

WAR DIARY

Walter Kenneth Stevens

RAF Laboratory Technician

August 1941 – March 1944

Iraq · North Africa · Sicily · Italy · Algiers

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About This Edition

This document is a narrative edition of the handwritten war diary of Walter Kenneth Stevens, spanning three volumes from August 1941 to Boxing Day 1943. Walter served as an RAF Laboratory Technician throughout the Second World War, departing Glasgow aboard the troopship SS Orontes on 28 August 1941 and travelling through South Africa, India, Iraq, North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Algiers before the diary ends.

Walter was the brother of Sergeant John Henry Stevens (Glider Pilot Regiment), killed in action on 24 March 1945 during Operation VARSITY, the Rhine crossing. Walter survived the war and married Margaret Notley, a serving nursing sister he met in Algiers in October 1943. Margaret's father, John Leonard Notley, had himself been killed at Ypres during the First World War.

This edition presents the complete text of Walter's diary in readable form. Page headings and pagination from the original notebooks have been removed. Ellipses used to mark page breaks in the transcription have been silently joined. Nothing has been deleted. Editorial introductions appear in italics at the start of each chapter, clearly distinguished from Walter's own words.

A note on Volume 3: Volume 3 covers Walter's posting at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Maison Carrée, Algiers, from spring 1943 to Boxing Day 1943. This overlaps chronologically with the end of Volume 2. Walter was not at Algiers and in Sicily/Italy at the same time — he made two separate visits. The diary presents them as separate volumes, written at different times. Volume 3 is placed at the end of this edition, as Walter wrote it, and a brief note at its opening explains the chronology.

Volume One: Iraq

August 1941 – November 1942. Walter embarks from Glasgow and travels via Freetown, Cape Town, Bombay, and Karachi to Iraq, where he serves at RAF Habbaniya and then RAF Shaibah and Basrah. Volume 1 covers his first year overseas – the voyage south, his first desert posting, dysentery, life on the Iraqi stations with his closest friend Ben, and a precious week's leave in Tehran.

Chapter 1: Departure – Glasgow to the Cape

Walter departs Glasgow on 28 August 1941 aboard SS Orontes of the Orient Line, part of a convoy escorted by HMS Repulse and HMS Furious. The convoy calls at Freetown, Sierra Leone, before heading south to Cape Town. Key figure introduced: Ben, Walter's closest friend throughout the voyage and Iraq posting. Historical note: HMS Repulse, which escorts Walter's convoy here, will be sunk by Japanese aircraft in the South China Sea on 10 December 1941 – less than three months after this passage.

We arrived at Glasgow by train from Wilmslow at 1.30 pm on Friday 28th August 1941. Immediately we boarded the Orontes which lay in King George V dock. It was a handsome looking ship of the Orient Line with 2 funnels. On boarding we thought the quarters were extremely good as we passed the officers dining room; but on being shown our mess deck we were not so pleased & had the impression of being herded about like a flock of sheep & treated as galley slaves. Soon we were issued with hammocks after waiting in intense heat for them. Once they were obtained, the next thing was – how to sling them? The night was spent quite comfortably & it was surprising how soon one got used to sleeping in them. The food was reasonably tolerable but we soon found out that oranges, tinned fruit, biscuits, chocolates & mineral water could be obtained from the canteen. Our ration of cigarettes was 100 per week, which lasted out fairly well. After a few days we were used to life aboard ship & then on Sunday 30th August 1941 the ship was led by tugs out of King George V dock & swung round into the Clyde.

It was a wonderful sight & now we could see all the ship building yards which appeared to be in full swing & many ships were under construction. We steamed slowly up the Clyde amidst cheers from crowds on the river banks. After a few hours we were in the Hebrides where we anchored until the other ships were ready for the convoy. During the night of Monday 31st August 1941 we started on our long voyage & for the most part of us an unknown destination. When dawn broke on Tuesday we saw the west coast of Ireland, which was the last piece of land we saw until we reached Freetown.

During the next 13 days we made headway at the speed of 12 knots. Once out at sea we joined a fairly large convoy escorted by the battleship Repulse & the aircraft carrier Furious. There were several other light cruisers, merchant ships & 5 troopers besides us in the convoy. I managed to secure myself a job in the hospital which helped to relieve the monotony while out at sea as there was no particular jobs for anyone while on board. After a few days it became rough & this told us that we were boarding on the Bay of Biscay.

[Editorial note: HMS Repulse was sunk by Japanese aircraft on 10 December 1941 – just three months after Walter sailed in her convoy escort.]

At 10.00 am on Saturday 13th September 1941 land was sighted & slowly we steamed into port at Freetown. When we docked, the first thing to catch our eyes were the funny little canoes in which the black men paddled around & came alongside the ship to dive for pennies which were thrown into the water. They were most amusing & could speak English fairly well but using one or two stock phrases such as "Any more?" & "Glasgow Tanners." We were not allowed ashore here but from the ship we could see a very pleasant view of the town situated amongst various types of trees. At the back of the town, were hills stretching very high, so that sometimes when the clouds were low, the tops were quite covered. While in Freetown some film shows were given on board, but owing to the weather being variable they were abandoned on several occasions. In one instance a rather heavy gale blew up & ripped the screen completely off the frame & blew it into the sea.

On Thursday 18th September 1941 at 1.0 pm the ship slowly steamed out of Freetown harbour & within a few hours we were out at sea again. For the next 12 days we sailed along merrily & arrived at Cape Town 9.45 am on Tuesday 30th September. Just before arriving here, the convoy split into two parts, the other part going onto Durban.

Chapter 2: Cape Town

The convoy calls at Cape Town for three days of shore leave. Walter is struck by the warmth of South African hospitality, the abundance after wartime England, and the pleasure of lights at night.

As we slowly steamed into the dock we had a wonderful view of the town with Table Mountain stretching up behind. We had 3 days shore leave here & everybody had a wonderful time. The South African people showed great hospitality & made us feel very much at home. As we left the ship at 1.0 pm there were many cars waiting to take us wherever we wanted to go. The town itself was very similar to that of any English town with buses, trolley buses, taxis, cinemas, restaurants, theatres etc. There were some beautiful shops & most things were cheaper than what they were in England. Parks & gardens were very beautiful & flowers of many varieties we do not get in England were very plentiful. There was no black out here & it was a wonderful sight to see all the shops & cinemas lit up once again. All of us were able to get a good feed which for the most part was badly needed. Oranges were so cheap that they were almost thrown at you & had we gone in the right season peaches could have been obtained for 2/- a box of 100.

It was grand to see a picture again after being at sea for a month. It was very intriguing to us to find everything so typically English. The South Africans are very patriotic & live up to their name in every respect. There were many sites to see & so many things to do but unfortunately in the small space of time it was impossible. Nevertheless everyone enjoyed themselves & felt very much better for the break. At 3.0 pm on Friday 3rd October 1941 we steamed out of Cape

Town harbour leaving behind us some very pleasant memories of the days we were there.

Chapter 3: India — Bombay

The convoy calls at Bombay, where Walter and Ben transfer to SS Lancashire for the onward journey to Basrah. Walter is struck by the contrast between European prosperity and Indian poverty. Key figure: Ben — Walter's closest friend, named here for the first time.

This was the last part of our trip on the Orontes because at Bombay we disembarked. We picked up the other half of the convoy off Durban & sailed onto Bombay. On Wednesday 22nd October 1941 we sailed into the bay at Bombay. The weather was extremely warm & carrying a kit bag & haversack onto the quayside was no easy job. The perspiration poured off us so much that I literally wrung my shirt out as though it had just been washed.

After depositing our kit bags in the customs offices we were directed to a service canteen where they gave us a cup of tea & a packet of cigarettes. In a short while we were marched down to our new ship which lay in 19 Alexandra dock — the Lancashire, which was to take us to Basra. On boarding her we found that everything was beautifully clean & far more spacious than the Orontes. During this time my pal Ben had contacted the Sgt in charge of the hospital & we volunteered for work there & so getting our own bunks which was very nice.

After tea, passes were issued & we were allowed into Bombay. Several of us took a taxi into the town. An ice cream parlour was sighted & we went in out of the heat & were very refreshed when we came out. We tried to get into the pictures but they were full so wandered round & had a look at the Gateway to India & had our photos taken. We left an English gentleman at the services canteen & had a beautiful fruit salad with ice cream at very cheap rate & which seemed to satisfy us most of all.

There were one or two things that struck us in Bombay & they were: the difference between the Europeans & the Indian people. Most Europeans seemed reasonably well off & could afford black servants to wait on them & cars

to drive about in. Secondly, how very poor some of these Indians really are & the conditions in which some of them lived was absolutely unbelievable. At night times, as I say, you could see them lying in the streets wherever you went. Some of the buildings & streets were very beautiful & with the native costume it seemed really wonderful in some parts.

At 11 o'clock on 23rd October 1941 the Lancashire slowly pulled out of Alexandra dock Bombay. On Wednesday 28th October 1941 we entered the river Euphrates. We had to travel 600 miles up this river & on the way we saw some of the country where Bible History was first started. Most of the way up the river we saw all the date palms, just as one sees them in pictures & these funny little mud huts in which the natives live. This was our first view of Iraq. The next thing we saw were the oil fields, which of course is what the country is so carefully guarded. They were certainly very large & apparently the field we saw is the third largest in the world.

Chapter 4: The Desert — Shaibah

Walter arrives at Basrah after a comic wrong-turn that deposits his party in an Army camp in the desert, calling themselves 'the Legion of the Lost.' After a month in hospital with dysentery, he is finally posted to RAF Habbaniya.

We arrived on Friday afternoon & were off the ship fairly quickly. We marched through the town & 10 Army lorries were sighted at the side of the road & the black men signalled us to get in, which we did. Actually these lorries were nothing to do with the Air Force & were intended for a Light Infantry detachment which followed us off the ship & it was not until we arrived at the camp that we found out the mistake. These lorries started off & drove 15 miles across the desert to the Army camp at Shaibah. Immediately all our visions of an Air Force camp disappeared, for all we could see for miles were these canvas tents & sand. There were no brick buildings at all.

We were allocated tents to sleep in & had to make the best of the two blankets we had with us. Although it is hot out here during the day, in the night it is very cold & so most of us did not get much sleep. Water was scarce & washing

facilities, well, there just weren't any. We carried a petrol tin from the one & only stand pipe to the tent which was for everybody to wash & shave in. The food was pretty terrible, being cooked in field kitchens, & nearly everything we ate had sand in it. The worst of it was, that no one had any money or cigarettes & the flies during the day were almost unbearable. After two days, a W.O. from our camp at Shaibah showed up & everybody cheered when he arrived.

Those of us in the medical branch were told we were going to Habbaniya. Anyway we were all piled into our own lorries & taken off to our own camp at Shaibah which certainly was a great relief to finally get away from the Army. I don't care what anyone says, I don't mind being called a 'Brylcreem boy' if it means living in a little more comfort to what these Army people do out here.

We were billeted in brick huts & issued with palliasses & mosquito nets which were a godsend from the flies which were a terrible pest. Within a few hours of our arrival we were issued with a free packet of cigarettes & the same afternoon were paid 1 dinar 500 fils. Unfortunately, the day before the party left for Habbaniya I fell sick with dysentery. I was soon carted off to hospital & put on fluids. For the first few days I felt like nothing on earth & really did feel ill. They kept me on fluids for a fortnight & towards the end of this time I began to feel extremely hungry & at long last they started me on light diet & then onto chicken diet, which was very tasty. After being in hospital nearly a month I finally got my discharge from it on 6th December & proceeded back to the camp at Shaibah. Posting to Habbaniya was arranged for us the following day.

Chapter 5: RAF Habbaniya, Iraq

Walter finally reaches RAF Habbaniya — a vast, self-contained camp of twenty square miles with tennis courts, swimming pools, a cinema, riding stables, and its own taxi service. He settles into the laboratory, celebrates Christmas with ceremony, and explores Baghdad with Ben on a memorable weekend. An unexpected posting to Basrah in April 1942 leaves him despondent.

That night I slept like a top & in the morning was very excited to see the hospital & my laboratory. I was given a very warm welcome by the boys whom I knew & met one of my old pals from the lab at Halton who is in the lab there. He showed me the laboratory. It was a finer place than ever I expected & very modern indeed. I was very thrilled about this & looked forward to times when I should be able to get down to some studying again.

The mess was extremely nice & the food easily the best I had since joining the R.A.F. The cpls had a separate table of their own & chickos to wait on us. Each billet had a chicko who cleaned your buttons & boots each morning, made all the beds & kept the room generally tidy. In the afternoon he would bring round tea at about 3.00pm for those who wanted it. He did all our washing & everything all for 100 fils a fortnight.

Although this camp is right out in the desert & 55 miles from Baghdad, it is supposed to cover an area of 20 sq. miles & believe me when I say it is very large. It is so large that we have our own taxi service, & when you want to go to another part of the camp, you just get on the phone & ring up for a taxi. There is a large cinema on the camp, a large swimming bath as large as the Galleon, & a row of shops half a mile long which is called 'Cheapside.' There are clubs of every description & kind — cricket, tennis, football, hockey, swimming, photographic, boxing, riding & many others. There is a large lake near by where the boys spend a great deal of their time yachting. The hospital has even their own horses & we go for rides at 75 fils an hour.

After settling down it was Christmas time. On Christmas Eve we had a fancy dress polo match on donkeys. I went dressed as a schoolgirl. All the boys had a very good laugh & some of the costumes which were made were extremely good & everybody enjoyed the afternoon. Christmas day was patients day. Boxing day was our day & I went for a lovely walk in the morning & played billiards & ping pong in the afternoon. Our dinner was at 6.0 pm & as usual the officers served us. This dinner was the best I had had in the R.A.F. We started off with soup, fish followed with chips & sauce, then turkey, mashed & roast potatoes, green peas & stuffing, Christmas pudding. Beer flowed freely & there were plenty of

cigarettes, almonds & raisins, oranges & bananas. Altogether it was a very enjoyable dinner & well cooked.

On Monday 5th January 1942 I was initiated into the Buff Lodge with all due ceremony. This proved, after a few weeks, to be a most interesting and entertaining evening every Monday.

Time rolled past & things went on in the usual way. Playing plenty of sport & quite enjoying life on the whole. Mail still arriving fairly regularly.

On Friday 20th February 1942 Ben & I managed to get a week-end in Baghdad. At 3.0 pm the gari arrived at the hospital reception room for us. It was a terrible day & a dust storm was just beginning. The journey included a memorable incident when our driver became hopelessly lost in the dark desert, circling round until we found a ragged old desert shepherd with a lantern who knew every inch of the ground and guided us back to the main road. Ben gave him a handsome tip of 250 fils. We arrived in Baghdad in a short while and got rid of all the sand.

[Editorial note: Walter mentions Cranleigh School in Surrey — placing his pre-war education there. He recognises a former schoolmate at dinner in the Tigris Palace Hotel.]

Ben had already booked us a room the previous week. It was beautifully situated at the back of the hotel, with a balcony facing the river. The hotel was the Tigris Palace. After breakfast we went for a walk up the main street. The bazaars were most difficult to describe. Some of the rugs we saw selling at 15 dinars would bring at least £50-100 in England. Sunday morning was beautiful & we visited St George's Church which is reputed to be one of the oldest in this part of the world & afterwards to the museum. Here we saw many old reliques, some of which dated back to 2000 years B.C. We took Lt Mummery & two other officers down river street to see the Amardah workers. Some of the silver ware was really wonderful craftsmanship. After dinner our things were packed ready & at 8 o'clock the gari arrived to take us back to camp. Both feeling very refreshed after an enjoyable week-end.

On Saturday 11th April 1942 I was posted to Basrah. I might add that this shook me very much as I thought that I should not move from Habbaniya. At 2.00pm the gari arrived to take me to Baghdad & so once more on that long & dreary journey to Margil. Feeling very despondent I waved goodbye to Ted & Hoppy as the gari moved off.

Chapter 6: Basrah & Shaibah

Walter serves at the Station Sick Quarters on the Basrah waterfront. He deals with a notable rabies case in a native village, endures summer heat of 120°F with 80% humidity, receives news of a death back home, and is granted leave to Tehran.

The Sick Quarters itself was very nicely situated on the waterfront & we could sit & watch the boats come & go as we often did. Unlike Habbaniya there was not a great deal of amusement on the camp with the exception of a cinema. But it was quite easy to get into Asher by car as it was only 5 miles away. Asher was quite a unique little town & the creeks which run up in various places were called the 'Venice of the East.' Every Sunday evening a special motor launch went to Asher for those going to church.

One day I had a job of going in the ambulance to fetch a patient who was a genuine rabies & in convulsions from one of these native villages. When we arrived the ambulance could only get so far owing to a wide stream & we had to walk about 350 yards through these narrow roads & between old shambles of rushwork houses to get to his house. This was the first glimpse of real native life I had had & it was not until then that I realised in what filthy conditions these natives lived. Eventually we arrived at his house where he was lying on the ground being held down by four people with about 20 others standing & watching. Once we did get him out we were surrounded by crying kiddies & women & the procession started back to the ambulance. Eventually we came to the stream & as there were only 2 planks across it I had vivid imaginations of everyone going into the water. We got him in much to our relief & started on

our way to the hospital. This job was carried out in the heat of the afternoon & the temperature in the shade was well over a 100.

During one week in May 1942 we watched no less than 6 troopships dock, each one full of troops. Not only troopships but as many if not more cargo ships arrived, each carrying at least 10 Boston planes from America. The Lease & Lend Act seemed to be in full swing in this part of the world. As the summer wore on so the heat rose but the thermometer never showed more than about 120° in the shade, although the humidity was as high as 80° on several occasions.

15th July 1942 I received the bad news that Joan had died. It knocked me cold & I had to take things very steadily for a couple of days as I was afraid of ending up with a nervous breakdown, but I recovered slowly & tried hard to forget it but her memory always remained.

30th August 1942. It seemed hardly a year ago to-day I sailed from England & on the whole the time has flown by quickly. To-day I was notified that my leave had been granted & that I was to start on the morrow for Tehran.

Chapter 7: Tehran Leave

Walter travels by convoy and train through the mountains of Persia to Tehran for a fortnight's leave. The rest camp at Quilchek, set in the grounds of the British Legation, is idyllic. Tehran is the most modern and European city Walter has seen since South Africa. He rediscovers beer gardens, mountain walks, and meets an old friend Arthur Cassett.

At 3.0 pm on 31st August the gari picked us up for the first part of about a 700 mile journey. The last 20 miles was the grimest journey I have ever done in my life & by the time we arrived at Ahwaz were absolutely covered in sand. It was here that most of us tried our first 'Sinalco' which is quite a nice drink made from the juice of pomegranates. It seemed a long wait until our train arrived & we were very pleased when it did, seeing that we had a 24 hour journey to Tehran.

At 7.30 pm we slowly steamed out of Ahwaz station for a long journey through the mountains. The carriage was very similar to that of any English corridor train but the backs of the seats pulled up making 4 bunks. We managed to get a decent dinner of chicken on the train. This was the first time I had really slept on a train & did so very effectively, awaking the next morning very refreshed. On looking out of the window we saw some wonderful scenery & were now right up in the mountains. It was a real treat to see green fields and pastureland again.

We arrived at Tehran at 12.0, 4½ hours late. Tehran was the first modern station I had seen since leaving England & reminded one of Waterloo or Victoria. The rest camp consisted of about 20 tents situated in most beautiful surroundings of the British Legation. If one could imagine a large estate in England with plenty of large trees, grass & beautiful lanes on which shadows are cast by rays of the sun through the trees, the site would be admirably described. Mrs Smith tried to make the boys at home as much as possible.

My first real glimpse of the town was very impressive. With the exception of South Africa it was the most European town I have seen in this part of the world. The streets were very wide, large shops, traffic lights, buses & the most modern American cars. Tehran is noted for its beer gardens which I must say are very fascinating. Imagine a garden with small trees dotted about and tables laid — either at one side or one end is an alcove and a platform where the band plays & in front a small piece cut out for those who wish to dance.

Friday 4th September. In Persia, Friday is the Sabbath day. John & I decided we would go up into the mountains. After about an hour we reached a village at the foot of the mountain, called Darband. It was one of the most picturesque places I had ever seen. The gardens, trees, waterfalls & scenery were simply magnificent. The scenery now was some of the most beautiful I have ever seen in my life, amidst rocks & boulders there were waterfalls, large & small, caves, alcoves, trees, rock plants & everything which makes these surroundings so wonderful.

As we were walking round, just by chance I bumped into an old friend of mine, Arthur Cassett who was stationed here at the Aircraft Factory & whom I had not seen for 2¹/₂ years since we were rookies together at Manston in March 1940. We arranged to meet later. On Friday 19th September this was our last day at Tehran. I met Arthur in the afternoon, went & had a feed at the Polish Café & then wandered round the shops & did a bit of shopping — bought some lovely coffee & brought it back with me. Said goodbye to Arthur. On Saturday we were up early & the lorry took us down to the station to catch the train back. Eventually we arrived back at Basrah. We were all very thankful to get back again after the long journey. Soon settled down to work & then after a fortnight I went sick with Sandfly Fever & had to have a week in hospital. Soon got over that & once again settled down to work which went on quite steadily.

Volume Two: The Desert to Italy

November 1942 – March 1944. Walter moves with 25 M.R.S. — 'Culliman's travelling circus' — following the Eighth Army across North Africa: Abadan, Cairo, Libya, Tunisia, Tripoli. In July 1943 he flies to Sicily, serves through the island campaign, and then moves to the Italian mainland via Bari, Torre del Greco, Naples, and Foggia. Volume 2 ends with Walter watching Vesuvius erupt from a rooftop in Naples, days before sailing for Algiers.

Chapter 8: Abadan & Cairo

November 1942. Walter is seconded to Abadan on the island oil refinery — the third largest in the world — to carry out blood slides during a malaria epidemic. He works alongside Dr Marsh and Mr Wilson of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's laboratory. After returning to Basrah, a Christmas posting takes him to the Middle East by Sunderland flying boat — his first ever flight. He arrives at Cairo and is quickly posted forward to 25 M.R.S. Key figure: Harry Harding (old Halton friend, S.S.Q. Heliopolis).

November showed signs of the cool weather coming along & how thankful everyone was. I had been out here just a year now & on the 3rd November had orders from the S.M.O. to proceed to Abadan for one month as an epidemic of malaria had broken out and they wanted me to do the blood slides in order to get the patients diagnosed quicker.

Abadan is an island 28 miles long & 5 miles wide & is more or less a big oil well. The whole island is nothing else but an oil refinery & incidentally the 3rd largest in the world. Everything on the island, including cars, buses, lorries, cranes, engines & every bit of machinery belongs to the A.I.O.C. Altogether there are about 2,000 English people on the island most of whom work for the A.I.O.C. Besides these people there are thousands of natives who also work in the oil company & the rest is, just, well, troops, troops & more troops including a large number of Americans who think they know everything.

Mr Wilson showed me the laboratory which I must say was a grand place. They gave me complete liberty & freedom there. I went up there every day for the first

fortnight & it was a great thrill to work in a big laboratory once again. After a while the malaria died down considerably & my next task was to blood group all the R.A.F. personnel of about 1,200. During the next fortnight I worked like a trojan doing about 150 B.G. every day & then doing all my slides at night. My month having come to an end I was recalled to Basrah. On the whole I enjoyed it & it was a nice change, & not only that I gained some very useful knowledge from Dr Marsh & Mr Wilson's long experience out in this part of the world.

Just to crown everything on the morning of Christmas Eve the M.O. told me I was posted forthwith to the M.E. This shook me somewhat as it came at a most inappropriate time, but nevertheless I was really very pleased & everyone said how lucky I was. Anyway by a certain amount of influence, I managed to get the posting held up until after the show.

Christmas Eve arrived & we all thoroughly enjoyed the meal which consisted of — cold salmon, roast goose or duck with chip potatoes, tomatoes & bacon, followed by Christmas pudding, trifle & fruit jelly. Then if anyone could eat anymore, there was biscuits, cheese & coffee & Christmas cake. Naturally, afterwards we all sat round the fire with beer & had a sing song.

Said goodbye to everyone after the Show & got to bed about 12 o'clock. Up at 4 o'clock & left Basrah at 4.30 by transport to the airport. From here onwards, I was treated as a gentleman for the rest of the day. 6 o'clock the party of about 20 of us left by launch for the B.O.A.C. flying boat which lay out in the river. For the first time of flying I had the privilege of going in a Sunderland flying boat. Punctually at 6.30 the 4 big engines roared & before you could say 'Jack Robinson' we were in the air. At 9.15 we landed at Lake Habbaniya and at 9.30 we were off again for a 4 hour flip to Kallai. We had a marvellous lunch & it was grand to be treated like a real person again. For the last time we made a perfect landing on the Nile — 1,000 miles in 11 hours.

The following morning I met Harry Harding who used to be at Halton with me. He showed me all round & we went & had a good feed which I thoroughly enjoyed & then went to the pictures. Helio is more or less a suburb of Cairo

where the more aristocratic people live. It is quite a nice little town & was a treat to see decent shops, houses, buses & trams etc. again.

1st January 1943. We went to the Services Club in Helio which is probably one of the finest in the world. Afterwards we went to the pictures & saw 'The Thief of Baghdad' which amused me rather being so highly fantastic & taken from the stories of the Arabian Nights.

6th January. I received a telephone message about 9.30 to report back to 22 P.T.C. I knew immediately that my posting had come through. They told me I was flying somewhere & that I had to take 5 blankets with me & only 40 lbs of kit & to be kitted out with battle dress straight away. I knew then, that I was going out on the desert & probably moving up the line. When I got my kit packed & weighed, I found that I could not take much stuff with me & had to leave a lot behind, including all my treasured photos. By this time they had found out my unit which they told me as 25 M.R.S.

Now comes, perhaps, one of the most interesting chapters in this book to date. We were up at 4 am Thursday 7th January & left Almaza for the airport at 5 am. They told us we were flying to Marble Arch by the 7 o'clock plane. I had been very disappointed at not going to see the pyramids while I was here, but on gaining height was able to see them beautifully & in the early morning with the sun just rising, made a perfectly wonderful picture. Little did I think then that the very next day I should be standing by & pass right under it.

Chapter 9: Libya — Following the Eighth Army

Walter joins 25 M.R.S. — 'Culliman's travelling circus' — in the Libyan desert, near the Marble Arch at the border of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Life is mobile, dangerous, and occasionally exhilarating: booby traps, mine fields, gazelle hunts, mobile NAAFI cinemas. Key figures: Norman House (Halton colleague, at the captured Italian lab in Benghazi); S/Sgt Aitken (authorises mobile lab); F/Sgt Smilies (lab officer).

At 12.30 we came in to land, & the picture I had seen the previous evening came to reality & sure enough we circled right round & landed just beside the Marble

Arch, where only about 10 days previous a terrific battle was being fought. It was built by the Italians in commemoration of some big battle fought there years ago. It is just an enormous arch across the road & made of marble. On one side you can look out over Cyrenaica & on the other over Tripolitania, the Marble Arch being the dividing line between the two countries.

Saturday 10th January. Managed to get a waggon to take me to Benghazi & a party of 5 of us set off about 11.45 for a 250 mile journey. About 60 miles from Benghazi the big end broke. We had to give up here & sent on for help, so I hitch-hiked in & arrived about 4 o'clock. Found out there was a big captured Italian lab which we were using & met Norman House who was working there & who used to be at Halton with me. He showed me around this most wonderful laboratory which when working in peace time must have been a magnificent place. It consisted of 4 very big labs & everywhere white tiled & beautifully finished off. The library was one of the finest I have ever seen. I certainly wished I could have stayed there & thought what a crying shame that such a beautiful place as this should be ruined. After looking round I met S/Sgt Aitken, the pathologist whom I knew in England & had a long chat with him. He gave me the necessary permission to get fitted up with a mobile lab.

In the evening Jerry paid us a visit & the Ack Ack fire was terrific & reminded me of the old 1940 blitzes on London. Anyway it only lasted about an hour & then everything was quiet again.

All the way up the road were notices such as these: 'Keep 100 yds apart' 'Do not brew up on the road, get right off' 'Don't be a bloody fool. Keep 100 yds distant' 'No overtaking' 'If Jerry straffs you, you won't laugh. Keep 100 yds distant' & on an old lorry which must have been blown up sometime or another it had written on it 'I was not a 100 yds distant — Are you?' Although all the notices were very crude, in my opinion they were extremely witty in most cases & if abided by, served their purpose admirably.

Friday 24th January 1943. We heard the news over the wireless that Tripoli had fallen to us. Up until this time bread had been non-existent. Fresh meat was unobtainable being so far out in the desert & naturally all our food was tinned.

We were fortunate enough to find out that there was a good gazelle hunting ground about 30 miles away from the camp. I managed to go out one afternoon with one of the officers & a couple of other lads & we did quite well getting 5 between us. I got the biggest one of the lot & felt quite pleased with myself. These gazelles go about in herds in the desert & can run faster than any other animals I've seen. One buck was chased for fully half an hour & at one time was level with the car & was travelling at a speed of nearly 50 miles an hour. As a result of these shooting parties we were able to have fresh meat nearly every day & roast gazelle is really lovely & some of the most tender meat I have ever eaten. It tastes very much like venison.

Chapter 10: Tunisia — The Mareth Line & Beyond

25 M.R.S. follows the Eighth Army into Tunisia, camping among olive groves and following the retreating Germans through Medenine, Sfax, and the Mareth line. Walter has two near-escapes: a bombing raid at Tripoli where a 500lb bomb lands ten yards away, and a moment on a minefield near Sfax. Tunis falls on 7 May 1943. Near Carthage, Walter sees Churchill, Eden, General Alexander, and Eisenhower pass in convoy. Key figure: G/Cpt. Lipscomb (old C.O. from England, encountered at Carthage).

The following morning, all tents were taken down & we moved off about 11 o'clock. By nightfall we reached the outskirts of Sirte. By nightfall we had to make Medenine just before nightfall — 90 miles. The C.O. found the spot where we were to pitch camp which was just 5 miles out of the village.

Then one of the boys saw a bomber heading straight for us. I ran into a building which was the only cover about. At that moment there was a terrific explosion & my tin hat was blown off my head & I was thrown right across the building I was standing in & the next thing I remember was bricks & mortar falling on top of me. I got up & felt myself all over & found much to my relief that I was entirely unharmed. I immediately shouted out to the other chaps to find out if they were all right & at that moment I could see a chap lying on the ground amongst the debris & pulled him out. He was only suffering from severe shock. The crater itself was not more than 10 yards away from where I had been standing & had

blown the whole of one side of the wall in which was scattered all over the place. It seemed an absolute miracle how no one was even hurt & I thanked God for my life. Had the bomb dropped another 20 yds up the pathway, no doubt it would have hit the hospital & there would have been hundreds of casualties. It was estimated from the big crater that the bomb was a 500 lb & the small crater a 25 lb.

My driver swung right round so we were level with the road again. All of a sudden I saw 2 of these Army lads waving frantically to us & immediately jumped to the conclusion that we were on a mine field. In those few moments I went hot & cold all over & am sure my heart beat went up to 120 per minute. With God's good grace we avoided all the mines & drew back on to the track quite safely, & oh boy was I thankful. When I got out & went & spoke to these lads they told us we were on a mine field & only 2 days previously a lorry had blown up not 50 yds from where we were.

Monday 19th March. We had been at El Hencha for a week when a case of smallpox turned up & we had to make a part of the camp isolated. Life went on steadily. We made a cricket pitch & had some good games with the surrounding units. Everybody was getting excited about the fall of Tunis which seemed imminent any day & we knew the day before that it had fallen, but was officially announced on the wireless on May 7th that Tunis & Bizerta had fallen. A few days later the remaining Germans were captured & so the terrific battle that had been fought out here finally finished. The unit had worked well & we were congratulated on the fine work which had been done on our long journey following the 8th Army all the way.

June 1st. I was granted a day's leave in Tunis. We reached the outskirts of Tunis by 4.30 & went on to Carthage where we stayed overnight at 30 M.F.H. On the way to Carthage we passed the Cathedral & here we were waved off the road & told to stop. Within a minute or so a large convoy appeared led by S.P.s of motorbicycles & armoured cars. At once we knew it was some celebrity. As the cars went past we were all greatly surprised to see as plain as anything — Mr Churchill & Anthony Eden who waved to us as they went by. In the car behind

them was General Alexander & behind that General Eisenhower & also numerous other higher rankers whom I could not recognise.

[Editorial note: Churchill's known visits to North Africa in June 1943 are historically documented. This sighting — Churchill, Eden, Alexander, and Eisenhower in convoy near Carthage — is an independently verifiable event that Walter witnessed in person.]

Shortly after dinner I was sent for by G/Capt. Lipscomb who was there at the time & who was my old C.O. in England. We went for a swim that evening in the Bay of Carthage. There were cliffs most of the way round the coast & to get on to the beach we climbed down a narrow pathway to a very pleasant alcove. We had a lovely swim.

Tunis being a French town, there were very many French girls walking about the town, & were they smart! The dresses & costumes they wore were some of the smartest I have ever seen. Not having seen a really pretty & well dressed girl for such a long time, I suppose it struck me more than it would normally. Tunis itself had not been damaged much & most of the shops were open again now. It was nice to see a real pub again & to be able to go in & get a drink & the wine which is made here is not at all bad & very cheap.

Chapter 11: Tripoli — Waiting for Sicily

25 M.R.S. moves to Ben Gardene near Tripoli, waiting for the Sicily invasion. Walter visits the remarkable Roman ruins at Sabratha. At the Tripoli race course, Harry Harding, Dave Summers, and Walter are together for the first time since Halton. On 30 July, Walter and F/Sgt Smilies fly to Sicily. Key figures: Dave Summers (reunited at Tripoli race course); Reg (organises the birthday dinner later).

We were only a mile from the sea here & after the camp was set up we were able to go for a swim nearly every afternoon. We were lucky to get one or two concerts & cinemas in the area & I saw Mickey Rooney in 'A Yank at Eton' one day, & 2 days later, 14th June — Ralph Reader & his Gang Show came round. This was a 1st class show, one of the best I have seen in the desert.

By 1st July we were still at the same site & I had the chance to go to Tripoli for the day with one of my pals (Reg) & the C.O. We got to Sabratha by tiffin time. The C.O. had a few things to do here & so Reg & I were able to look round the old Roman ruins which were really interesting. These are some of the oldest Roman remains to be seen in this part of the world & the amphitheatre is supposed to be dated back to 200 B.C. We took quite a few photos here & had a look round the old town. Most of the ruins were in good preservation & obviously had been looked after.

Eventually we arrived at Tripoli race course once again at 1900 hrs. A hot meal was already ready for us & very thankful we were. By now everyone knew we were going to Sicily & once again were following the 8th Army as we had done in the previous campaign. There was a certain amount of excitement shown by everyone & all eager to get over the other side. July 21st. As 21 were also on the race course Harry was with them & so Harry, Dave & myself were altogether for the first time since we were at Halton together just about 2 years ago.

They signalled for me urgently & so I had to pack my microscope & stains in a box. F/Sgt Smiles decided to come with me & so we had everything in readiness. 30th. Final arrangements were made & without further delay F/Sgt Smiles & I set off for Castel Benito Aerodrome.

31st July. Up at 5.30 — Breakfast at 6 o'clock & on the 'drome at 6.30. A gari took us out to the kite which was a D.C.3. Altogether there were 12 of us plus a crew of 4. Punctually on time the pilot taxied to his position & on receiving the signal we were airborne before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' After about 1/2 hour we were over the sea & saw nothing for the next 2 hours but waves after which time Malta came in sight.

This was the first I had seen of Malta & we circled twice & could see the whole island. We were flying quite low & could see what a wonderfully fertile place it is. There seemed hardly a square yard of land which was not cultivated. We landed on one of the 'dromes (Luga). I had just finished a cup of tea when F/Sgt Smiles came running in & called out for me & said the plane was taking off straight away. We had to run hard & just caught it before the doors were closed.

Within a few seconds we were in the air again & out over the sea, this time flying low so that we could not be picked up by German radio location. In 20 minutes we got our first glimpse of Sicily & in ½ an hour had landed once again at an 'drome at Cassibile, 5 miles from Syracuse.

Chapter 12: Sicily — Cassibile to Catania

Walter serves first in the advance party near Syracuse, in an almond grove with vineyards and sea bathing — 'one of the happiest weeks he had spent on the unit.' As the island campaign progresses he moves to a hospital inside Catania's Commercial Institute. He visits Catania University, passing the bridge where Hedley Verity was fatally wounded. He shelters from an air raid behind a tree as shrapnel clatters around him. Key figures: G/Cpt. O'Malley (P.M.O. Catania, champions Walter's promotion); Reg (organises birthday dinner).

[Editorial note: Hedley Verity — Yorkshire and England cricketer — was fatally wounded at the bridge over the Simeto river near Catania in late July 1943. He died on 31 July 1943. Walter passes this bridge on his way to the University.]

Our advance party were only a matter of 200 yds from the 'drome so it did not take very long before the gari came to pick us up. The camp was situated in an almond grove right in the farm lands, surrounded by some of the prettiest scenery I had seen for sometime. In the evening Reg took me for a walk all round some vineyards which were quite near at hand & we picked grapes & ate them until we looked like them. Never before have I seen such big grape vineyards with almond trees intermingled. Our surroundings here were really beautiful & one could almost imagine oneself back in England again, somewhere in any farming district.

1st August. Life was very pleasant here & everyone went about their jobs & when you finished, walked down to the sea which was only ½ mile away. It was lovely bathing here but no sand! Instead, there were the famous Sicilian coral rocks which we were able to dive off into about 15 feet of crystal clear water. I went to bed that night feeling very satisfied with the situation & can honestly say that the first week here was one of the happiest I had spent on the unit.

11th August. The P.M.O. informed me that I was to go to Catania to pick up some equipment I wanted from the University. We set off early morning & soon passed through Syracuse & was not long before we were up in the very high hills. The views we had on the way were some of the most wonderful I have seen for sometime. We carried on & got to the plains of Catania & passed over the famous bridge which was the Germans' strong point in their last effort to save Catania. It was while taking this bridge that Headley Verity the Yorks cricketer lost his life. We had a wonderful view of Mount Etna from here which seemed to stand majestically behind Catania.

We soon found Area H.Q. & they directed us to the University of Catania. This place was an eye opener to me & the whole place had been left just as it was & by the looks of it had been evacuated in a hurry. The equipment I saw here was some of the finest I have ever seen in my life. It was practically a brand new place. Anyway, our job was to pick up a balance which we did & as many other things as we could lay hands on. Time was short & we were afraid the officer might come round & catch us piling all this equipment in the lorry. Anyway we got some very useful things & cleared off quickly.

We stayed the night at M.T. & R.U. & had a good show here & something to eat & then went for a stroll in a beautiful park. We had not been out long before we were caught in a raid & had no option but to take shelter at the nearest tree. We made one just in time before the shrapnel from the Beauforts came clattering down all around us. We stood hugging that tree for 1/2 hour which seemed like years to me. All the time, shrapnel was falling all round us & was hitting the trunk of the tree just above our heads. It was a miracle how none of us were touched & for a second time I thanked God for my life.

1st September. We had our orders to move to Catania & take over a big Commercial Institute which we turned into a hospital. In a week we were completely organised & the whole place looked as different again. The P.M.O. came round & was amazed at the work we had done.

Within a fortnight we were up to 300 patients. Everyone had to work very hard. I was doing 50 specimens a day in the lab which was more than I had ever

dreamed of doing on a M.R.S. I really enjoyed it & felt at last that my presence was felt. Again the P.M.O. (G/Cpt. O'Malley) came round & complimented me on the good work I was doing & told me that he was doing his best to get my third.

The P.M.O. managed to commandeer a hotel up at Mt. Etna which we used as a convalescent home. I managed to get a week-end up there which I enjoyed immensely. The hotel itself was situated about 5000 feet above sea level, Mt. Etna being 10,000. The ballroom was a grand place & on the Saturday night we got a dance band & invited about 30 sisters from the surrounding hospitals & our own & had a really good dance.

Chapter 13: The Bari Detachment

Walter is sent from Catania to Bari, Italy, to set up a laboratory at 30 M.F.H. At Bari — 'the Blackpool of Italy' — he encounters Wee Georgie Wood and Dolly Harmer at a café, having just seen them perform the previous evening. He returns to Catania in time for his birthday. Key figures: Wee Georgie Wood & Dolly Harmer (variety performers, 68 shows in 32 days, Cairo to Algiers to Sicily to Bari); John Walker (best pal, introduced at birthday dinner).

On the 11th October I was told I had to fly to Bari — Italy to 30 M.F.H. to set up a laboratory for them. We took off at 8.0c. We had been flying for about 1/2 hour when we ran into a terrific thunderstorm & the plane was pitched & tossed about like a cork in some waves & many times I had visions of coming down in the sea & having to swim for it. The pilot decided to turn back & said it was too risky to go any further.

The following morning I was up early again & this time we had a lovely day for the trip. When we finally got sorted out had a major general, a brigadier & an air commodore & many colonels & majors — altogether 28 of us. We took off at 8.0c. We landed at Taranto at 10.30 & then took off again & landed at Bari at 11.30.

During my stay here I was able to get out into Bari quite a few times & soon found out what a wonderful place it was. The Italians consider it 'their Blackpool of Italy' & I must say that it nearly comes up to any of our seaside resorts in England. Bari is still run entirely by the Italians & has not been taken over by the British Authorities — not only that — it was by-passed by our troops & in consequence has suffered very little war damage.

All the Italian cinemas were open & showing quite modern American films with the dialogue changed into Italian. There was one theatre reserved for British & American troops right on the sea front. It was here that I saw Wee Georgie Wood & Dolly Harmer in a very good variety concert. That same morning I was wandering around the town & sat down in a café for an ice cream & he came walking along the street with Dolly Harmer & came & sat down at the same table as us. We soon got into conversation & they told us they had done 68 shows in the last 32 days, travelling from Cairo right through to Algiers & then around Sicily & finished up here. He was most interesting & wanted to buy us drinks or anything although we had finished, but in order not to be rude we had another ice with him.

I had been there 5 days when my C.O. turned up on his way to Foggia. I told him straight out that I was fed up & wanted to get back to our unit as soon as possible. He fixed it up & made arrangements for me on the Tuesday morning, which I was very pleased about as it was my birthday on the Wednesday & I knew my pals were arranging a party for me.

We had a very smooth & comfortable journey back & landed at Catania once more at 11.0c. The following day being Wednesday 20th October, my birthday, I did not do a great deal of work. Finishing at 12.30, I went for a walk round the town after lunch with my pal John Walker & bought a few things for the evening. The dinner was arranged for 7.0c & my other pal had fixed everything up marvellously. Reg certainly made an excellent job of it — even down to the finest detail such as toast with the soup & iced coffee to finish up. The chicken itself was beautifully tender & most enjoyable. Not for many a long day have I seen such a spread as we had that night. The cooks made me a lovely fruit cake

& had even iced it for me. Of course we had a few bottles of wine which went down very nicely afterwards. As usual we had a very good sing song & finished the party about midnight, everyone having thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Chapter 14: Torre del Greco & Naples

In November 1943 the unit moves from Catania to Torre del Greco, six miles south of Naples, in a Convalescent Depot with views of Vesuvius from every window. Walter watches the volcano erupt at night, visits Pompeii, sees two operas at the San Carlo (La Bohème and Lucia di Lammermoor), and celebrates Christmas with his unit's own variety show.

At last on 17th November 1943 we received our orders to move to a place called Torre del Greco which was about 6 miles south of Naples. Our total mileage was 516 miles & the longest run & I might say the most enjoyable we had done. The Convalescent Depot was a large modern place with every convenience. We were 6 miles from Naples & from the upstairs windows one could look out right over the bay of Naples. From the north windows you looked straight on to Mt. Vesuvius which was a wonderful sight at night time, throwing out lava & flames. The local inhabitants say that all the time it erupts they know they are safe but when it stops there is a great panic as it is liable to erupt in other places other than the normal crater.

I had a room for my laboratory on the top floor looking out to Vesuvius, & on looking round one could see quite plainly that the Italians had certainly picked a beautiful spot for a convalescent depot as there was picturesque scenery from all views.

Sunday December 11th. I took a half day & visited the ruins of Pompeii which was only about 5 miles away. Comparing these old Roman ruins with those at Sabratha, they were far superior. Here we saw complete streets with the shops on either side, the market place, swimming pools, arenas & of course some of the famous houses with the actual paintings on the walls. Some of them were in extremely good preservation. A guide took us round & explained all the

different places of interest as we came to them. I was very glad of the opportunity to go round & it was very educational.

Christmas Day. Was a holiday for us all & we did our best to entertain the patients. I must say our cooks did it very well & the turkey & pork we had was lovely. Of course we had Christmas pudding & 2 bottles of beer per man. After the dinner we sat and ate nuts & raisins until we could not eat any more. After that we had a sing song which lasted until the early hours of the morning.

31st December. My pal & I went to Naples & went to see an opera. The opera house in Naples is really a marvellous place & the biggest theatre I have ever been in. The opera was La Bohème & as I had not seen opera before expected to be bored especially as it was all in Italian. On the contrary I was thrilled with every moment of it. When I first saw the orchestra of 65 players, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. They were absolutely first class & it was a real thrill to hear a good orchestra again. The woman who took the leading part of Mimi had one of the best voices I think I have ever heard. I enjoyed it so much that we decided to go the next afternoon and see the Scottish opera called Lucia di Lammermoor. This time we made sure of getting a good seat & got a box on the second floor.

Chapter 15: Foggia — The Final Posting

In January 1944 the unit moves to Foggia, a city Walter describes as more completely devastated by bombing than even Naples. His best friend John Walker survives a dangerous abdominal operation. In mid-March Walter is posted to No. 2 RAF G.H. Algiers. Key figures: John Walker (best pal, survived dangerous operation); Jack Holland (lab assistant from 30 M.F.H.).

We got our orders to move on the 5th January & at 9.0c on the 6th we were on our way to Foggia. We got about 20 miles along the road & were stopped by M.Ps saying that we could get no further than Avelino because the roads were ice bound & the 5th Army divs were on the move & had got stuck. I was not at all surprised at this because all the high hills surrounding us were covered with snow & it was bitterly cold.

Some Canadians found out we were there & offered to put us up for the night in their transit camp. They made us welcome & got a good hot meal for us. The next morning they gave us such a big breakfast that the majority of us could not finish it. In the afternoon we arranged a football match with the Canadians & had a good game.

Shortly after 9.0c we were on the move again with a 100 mile journey ahead of us. We made good headway, finally reaching Foggia at 2.30 am. I don't remember anything about the last 10 miles of the ride & fell asleep in the car.

Jack Holland the lab asst. from 30 moved in with me & it did not take us long to have a nice little lab organised for ourselves. We had plenty of work to do but for a change it gave me the chance to have some half days.

Foggia itself was just one mass of ruins & one day I had a walk round & as far as I could see there seemed hardly a building in the place which had not been bombed or affected by bomb blast. It was said that Naples had been raised to the ground & although Naples was a far bigger place, I considered Foggia had been hit far worse in comparison.

March arrived & showed signs of the better weather coming which was a good thing as I have never seen it rain so much as it did here in February for the whole time I have been overseas. My best pal John Walker was taken seriously ill & had to undergo a very difficult abdominal operation which afterwards proved to be very successful, but at one time it was definitely a touch and go as to whether he would live & we were all very worried about him.

Then, just to crown everything I was told I was posted No. 2, which quite honestly shook me badly as I never expected it, but on being told by the C.O. it was the only possible way for me to get promotion, I understood the reason why. It did not take many days for the posting to become effective & I had to pack up my lab in a hurry.

Having said my farewell to most people on Thursday evening I was ready to move away first thing on Friday 17th March & it was arranged that I should go on the ambulance with the evacuations to Naples to 3 B.P.D. where I had to wait

for the boat to Algiers. My heart was definitely in my mouth that morning, as I had made some grand pals on the unit & I was particularly sorry to leave while John was still very ill, although I was thankful to hear that before I left he was taken off the D.I. list & showed he was making very good progress.

Chapter 16: Departure — Naples & Vesuvius

Walter awaits transport to Algiers at the Base Personnel Depot in Naples. On 19–20 March 1944 he witnesses the great eruption of Vesuvius — the most destructive eruption of the twentieth century. The town of San Sebastiano is destroyed. Walter watches from a rooftop five miles away.

[Editorial note: The eruption of Vesuvius in March 1944 is historically documented as the most destructive eruption of the twentieth century. Beginning on 17 March, it reached its peak on 19–23 March. The town of San Sebastiano was destroyed. Walter is a direct eyewitness.]

Having finally said goodbye to all my friends I set off in the ambulance for Naples, still hardly believing I was leaving 25 M.F.H. after being with them for 1 yr 3 months.

On Sunday 19th March Mt. Vesuvius started erupting & threw out quite a bit of lava which according to the local inhabitants of Portici was the biggest eruption they had had for 15 years. By Monday afternoon the volcano was still erupting & getting far worse. Thousands of tons of lava were being thrown down the sides & travelling at the rate of 1 yard per minute in a 36 foot high avalanche of white hot lava. There was a small town right in the way of the main stream of lava called San Sebastiano & by nightfall the whole of this town had been destroyed but all the inhabitants were evacuated safely.

It is difficult for me to describe the sight I saw this night with the volcano in full eruption. I was standing on top of the building in which I was billeted, not more than 5 miles away from the mountain itself & it was a sight I, as many millions of people have never seen before. The whole of the mountain was lit up & all the lava by night showed up bright red as it trickled down the mountain side. For anyone who has never seen a volcano erupt — the only thing I can say, that it is one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen in my life but at the same

time very terrifying when you can see easily the terrific power there must be behind it.

Volume Three: Algiers

Spring 1943 – Boxing Day 1943. A note on chronology: Volume 3 covers Walter's first posting at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Maison Carrée, Algiers, from his arrival in spring 1943 to Boxing Day 1943. This overlaps with the later chapters of Volume 2 – Walter was in Algiers while the Sicily and Italy events were unfolding elsewhere. Volume 3 was written as a separate notebook and is presented here as Walter wrote it. Key figures: S/Ldr Price (Walter's superior, put him up for promotion on his first day); Margaret Notley (nursing sister, met October 1943).

Chapter 17: No. 2 RAF G.H., Maison Carrée

Walter arrives in Algiers and reaches No. 2 RAF General Hospital at Maison Carrée – a large hospital on a hill overlooking the sea and the city. He is immediately put up for promotion by S/Ldr Price. He establishes the cricket club, takes leave at Sidi Ferruch, and in September is unexpectedly called to the C.O.'s office and told he is now a Flight Sergeant.

My first impression of Algiers was rather a thrilling one, because I saw it all lit up at night & this was the first time I had seen lights in a harbour since being in Cape Town.

Transport took me right to No. 2 RAF G.H. & when I saw it was very thrilled indeed. It stood on the top of a hill just outside a place called Maison Carrée. From the front of the hospital one could see right on to the sea front & to the left look right on to Algiers which was about 4 miles away. S/fdr Price came in & seemed very pleased indeed to see me. After a short chat, he took me all round the hospital & introduced me to the departmental chiefs. I can honestly say that I felt very happy & very pleased with everything. S/fdr Price put me up for promotion the following day.

After a few weeks I was thoroughly at home & had made several changes in the lab & started to teach my assistant & help to get him through his lab exam. I found out that there was plenty of sport on the unit & it did not take me long to get my place in the football team.

After a month my promotion came through & I went into the Sgts mess which made a lot of difference as most people know. A few days after I was promoted the Sgts mess had an outing & we had a very pleasant day at Tipaza, Milena & the Tomb of the Christians. On the way back we ran into a terrific swarm of locusts which hung around this area for a week or more & were a source of nuisance to everyone & of course the crops.

I paid one or two visits to Algiers but soon found out that there was not a great deal to do there except go to a show & I will say this, that there were always plenty of films to see. There was also a very nice opera house where they held some good shows. The season closed down during the summer & I was sorry because I had intended going each week & kept putting it off until finally it was too late & had to wait until the winter season started again.

We had some very good ENSA shows at the hospital. Most of the chaps on this unit had not been overseas very long & they were some of the worst bunch of chaps for moaning I have ever met. I think it would have done a lot of them good to spend a few months in the desert without any entertainment at all. Nevertheless, they did not worry me very much as I was very happy in my job & that was all I worried about.

By the time June came round we had not had any cricket & so I tackled S/fdr Price about it. After a week or so I managed to get the club going & we started playing away matches because we had not a ground of our own at the time. We started the cricket far too late in the season & by the time we really got going it was time to pack up.

September arrived & about 3 days before going on leave I was going on pay parade & was called to the C.O.'s office immediately. I had no idea what he wanted to see me for & was trying to turn over in my mind what I had done wrong! Anyway I marched in smartly & saluted & he got up from behind his table, came across & shook hands with me & said "Congratulations — you are a F/Sgt now." Well I could have fallen through the floor & could not believe my ears for a minute. Of course the rank was only acting, but nevertheless paid which I suppose was the main thing.

My friend & I went on leave the first week in September & spent most days swimming at Sidi Ferruch. We were very lucky to have exceptionally good weather. During that week we saw quite a number of shows & I suppose on the whole, had quite a good time although I felt I wanted to get right away from the place for a little while.

On my return from leave, the work bumped up nearly 100% & it was really hard going for the two of us for the next month or so.

Chapter 18: Margaret

Cricket gives way to football. On a Sunday afternoon in early October 1943, Walter walks into a sister's office on impulse, still in football kit, and asks her to the Sgts mess dance. It is the best decision he ever makes.

Cricket did a natural death & once more football took its place & I think it is here that the next chapter in the book should begin.

One Sunday afternoon early in October I had been playing football & came back to the laboratory to collect a towel & some soap & passing one of the sisters' office, I saw her sitting at the desk writing. Seizing the opportunity I went in and asked her if she would come to the Sgts mess dance. I must have looked an awful sight in football kit & hair all over the place & as it was all done so quickly, I must have caught her unawares & she accepted my invitation. The following week, I had a return invite to a dance at the Y.W.C.A., which, I must confess, shook me considerably as I never expected it. Unfortunately the dance was cancelled but instead we went to the pictures. It was a very enjoyable evening & I realised then that I had formed a great liking for this girl. And so I made up my mind not to let the opportunity slip by without finding out if she would care to come to the pictures again with me sometime.

Knowing that I was keen on dancing, she asked me if I would like to go to the Y.W. dance the following Wednesday. I was very delighted & thrilled & accepted her kind invitation. That Wednesday would not come round fast enough but eventually did & I had a half day & met her for tea & then the dance in the

evening. By now we realised that we both had a number of things in common & both liked one another's company.

I had known her 3 weeks now & it was my birthday week, which of course caused for celebration. We had a very nice little party & I was convinced even more then, that I had a very lovely girl.

As time went on, we arranged our 1/2 days & days off together & then I had to go & get Infective Hepatitis. I don't think in my whole life have I been so annoyed with myself as I was then, because I did not feel ill & did not want to go into hospital — nevertheless I had to & that was that. Of course I asked to go on her ward & I think that I made one of the quickest recoveries from Jaundice that anyone has ever done. I was in and out of hospital in 9 days, which to anyone knowing how resistant Jaundice can be sometimes, was exceptionally quick work. Mind you had I not wanted to have got out so quickly, I am sure I could have had another week at least!

So once again I was free to go out with her but she was going on leave the next day so I did not see her for 5 days.

On her return we really began to enjoy ourselves & went to concerts, cinemas, theatre, dances, in fact everywhere together. Even though it was the beginning of December, the weather was still very warm & on fine days we went out on picnics which were a great success.

The time was passing very quickly now & after what one might call 3 years of solitary confinement, I was enjoying life to the fullest. It was not until I started going out with Margaret that Algiers held any interest at all. But with her, it was a different place & I might add a place I shall never forget as long as I live.

December rapidly melted away & Christmas was drawing near. Once again I was in a show on Christmas day which, when the time came proved to be most successful. After serving out the airmen's dinners I went straight on to Margaret's ward & helped with the washing up & meals. We had some good fun together & everything went very well indeed. By the time I had finished at 11.30, I was just about all in & finished off the day with a cup of tea in the bunk with

Margaret. Although I was dog tired & thoroughly worn out, I enjoyed the day immensely & am sure I would not have done so had it not been for Margaret.

Boxing Day. I was so tired that I went to bed in the afternoon & slept 3 hours solidly. In the evening we had our Christmas dinner followed by a dance in the evening. Naturally I was with Margaret all the time & realised now that I was more than fond of her.

The Christmas celebrations finished up with a dance on New Year's Eve which was more of a success than the one on Boxing Day.

[This is the final diary entry. Walter put down his pen on Boxing Day 1943 and did not write again. He and Margaret Notley married after the war.]

Appendix A: Timeline of Walter's War

28 Aug 1941	<i>Glasgow</i>	Departs aboard SS Orontes; convoy escorted by HMS Repulse
13 Sep 1941	<i>Freetown</i>	First port of call, Sierra Leone
30 Sep 1941	<i>Cape Town</i>	Three days shore leave
10 Dec 1941	—	HMS Repulse sunk by Japanese aircraft, South China Sea
22 Oct 1941	<i>Bombay</i>	Disembarks from SS Orontes; boards SS Lancashire
28 Oct 1941	<i>Basrah</i>	Arrives in Iraq via the river Euphrates
Nov–Dec 1941	<i>Shaibah</i>	Army camp mix-up; dysentery; hospitalised for nearly a month
7 Dec 1941	<i>Habbaniya</i>	Reaches RAF Habbaniya — vast desert base, 55 miles from Baghdad
Jan–Apr 1942	<i>Habbaniya</i>	Christmas 1941; Baghdad weekend with Ben; Buffalo Lodge
11 Apr 1942	<i>Basrah</i>	Posted to Basrah S.S.Q. on the waterfront
May 1942	<i>Basrah</i>	Duke of Gloucester inspection; 120°F heat, 80% humidity
15 Jul 1942	<i>Basrah</i>	Receives news of Joan's death
31 Aug–19 Sep	<i>Tehran</i>	Leave at Quilchek rest camp; mountains, beer gardens
3 Nov 1942	<i>Abadan</i>	Seconded for malaria epidemic; works at AIOC laboratory
29 Dec 1942	<i>Cairo</i>	Departs by Sunderland flying boat; first ever flight
7 Jan 1943	<i>Marble Arch</i>	Flies to Libyan desert; joins 25 M.R.S.
Jan 1943	<i>Benghazi</i>	Visits captured Italian lab; meets Norman House & S/Sgt Aitken
24 Jan 1943	<i>Nufilia area</i>	Hears of fall of Tripoli on wireless
Mar 1943	<i>Tripoli/El Assa</i>	Near-miss: 500lb bomb lands ten yards away
Mar–May 1943	<i>Tunisia</i>	Medenine, Sfax, El Hencha; close call on minefield
7 May 1943	<i>El Hencha</i>	Tunis & Bizerta fallen; North Africa campaign ends
1 Jun 1943	<i>Carthage</i>	Sees Churchill, Eden, Alexander & Eisenhower in convoy
Spring 1943	<i>Algiers</i>	Arrives No. 2 RAF G.H., Maison Carrée
Jul 1943	<i>Tripoli</i>	Harry, Dave Summers, Walter together for first time since Halton
31 Jul 1943	<i>Sicily (Cassibile)</i>	Flies from Tripoli; lands near Syracuse
11 Aug 1943	<i>Catania</i>	Excursion to University; passes bridge where Hedley Verity fell
1 Sep 1943	<i>Catania</i>	Unit moves into Commercial Institute
Sep 1943	<i>Algiers</i>	Promoted to Flight Sergeant
11 Oct 1943	<i>Bari</i>	Flies to 30 M.F.H.; meets Wee Georgie Wood at café
Early Oct 1943	<i>Algiers</i>	Meets Margaret Notley; asks her to Sgts mess dance in football kit
20 Oct 1943	<i>Catania</i>	Birthday dinner arranged by Reg: chicken, iced coffee, fruit cake
Oct–Nov 1943	<i>Algiers</i>	Infective Hepatitis; recovers in 9 days on Margaret's ward
23 Nov 1943	<i>Torre del Greco</i>	Arrives at Convalescent Depot; Vesuvius visible from windows
11 Dec 1943	<i>Pompeii</i>	Half-day visit to ruins
26 Dec 1943	<i>Algiers</i>	Final diary entry: Boxing Day with Margaret
31 Dec 1943	<i>Naples</i>	Sees La Bohème at the San Carlo opera house
6 Jan 1944	<i>Naples–Foggia</i>	Unit moves to Foggia; ice delays at Avelino

Mar 1944 *Foggia* John Walker's dangerous operation; Walter posted to Algiers
17 Mar 1944 *Naples* Departs Foggia for Naples en route to Algiers
19–20 Mar 1944 *Naples* Mt. Vesuvius erupts; Walter watches from rooftop 5 miles
away

Appendix B: Key People

Ben

Walter's closest friend from departure in Glasgow through Iraq and Basrah. Shared the Baghdad weekend and the Habbaniya posting. Full surname unknown.

F/Sgt Smilies

Walter's lab officer at 25 M.R.S. Flew with Walter to Sicily, July 1943. Nearly missed the plane at Malta.

Norman House

Old Halton colleague encountered at the captured Italian public health laboratory in Benghazi, January 1943.

S/Sgt Aitken

Pathologist at Benghazi. Authorised Walter's mobile laboratory setup.

Dave Summers

Old friend, reunited at Tripoli race course, July 1943.

Harry Harding

Old RAF Halton friend at S.S.Q. Heliopolis, Cairo. Showed Walter around Cairo, January 1943.

Reg

Walter's pal in Sicily and Catania. Organised Walter's birthday dinner on 20 October 1943.

G/Cpt. Lipscomb

Walter's old C.O. from England, encountered at 30 M.F.H. near Carthage, June 1943.

G/Cpt. O'Malley

P.M.O. Catania. Complimented Walter on his laboratory work and championed his promotion.

John Walker

Walter's best pal at Foggia. Survived a dangerous abdominal operation.

Jack Holland

Lab assistant from 30 M.F.H. Worked with Walter at Foggia.

S/Ldr Price

Walter's superior at No. 2 RAF G.H. Algiers. Put Walter up for promotion the day after arrival.

Margaret Notley

Nursing sister, No. 2 RAF G.H. Algiers. Met Walter in early October 1943. Walter recovers on her ward from Infective Hepatitis in 9 days. Final diary entry, Boxing Day

1943: 'I was more than fond of her.' Married Walter Stevens after the war. Her father, John Leonard Notley, was killed at Ypres in the First World War.

Wee Georgie Wood & Dolly Harmer

Real variety performers encountered at a Bari café and seen in concert. Had completed 68 shows in 32 days, Cairo to Algiers to Sicily to Bari. Wee Georgie Wood was a well-known British music hall comedian, a small man famous for playing schoolboy characters.