constantly giggling and playing about with each other. Just like any English girls, but impossible in Kenya, where the native women still mainly dress in their traditional clothes and ornaments, and appear quiet and submissive in public.”

(Saturday 12 February 1994) “Yesterday I went for my first long run into the countryside. It is quite hilly - steepish hills and valleys covered with fresh green grass, with woods in the valleys and climbing up the hills in places. Little streams in the valley bottoms with mangrove swamps where the road comes down to the sea. The woods are deciduous, very English at a glance, because they are completely lacking in palm trees. In places the road ran through wooded glades, and in places over stony moors, green with grass now. This grass only lasts for a few months, and is then replaced by a red desert with a constant dust storm.

“I must not forget to tell you about the butterflies - large and brightly coloured - which sail gracefully about, and the birds, including some which are pure white, and others which are the most brilliant red with a black splash on each wing. I went for a walk down to the seashore a couple of evenings ago. There are no mangroves growing just here, the beach consisting of large black boulders of some igneous rock. Hundreds of little jet black crabs scuttled about on these boulders, and once or twice I saw enormous ones disappearing under the stones - almost as big as edible crabs and dark brown in colour. Sinister looking brutes.

“Most of the plant have small green flowers. Insects exist in almost every shape and form. The most spectacular are beetles about two inches long, and innumerable varieties and sizes of flying grasshoppers. The less spectacular include houseflies, although fortunately not so troublesome as in some places I have known.

“I am sharing a room with Captain Bevan, whom I am relieving, and the Doc. Captain Bevan is one of the pleasantest people I have met for a long time, although he is feeling that the hills are rather close at present. He is Welsh, although not too obviously so, and was a Cardiff physicist. He was at Bury at about the time I was at Petersham, and has been out here almost 2 years. The Doc is also very pleasant. I am writing this at his table surrounded by photographs of his wife, who looks rather

sweet.” (Captain Bevan had requested a transfer from Diego Suarez to escape from being in love with Suzanne. It later became apparent that Doc Gibson was scheduled to wrestle with the same problem.)

(Saturday 19 February 1944) “We are right on the coast here” (at Cap Lazaret), “at the top of a rather steep slope down to the shore. The slope is thickly covered with a tangled mass of bushes and large plants. Across the other side of the bay is a mass of steep sided hills, with wooded areas climbing up the shallow valleys cut into them. A little to the left of the hills is a low-lying rounded plateau, covered with fresh grass and as green as any pea at the moment.

“The barracks we occupy are substantial pleasant buildings, with red tiled floors, 12 ft high ceilings and shuttered windows to keep out the sun.” (They were pre-war French army barracks taken over by the Brits when they occupied Diego Suarez, and later returned to the French.) “We are really fortunate in some ways because many troops have to be content with bandas to live in. These look for all the world like huts from darkest Africa - walls are made of split strips of bamboo laced together, and roofs of leaves of some variety of palm tree laid in a mass about 9 inches thick to keep out the occasional heavy rain. There is a supporting bamboo framework, and each hut is provided with either a concrete or a sacking floor.

“Another luxury we have, and which most of the troops must do without, is a concrete building with first class showers. The only snag is that I have a good 50-yard walk to them, which cuts the number of my daily showers down to one. A great point about this room, though, is that it is quiet, being cut off from the rest of the building by brick walls instead of just by partitions, as is usually the case in this part of the world. It is a great joy to me that, although I can hear the vile noises which indicate contemporary human occupation in the distance, I am unable to distinguish any details. I have been able to do a certain amount of reading when not too hot, too tired, or too busy. Amongst other books I have read a new Penguin called “Into Madagascar”, which gives quite an interesting picture of what the writer calls a “Walt Disney land”. I have started on a large tome which I brought with me, called “A picture of life” by Viscount Mersey, his autobiography.” (This was my slightly laboured effort to inform my readers of my location without offending the army base censor, who occasionally opened correspondence from officers – unsurprisingly, however, my readers had already guessed, as they later informed me.)

“Last Sunday I, Bevan, the Doc and the Q went to “Chez Georges”, which is a French restaurant in the local town, reserved for officers and civilians. It consists of a large open room, with an open-air dance floor joined to it, the dance area being roofed by trailers of climbing plants. Just a solid mass of officers with here and there a few French civilians and French girls of assorted colours.

“I have been Orderly Officer at RHQ today, and had my first experience of mounting an African guard. The guard mounting verbiage is mainly designed to impress the Africans I suspect. I had to start by shouting “15th East African Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, East African Artillery, Guard and Details, Guard shun!” That’s not a bad tongue twister, apart from its other attributes. With a Sam Browne I borrowed, and

my new tailored brass-buttoned bush jacket, and turned-up-bottomed-trousers, I looked exceedingly smart - plenty of creases and starch (although I say it as shouldn't, and of course it was only due to my boy). I can't help thinking that smartness is rather wasted in this place though.

"I have a boy to myself again now, being the only officer in Det 41 AA W/shop. His name is Aruko, and we have exchanged about two words in a fortnight. He just glides around with a look of silent contempt on his face and I scarcely notice his presence, but he does his job quite well. Mwita was rather too much of a spoilt child. I am writing this before supper, whilst I indulge in my daily drink of tomato juice - now a habitual vice which is driving me deeper and deeper into debt."

(Letter of Monday 21 February 1944) "On Saturday evening I, Doc, Q (the Regimental Quartermaster), and a fellow called Bagley went to Chez Georges again with Monsieur and Madame La something or other. (Actually they were Suzanne and Raymond Leclert.) They were two of the people at the party about a fortnight ago. Madame is very French and dark and beautiful, although she is in her thirties. I am afraid I was feeling very tired and rather fed up, so I remained silent most of the evening. This seemed to convince Madame that I was a shy homesick boy, so she invited me to come to her house whenever 'Monsieur le Docteur' did so. As a result I am going to dinner tomorrow night. I only hope I do not feel too tired, because it is a dreadful strain trying to remember French when tired.

"On the way back to Cap Lazaret on Saturday night I almost went to sleep in the car, in spite of the jolty road. Unfortunately this was only the beginning of a very hectic night, during which I was repeatedly dragged to the telephone to direct the activities of distant minions on urgent work. Trucks went out into the night and broke down, irritated duty officers rang up repeatedly, everything that could go wrong went wrong. I went to sleep in the intervals, and was quite surprised in the morning that I had handled a difficult situation quite sensibly. I eventually got to bed at about 4am.

"On Wednesday a chap called John and I, filling a vacancy left by a tired doctor, went to supper and cinema with a naval officer. We supped very nicely in his mess, and then went to a new Garrison Theatre which has recently been opened. I forget the title of the film, but it contained George Formby and was a pretty poor advertisement for British films, although I suppose the fellow has talent of a sort. My opinion of the navy is rising - there usually seems to be a proportion of civilised people in their messes.

"Since last weekend I have done a good deal more exploring of this place - on duty. One of the locations I have to visit is about twenty miles away over the most incredibly bad roads. They have apparently been improved recently because they used to become impassable during rainy seasons. The method of improvement is to bung piles of huge stones in the dips, but potholes and ruts have not been worried about, so a car just crashes and rattles along like a tin can.

“It is quite an experience to drive along this road at night, the bouncing pool of light from the headlights shows up the rough track running through tropical bush, past jagged crags and mangrove swamps. During the day dozens of birds flit along just before the car and there are a lot of birds of the eagle family which look rather like scruffy buzzards and do not bother to fly away. And there are the native carts each drawn by a couple of yaks I believe they are called - they look like cows with a Panches’ hump and large horns. They dart across the road when the car is level with them. I saw my first snake on the road but it was too hot to stop - the snake was about 4ft long, a sort of dirty pink colour and rather fatter than a snake should be for its length.”

(Letter of Friday 25 February 1944) “I told you I had been invited to dinner at the LeClair’s (sic) house on Tuesday evening. Well, the Doc, Q, Major Hanson and I went. Major Hanson is the local IG (Instructor of Gunnery) and not a bad chap at all, in his thirties. He is always the awkward boy - bound to sit on the damp seat, or get dengue fever, or have tummy trouble.” He was also always the first to be attacked by any wandering mosquito. “He just suffers in silent self pity; but at other times he is benevolent and pathetically anxious to please.

“The LeClairs consist of Monsieur and Madame. It seems to be a French custom for hubby to be 15 to 20 years older than his wife, so hubby has to strive to be sociable for his wife’s sake when he would probably much rather sleep or read in peace. The Leclairs also include a little girl (Monette), all eyes and attentiveness, but quite silent and not regarded; Jackie, about 2 and thoroughly spoiled; Bernal (Bernard), about 6 and so shy that he runs away if looked at, but if not looked at he plays around quite happily. Jackie behaved rather like a spoiled dog at table. He ran from person to person imploring them silently for little tit bits, and if he succeeded in making a sufficient nuisance of himself he was rewarded with a morsel from the plate of the person he was pestering.

“As I said, we went to dinner. The beginning of the evening, about eight, was dinner and the end of the evening, about twelve, was still dinner. We sat at table and drank various things the whole time, but I do not think the actual eating part occupied more than about two hours. We started with tomato and rice soup; then a fish course; then an egg course, but naturally the insides of the eggs were removed and they were filled with some salad-creamy substance; then a meat-etc-inside-pancake course, then pancake with jam inside. I believe there were several other courses (eg chicken), and we were more than full at the end. This dinner must have taken hours to prepare.

“Each course had its special wine. We started with four glasses in front of us, neatly arranged in descending order of size from left to right. Red wine went in one, white in another, and I cannot remember the other two. We also preceded dinner with a large glass full of some milky alcoholic substance which took a lot of preparing with mixers and lumps of ice etc. It tasted worse than the worst medicine I have ever tasted, and it was a dreadful torture to drink; but in the end I said it was ‘très bien’. These drinks were without exception unpleasant, only to be drunk for the sake of international relations.

“We returned from this party about 12pm, and then at 2am I was dragged from my bed to go jolting over 20 miles of execrable roads to attend to a job which required doing. Fryer and I and Cameron got that buttoned up fairly soon, and were back just in time to walk in to breakfast as though we had slept soundly all night. I worked Wednesday morning too, but by the afternoon I was ready for a four-hour sleep.

“Thursday I went out in another direction and came back after dark with a truck with no lights. Try driving a 3-ton truck along a bush track on a moonless night without lights, and you will realise that I was quite proud we didn’t end up upside down somewhere. We missed the last ferry (across Diego Suarez harbour) anyhow, so had to ask the hospitality of a neighbouring gun site, which was given readily enough. That night I found that a banda is so cool in the early hours of the morning that it is necessary to have a blanket - very pleasant too.”

(Letter of Saturday 26 February 1944) “Today I have been out for the morning, mainly for the run. The grass, short and green and fresh when I arrived, is now about six feet tall, still green. In places it is like a wall on either side of the road. I reached my destination in about an hour and stood on top of a cliff-like slope down to the sea - green just offshore and deep blue farther out. I could see green wooded coastlines, rocky Cornish shores, plenty of primary colours. Through glasses I saw three large sharks gently cruising along just off the coast. Their brown colouration with red and white marks was clearly visible. Then I saw a huge shoal of fish, each about two feet long - hundreds of them concentrated in quite a small patch.

“I am being driven to the conclusion that African native music is even more painful to me than English native music. There is a boy ironing the Doc’s clothes outside the door, cheerily burbling away to himself in the usual monotonous tuneless mumbling drone. Sometimes we hear the organised music from the native camp, produced by an accordion, two spoons and two mess tins. The same few notes are repeated ad nauseum, then changed for a different set of clanging notes for another half hour.

“This is the only music we hear. In the mess they play a very involved dice game which requires great intelligence and is quite beyond me. I am afraid it bores me to tears, so I sit and read “Saturday Morning Posts” about six months old whilst waiting for meals. Once I was compelled to play some wretched dice game on a gun site where I was a guest. I hadn’t the faintest idea what I was doing, but I won and left the mess 40 francs the richer.”

(Letter of Monday 6 March) “I really do not think I have ever before been quite so snowed under. Thing after thing has gone wrong, and in each case replacements have to be more or less improvisations in this part of the world owing to its isolation. Matters reached a grand unprecedented crescendo yesterday, but today we have seen the first break in the clouds.

“It is an interesting point that the clothes of the local natives, although usually ragged and ill kept, are always quite clean in spite of their grubby living conditions. There is

a native washing bath, a concrete affair about 20ft by 20ft with raised walls and a corrugated iron roof, on a road along which I frequently pass. At all hours of the day dozens of native women stand round it scrubbing and pummelling piles of clothes - quite an unusual display of energy for this part of the world.

“The Doc is ill at present - quite cheerfully, but confined to his bed. In the space of a week he has had and finished with malaria, and now is just finishing with yellow jaundice. There is not a great deal of these about - much less than in previous wet seasons in this place. Dengue fever, also spread by mosquitoes but not considered so serious as malaria, is more common, and several of my chaps have had it. Fortunately mosquitoes seem to dislike me and very rarely bother to nibble at me.

“As a result of the Doc’s illness he dropped out of a trip to the local Garrison Theatre which he had arranged, so Captain Certes and I had to take Monsieur and Madame Le Clerk (sic) on our own. We saw “The First of the Few” - quite an old Leslie Howard film about the designer of the Spitfire. I think it is one of Leslie Howard’s weaker efforts, but it was quite enjoyable all the same. Afterwards we spent about half an hour at the Le Clerk’s house and I spoke an extremely ungrammatical mixture of three languages whilst Certes acted the rather strong silent man.

“On Saturday (must have been 4 March 1944) I, John Ange and a horrible Garrison Engineer friend of his, Perry - a naval civilian - took Madame and Monsieur and Lucette to Chez Georges. I really had quite an enjoyable time and danced as frequently as I could in the heat. All the local REMEs and RAs were there and I have heard nothing but envious remarks ever since. The end was rather spoilt by the fact that everyone was rather merry except myself, but it was probably just as well since I was the driver.”

This was the first mention of Lucette, to whom I was introduced in the sitting room of the Leclerts when we went to collect them. At this time she was normally living with her mother at Joffreville, in the hills around 20 miles south of Diego, which she visited from time to time.

(Letter of Monday 13 March 1944) “This is the unhealthy season, and dengue is rampant in this camp, which is reputed to be one of the healthiest spots in the area. Owing to a legend that dengue mosquitoes breed in long grass, the regiment decided to remove the grass in its neighbourhood. Since the grass is six feet high and rather like a young jungle, this was a bold resolution. But an army of Africans was set to wade into it with long bloodthirsty-looking knives, and they have now cut the grass, removed the roots, and even swept the dust into geometrical patterns, so the camp is surrounded by an artificial desert. Our REME workshop, farther away, is still buried deep in grass though - not that we have any mosquitoes.”

(Letter of 14 March 1944) “I have decided that, as a generalization - not of course applicable in all cases - I can safely state that Sergeants are the most objectionable group of people in existence. Raucous, vulgar, filled with a quite unjustified petty confidence, crooning, drinking, lazy. You may gather that one of these horrible



people is treating me to a vile exhibition of crooning as he washes his carcass. I am certain that my wonderful self control will one day result in serious mental and physical damage to myself. Fortunately I don't have to suffer much of this sort of thing at present though.

"We have had some quite spectacular weather here today. Hot sunny morning, enormous heavy black clouds gathering over the massif about midday, then a strong breeze raising clouds of dust from the bare ground around a camp we can see about a mile away. A large billowing patch of red dust, green countryside, and blue bay. Then came the rain for about ten minutes in a solid sheet. Later more sun and the stickiest clammiest afternoon ever, after a period of beautiful coolness due to the rain.

"I look out of a window across the bay - I guess I shall remember this scene for a good long time. Like most landscapes it has many different appearances. Under the present full moon it looks quite romantic at night. It could be a bit of a Scottish loch at times if the weather was more appropriate."

(Letter of Saturday/Sunday 18/19 March 1944) "It really has been hot this last week. Much too hot to think or write letters – just work automatically, eat and sleep, and wish it were cooler. Occasionally it rains, and the rains, coming from cooler regions, cool the air, but ten minutes later the place is a steaming hothouse. Even Monsieur Le Clerk, who has been here 18 years, is complaining, so it must be hot. Everyone is looking forward to the windy season, which starts in about six weeks, but that means dust as well.

"I have been out three evenings this week. On Tuesday and Thursday to dinner at the house of Monsieur Le Clerk, and on Saturday to Chez Georges. The two dinners were most sumptuous affairs, each occupying the whole evening. The practice is to sit down to feed at about 8pm – half an hour after arriving – and rise on departing at about 11pm. In the meantime food is served course by course, with fair intervals between each. Tuesday – (1) Soup with chunks of every vegetable created in it – at least every vegetable which can be persuaded to grow in the neighbouring Highlands. (2) A truly enormous lobster, as big as the warm tropical waters can make them, and that's about twice the size of our English ones. (3) Goose à la Something-or-Other – vermouth I believe. (This was considered a great luxury, because a large quantity of some alcoholic drink was used for cooking it. As far as I was concerned this was represented by a rather obnoxious gravy.) (4) Omelette with various vegetables in it. (5) Tart I believe, but I can't remember for sure because by this time eating had become a duty rather than a pleasure. Of course each dish had to be admired and praised – a trying business. There were also five different wines, which appeared at various stages – red, white, Port, liqueur and Hock.

"Thursday's dinner was similar to Tuesday's but with different courses. There was, for example, a fish course – very nice freshly caught fish, served up complete with gaping jaws and sightless eyes. Then there were oysters. Rather small ones of the local wild variety. It was necessary to eat them by placing the shell in one's mouth and sucking them out complete with grit and bits of chipped shell.

“One rather amusing characteristic of Jackie, which the Doc discovered, is that if you make a face as if you are crying he immediately rushes up and kisses it”

(Letter of 20 March 1944) “Oh dear me! Showri ya meme. An African trying to explain his woes to me and I just can’t understand. Never mind – just shove him on to Thain. Thain, the Glasgow MA, is now the unit clerk, and very soon I shall have trained him sufficiently well to enable me to sleep all day. This week he produced three short poems, typewritten, and really not at all bad. The result of his meditations during the last six months.

“The worst pest here is a small black beetle, about a quarter of an inch long, which barges blindly about, hits one’s head, falls down one’s neck, lands with a crash in one’s food or on the table, where it rolls over two or three times before recovering itself. The worst thing about it is that if it thinks its dignity offended in any way it lets off a very powerful and unpleasant almond smell. I mustn’t forget to tell you about the enormous cockroaches, brightly striped yellow and black, which live in heaps in every cranny, and scuttle in all directions when one moves one’s luggage.

“Saturday’s dinner dance was quite a normal affair – Monsieur, Madame, Doc, John, and Garrison Engineer Lt Turner. There are some dances which will always bring this place back to me ‘Parlez moi d’amour’, ‘Madame la Marquise’, ‘Show me the way to go home’ – danced as a Palais Glide with Madame and Doc; we do it quite nicely.

“At Chez Georges the menu always consists of a large omelette followed by chicken. Madame dances every dance. Monsieur sits on the outskirts of the party and occasionally demands a dance. Madame and the Doc talk interminably, John talks in pidgin English and frequently says, ‘Uh yes, oh yes!’ Turner remains silent except to enquire where Lucette is. I listen attentively to the Doc and Madame, who occasionally appeals to me or asks if I am thinking of England. Sometimes I turn to Monsieur, just to indicate that he is not entirely forgotten, and make conventional remarks about Russia and the 3000 ton raid on Stuttgart.”

(Letter of Sunday 25 March 1944) “Yesterday Doc and I and John had a party organised at Chez Georges, to which were invited Perry, Monsieur and Madame, and Lucette. The colonel and two of his pals barged in more or less uninvited. The colonel started off by knocking a large bottle of red wine all over the table. He then insisted on monopolising the conversation of the somewhat disorganised party and speaking in an unintelligible mixture of about four languages. He was then joined by a most offensively drunken friend of his whom Doc and I and Perry had to remove forcibly as the colonel was much too busy being charming to do anything about it. The party was really quite enjoyable in spite of the disturbances. Doc, Perry, Madame, Lucette and I had another of our smashing Palais Glides – we really do put a tremendous lot of concerted vigour into them. Then Lucette several times claimed imaginary dance fixtures with me in order to cool the ardour of her admirers.

“Yesterday I sent a party of about a dozen British Other Ranks (BORS) to a local rest camp. About 25 miles away, it is over 1000 ft above sea level and has quite a tolerable climate. I took the chance of making a flying visit there myself on Wednesday morning. It was a most pleasant change. The road not at all bad, although not surfaced of course.

“In these hills it rains at all seasons of the year, so there are large areas of almost semi-temperate woodland. The road winds through wooded valleys, with brightly coloured flowers bordering the woods on either side. Then it is quite cool – quite cold at night I understand. The houses in the village” (Joffreville) “near to which the rest camp is situated are mainly of the usual dog kennel type, but they are set in most beautiful gardens, very fresh and green and colourful. Roses, which would wilt in the heat of our station, flourish. Of course there are plenty of European houses here too. Madame and Lucette were born in this place, and Lucette still lives in it, visiting our town” (Diego Suarez) “about once a fortnight. My visit was very much a flying one, though, so there was no chance of making any calls.

“As we thundered downhill at about 50 miles per hour it was like walking slowly into a tropical greenhouse. The 50mph was due to the exuberant spirits of my Askari driver, but it didn’t bother me much as he is a really first class driver – he drove all through the Abyssinian campaign. He spends approximately half his time in prison, and is again in now as a matter of fact.

“We have acquired a lemur. About the same size as the pet monkey we had on the Kenya coast, ie about as big as a cat. It has rather a pointed face, not flat like a monkey. Its very large prominent eyes make it look frightfully fed up with life.

“The wind has started today. A tumbling, fluttering, door-slamming wind – very cooling when one is in it, but directly it stops one is broiled alive in a few seconds. The rains are just about over, and before long the wind season will have set in properly.”

(Letter of Saturday 1 April 1944) “Just at the moment the roads are extremely slippery and almost impassable as it has been raining almost continuously for over 12 hours. This is all wrong really, because the dry season is supposed to have started. The grass is very tall and is doing its best to be independent of the weather and turn brown, as is the correct thing for it to do now.”

On Sunday 2 April Suzanne and Raymond Leclert arranged a largish picnic in the woodlands above Joffreville. This started from Diego, and Lucette and Madame Brun were picked up en route.

(Letter of Monday 3 April 1944) “The Doc and I got to Madame Le Clair’s (sic) house at about 9am and we found John and three naval civilians already there. Monsieur was due to turn up with his truck at 9am but he was delayed by work and did not put in an appearance until about 11am. In the meantime Micheline and Monique Rondeau turned up. I cannot remember which is which, but one is 20 and

plump, the other 16 and pretty. They are both fair haired and of strong character. The 16 year old is still a playful child, although she is engaged to Billy Goat, who was also there. At 11am we all piled into the truck, together with two maids of Madame's – dusky locals wearing the usual semi-European garments adopted by the dusky locals. One was quite young, and the other was the typical devoted wrinkle faced old nurse. They took it in turns to nurse Jackie. Bernal (sic) and the daughter aged 12 (name also begins with M) were also present ." (The 12-year old was Monette.) Then there was an Arab driver, who sat in the back most of the way. He was dressed in typical costermonger's clothes, including an East End peaked cap. Very different to the gaily clad, turbaned and moustached Arabs one frequently sees in the streets.

"We sang a few English songs in the truck, and then Madame and the 20 year old, both with good voices, treated us to a few of their songs. The picnic consisted of every conceivable vegetable, plus chicken and various meats, with the normal cake conclusion. Very nice, but we were forced to eat enough to keep the wolf from the door for at least two days. Then we walked and talked and had a group photograph taken."

This picnic was the occasion of my first walk with Lucette, which ended in a slight but awkward communication problem, irresolvable by my schoolboy French. We walked a short distance along what I believe was a disused mineral railway running through open jungle. The distance must have been short because any long walk in these circles would have necessitated a chaperone, which we did not have. In seeking comments appropriate to the occasion Lucette remarked that the setting would be appropriate for a film featuring Dorothy Lamour (a contemporary American actress best known for decoratively sporting a sarong in jungle locations). It was the French pronunciation of 'Dorothy Lamour' which my translating abilities found to be a problem. Despite lengthy efforts at rephrasing, it was in the end necessary to return to the main party to obtain clarification.

"Then we rode back. A glorious cool cool ride through green woods and valleys and hills, with far below us the panorama of bay beyond bay, a confused mass of headlands and water and plains, all merging into the misty horizon. We talked and sang a little. I was told I do not sing in tune. Eventually we arrived back in the land of clammy warmth at about 7pm by moonlight. The truck was coughing and spluttering in a way quite in keeping with its rickety appearance, and I am convinced it was only enabled to do the return journey because it was downhill."

(Letter of Monday 10 April 1944) "Wherever the British soldier goes he creates a little Britain, and he lives in his little Britain almost entirely insulated from his environment. He lives in his unit just as he does at home, and he does the usual jobs. He drives his truck through amazing places, but after two days he might just as well be driving through British lanes, no longer noticing anything strange. The majority of the troops have little contact with the locals, and never get to understand them. They regard them as just Wogs, and all Wogs are the same. This town (Diego Suarez) probably has one of the most mixed populations anywhere. Indians, Arabs,

Europeans, Chinese – all varieties of each and all mixtures of all varieties with each other and with the natives. Mixtures of features, clothes and religion.”

(Letter of Monday 17 April 1944) “On Saturday was the Civil Engineers’ dance. Perry invited the Doc and me. Madame, Monsieur and Lucette were also there: and also Monique with her dreadful Billy Goat, and Micheline. As this was an invitation dance the numbers of men and women were approximately equal – an unusual state of affairs in this place. Some of the girls were pretty brown, but the browner they were the better dancers they seemed to be. I danced with a greater variety of partners than ever before in my life, and had a most enjoyable time on the whole. Monique’s Billy Goat detests dancing and was dragged there to escort her whilst she gaily flirted with as many English officers as she could. Most humiliating situation for the unfortunate fellow.

“I have discovered that the only way to keep reasonably comfortable at these dances is to take a towel, spare vest, two spare handkerchiefs, and a water bottle full of water to wash in occasionally. I consider that my dancing excelled itself, but I was rather disconcerted from time to time by the fact that the local girls went into fits of giggles whilst dancing. Language difficulties prevented me ever discovering the reason for this.

“On Thursday was a dance at Chez François. Another invitation dance and again not many British officers. This was a national charity dance, and therefore supported by all the “best” people – not that they are a very imposing crowd. It was such a long time ago that I can’t remember much about it except that I got hotter than I have ever been in my life before, since the presence of two bands playing alternately made intervals between dances very short. Chez François is another of the local “first class” hotels, but not frequented by officers because Chez Georges is out of bounds to ORs (Other Ranks - than officers), and officers therefore congregate there.

“Yesterday was mainly a day off. We finished at 11am and six of us went up into the hills for the day. There is an officers’ club at the hill village (Joffreville), and we had a nice lunch – the usual chicken of course. After lunch we had half an hour’s quiet read, and I a good look at the usual amazing view. Not far from where we are stationed (near Diego) is a high overhanging crag, rising steeply on the landward side as well as on the seaward; in the view from Joffreville this was just a little bump. The view must be one of the most romantic in the world, although it certainly isn’t particularly romantic to live in it.

“Then we all piled into the truck again and went on about six miles farther into the hills – up a winding red-dust track into the tropical rain forest which forms a solid cover to the hilltops, almost unbroken by clearings. This was another type of country to me. Largish tree in the main, but with a good admixture of scrub and small trees, with plenty of Tarzan creepers and trailers festooned from tree to tree. Then there were plenty of epiphytes – mainly ferns – growing from the trunks far above the ground. The trees had been cleared away for a few yards on each side of the road, and

the cleared ground was covered with dense bushes, rising into the wall of grey-green forest. Quite a number of flowers, all strange.

“We parked the truck and walked along a narrow path through the trees, by the side of a very Scottish looking stream – rippling over boulders. At the end of the path was a quite impressive waterfall about 40 to 50ft high. It tumbled into a steep sided hollow, from which the only exit was through the steep sided valley along which we had come. In places the walls of the hollow overhung, and in the roof of the overhang, behind a curtain of water, hundreds of bats were suspended. Some of the local café-au-lait population were throwing stones at these unfortunate bats, many of which were fluttering about like a swarm of bees. This was an enormous café-au-lait family of children of all ages from 3 to 18 – quite uncontrollable, excitable and noisy. The older girls in their bright dresses paddled in the stream and looked coy whilst we looked solemnly at the scene.” (I did not mention it in the letter, but Lucette must have been our guide on this occasion.)

(Letter of Monday 24 April 1944) “Whilst we were at Madame Brun’s house last Sunday I noticed an orchid in a pot – a wild one, which had been collected lock stock and barrel, complete with flowers, from the forest. Just a spray of small white blooms rather like the butterfly orchid of English woodlands. In this particular tropical forest orchids do not seem to grow like daisies at home. The orchid location was unfortunately too far away to visit on Sunday, but I hope to go there some day.

“To turn to food. A matter of which I am taking a good view at the moment is there is an absolutely unlimited supply of bananas. There is always a loaded plateful in the mess, and I must eat between six and twelve a day. Fortunately they don’t seem to affect my stomach, so there is no need to practice the restraint which appears to be necessary with oranges. The local oranges are horrible in any case – very bitter. Major Hanson brought back from a local gun site a peculiar fruit just like an orange to look at, but as hard as a cannon ball. I cracked it open and found that it had a hard shell with about half a dozen large pips inside, surrounded by a pulpy mass. It wasn’t any relation to an orange botanically, yet to look at it I think anyone would have sworn that was what it was. Last night we had corn on the cob again – with plenty of butter and salt – rather on the hard side but very nice.”

(Letter of Thursday 27 April 1944) “Needless to say we are all rather interested in this second front business, and a sweepstake, in which I am not taking part, is being held as to when it will start.

“Today has been our first really windy day, and everything is a-rattle and a-rustle all the time. I scarcely notice the heat, although it is still very warm by English standards. The wind dries up perspiration, with the result that the evening shower is becoming more of a duty, to get dust off, than a pleasure, to cool and de-stickify. The water is also unpleasantly cold.

“One of the more memorable events of the charity dance of our gallant allies two weeks ago was the auctioning of a goat on the dance floor during the interval. It was

quite a clean goat, and was led protesting in by two very happy allies. I never quite understood the logic of the auction, but the idea was that someone bid, then others added to the bid, just handing over the addition to the previous bid to the money collector. There was no question of bidding for the goat, it was just a matter of adding to the steadily increasing sum in the cashier's hands. The auction raised the equivalent of £50, so it appeared to be a good way of getting money for a charity, but its success depended on the presence of many happy souls.

“The scenes on some of the roads near here are just as I imagine India to be. Dusty tracks cutting through tall brown grass, beaten down and reddened with dust near the road. Plodding along the road are native oxen-drawn carts – ramshackle affairs drawn by brutes with huge humps on their backs and long horns. Sitting in the cart is a wide-eyed native woman with a couple of children, and walking by the oxen's heads is a grubby, scantily-clad native farmer – his main dress his straw hat. Scattered here and there along the roadside and in the grasslands are occasional stunted trees, very green by contrast with the grass.”

At about this time I was having a problem with the UK Inland Revenue concerning my income tax, basically because my 1941/42 liability had been assessed incorrectly as £48. 8s. 6d, and I had paid only £10. In a letter of Friday 5 May 1944 to my father I asked him to sort the problem out, and listed my income for 1941/2 as follows (for comparative purposes I have included monthly amounts in 1990s' terms in brackets):

Employee Welwyn Stores	14/07/41 – 14/08/41	£10. 0. 0.	(£10.00)
War Office student AA Radio School	23/08/41 – 22/11/41	75. 0. 0.	(£25.00)
Pay of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieut	22/11/41 – 05/04/42	82. 0. 0.	(£18.42)

(Letter of Monday 8 May 1941) “On both Saturday and Sunday evenings Doc and I were dancing with our local friends. The dance hall adjoins a cinema – the only peace-time cinema in the town – and in the cinema is a narrow balcony which can be used by exhausted dancers if they feel they would like to watch the film for a while. On Saturday evening there was a play performed by local natives instead of a film. Much the same as an English play in some ways, although rather crude. The general idea was to get the words out without bothering too much about expression or technicalities. The actors all wore European clothes and seemed quite at home in them. On Sunday evening there was an Indian film – plenty of deep passion, fierce and intense. I believe the love scenes would make even an American audience laugh. The cinema must have broken down thirty times, so that the stoppages made the film last about twice as long as it should have done. Also there was a constant vertical flicker on the screen and the sound track was so worn that the singing sounded rather like Donald Duck

“This dance on Sunday was only the conclusion of a 14½ hour day spent with our local friends. It started with a picnic. A harbour tug was provided to transport us to a beach, not so far away as last Saturday's. We bivouacked about 50 yards back on the hillside beneath some convenient coconut palms, drunk coconut milk, fed, slept and walked, and eventually returned in the same tug by moonlight. Our local town looks

quite respectable when seen in silhouette against a moonlit sky, especially if there are a few palm trees available to be silhouetted and thus complete the picture.”

(Letter of Friday 19 May 1944) “I thought you might be interested in the words of a song which is sweeping East Africa Command at present. Madame sings it very nicely:

J'écoute la guitare  
Plaintive dans la nuit,  
Dont la rythme bizarre  
Eveille un son plus joli.  
Plus rien ne me sèpare  
De cet heureux pays  
Et mon rêve s'égare  
Jusqu'aux îles d'Hawii.

“This of course is only the refrain. Madam has written the whole song out for Doc, who hums it all day and every day.

“We are changing our location slightly this weekend – moving into our local town. Fortunately the unhealthy season is over, so we will miss the numerous ills which flourish in the town during that part of the year. I shall miss the view from my bedroom window though. I frequently take a chair outside during the cooler part of the day, and contemplate it.

“Q Gaunt (the Quartermaster) will tell you that this country is in every way evil. Beneath its gorgeous views everything is hostile to man. The plants are covered with burrs and stickiness. The insects bite and creep over everything. Poor Q. He is a most representative Englishman. He will bore you for hours with his talk of his business, his son, his last war experiences, the bomb near his home. He will grumble and grouse, but beneath it there is a stubborn unshakeable nationalism. He is never wrong in his views.

“Last night I had the pleasure of my first night job for some weeks. In fact my first job worthy of the name for some time – I have been sitting at a bumph-covered desk most of the time recently. You would have thought our askaris ‘wonderful’ if you could have been with me last night. They challenged us at points along the road in a most determined manner. As black as night themselves they appeared in the headlights in their most ferocious challenging attitude, pointing their rather puny bayonets at the bulk of our six-wheeler truck, mouths open in a loud bellowed command to halt – followed by an obstinate refusal to allow the truck to pass until irritation was well aroused.

“This has been another picnic day. Just the Leclert's and their children, Doc and I. On such occasions I spend most of my time playing with the children. Doc attends to Madame, throws an occasional word to Monsieur. I have quite fallen for Monette – we hold each other's hands romantically – don't worry though, she is only 12. Jackie



aged 3 is full of pep and spends most of the time bringing the house down with roars of laughter or sorrow. I am apt to find myself buried beneath a pile of children on occasion.

“The picnic was in our usual seaside place, about 15 miles out. A nice white sand beach, bordered by sparse coconut palms with grass underneath. The grass contains some of the most tenacious seeds I have ever come across. We have learned to use blankets over it, and let our boys pick the seeds out the following morning. Another lesson of a similar type, which I did not learn until today, is to avoid touching a certain cactus. About six feet tall, with the usual large squashed-pear-shaped branches growing out of each other. It looks harmless enough apart from two-inch long prickles all over it, but touch one of the bare spots, such as flower buds, and immediately you get a bunch of tiny prickles in your hand, apparently shot up from below the surface of the branch. About a dozen in each bunch, they are as fine as hairs and less than a quarter of an inch long.

“I want to tell you about my bath sponge. I was standing surveying the countryside a few days ago when I saw, half way down a slope in front of me, a sort of dried marrow hanging suspended in mid air. I scrambled down to investigate, and found that it had a cork-like affair at one end. I uncorked it and about twenty dry black seeds fell out. Then I looked in through the cork hole and to my surprise found I was looking into the inside of the twin brother of our bathroom sponge at home – the long fibrous one. The only difference was that this one was encased in a very tough brown skin. I left it in my room and, quite unasked, my boy skinned it, so that when I returned I found I had a perfectly good sponge. It has come in quite handy in removing Diego dust.”

On the weekend of Saturday/ Sunday, 20/21 May 1944, I was transferred from my cosy quarters at Cap Lazaret, where I had been attached to 15 (EA) Heavy Anti-aircraft Regiment EAA to an EAEME workshop actually in Diego Suarez. My address became 451 Radio Holding Coy, EAEME, Att No 4 Inf Bde W/shops EAEME, but I continued to have responsibility for maintenance of anti-aircraft radar.

(Letter of Wednesday 24 May 1944) “The new mess is not a bad place at all. It consists of quite a respectable tropical-type house. White washed stone walls, 15ft high ceilings, no windows but verandas with wooden shutters to front and back of the house. The front looks out across a gravel yard to a main road in the respectable part of the town, the back across a dusty courtyard to a steep tree covered slope with the water beyond. Stand at the end of the garden and you can see the blue sea through the trees. There are roads and buildings at the foot of the slope.

“There are six others in the mess – all of REME type and all quite pleasant. I am sharing a room with Henri Delronchiere, a Belgian lieutenant. I don’t know how he became a British officer, but he is French Belgian and originated in the Belgian Congo. He speaks English with a decided accent, and is still at the stage of making rather amusing experiments with English idioms.” Henri had a philosophy of trading on his poor English by always replying “Yes” to instructions, in order to avoid any need for fruitless argument. He would then do exactly what he himself judged

appropriate, secure in the knowledge that if necessary he could claim failure to understand.

“One of the disadvantages of my new mess was that it was a full quarter of a mile from the EAEME workshop, and lifts were not always available. (Letter of Saturday 27 May 1944) “The problem is now solved, because I have acquired a bicycle. They are quite priceless here, so I was very surprised when the major i/c 4 IBW presented me with his, as he is intending to motorcycle.

“The weather is getting cooler now. I never really feel dreadfully uncomfortable from the heat at present, and in the small hours I find a blanket necessary in bed. The workshop here has employees of every colour and tongue. It is not uncommon to find one in difficulties who speaks a language for which there is no interpreter available. Thank heavens I was not born in this place – there is such a deadening atmosphere of lazy futility. It is definitely comfortable, through no conscious effort of my own that I can remember, to belong to one of the “master” races of the world - do I detect shades of German philosophy?”

(Letter of Monday 29 May 1944) “Out here the grapes are about half grown now – plenty of large bunches. The Leclerts have a vine sprawling over their veranda, and the dance hall at Chez Georges is roofed with vines growing along criss-crossed wires. The bunches of grapes hang over the dancers’ heads, and beyond them are the stars, or the moon. One night Doc noticed a lump on the Leclert’s vine, in the dark, and wondering what it was he touched it, then recoiled with horror as it became alive. It leapt onto the veranda and made off with all the speed that a – normally sedate – chameleon can muster.”

(Letter of Saturday 3 June 1944 to brother Richard) “AB is a private code between myself and Doc by which we are able to discuss his innermost emotions within public hearing yet with complete secrecy. “A” is the mental and “B” the physical, and he is suffering AB in respect of Suzanne. Quite private and unsuspected of course, but he is leaving before long and rarely have I seen a more depressed person. He has recently been moved down to a new mess in town, where he is amongst other doctors whom he does not particularly like. When I saw him yesterday he looked as if he was about to burst into a flood of tears at any moment. Doc at Diego is rapidly replacing Smith at Bury as my conception of a depressed man. I am afraid his two year psychology course has not helped him much.”

(Letter of Sunday 4 June 1944) “Paw paws coming into season locally. Our bread would interest you. It is brown, and absolutely full of insects. Dead and thoroughly cooked. I think they are mainly weevils – about an eighth to a quarter of an inch long. The drill is to pick them out before applying the butter, but it’s difficult to get them all out. You don’t taste them anyhow, so they don’t worry me much.

“The Leclerts have a pleasant view from their back veranda. The ground falls sharply to the bay, and one can see other bays and headlands beyond. Just in front is a sandy

island with a few bushes, and there is a half-hearted sort of mangrove swamp to the right. It looks very pleasant by moonlight, and just now the moon is nearly full.”

(Letter of Wednesday 7 June 1944) “We first heard the news (of the Allied invasion of Europe) at 10.45 yesterday morning in the sergeants, mess at IBW. Work stopped and all British ranks crowded round the wireless there to hear General Eisenhower’s first statement. I am afraid the American super-dramatisation of the situation raised a laugh at a moment which is really far from a laughing occasion. Since then work has proceeded at a reduced tempo in the wireless shop, owing to the ever-present temptation to listen in to both British and foreign stations broadcasting the latest communiqués.

“I was interested in the Church’s interest in its members in the forces. The prospect of being written to, and having to reply to, a member of the Church fills me with horror though. It’s a nice thought, but I hope it doesn’t come off. The cigarettes are a nice thought too, but if any are sent to me my boy will be the one who will benefit, because I don’t smoke at all these days. As a matter of fact we get a free issue of 50 cigarettes per week, and my boy gets all of mine.

“The owner of Chez Georges is a most amazingly ugly stout old lady who has never outgrown the idea that she is still sweet sixteen. She is full of life still, though, and she gave a party of us on Wednesday a very amusing half hour. The party was thrown by Doc, who won the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment sweepstake on the date of the start of the invasion. By going to this party I unfortunately missed one which was given by the Asians of No 4 IBW. Asian is a general term given to troops of Indian, Arab, Somali and Mauritian origin. I don’t quite know about the anthropological definition, but socially it means that although they are one step above the Africans they are still untouchable as far as European troops are concerned. Just at present we have an Asian officer living in our mess. Asian officers are very much a rarity in East Africa, because it is a bit difficult to treat an Asian as an officer and still maintain the colour bar. The consternation of some of the Europeans on hearing of the pending arrival of Captain Din was rather amusing, but he has turned out to be thoroughly English and quite pleasant. On the evening of Invasion Day, when everybody else was celebrating, I went to the cinema with Din and Debrouchiere.”

(Letter of Monday 12 June 1944) “Doc and I have had a pretty busy week end one way and another. It started on Saturday with dinner and a special dance, on Sunday there was a picnic and dinner and this evening a dinner party. Unfortunately the dance was rather spoilt for me by the fact that I wore service dress and became indescribably hot after a series of dances. It started very well though. Doc, I, the Leclerts, Lucette and Micheline had dinner at Chez Georges. It was most amusing to see dozens of envious eyes watching us as we walked in with three of the best looking local girls, and they were quite good looking in evening dress. After dinner we all went to the Garrison Theatre for one of the periodical officers’ dances which are held there, and it was nearly 3am before we were in bed. I was dragged out at 6am for a telephone call, which rather annoyed me as it is quite possible to stay in bed until 12am in this place

(on Sunday) without exciting comment. Still, I was able to get back for another three hours before I was dragged to the telephone again.

“The picnic party was the same as the dinner party, with the addition of the children, this time including 12-year old Françoise, the red-headed sister of Micheline. Micheline, by the way, is not normally a member of our gatherings, but seems to be becoming one. She is 19, and looks like a rather tougher version of Margaret Powers, but is quite energetic and intends to have six children. (In later years Lucette informed me that Micheline did in fact have six children.)

“We all bundled into the Doc’s truck, plus a native servant, and went about twenty miles to the normal beach we visit. This was the first time I had been this way for about two weeks, and a big change in the countryside was noticeable. The grass is all quite dead and brown now, with grey brown rocks sticking up through it and scattered bright green trees and scrub patches. In places the road ran across dry salt flats, where the wind was blowing up grey clouds of mingled salt and dust. On some of the steeper hillsides the wind produced a rapidly moving ripple in the dry grass, giving the impression that the hillsides were moving.

“I expect you will guess that I found myself in the back of the truck with Lucette on one side and Micheline on the other. Monique and Françoise sat opposite and Monsieur quietly in a corner. Rather a terrifying situation really, but fortunately they had an inexhaustible fund of songs which they sang one after another.

“When we reached the beach we fed, rested, walked, swam, played around generally, had a photo taken (which Lucette refused to join because she thought her hair too bedraggled) and finally I returned shoeless and sock less, having walked in the sea with them on.

“Then we had dinner at the Leclerts’, everyone very exhausted after so much exercise. It was necessary for the Doc to return the truck to the unit to which it belonged, and then walk back to town, so I joined him. We took a short cut over hills and salt flats and along the edges of mangrove swamps. Of course the tide was up, so everything was very sticky, and of course Doc lost the way. Fortunately a good moon came up, though, so we managed quite well. It was a pleasant walk to end a pleasant day.

“This evening’s dinner party includes the Colonel and Major Hanson, so it will doubtless be a bit stiff. During the last few weeks the Colonel has been quite tolerably pleasant, but simple-mindedness in a fellow partisan is always rather trying.

“Tomorrow is another of those infernal sergeants’ mess parties. I got out of the last one by means of an imaginary headache, but I feel that imaginary headaches are things of limited application. The sergeants here are bitten by the party bug, because it cannot be more than three months since their last one. Once a year is one matter, but once every three months seems a bit thick. At least half the visitors regard attendance as a duty rather than a pleasure.”

(Letter of Thursday 15 June 1944). “On a journey today I was reminded of some trees I had intended to tell you about – they do look a little peculiar when there are a lot together. Smooth-skinned ashen-brown in colour, the trunk and tuft of branches at the top are swollen up to three or four times the diameter one would expect from their length. They look swollen too, because they are fat in the middle, thin at the ends. As far as I can remember they had tufts of leaves at the ends of the branches when I arrived, then they were quite bare, now they have tufts of pure white flowers. They look as if they should be growing on the moon, or somewhere definitely creepily mysterious.

“I have been over the hills and far away today. Not the purple wooded hills, but the low brown-grass covered hills. Hot but dry and quite pleasant – almost like Suez as far as climate is concerned at present. A dry heat is nothing to complain about. There have been grass fires here and there, leaving large areas of blackness across the brown hills.

“Along the roads are gangs of natives chipping stones for building purposes – the grass is full of loose rocks about two feet across, and these scantily clad, dust covered natives spend long hours chipping them into little pieces about an inch across. Their energy is a great contrast to the peaceful sit-in-the-shade life of the average local agriculturalist. I suppose they want to get the job done as soon as possible so that they can get back to their normal life of ease at the earliest moment.”

(Letter of Sunday 18 June 1944). “For no apparent reason I felt very tired on Friday – could scarcely keep awake all day, so the fates would choose that day to make me Orderly Officer. Orderly Officer is a pretty full time job here, but it only comes round about once every three weeks as Staff Sergeants also take their turns on the roster. Anyhow, I clean forgot to mount the guard.

“After dinner I lay on my bed fully dressed. I remembered that it was necessary to turn out the guard, so I cycled to the Workshops cursing and groaning, in pitch darkness. The whole business had its comic side, though, and I realised it when I saw askaris scampering excitedly around on all sides trying to get into order for my midnight inspection.”

(Letter of Monday 26 June 1944). “On Sunday morning I went for a bicycle ride, dumped my bicycle in a dried up stream bed and climbed half way up one of our local hills. I started with the idea of getting right to the top, but was so hot by the time I got half way that I was exceedingly glad to find that the thorn scrub, which started growing there, was quite impassable. I tried to figure out the geological structure of the hill and came to the conclusion that it must be complicated.

“There was an interesting view from my highest point – across a flat bottomed river valley leading down to the sea, with white salt flats at its seaward end and beyond them a green crescent of mangrove swamp. The general scene was deserted and brown, with dry grass, boulders and patches of grey-green bushes. The blue sea and the blue sky with fluffy clouds, as always, in the background.

“I have a family of cats in one of my boxes at the moment. They are about ten days old and maman decided they were too disturbed in their old location. Each time I move them back she instantly grabs them and brings them back to my box, so I have given in, emptied the box, and presented them with my rugger shirt to sleep on.”

(Letter of Sunday 2 July 1944). “Today Brassington (a new Radio Officer), Jones (an Armament Officer about 35 – a regular army man) and I went for a climb. Almost the same as the one I did last weekend, but this time we used a car to get to the bottom of the hill, and went up in a different place. We found a path for quite a long way, over the grassy foot of the hill, then we followed a wooded stream valley, finally climbing over an incredibly jagged jumble of limestone rocks with brambles between and cacti in the crevices. That last part was very hectic and resulted in many scratches and a large tear in the seat of Jones’s pants.

“Finally we reached the place we were aiming for – a huge cave in a sheer 200ft limestone cliff which led to the summit of the hill. The cave had two openings, one at the bottom, through which we entered. Inside the cliff the cave extended up to another opening - a tiny hole showing light from the top. It would be an unpleasant experience for anyone walking on top to fall through that hole on a dark night, but from this side at least it was impossible to reach the top.

“Inside the cave we found a number of quite presentable stalagmites and stalactites, and a very strong smell, which came from a large number of big bats fluttering about far above our heads.”

(Letter of Wednesday 5 July 1944). “We held a mess meeting today at which I had the doubtful pleasure of being made mess secretary, treasurer and caterer. This has involved nothing more arduous than putting the key of the cupboard in my pocket so far, but I have a horrid feeling it is not going to be as simple as that.

“Yesterday was the worst day we have had for dust so far – the town lay under a pall of dust all day, and it swirled across the workshop yard in whirling tornadoes, seeming to get through every window and door, even if closed, and settle on books, chairs and tables.

“My kittens are exploring the room today on wobbly legs. Yesterday one scratched its ear with its back leg for the first time – not with any great success though.

“Henri is making the night hideous with rollicking French songs – quite nice and quite a good voice, but not welcome at letter writing time”.

(Letter of Monday 10 July 1944). “For the first time since I have been here I managed to spend a night at our local hill village (Joffreville). I went up at about one o’clock on Saturday, accompanied by Henri and Lund, and I also gave a lift to Lucette and Monette, who had intended to go there in the rather uncomfortable local civilian conveyance. We had a pretty bumpy journey, but it was pleasant to watch the brown

countryside becoming green, and to feel the air becoming cooler. I discovered that the hills are over 3000ft high, not 1000ft as I had thought. This explains the very great change in temperature and rainfall, which I had been unable to understand on the 1000ft hypothesis.

“After I had dumped Henri and Lund at the Officers’ Club I took Lucette and Monette to Lucette’s home, and after that it was necessary to stay for about three hours talking to Madame Brun. As there was no cake, and as it was quite unthinkable for a person to enter the house without partaking of cake, machinery was immediately set in motion to make one. When it eventually appeared I was forced to eat far more of it than I would have wished, with horrid vin rouge, the most poisonous drink ever concocted by mankind.

“Next day I was invited to be at Madame Brun’s house at 11am, and when I arrived it was necessary to play hide and seek with three female children for about an hour in the countryside around. This was done with a great deal of noise, and intervals of dignity necessitated by the appearance of little groups of askaris, who seemed to abound. I am afraid the dignity wasn’t very dignified, but it passed I daresay.

“After this the Great Meal appeared – the meal which had been planned all the previous afternoon. My heart sank when I saw it, even though I had prepared myself to a certain extent by eating only a small portion of a very nice looking breakfast at the Officers’ Club. Still, I am getting quite good at regulating my intake of food at these meals, so we eventually reached the cake course with very little worse than a ruptured duodenum as far as I was concerned.

“After dinner I took Lucette and six children for a ride in my car up into the forest, with many hairpin bends and climbing all the time. The road dwindled into a grass covered groove between tall damp trees. We came to a tree lying across the road, but it was rotten and we managed to move it. Then after a particularly steep and slithery bend, which we only just negotiated with the assistance of four-wheel drive, we came to a large and solid tree across the road – a tree which would have stopped a tank.

“We parked the car, and left the road down a very steep footpath through the trees. As we went, leeches attached themselves to our legs and stockings – very thin and about an inch long, moving like caterpillars. A few around my shoe escaped my attention until I noticed they were swollen with blood. The legs of some of the children were covered with blood where they had squashed these things. At the bottom of the path the trees cleared and, lo and behold, there was a large round lake, with steep wooded hills rising up on all sides: a text book example of a volcanic crater lake.

“I met Henri and Lund at the Club at 6.30, and we returned to the warmth of the coast that evening. I had been given a letter and some fruit for Madame Leclert, so I went to see her after dinner. There is no such thing as a brief call in this part of the world, so it was two hours before I was able to get away.

“The technique is always the same. You say, ‘I must go.’ No one takes the slightest notice and the conversation continues uninterrupted. After saying this three times at

intervals of perhaps half an hour, someone may chance to look at you when you say it. That is the signal to push back the chair and rise, only to sit down again when everyone looks away. Anyhow, I can vouch for the fact that it is possible to get away with perseverance.

“Not that I particularly wished to go early in this case. I had to sample some home-made wine of Madame Leclert’s, made by soaking some large pips in rum, then adding the juice of the fruit which produced the pips. It wasn’t bad really, but I slightly overestimated the degree of enthusiasm required, because it was decided to present me with a bottleful.

“Oh yes. Madame Brun also gave me a bunch of grapes, rather small but very nice, and a bouquet of violets, real English violets, which are on my table at present. I think they find the change of temperature rather disturbing, but they are pleasant to have all the same. Have I told you about Madame Brun? She is rather stout and getting on in years, but with a lot of spirit and a lot of children, now grown and mostly departed. She is a really kindly old lady of the old brigade, originally from Reunion Island but French to the core.”

(Letter of Monday 17 July 1944). “We live in an atmosphere of tricolours, Croix de Lorraine, and Malgache troops (the native inhabitants of Madagascar being called Malgache). The French idea of colonisation differs vastly from the British, at least as seen in this part of the world – maybe this is a colony of poor French and Kenya a colony of rich British. Be that as it may, the French come here prepared to live and mix with the people, but the British go to Kenya to be an untouchable caste of gods who only associate with the natives to give orders.”

(Letter of Tuesday 25 July 1944). “Yesterday evening I went to the local French cinema with M and Mme Leclert, Lucette, Monette and Josephine and Bernard. Fortunately the film was a silent one, a fact which will give you some idea of its age, so I was able to follow it easily, even though the captions were in French. I would guess it was made in about 1925, and it was a story of the French air force in the First World War. It struck me as being slightly melodramatic to say the least, but I noticed the locals took it a deadly serious – a very sad and tragic story. I rather suspect they have scarcely ever seen a modern film with its rather more subtle techniques. I was forced to commit an action which at home I would regard as a major sin, namely to discuss the film loudly as it proceeded. It seemed to be the done thing here though. As a matter of fact it didn’t matter much, because the proprietor of the cinema appeared to think it a bad thing to allow the film to unroll in silence, so he played French jazz music very loudly and very untunefully on a cracked gramophone record. Occasionally the needle jammed and repeated a line of the record half a dozen times or so. Needless to say the mood of the music had no reference to the mood of the film; the hero died bloodily to the strains of a waltz. I observed with interest that I was the only British soldier in the place.

“Afterwards I went to the Leclert’s for dinner, finally departing at 11.30 with a present of three large bunches of grapes and a dozen or so tangerines, all arranged in a raffia



tray, and a bottle of home-made liqueur de something-or-other. All very embarrassing really, because it's so one sided. They are definitely a very pleasant crowd of people."

On the day before (Sunday) the Leclerts had shown me around some of the local farmsteads in the Joffreville area:

"The local French peasantry are quite interesting. Small farms, very much on the French plan I imagine, in a more or less French climate. They are stocky, religious, not very wealthy, large families people with smallish wooden houses surrounded by groves of orange, grapefruit and tangerine trees. Usually shoeless and the men in need of a shave. Reception room a bedroom with an occasional chicken scampering through. Some of the farms are right off the beaten track, and it is necessary to travel over open grassland to reach them."

(Letter of Friday 28 July 1944). "Today I have had the pleasure of paying Africans all the afternoon. They are a strange crowd as they move past in a steady stream to be paid – nearly all with special tribal cuts and scars on their faces, and many with large holes in their ears where bone rings were hung before they joined the army. Now they masquerade in more or less British clothes – a few even wear spectacles – and present an interesting hybrid appearance between a cannibal and a student.

"I was frequently severely startled by their leisurely shuffling entry terminated by a sudden leap into the air and a clicking-crashing-shun-plus-salute. The effect was spoiled by the fact that they nearly always tripped over as they about-turned.

"It appears I am about to be made 'Education and Welfare Officer' of the Workshops, a job I shall find quite interesting. I have already persuaded most of my Europeans to apply for educational books from the newly-formed Command Education Library. I myself have applied for about five, including 'Geology for South African Students', which I hope may throw some light on the rather difficult Madagascar geology, and 'War and Peace'.

"I am afraid that social outings and meetings with the Leclerts have been put to an end for some time due to the unexpected death of a member of the family whom I did not know. (Georges, brother of Lucette and Suzanne, had been killed in a road accident. A lorry on which he was travelling was overturned by a drunken driver.) I walked straight into the midst of a rather strawsome family on Wednesday evening and believe me I had an awkward time.

"Condolence in English is difficult enough; condolence in French is very much more difficult, especially when one is not aware of national conventions. I do know, though, that one of the conventions involves a lengthy period of formal mourning."

(Letter of Monday 31 July 1944). "On Sunday I and Brassington went with Henri and two civilian friends of his – M and Mme Motley – to yet another beach. A long way away, to the SE, because we travelled 75 miles in all. M and Mme Motley are very quiet, very English, French people of about 35 I suppose. Both strong de Gaulists,

even in pre-invasion days, and both very charming. M is red faced and likes his bit of shooting. Neither speaks English

“Most of the journey was over a road new to me, in fact it was the last local road which I had not seen. There seemed to be a lot of bridges, over streams rising in the hills and therefore flowing in the dry season. These streams are non-existent in the part of Madagascar which I had previously known (except in the hills of course) and they resulted in broad green valleys through the brown hills. Quite a number of small irregularly shaped rice fields, each with its low wall of mud and its sheet of water or rice plants in various stages of growth. Two crops a year are grown if the water supply is sufficient – I imagine that practically every drop must be used before the unfortunate rivers, really only small streams, reach the sea.

“The last five miles before the beach were over flat sandy country with a new type of woodland to me – very open palm oil trees with a regular height of about 20 ft and a carpet of dry grass underneath. Their smallish hand-like fronds are used for roofing material when dry. From each tree hang brown bunches of nuts, like fantastic grapes. In East Africa these nuts are crushed for palm oil, but here they just fall to the ground and rot.

“The beach was disappointing, covered with peculiar-shaped limestone masses and with mangroves pushing up in clumps. Also there was a native village and hotel – the hotel a three roomed bamboo hut, quite clean and pleasant, communal property of the village and intended for use by white visitors. We used its table and fed on its veranda.

“When we arrived we asked for fish, and a boat was sent out especially to obtain them. Afterwards, whilst we waited for the boat to return, the head of the village, a French speaking raggedly clad old Malgache, demonstrated the local game with small nuts. It is played by two men who move the nuts between about 32 little holes in the ground. I failed to follow it as it is played very fast. So did Henri, even though he squatted on the ground and joined in wholeheartedly.

“Most of the village congregated eventually, including the chief’s daughter and grandchildren. He stood with his hand proudly on the tousled head of a pretty little granddaughter to have his photograph taken. They were all very friendly and waved goodbye with plenty of smiles when we left

“The fish eventually arrived, and we paid 25 francs (12.5p) for the whole boatload – about 50 fish, each a meal in itself (well, perhaps half a meal!). I took 10 round to the Leclerts in the evening. For some strange reason fish are very hard to get in town.”

(Letter of Monday 7 August 1944). “I have today visited a site with the officers’ mess more full of animals than ours. Only three officers – Wild, Campbell and Marney, with five kittens, a large puppy, and one of the biggest lemurs I have ever seen. It is amazing to see the puppy play with the kittens. It is by no means gentle, yet they allow it to take their heads completely inside its mouth.

“The lemur is chained to the top of the bamboo wall, sitting on top of the wall in the space between the wall and the roof. Periodically it hangs down by its lead, and using the springy wall as a springboard it bounces backwards and forwards rhythmically and with considerable force. It doesn't mind the puppy, but strangely it is rather nervous of the kittens, each about a third the length of its tail. Lemurs are vegetarian, very shy and gently, with thick bushy grey fur.

“I have very nearly finished struggling through Mme Leclert's bottle of liqueur de bibaces and am driven to the conclusion that the many times I have smacked my lips in the process have been quite wasted, because I have been unable to convince myself that I really like it.”

(Letter of Thursday 10 August 1944). “On Monday evening I didn't get the energy to go to the Leclerts, so I went on Tuesday instead. I was surprised to find Lucette there, as she is in town for a few days. We had an enjoyable two hours or so. Then today I was asked to call at lunchtime to see if I could give her a lift up to the hill village on Saturday, but as it turns out she has to go today.

“Now I have to call on Saturday to see if I can give M and Mme a lift, as they are thinking of going. Last time I called at lunchtime I arrived embarrassingly about three-quarters of the way through the meal. Since the meal takes two hours I can't call after, so today I called before in order to get the visit concluded in time to have my siesta. This resulted in an invitation to lunch, so I didn't get my siesta after all. My stomach was surprised to be presented with vin rouge, French salad and generally French fare at this time of day, but it managed.

“This afternoon the Anglican Bishop of Madagascar gave a lecture to a military audience detailed to listen to him. He spoke on the history of Madagascar, with special reference to the religious aspect of course. The reason for the existence of English missionaries in Madagascar is apparently that they were well dug in before the French conquered the island in 1895. There are only three Anglican missionaries the Bishop, a Vice Bishop and a Dean, their high ranks being accounted for by the fact that the junior ranks are all Malgache. An unexplained mystery is that he did not once mention Roman Catholics, even though there must be ten of them to every Anglican.”

(Letter of Monday 14 August 1944). “Some time ago, during a general exchange of anniversary dates, I was compelled to reveal that August 14 was my birthday, and much to my surprise they remembered. Yesterday a cake was produced out of the blue with ‘Happy Birth Day’ written on it, and 24 matches, in lieu of candles, round the edge. So you see, I had my birthday cake, even in Madagascar.”

“I went up to the hill village on Saturday by myself. Henri couldn't come and Brassington wouldn't come because he realised he would be thrown on his own resources most of the time if he did.

At the Officers' Club where I stayed I found Lt Turner, an RE whom I know quite well, so I wasn't entirely alone. I fed with the Bruns on Saturday evening, and after

dinner, because it was so cold, we went and sat in the adjoining bakery. Mme Brun is the baker of the hill village.

“There was a little Malgache boy of about eight sleeping in the bakery. His parent are pagans, and one of the things it is distinctly not done for a pagan is to eat pig. On Saturday apparently he ate some pig with some of his comrades, so his maman turned him out of the house for a few days and he was thrown on to the hospitality of Mme Brun. He seemed quite happy about the whole affair, even though his maman had told him he would certainly die. He was unable to understand why he would die, and his white comrades, who had eaten far more pig than he, would be alright. When asked if he would eat tortoise if he could, he replied that he would if he liked it. Tortoise is even more prohibited than pig to a Malgache, because long ago a tortoise ate their god accidentally.

“He eventually got into a sack, crawled under the table and went to sleep.

“Mme Brun gave me a hot loaf for the morning just before I left, so I used it as a hot water bottle. In the morning I found that a mouse had drilled a neat round hole down the middle of it, perfectly symmetrically.

“Next day I had midday dinner with the Bruns, and this was when the special gâteau was produced unexpectedly. I realised then that the furtive consultation of dictionaries had been to find how ‘birthday’ was spelt. Like all the Brun’s meals at present, dinner consisted mainly of pig in various forms. Mme killed a large pig on Friday – he produced 462 lbs of fat amongst other things.

“After dinner I took Lucette and two children for a ride up to the Petit Lac, which we visited once before. This time, though, we stood on the brink of the volcano and looked down into the lake far below, framed by densely wooded cliffs and slopes. It looked very strange because we found ourselves up in the clouds, giving an effect of streaky fog which made it impossible to see as far as the other side of the crater. The woods just faded into greyness.

“We had to walk the last mile, because of another tree across the road: not the same one as last time. We encountered this tree when we were sliding gently along a narrow muddy track with a steep rise to the left and a steep drop to the right, both densely wooded, so later – to get out – I had to drive gingerly backwards for about a mile and a half until the track became sufficiently broad for it to be safe to turn.

“In the evening, back in the coast town, I felt very tired, partly due to the changes of air, partly to the continual supply of van rouge which is pumped into one in any household in this part of the world. After dinner I had to take flowers, pieces of pig, and the rest of my birthday cake, to the Leclerts. Cake plus vin blanc followed and a pleasant evening during which I forgot my tiredness until I started back to the mess. From the hill village I brought for myself a large bunch of violets and a bouquet of red and white roses and camellias plus fern fronds, so my room is full of the smell of flowers today.

“This evening I have managed to get my boy – unwillingly – organised into producing a hot bath. This is the first time I have demanded this, and such a departure from his normal system is almost more than he is capable of supporting. The organisation was also difficult because my Swaheli vocabulary does not extend to any technical details, and this fact has deterred me from trying it before. However I have now had my bath and it was a great success. Water had to be boiled in buckets, and the bath consisted of two old French ammunition cases welded together. Apparently the previous inhabitants of this house confined themselves to showers.”

(Letter of Thursday 17 August 1944 to brother RJ Eden). “ Today I have had the pleasure of conducting a Court of Enquiry into injuries received by an askari. He had been bitten by a Malgache woman and also received a hearty clout on the head which required four stitches. It was a typically African blood plus passion plus knives and hatred story.

“The woman was very sweet and gentle, with one of the most musical voices I have ever heard. She was charmingly informal, leaning over the table as she told her tale. In the morning she appeared in the usual flowing Malgache robes; but in the afternoon she felt so flattered by her importance that she appeared in a European frock of bright red cotton, complete with sun hat and earrings. She was quite unruffled, calm and gentle throughout the proceedings, as though she felt these external events were really quite uncontrollable and unimportant. I have, however, never before seen a bite quite so hearty as that which Mona Lisa was capable of delivering.

“The askari calmly admitted that he had drunk two bottles of red wine and a bottle of rum before he was attacked by the woman – enough to kill any European.

““There were four stories to listen to. Two in Swaheli, one in Malgache and one in French. They were all uttered with conviction and duly signed as accurate even though they looked so different that they might have been about different incidents. Thick headed interpreters added to thick headed and unwilling witnesses didn’t help. I believe that truth to an African is that which is suitable to the individual – only this assumption can explain their quiet conviction when telling obvious lies.

“I was very impressed by a Malgache boy of 14. Even though he hailed from the slum district of this town, he was well educated, speaking and writing fluent French. He had the usual dreamy mystical air of these people, largely due to wide long-lashed eyes and graceful movements. An instance of where the French policy of trying to bring up the natives as Frenchmen, rather than segregating them with their own laws and customs, has been a great success.

“We had a pretext to visit the house where these people live, so we seized our chance, accompanied by a native French policeman who fell in love with the heroine at first sight.

“I am afraid that Grandma had been selling rum to the askaris, which is very naughty. She just squatted on the ground in a dark corner and watched us with cynical amusement – rather like a sinister black toad.

“Yesterday evening we gave a formal dinner to a senior REME officer on tour. Arrays of bottles filled me with apprehension, but the producers of the bottles were disappointed, because we talked colonial politics soberly the whole evening. As a Kenya inhabitant he is keen to see Kenya home rule, and is convinced that it is well on its way. Please arrange to have this stopped.

“Home rule in Kenya means rule by the white population in the interests of the white population. So far the praiseworthy idealism of the far away Colonial Office has protected the natives from exploitation on South African lines, but if this control is removed the whites will undoubtedly grow very fat in a state of which they control the legislation. They have grown fat enough already, and developed an atmosphere of pseudo-aristocracy which I find painful.

“Psychology is admittedly not a fully quantitative science at present, but it is developing in that direction. One day it will link up with nervous physiology and, if men can be found whose brains are capable of mastering the intricacies which will be involved, it will become fully quantitative. (How’s that for a bit of intuitive prediction? - Ed)

“It is mere vandalism to destroy faith if one cannot put thorough education in its place.

“Everyone has a certain level of education, inheritance affecting emotionality and intelligence, all of which things are largely outside their control ultimately. (That too! - Ed)

“I am afraid I feel a fearful lack of any really ardent personal hatred for the Japanese. I try to stimulate the gland responsible for hatred by staring intently at drawings of brutal Japanese which I distribute as Education Officer, but so far without result.”

(Letter of Monday 21 August 1944). “I visited the Leclerts on Saturday evening and found it impossible to get a word of sense out of them. The red tape on their wall map was stretched to bursting point in the direction of Paris, in conformity with all the most optimistic rumours, although I believe that the official line lags far behind the rumours. M Leclert has already written by air mail to his parents in Paris.”

(Letter of Friday 25 August 1944). “You will probably guess that the reported occupation of Paris by the FFI was received with a good deal of enthusiasm here, not unmixed with anxiety for relatives in France. The British troops did most of the celebrating in public, I suppose because they are on French territory here they felt it incumbent on them to be extra enthusiastic. The French confined themselves more to small quiet parties.

“M. Leclert called at the workshop to ask me round to his house, and he also asked John Ange and Captain Certes. It was a peculiar evening in some ways. People kept arriving and departing and taking aperitifs, so that dinner was pushed farther and farther back. Apart from myself, a M. and Mme ? were there all the time – even John and Certes disappeared for about an hour at one time.

“They returned rather the worse for wear, which made the dinner a bit awkward, but John had a grand time with Mme ?, who was very plump and perpetually giggly. We finished at about 1am with one of the three Leclert bottles of champagne, 1928 variety, but I must be a boor because I did not find it particularly pleasant. The gallons of alcohol which I must by now have consumed under French tutelage have failed to develop any real taste for it, so good, apparently, was my upbringing.

“At the conclusion of the evening, Mme ? invited everyone to take an aperitif at her apartments next evening. She had previously spoken rather disparagingly of her rooms, and since it is not unusual for quite respectable people to live in rabbit hutches I assumed we would find a rabbit hutch. However, when we arrived we found a really pleasant flatlet, with extremely tasteful fittings and furniture.

“The alleged aperitif lasted from 6 to 10.30, and included a full meal of odds and ends inside tomatoes and eggs, and pieces of bread – all eaten with the fingers.

“Mme ? is a very jolly and hospitable soul who believes in laughing. Although quite surprisingly fat she thought a scanty dress suitable. I am afraid that M. ? mainly sat in the corner and watched the proceedings. The next day (Friday) Mme Leclert had already invited John and I and Major Hanson to dinner, so we had three social evenings running. Neither John nor Major Hanson can speak French, although when he is excited John speaks an amazing variety of pigeon English plus an odd French word, which can be understood by neither French nor English.

“So on Friday (yesterday) I found myself the interpreter – quite a pleasant job. I am beginning to find that I can launch out quite happily into the expression of an idea in French without thinking out the words first. There is nothing worse than finding oneself with French people and with an Englishman who can speak more French than oneself. Under those conditions it is possible to be stranded and enforcedly silent for hours, boring hours, at the end of which someone turns round and says, ‘Pour quoi vous êtes trist ce soir monsieur?’

“That is why I am glad to find myself frequently acting as the interpreter these days. Henri is the only one capable of cutting me out now, so I try not to encourage his acquaintance with the Leclerts. I think Friday was the pleasantest of the three evenings. It was brought to an abrupt end at about 12.30 by the lights failing.

“With regard to headgear. Up to the present I have always worn a peaked cap during the day and side cap at night, but my peaked cap is getting rather past the permissible limits of dilapidation, so today I have produced my bush hat and worn it for the first time. Most of the others wear bush hats. They are like boy scout hats with one side

turned up. On the turned up side one wears the REME colours in three vertical stripes – red, yellow and blue.”

(Letter of Monday 28 August 1944). “I went to our hill village yesterday, partly to get cool and partly to see Mme Brun and Lucette. Owing to an extraordinary chain of events Lucette also came down to the coast town, so I missed her. In the evening I came back again, giving a lift to a French soldier, a friend of Mme Brun’s son who had been on leave for the weekend.

“I tried a new route for the first time. Only an earth track, but on the plateau levels it is smooth and straight, so I was able to achieve a speed unusual on the normal pebble and pot hole roads of Madagascar. There are several plateau levels here, the intervening escarpments being steep and covered with boulders and brushwood. On the slopes this new track wound and twisted amongst the boulders, and was so steep in places that I was afraid my car would fail to make the grade, leaving me unable to go backwards or forwards.

“On Sunday evening I went to see the Leclerts, and was invited to Jackie’s third birthday party on Monday. Since it is now Tuesday and I am finishing this in office hours I am in a position to say that this was an enjoyable evening. Jackie is a young man of most amazing energy. He is never still or quiet, and he goes to bed at about 10pm. In order to provide the motive power for his activities he is obliged to eat a larger meal than I can tackle, and I have not yet seen him voluntarily cease eating. He had a birthday cake with three pre-war candles, which have now been used three years running. Since the Leclerts have only got four candles it is hoped that the war will be over by his fifth birthday.

“Recently we had the mixed pleasure of being dragged out of bed at 3.15am to watch one of our trucks which had burst into spontaneous combustion at about that time. It was a queer scene with dozens of yelling askaris throwing tins of sand onto the vehicle, seen by the light of the fire, and Europeans in their pyjamas. In the end, to put the fire out it was necessary to turn the truck on its side. Several foam extinguishers, arriving too late, had started off as they were jolted in the back of a truck to the fire, so they left a white track behind them to indicate their route.

“When the fire was eventually out there was a red glow in the sky which I had not noticed before – apparently a bush fire on a hillside far to the south. They are frequent in the dry season.

“My job at present is very largely an office job, although I am going out later today. This has taught me one thing, and it is that my job in the post-war world must have no connection with an office. I am unable to raise the slightest enthusiasm for it, and my efficiency is steadily declining.”

(Letter of Monday 4 September 1944). “On Saturday I went up to the hill village with M and Mme Leclert and their children in N’s civilian car. A very Heath Robinson



affair, dating to well before 1939 I should think, but one of the few that has been able to survive five years lack of spare parts.

“I stayed at the officers club until this morning, but during that period I did not eat a single meal at the club. The Leclerts stayed at Hotel Rousette, near the club. Saturday afternoon we did a stiff thirty minutes climb to see the Brun family, then returned to dine at the hotel.

“On Sunday morning I got up early (7am) and went to the Roman Catholic mass with Lucette, afterwards returned and had breakfast with her. On the way from the mass to breakfast we called to see some of the local pigs, far famed for their size. They live in clean sties and look very healthy, although one was so fat that it could not stand up.

“I gather that Lucette has now lost her reputation by walking around the countryside alone with me and taking me to the church. She is expecting a sound ticking off from the curé.

“I couldn't understand much of what he said during the service, but I was told afterwards that he had been deploring the licence and lack of religious feelings of these modern times. He really got quite vehement in places and I noticed the people around me, including Lucette, were having great difficulty in stopping themselves from laughing aloud. He said that even the English were scandalised to see young girls at dances.

“He was a most picturesque old man, with a bright green stiff cloak with a large red cross on his back, and a square-cut white beard down to his chest. The church itself was quite simple, except for three very beautiful coloured statues on the altar and a lot of rather gruesome framed pictures round the walls. The only real difference from any other church was the lack of singing, except for choir chants, and the fact that the place was crammed to capacity. Every shade of black and white mixed indiscriminately, including our jet-black askaris.

“I was taught how to cross myself and so on before I entered, and I think I managed quite well, although I got it the wrong way round occasionally.

“After breakfast I walked with M Leclert and the children for about an hour. A new path, along a deep cut forested valley. A small stream tumbling amongst boulders at the bottom, the valley sides steep and covered with every variety of tropical vegetation.

“Then we had dinner in the Brun household, and as usual I couldn't eat as much as was expected. Since I had had a three egg breakfast two hours before, that was less surprising than usual.

“After dinner I went for a long walk in the forest with Monette, Dédé and Lucette. It really was quite pleasant, lasting about 2.5 hours. When I got back I was so tired I

could scarcely stand. We left the beaten track and wandered through jungle until I was quite lost and very dirty and scratched. I took several photos.

“On Sunday evening I again dined with the Leclerts at Hotel Rousette, but as everyone was more or less asleep it was not a very lively dinner party. Jackie dropped his knife and went to sleep in his chair.

“This morning we left to come back to the coast town at 6.30 am, arriving here at about 8. Another day’s stupid work. I am tired of working; it is such a waste of time.

“The wind in our coast town has been getting a good deal more insistent recently, and the town frequently tends to be covered in its pall of reddish brown dust these days. When the door is opened it comes swirling into my office in little whirlpools, and even when the door is not open it seeps in so that a layer of dust soon accumulates over everything. The necessity for baths and thorough washes is slowly wearing my skin away.

“I am getting into the unpleasant habit of going to sleep at midday. When I wake up at 2pm I feel terrible. It takes until at least 4pm to arouse my energy, and I stop work at 4pm anyhow.

“I forgot to tell you that Mme Brun slew another pig on Sunday morning. Not such a big one this time. I was presented with various things made from it, including sausages and two other varieties of mixed pieces the names of which I forget. One variety was rather garlicky, but the other was really very nice and was much appreciated in the mess. Mme Brun also gave me a tin full of cakes which were also much appreciated by the mess, although I found them rather dry myself.

(Letter of Monday 11 September 1944). “In connection with an enquiry I had to visit an African detention barracks today. The prisoners are all completely shaven and wear only shorts. Mainly jet black and broad-nosed, thick-lipped, they look like some strange creatures from Mars as they double about in orderly squads. It was strange to take one individual from one squad for questioning, and to find that he was actually an individual with a mind of his own. It is very easy to get into the habit of regarding askaris as animals with no mind in the European sense. It is only when one finds an English-speaking askari that one begins to feel they are not quite so remote from us.”

(Letter of Friday 15 September 1944). “I have taken the momentous decision to speak to Orouko (my boy) on the subject of socks, in fact to teach him to darn socks with the aid of your mushroom. At present he either fails to darn, or else darns by joining opposite sides together. My policy of ignoring his presence completely, which I think he prefers, has so far prevented me from approaching him on this subject.”

(Letter of Tuesday 19 September 1944). “I want to introduce you to Lucette. Not a very satisfactory introduction to do it on paper I am afraid, but it is better than nothing. She is 25, about 5ft 8in, with about an eighth Réunion blood which gives her a slightly Jewish appearance, jet black hair and a skin which appears slightly sunburnt

even when it isn't. She is Roman Catholic, very French, and behaves like a child of two. She has had very little formal education but makes up for it by a quick brain. Slim, good natured, speaks practically no English. She sticks more or less to the rather rigid colonial French moral code, not for any reasons of dogmatism but because it is quite a sound code and because it is socially necessary to observe it. She needs a good deal of education in such matters as nationalism. Alors, Monsieur et Madame Eden, je vous presente Mademoiselle Brun. Maintenant vous la connaissez.

"I took the Leclerts, Brassington and Lucette for a picnic on Sunday. We had a pleasant day, and very energetic too. Everyone was just about asleep when we got back. We bathed, walked, lay on the beach, played with the children, fed and slept. Poor Jack found the French rather awkward and remained silent for large lengths of time, but I found that infinitely preferable to the endless fluent French chatter to which Perry used to subject such parties at times.

"I also went to dinner with the Leclerts on Saturday and Monday evenings. We went to the French cinema on Monday, but it broke down, so after half an hour's wait we were given our money back. Just as well really, because I find that cinema more of a pain than a pleasure."

(Letter of Friday 22 September 1944). "I wonder where Richard is now? If you know that he is in this Dutch fighting it must be rather an anxious time for you, and it certainly is for me with no idea where he is. (He was in the airborne landing at Nijmegen.) I wish that British tanks would hurry up and reach Arnhem."

(Letter of Monday 25 September 1944). I had arranged to go to Joffreville in the civilian car of M. Grammaire, a French Malgache. "M. Grammaire was not much of a success, as he kept me waiting longer than I care to be kept waiting. I was so annoyed that I didn't bother to speak to him on the way. There was also a French soldier and his wife in the car, and as they shared my silence it was not too obvious. Another trouble with carless visits is that the Bruns live two miles up a mountain from the officers' club, and this entails too much work to make it worth saving the 10/- which I save by using M. Grammaire's transport.

"Lucette and I, escorted by two children, went for a picnic on Sunday to le Grand Cascade. We walked about twelve miles in all I suppose. It was very hectic going, as the path dwindled to a sheep-run, crawling through forests and round precipices and over areas of grassland. It became alarmingly steep in places, with visions of forested bottomless pits in front and to the sides. In the end we found ourselves in a deep gorge, with almost vertical rock sides, a stream in the middle, and wood and grass between the stream and the sides. The cascade plunged into this from a considerable height, and farther downstream there were more cascades and pools

"Then it started to rain, really hard, so we got under a rock ledge, giving very little shelter, and resigned ourselves to getting wet. I put my bush jacket, socks and shoes in one of my haversacks, and sat with my bush hat on my knees to try to keep my trousers dry.

“We then had lunch, consisting of warm sweet potatoes in their skins and cold chicken, plus, even here, the inevitable gateaux. When we left it was still raining and quite impossible to negotiate the muddy paths with shoes on, so I walked about three miles barefooted. When the rain stopped we took a few photos of our very disreputable-looking party, and then made ourselves as presentable as possible before reaching the road. We were quite dry before we got back but rather tired.

“The rest of the day was passed in talk and more food and another walk, a respectable one this time, and a game of ludo. I eventually left at 11pm after fifteen hours of French. It was a very pleasant day. I like being disreputable.

“Lucette is quite a nice girl. She has a quick brain and picks up English words without seeming to bother to learn them. She also has a knack of knowing exactly what a person is thinking, although she never mentions it until later.”

(Letter of Thursday 28 September 1944). “Brassington is no longer with us. A pity really because we had much in common, even though he was a bit too solid for me. We used to get on well together, and formed an anti-party-in-the-mess block which kept the atmosphere quite respectable. Practically all my original friends have left now, and the few who remain will be gone shortly. Several have come and gone during my time here. I am beginning to feel like the oldest inhabitant.”

(Letter of Tuesday 10 October 1944) “Lucette came down here on Saturday and went back, or is going back, today. Owing to the fact that the Leclerts had agreed to go for a picnic lunch with about eight British soldiers on Sunday before I knew of this, it was necessary for us to crash in on the picnic. It wasn't much of a crash though, because I brought my car and eased the transport situation a good deal by carrying about six children and the day's provisions. Also at the picnic were Mme X and her three little girls aged three to six, and an additional child brought by Lucette. (Mime X was Bébé Lauret, with her children Mugette, Lillie and Marie The.)

“Mme X and her three little girls are a typical English family, although a very pretty one, and they look quite European, but the colour of their skin seems around 50% non-European. I think I have rarely seen three such pretty little girls. Mme X lives near the unit to which the eight soldiers belong, and she keeps open house for them – they include most ranks between captain and private. In the evening we all fed at the house of Mme X, and also danced a little to gramophone records.

(Letter of Monday 16 October 1944) “Well, here I am in the hill village, in the writing room of the officers' club. I arrived here on Saturday afternoon at about 4pm with all my kit, my boy Orouko, and nowhere to stay. I knew the officers' club was full for the weekend before I started. I hoped, successfully, to be able to stay at Hotel Rousette – a rather grubby local hotel. I had a bit of a job to fix Orouko up as he could not stay at the hotel; in the end I succeeded though.

“Now I have moved to the officers’ club, where I shall stay for the rest of the week. There are about five other officers here – all very unfriendly and uninteresting looking, probably mainly due to the fact that they had a big party last night. I am afraid they won’t see much of me anyhow. Hotel Rousette didn’t either.

“Yesterday I went to the Mass, and understood most of the sermon this time; then with Mme Brun, Lucette and several children for a picnic near the Rousette Falls in the car. Then we returned and filled in the rest of the day with walks and talks. Owing to the fact that she ate too much raw cabbage Lucette’s tummy made a nuisance of itself in the evening, and she wasn’t feeling too well. I suffered from the same complaint, but am quite recovered now.

“Lucette is not by any means the country bumpkin one might expect from the fact that she lives in the wilds. She has spent a lot of time with the Leclerts, who are quite well up in the coast town. M Leclert is the head of a French firm which seems to more or less control the civilian running of the port. (He was the local manager of the CMAO – Compagnie Maritime de l’Afrique Oriental.) Except for poor Maurice the Brun family is not a family of bumpkins; several of them are in France.

“Mme has a government pension which is quite sufficient to live on comfortably in this part of the world, but all the same she insists on working like a trooper from about 5am to 11pm. She runs the bakery, a bullock-cart transport system, pigs, chicken, rabbits, 32 oxen, and a small army of Malgache employees; also a largish kitchen garden. About twenty of the oxen were bought only around three days ago, and she frequently dashes out to proudly regard them. She is really an amazing old woman. Although she is plumpish he never sits still for more than five minutes.

“Lucette runs the financial aspect of things, about ten children, whom I have still not properly sorted out but who are as thick as chickens about the premises, the household, and in her spare time she makes large numbers of frocks for the local lasses. I am not an expert on frocks, but she seems to do very well on the present limited materials and complete absence of patterns.

“Maurice is in the army at present, but he wants to go in for farming after the war. It is a very easy life for farmers here even if they are not too fond of serious work; food, which is about the only necessity of life, is quite cheap.

(Letter of Tuesday 24 October 1944) “This is to tell you about my week in the hills. I spent most of my time in the Brun household, rocking myself in a rocking chair. I fed there about every other day. On alternate days I went down to the club for meals – on the pretext that Mrs McMahan, in charge of the club, would think I was rude if I did not feed there occasionally, but in fact to avoid trespassing on Mme Brun’s hospitality too much.

“Also to have a few meals without the necessity of nearly bursting to fulfil the requirements of the hostess. There is a saying that to ask a person to have a second helping once is a formality, twice is politeness and thrice is rudeness. By this

assessment Mme Brun is more than rude, but she really means it kindly. When a strong willed woman insists that a guest shall eat a lot it is a painful experience to be the guest.

“I went for numerous walks with Lucette and children, and even Lucette without children, thus defying established conventions. I was introduced to lots of locals, including the three local belles.

“I saw the Malgache labourers at home almost every evening when Lucette went to have a word with them. They are quite happy under conditions of unsurpassable primitiveness. Three of them will live in a little straw hut about five feet high, five feet wide and seven feet long. In one corner is a fire, and they lie on the floor eating and cooking at the same time. There is a low door, and to speak to them one has to bend down and look over the top of the door. They don't usually speak French, but the local Europeans speak Malgache fluently, and when the Europeans address them they reply cheerily.

“I really wonder why we bother to erect our intensely complicated structure of civilisation, only to find its occupants riddled with neuroses, when it is possible to be quite content without all that exertion. This is of course only one side of the story.

“During the week I had a good many of my tattered clothes repaired. Orouko is hopeless at repairing clothes, and natural inertia holds me back until the supply of untattered clothes is exhausted.

“This assistance has come just in time. Lucette is really first rate with a needle and sewing machine. She has made nearly all her clothes herself and is always well dressed. She also has a near mania for cleanliness, and during the week re-did all her washing because she was not satisfied with the washerwoman's efforts.”

(Letter of Thursday 26 October 1944 to brother Richard) “Sharing my table with me is an inspiring sight – a great big bunch of yellowing bananas given to me when I left the hill village on Sunday – whorl upon whorl of lovely big bananas, making a bunch about two feet long in all. Far too many to count, and about the nicest I have ever had. It requires about eight bananas a day to keep my morale up at present, so I am going to have an expensive time when I eventually get home again. Mangoes, soft sweet melon-like fruits the shape of a rugger ball but the size of a cricket ball, are also a daily necessity of life which probably cost at least 5/- at home. They are the world's most awkward fruit to eat, but having acquired great skill it is a daily pleasure to publicly exhibit my skill.”

(Letter of Thursday 26 October 1944) “In addition to the bananas I was presented with the largest gateau I have ever seen when I left the hill village on Sunday. Although it was supposed to be a super-gateau I found it rather horrible, and was very worried about how to dispose of it honourably without insulting the kindness of the giver. Fortunately experiment has shown that if treated as bread, and eaten in thin slices with butter, it tastes rather like the date loaves you used to make in pre-war

days. In this form it is fast disappearing, much to my relief. I have memories of a gateau which lingered until it became like a piece of rock before a kind mouse devoured it in the cupboard.

“I have just received back a pile of clothes I sent up to the hill village for Lucette to mend. She really has made a first class job of them. One shirt had a collar so battered by Orouko’s efforts, especially his mending efforts, that it was quite useless. She made a new collar by cutting off the sleeves, and no tailor could have done better.

“Did I tell you that when I was there she asked me to mend her sewing machine, which turns rather stiffly? After undoing all the undoable parts and putting them together again the thing was exactly the same as before I started, except that I broke her scissors whilst using them as a screwdriver. Not a very good advertisement for REME I am afraid.”

(Letter of Monday 30 October 1944) “I have just made my mechanical evening call of \*OROUKO!\* -----\*Ndio effundi\* -----\*BAFU!!\* ---- , which means that I want a bath and the reply means that machinery is about to be set in motion. This evening I don’t want a bath, but my super ego plus my mechanical habit seems to be driving me towards one. At any rate dripping bucket of hot water are in process of being carried through my room, and I fear I shall feel obliged to make use of them

“The reason I don’t want a bath is that I have a cold. Previous colds have rarely lasted more than two days here, but this one has already lasted four. Miraculously it cleared up for the day yesterday in order to enable me to pass a very pleasant Sunday in the hill village, but today it has reappeared. I hope it will miraculously clear up for tomorrow evening as well, because that is to be the first Leclert dance since the mourning started, and I would hate to be snivelling all the time.

“I went up yesterday in one of the Leclert lorries, with M Leclert driving, Mme, Mme Loreil (?) and the combined children of both families, plus three French soldiers, two white and one quite black. French soldiers, like the population, range through all colours, and they only become Malgache when they haven’t got the tiniest suspicion of French blood in them.

“Next Friday I am going to dinner with the Leclerts, and a Major and Captain of the RAOC who are trying to break into my private circle. They will soon find themselves with an inferiority complex on Friday though, because they cannot speak French and the Leclerts will not speak English when I am about, so all conversation has to go through me. Perhaps I am being rather harsh on them – they are two rather nice elderly men actually, so it will probably be a pleasant evening.”

(Letter of Monday 6 November 1944) “I received two films from Nairobi on Friday and I have already used one of them. I photographed Mme Lauret and her children before I left the coast town on Saturday afternoon. They really are a very good looking family. The three little girls are all genuine South Sea Island beauties, especially the youngest – Marie Theresa, aged five. They are full of beans too, and Mme Lauret is extremely good natured. Her mother’s mother was English, and she

also has French and Réunion blood in her. Anyhow the mixture produces a 'gentile' result.

"I also took a 'respectable' photograph of Lucette so that you can see what she looks like. She usually manages to get herself photographed in some 'drôle de situation', or else unduly hilarious or serious as a judge."

(Letter of Sunday 12 November 1944) "For the first weekend for a long time I am spending a tranquille Sunday in the mess. Not voluntarily, but as Orderly Officer. Huggins and Lloyd are at the hill village for a weekend and it is necessary for an officer to be in the coast town always. Today that's me. I hope Huggins and Lloyd don't have too enjoyable a time up there, otherwise they may be tempted to repeat too frequently.

"Mme Brun is much better, but not yet well enough to be left in the house alone. The Leclerts are going there today to see her. Maurice is also there for the weekend, and in view of this, plus some not very bright news which has filtered out from France, it is perhaps just as well I am not there.

"A letter came from Mme Sol (ie Marcelle), sister of Mme Leclert and Lucette, saying that her husband vanished about eight months ago and she has no idea what's happened to him. Also M and Mme Brun of Saint Trojan, whom she had previously telegraphed as safe, are still on the other side of the German lines. The letter is, to say the least, distracted, and calculated to arouse the maximum degree of alarm and despondency. It paints a vivid picture of the hardships through which France is at present passing. As I spent Thursday evening sympathising, and also listening to talk with a distinctly anti-German bias, I feel that I have had almost enough."

(Letter of Tuesday 21 November 1944) "Last night I did some (electronics) work, quite an unusual occurrence these days, and was not in bed until 3.30am this morning. Rather tired after a long ride over our Madagascar roads. I think I must have broken every spring in the car, but I haven't bothered to look yet. C'est la guerre.

"I spent the weekend at the officers' club of the hill village. On Monday I got up at first light, had breakfast with the Brun household, which is well astir by 5am, and was back at the coast by 7.30 in time to start work promptly.

"On Sunday Gie, Monette, Lucette, Dédé and I went for an energetic picnic a la rivière. The rivière proved to be about six miles away over an exceedingly switchback footpath, which plunged into, and emerged from, numerous steep-sided wooded valleys before it reached its destination. Between the valleys was a grass covered plateau. The walk was made more energetic by a great weight of accoutrements, including everything from salt to frying pans and a large chunk of raw meat.

"The river was very nice when we reached it – a cool refreshing stream amongst pools and boulders and cascades. The first thing I did was to fall into it up to my neck, with



the result that I was wet for some considerable time. We had a pleasant two hours or so.

“Later that evening I had another memorable experience when I accidentally rubbed my head against Mme Brun’s soot-encrusted chimney mechanism. A quarter-inch layer of soot detached itself from the chimney and fixed itself to the brilliantine of my hair.”

(Letter of Friday 15 December 1944) “Did I tell you that Lucette made a shirt for me recently? I have only one cotton shirt, and I let her have it for repair. While she had it she copied the pattern, with some cotton material he happened to have, and produced a second cotton shirt for me. It really is very useful, especially now it is hotter, because I can wear a cotton shirt each day now. Those on sale in the officers’ shop are far hotter, heavier and badly fitting as well. She made this shirt really very nicely – as well as the original – and I was quite surprised. Mme Leclert somewhat reduced my surprise by telling me that a shirt is an easy thing to make, but I still think it was well done.

“This Sunday we are to go touring the harbour in one of M Leclert’s tugs. Tomorrow afternoon I hope to persuade Lucette to climb up to the cave in the cliff which I climbed before with Brassington and Jones. It is a pretty stiff climb, but Lucette is an energetic sort of person and should be able to manage it

“I have seen the Leclerts several times this week, including yesterday evening and this lunch time. I frequently spend an hour at lunch time with them, usually occupied in talking scandal with Mme whilst M sleeps – rounded off with a cup of coffee.”

(Letter of Friday 15 December 1944 to brother Richard) “I am afraid I am labouring under distractions. An askari banda is on the other side of a wire fence twenty yards from my window, and they seem unable to talk without being expressive and emphatic – they are therefore not good neighbours for anyone wanting peace. There is also a British ranks canteen about half a mile away, and the liberal Christmas-period beer rations make them sing so loudly that it is difficult to concentrate.

“At such times I sometimes wonder, or rather I emphatically decide, that human beings are really so intrinsically beastly that it is not worth putting a lot of energy into idealisms involving bettering their lot. Such idealisms seem to be only a cloak for sectional selfishness trying to pinch something from the other fellow. The weaker side in such a conflict can always assume an air of moral justice simply because it is the weaker side.

“I am finding life, in general, boring. The weekends usually provide an exception and I enjoy them so much that they slightly more than balance the rest of the week. I am hoping I am an erratic genius who has bursts of great creative inspiration when given the chance. At all events I am an unsuccessful routine cog in a peacetime army

organisation. I have fairly frequent periods when I look solemnly out of the window and remain completely inactive mentally and physically.”

(Letter of Tuesday 26 December 1944) “This was my Christmas Day programme – Friday evening I took the entire Leclert family plus Malgache maid to the hill village in my new car – a big seven seater which takes nine without discomfort. It had a puncture exactly as I stopped outside the hotel, and as it was dark and I had no spare wheel I left it there for the night. Since it was in the middle of the road and I didn’t dare push it on a flat tyre I had to leave the side and tail lights on all night, which didn’t do the battery any good, especially as I discovered that the generator wasn’t charging. We all walked up to the Brun household in the evening.

“Next morning I mended my puncture myself and found that it was a large rip caused by a three inch nail almost right inside the tube. It was lying flat inside and must have been there since the previous day when the tyre went flat just as I pulled up outside our mess. An askari mended that puncture and obviously failed to look for the cause of it. I was fortunate to have the second puncture in such a convenient place, as the twenty one miles between the hill village and the coast town are through practically uninhabited bush country.

“Saturday I spent with the Bruns, except that in the evening Lucette and I went down to the hotel to dine with the Leclerts there. Mme Brun was most upset that we did not pass the evening with her, and when we got back she was positively cross. Apparently she had prepared a special dinner. I am afraid she is a little too possessive. Anyhow we soon soothed her by telling her the food at the hotel was very bad, plus a little not-very-subtle flattery. It is useful to find people who react so gratefully to not-very-subtle flattery. It makes life a lot easier. She was quite consoled by the time I left.

“Sunday, Christmas Eve, was the great day. The morning was largely occupied by preparations, including a Christmas tree in a petrol box in the corner of the sitting room. Lucette did most of the organising, including preparation of most of the presents, consisting of sweets contributed by me, plus clothes made by Lucette. The amazing thing was the joy and pride with which the clothes were received by the children.

“Dinner came at about 7.30pm, then the Christmas tree, then dancing to Mme Leclert’s gramophone. From the tree I got a crocodile skin belt – a really good one, as I know from the experience I have had in trying to find a presentable one for Mother. This one was nicely finished, and made of one piece of skin – most of them are made by joining several pieces together. This was from Lucette, and a good deal of enthusiasm was called for in its reception because it was purchased from her own private capital which she has begun to build up from her dressmaking activities. I wish I could send it you Mother, but I am afraid I can’t under the circumstances.

“It will be useful because I shall not now need to use a tie to keep my long trousers up. I also received a large pillow stuffed with feathers of generations of chickens, and a case for it with RE embroidered in red on one corner. The shirt which I received a

week or so ago was also a Christmas present. So you see that locally I did quite well in view of the complete absence of Christmas presents in the shops here. I gave M Leclert some cigarettes, Mme Leclert some stuff for her hair, Lucette a little box for her cotton spools

“After dinner we lit the candles on the Christmas tree and removed the lamp. All the presents were in little bundles on the tree, and Lucette distributed them.

“On Christmas morning I went to church. After that we all fed at the Brun’s and came down to the coast at about 3.30pm. Mme Brun’s Christmas period fare was not at all bad, including three geese, two chickens and a duck in the space of a few days.

“During the previous week I found a good excuse to go to the hill village officially, in order to ask Mme Brun to make some cakes for the Christmas dinner of 62 CAMU, also order lechies, flowers, spinach and lettuce. She made a huge number of very nice cakes, including three big ones, which Mme Leclert covered in chocolate with the words ‘Happy Christmas’ in white.

“I had great difficulty in persuading Mme Brun to accept any money for these, and only succeeded in the end with the help of Lucette plus the assurance that the troops had given me money for the cakes. This was a lie, but it worked, and finally I paid 15/- for the lot – a quite inadequate price. I also received a little bunch of violets, forget-me-nots, thyme, ferns and violet leaves for my self which I have on my table now.

“I made my ‘official’ visit to the hill village on Wednesday with S/Sgt Chapman, who was arranging the Christmas catering. I am afraid S/Sgt Chapman arrived back at the coast a good deal later than he had bargained for. It was after this visit that my car had its first puncture just as I stopped outside the mess on my arrival back.

“A third defect of the car which occurred at a fortunate moment happened yesterday evening. I could see the battery was getting pretty unhappy as we returned to the coast, and the self starter had failed to work ever since I left the lights on all night. Yesterday I took the Leclerts home, went to the mess and changed, returned to the Leclerts with two corporals to collect the cakes which Mme Leclert had just finished, and pulled up outside the sergeants’ mess, where the Christmas dinner was to be held. As I got into the car again to take it to the unit car park the engine died. So for the third time in a week the car broke down just conveniently at the end of a long journey.

“The unit dinner started at 6pm and finished at about eight. As is the custom overseas, the officers and sergeants served the dinner, not a very arduous task. Afterwards there was a certain amount of singing, individually and together. The officers always get asked to sing or tell a story at these functions. Last year I was caught unprepared, but this year I had an idea in the nick of time and suggested that everyone sing a few carols, which up to that time had been completely lacking. So we sang Good King Wenceslass and Noel.

“At 8pm I left and went to bed, having nothing better to do. Lucette had intended to come down with us, but decided to come down for the New Year instead, as it will be quite impossible for me to go there next weekend. On the whole I passed a bad night, partly because my new pillow still smells slightly of chicken. I have put it in the sun to air.

“One of the features of the Christmas period here has been the almost continuous roll of tom-toms. Most of the askaris come from the bush of Kenya, Tanganyika and Nyasaland, and dancing to the tom-toms is an important part of their social life. The askaris in the hill village had their dance area just outside the hotel where the Leclerts were staying, and they danced continuously from 9am to 9pm on Saturday, Sunday and Monday – and are probably still dancing, as the greatest day of all is the 27th, tomorrow.

“The Leclerts found Africa’s jungle drums more irritating than romantic after the first few hours. Each tribe has its own dances and they are done separately but in the same area, so one might have two or three sets of tom-toms going together. In general the askaris are content to dance in their uniforms, although I noticed that many had added bits of red material. The principal dancer usually exchanges his uniform for a costume of grass, beads and bones, presenting a fearsome sight and going through the most amazing contortions with great speed and energy for long periods. A few of the local Malgache women were drawn into the dancing and added a splash of colour with their bright clothes.

“Last Tuesday the heavens opened at about 3am and it poured without ceasing all day. 4.5 inches of rain fell in less than 24 hours, which isn’t at all bad going. The result is that the dust has suddenly turned into emerald green grass, each blade already one to two inches long. The hills are changing colour and the broad streets of the town are developing pleasant verges. The scenery is beginning to resemble what it was when I first came here.”

(Letter of Wednesday 27 December 1944) “I have been to the first part of the African sports day here. The afternoon started with European sports, such as obstacle racing, egg and spoon, relays, sack and straight races. It was amazing to see the facial expressions which an African is capable of developing in the concentration of a tug of war.

“At the end, the tribal dancing started. When I left there were four tribes dancing, all in the same area but ignoring each other completely. Each was quite different, but each interesting in its own way.

“The first I saw centred on four large tom-toms on poles, banged very loudly and strictly rhythmically with sticks. The whole air vibrated, causing ripples to go up and down one’s spine. Round the tom-toms danced a single line of askaris, moving slowly round in an anticlockwise direction. All were dressed in more or less bright civilian clothes and all held a stick in each hand with which they banged the ground

periodically as they danced – or rather, walked with a peculiar bodily waggle. At the same time they chanted.

“The next I saw was quite different. Two rows of askaris, wearing shorts and no shirts or hats, were flinging themselves about in fantastic contortions with great energy. The two lines approached and withdrew, and as they came together the opposite askaris hissed loudly in each others ears – first on one side of the head, then on the other. There were no tom-toms with this lot, but the rhythmic stamping of bare feet on the dusty ground produced the same effect, plus a cloud of dust.

“In the next crowd the real dance had not started. Most of the dancers stood and clapped their hands in tune with their tom-toms, which were small and banged by the players’ hands. Two masked askaris, dressed in grass skirts with red flashes and bangles, danced round each other, wagging every part of their bodies in every possible way.

“The fourth group was dressed in straw hats and local suits more or less. About thirty stood in three rows and swayed backwards and forwards together as they chanted – the general effect was rather early Christian.

“I shall be going back later, after dinner, to see how things are going and how the twelve oxen – lying skinless and gory under tarpaulins this afternoon – are getting on. They are to be roasted whole by sticking a pole right through them and hanging them on supports over twelve log fires, each in a ready prepared pit. One was being roasted this afternoon.

(Letter of Saturday 6 January 1945) In this letter I informed my parents that Lucette and I were to be engaged, I expounded in convincing detail on the logic of the action, and I asked them to obtain an engagement ring in the UK – to be forwarded to Madagascar per registered air mail. The formal engagement announcement was to await the arrival of the ring unless I was moved first, which I suspected could happen at any time. The wedding was to be in France as soon as we could get together there. I envisaged a couple of years back at university, possibly immediately on demobilisation or possibly after a few years employment.

(Letter of Thursday 11 January 1945) “Our mess stands at the top of a cliff overlooking the harbour. We take tea, and breakfast too, on a veranda right on the edge. Frequently the entire scene is blotted out by blinding rain, and when it stops the air is so cleared of dust that the trees and buildings on the far side of the bay stand out with a startling clarity.

“The rain, of course, produces a refreshing coolness in the atmosphere, but in the sunny intervals heat plus moisture make a sticky mixture. I seem to be fairly well hardened to it now however and the climate does not worry me a great deal.”

(Letter of Friday 12 January 1945) “One thing I notice with a certain degree of involuntary pleasure, which is partly malicious I suppose, is that I never feel like

sleeping at midday at present, whereas Lloyd, renowned for his vigour, always has great difficulty in dragging his weary body off the bed at two o'clock. I remember that last year I felt like that during the hot season myself.

“We have had more heavy rain today, and some sun too. Our tap water is now the colour of tea, so thick is it with mud. We have to use it for washing and showers, but for drinking water we have a filter. Recently we have been catching buckets-full of rainwater as it cascade off the roof, but we have not enough containers to hold all we need.

“Our drinking water, once it has been purified, we place in earthenware flasks, onion-shaped with a very narrow neck. A certain amount seeps through and evaporates, thus reducing the temperature inside to quite a pleasant drinkable level. Now, as last year, we are issued with one bottle of lime juice per head per week, which is useful as it saves having to spend 3/- on a bottleful to use for adding a little taste to the drinking water.”

(Letter of Tuesday 16 January 1945) “I have had a pleasant weekend with several new experiences. For one – I rode in a puss-puss for the first time. This is the normal method of travel here for civilians and for lazy troops too, but uncertainty about the amount to pay, and the usual availability of a car, have put me off in the past. A puss-puss is a little cart, upholstered and with a sunshade and two large wheels. It is drawn by a Malgache. I rode with Lucette, and after he had done a lot of hard work and had a long wait we presented the puller with 5 francs, equivalent to 6d (ie 2½p).

“On Sunday afternoon I went with the Leclert family for a tug trip and swim. We crossed to the other side of the bay in M Leclert's newest and biggest and best tug – it really did look rather clean and efficient. He was very proud of it. We had a pleasant ride back in the dusk, with the lights of our coast town coming nearer and nearer.

“On Saturday evening Sabine, Françoise, Monette, Sabine's brother, Lucette and I, plus another Frenchman and his wife, went for a row on the other side of the town. We visited a small island in a little bay overlooked by the house of the Leclerts. The island is about 500yards out, and is a crescent shaped mass of volcanic rock a few feet above high tide – its only vegetation a few plants and mangroves.

“It is famed for its snails, which are highly esteemed. These turned out to be ordinary English winkles, and not many of them. I suspect their rarity is a function of the rough time they have due to the proximity of a French town. Anyhow it was a pleasant row in the twilight.”

(Letter of Thursday 25 January 1945) “Mosquitoes and flies are absolute pests at the moment. The recent rain has given them their chance. Every half-hour as I am writing I get up and flit the room for the benefit of the mosquitoes. Our present flit is fairly effective, but even so it isn't long before I hear ziz z z z - - - past my ear again. I suppose I only get bitten two or three times a week as a rule though, and fortunately they don't seem to be infected with fever at present. Later, when they are, I shall try to reduce my bite rate still further.

“Flies are a pest in the office, but recently I have got out my Suez fly swotter and matters are now under control. You will notice that my previous ideological dislike of taking the lives of fellow creatures has almost vanished. I have decided that interspecies warfare – the basis of evolution – applies to me too, and that as a human animal I am justified in defending that portion of the species represented by myself.

“I am quite busy these days, and this assists the hours to pass more rapidly than two or three months ago when I was rather underemployed. I deal with all the office work of the “Combined EAEME Workshops (Diego Suarez)” and am in effect the adjutant. My French comes in quite useful as I deal with all our civilian employees. It is really rather a sorry sort of cog in the machine existence, but it is a most important principle of life to try to adapt oneself to whatever circumstances one finds oneself in, however unpleasant they may be. I have here the satisfaction of feeling that I have at last more or less succeeded.”

(Letter of Tuesday 20 February 1945) “Lucette has spent the last ten days in our coast town. The regular drill is that we finish work at midday, I eat, then see her from 1 to 3. At 4.30 we stop and I see her again from 4.45 until about 10 or 11, with a break to wash and change around 7.

“We had a long gap in incoming mail due to one or two cyclones in the Mozambique Channel, which gave us a period of very bad weather here and a number of fruitless cyclone warnings. When the mail did arrive I had a record bag for one day – 18 letters in all. They included letters from Mother and Dad for Lucette, Mme Leclert and Mme Brun – they were all very touched. (These letters arose from the engagement announcement of 6 January, and had been preceded by telegrams). Lucette was greatly relieved by the willingness with which you have accepted her, and is already convinced she is going to be great friends with you.

“Numerous interruptions are inevitable when I write to you in the office as I am doing at present. Fortunately Major Lillistone (the local DADME - Deputy Assistant Director of Mechanical Engineering) is no longer here to come in for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon and talk in his dreadful voice with Harold (Lloyd). Many a time it drove me from my office down to the radio workshop.

“Last week, during one of our cyclone warnings, we had quite an exciting interlude. The rain came down in a solid wall, then suddenly the wind rose in eddying gusts and whipped the rain round in spirals, whilst windows and doors crashed and the trees tied themselves in knots. It lasted only about five minutes. I was half hoping it would become interesting, but it stopped quite suddenly although the rain continued. This was just a local eddy at the side of a cyclone hundreds of miles away.

“It is a bit difficult to start recounting my social life during the last week or so, because it has been so full that I don’t know where to start – French cinema, dinners with Leclerts both at home and in clubs, dancing, swimming, church. On Saturday at

Chez Georges Lucette and I broke every local convention by having every dance together.

“When it was fine we went swimming at 5pm, usually with the infants or the entire Leclert family. We have found a rather pleasant little beach about three miles out of town, not far from the camp at which I was stationed when I first arrived in Madagascar. It is sandy with rocks and a large barricade of big stones all round to keep out the possible sharks and barracudas. It is some distance from any habitation, but British soldiers have got into the habit of going there for an evening swim without bothering about the formality of a bathing costume. For this reason a careful reconnaissance is necessary before approaching with the Leclert family.”

(Letter of Tuesday 27 January 1945) “We told Mme Brun on Sunday that we considered ourselves officially engaged wef 25 February 1945. If the ring arrives reasonably soon we may have a little party for it, but 25 February will remain the official date. We went up to the hill village on Saturday.

“On Sunday morning we went for a walk in the forest and revisited the places we visited together for the first time about a year ago. On that occasion, when I did not know Lucette at all well, we left the others and went for a short walk together by the side of the river. Lucette tried to explain that the scenery might very well have been taken from a Dorothy Lamour film. I failed to understand, and after a lengthy and difficult effort at explanation we gave it up and submitted to an embarrassed silence, followed by a fairly rapid return to the society of interpreters.

“This Sunday the cascade was at its best – lots of water, and a fine mist thrown off by the force of its motion. We sat and watched it for a long time.”

(Letter of Thursday 1 March 1945) “Parcel making has been to the fore recently. The Leclerts have been able to send food parcels to France – a certain specified number, but only in small packets. In all they have sent 35 parcels, each of about 1lb weight. They have had quite a belt system of production going when output was at its height, and the finished parcels were very smart.”

(Letter of Thursday 8 March 1945) This letter was written from Mombassa, to where I was moved on Wednesday 7 March, again travelling by BOAC flying boat.

“Before I left, Lucette and I had over three weeks almost continuously together. On Friday I went up to join her. On Sunday we persuaded Mme Brun to have the midday meal in the forest. Unfortunately it rained – not too hard though. We sat and ate a sumptuous meal in the rain – duck cooked in vermouth, a delicious preparation of crab, and the accessories.

““Monday was one of the pleasantest days we have spent together. In the morning we climbed Pic Badens – a steep pinnacle-like isolated grass covered hill about two miles south of the Brun household. Rather reminiscent of our chalk hills. It was a hard long climb, but worth it, because we seemed to be on the roof of the world when we reached the top. To the north lay the beautiful landscape I have described several



times already, but even more extensive than I have seen before, as we could look over many of the hills which had limited the extent of the view from other places. Behind was an immense forest – the Forêt d’Ambre, rounding off the sharp contours of the hills. At our feet were deep gorge-like valleys, forested even in the steeper parts. We ate an orange and watched the view for quite a long time

“The rest of Monday we spent quietly in the Brun household – Lucette did quite a lot of darning for me, and I helped her to make out the month’s accounts. . Thank heaven Lucette stubbornly refuses to be either pro-de Gaul of pro-Petain, pro-English or pro-French. These squabbles make me tired. I am training her carefully, and before long she won’t even be anti-Indian – no mean achievement of the intellect for Europeans brought up in this part of the world.

“On Tuesday I had a car sent up specially to bring us down together.

“Thanks for the ring. I received it exactly 20 hours before my departure from Madagascar. Much time was spent in admiring it and looking at the various colours it produced when flashed in the light. The long awaited arrival of the ring helped to cheer an otherwise rather cheerless Wednesday. However, my departure was long expected too, and I never hoped to be able to stay thirteen months without being moved – it was thirteen months to the day, almost twice the normal period of service at the station.”

