A FAMILY EDITION

A Different Place

The War Diary of Walter Kenneth Stevens



RAF Laboratory Technician · August 1941 – December 1944

Glasgow · Cape Town · Bombay · Iraq · Libya · Tunisia · Sicily · Italy · Algiers

“With her, it was a different place, and I might add a place I shall never forget as long as I live.”

Walter, on meeting Margaret

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Abridged for the family from the three handwritten volumes
with photographs from Walter's own albums

Version 1.0 · 27 October 2026 · archium.uk



Walter Kenneth Stevens, RAF, about 1940. Colourised from an original black-and-white portrait.

Introduction

This book is a family edition of the war diary kept by my grandfather, Walter Kenneth Stevens. He wrote it in three notebooks between August 1941 and Boxing Day 1944. It follows him from a troopship on the Clyde to the deserts of Iraq and Libya, through Sicily, Italy and finally to a hospital on a hill above Algiers, where he met my grandmother.

As his grandchildren growing up we knew him as Umpa, Oompa, Dad Dad or Grandpa. Which one depended on which branch of the family you were from. He was a kind, gentle man with a passion for stamp collecting that he tried, with great patience, to share with me. I am sad to say it never took. Sorry, Umpa.

Walter was a laboratory technician in the Royal Air Force. He was not a pilot or a gunner, and he never describes himself as a hero. He tests blood slides and counts specimens. What makes the diary worth reading is how closely he watches the world that war carried him through, and how honestly he says what it was like: the heat, the sand, the flies, the kindness of strangers, the long gaps between letters, and the bomb that landed ten yards away.

Towards the end of his life he suffered greatly from emphysema, an unfortunate result of years of smoking. This was a habit he had given up long before we were born. It breaks my heart a little to read these diaries and meet the young man he was then: athletic, sociable and endlessly curious. He organised the cricket club, played football and danced at every opportunity.

He did however make it home. His younger brother John Henry (and so many others) did not. A marriage, three children and everyone who has come since exist because he did. All because on a Sunday afternoon in October 1944 he walked into a sister’s office in his football kit and asked her to a dance.

I should tell you how these diaries came to be here. My father, John Stevens, Walter’s son, knew what they were worth. Before he died he spent many late nights working through them, first reading them aloud into dictation software and later typing the transcription by hand, page by patient page. Then his hard drive failed and the files were lost. It haunted him.

After my father passed, my mother Gillian took on the task of collating the original documents, photographs and research, with the same passion for family history that he had. Without her care, much of this book would not exist. I find it both sad and wonderful that the tools which finally made this possible came too late for my father. He deserved to see it finished. This book is, in part, the completion of what John started.

Only now, reading his diary, have I found the answer to a question that our generation of grandchildren could have asked but were too young to understand.

“Grandpa, what did you do during the war?”

We saw why it mattered only when we were old enough, and by then they had passed. For most families, that memory dies with the people who lived it. My grandfather left his books and my grandmother her keepsakes. In today’s world, it is sobering to see how hard things were for them.

I was always fortunate to have them as grandparents; only now, as an adult, do I feel honoured to understand what they did for us, and grateful that he wrote it all down.

I hope you enjoy meeting him as much as I have.

Will Stevens

(With thanks to Walter and Margaret’s other grandchildren:
Emma and Hannah
Nicola, Joanne and Louise
Sharon and Carol)

About this edition

Edition. Version 1.0, 27 October 2026. If you are reading a copy without this line, or with an earlier date, a newer version may exist.

This edition is abridged. It follows the diary in order, but passages of routine and repetition have been shortened or left out, and some sentences have been tightened for the reader. Walter's own words are kept in quotation marks. The full text is on the family website.

A correction to the dates. An earlier transcription of the notebooks, and the family website, dated the Algiers chapters (17 and 18) to 1943. The diary itself shows that is not right. Walter records leaving Naples on 17 March 1944, after a year and three months with 25 M.F.H., before he went to Algiers; he writes of the Vesuvius eruption of 19–20 March 1944 first; and his last entry is Boxing Day 1944. This book therefore places Walter's time at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Maison Carrée, in 1944, and his first dance with Margaret in October 1944.

Photographs. The pictures come from Walter's own albums and from the family collection. A few were restored or colourised digitally, and those are marked in the credits at the back. Where a caption is a guess, it says so.

Maps. The five maps in this book were drawn for it. They show the places Walter names and the broad shape of his journey, not the exact routes of the ships, aircraft and lorries.

The World Around Walter. The boxed notes carry their sources. Where I have used a general reference such as Wikipedia, I say so; they should be checked against printed histories before anyone relies on them.

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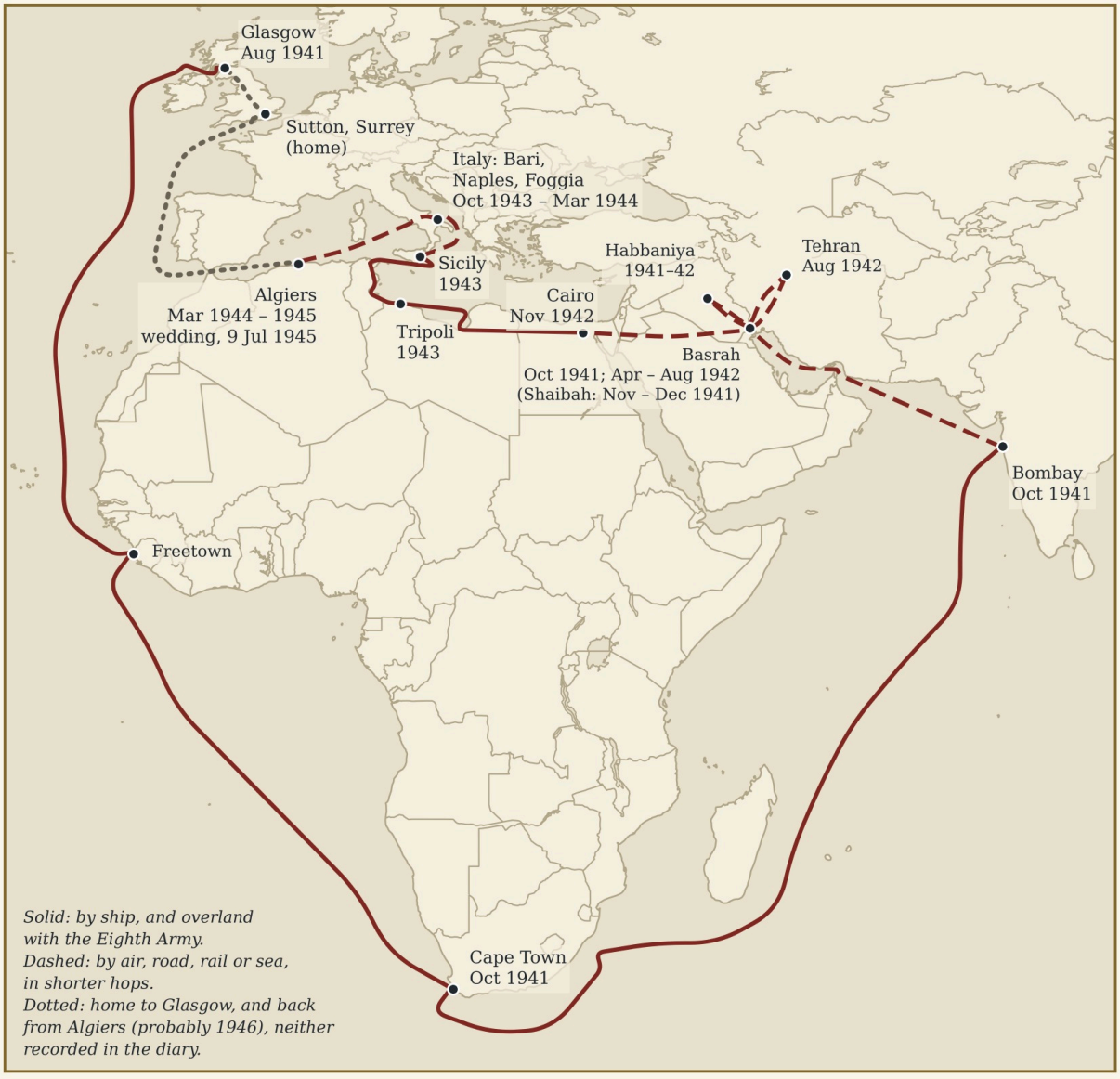
Walter Kenneth Stevens’ Second World War Journey

Sutton to Algiers and home again, 1941 – 1946



Walter’s Second World War journey. *Sutton to Algiers, 1941–45: by ship round Africa to India, by road and rail through Iraq and Persia, overland with the Eighth Army through Libya and Tunisia, and by air and sea through Sicily and Italy to Algiers. He married Margaret there on 9 July 1945 and, probably in 1946, came home. The sign at Habbaniya read ‘3300 miles to Sutton’. The route is schematic.*

PART ONE

The Road to Iraq

August 1941 – November 1942

Glasgow, Freetown, Cape Town and Bombay, then six hundred miles up the river to Basrah. Walter's first year overseas takes him to the desert camps of Shaibah and Habbaniya, a long summer in Basrah, and a fortnight's leave in the mountains above Tehran.

The Long Way Round

Glasgow to Basrah, August – October 1941



The Long Way Round. *Walter's voyage from Glasgow to Basrah, August – October 1941: SS Orontes to Bombay, then SS Lancashire up the Gulf. The route is schematic.*

CHAPTER

1

The Long Way Round

Glasgow to the Cape

28 AUGUST – 3 OCTOBER 1941

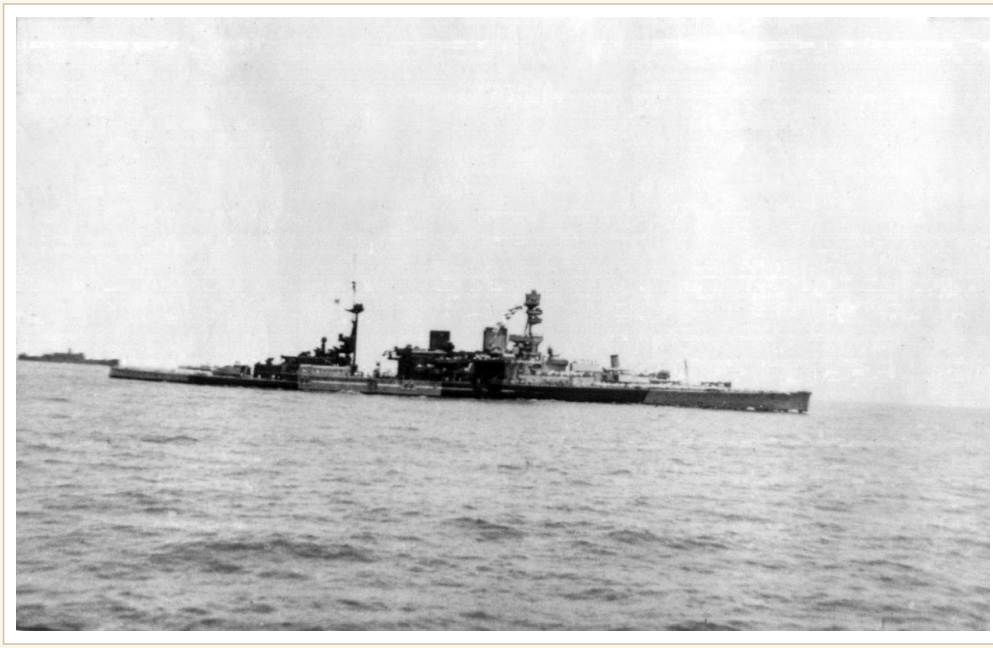
Walter leaves Glasgow aboard the troopship SS Orontes, in a convoy escorted by HMS Repulse and HMS Furious. They call at Freetown, then Cape Town, before the convoy splits.

Walter reached Glasgow by train from Wilmslow at half past one on Friday 28 August 1941 and went straight aboard the *Orontes*, a handsome two-funnelled liner of the Orient Line lying in King George V Dock. The officers' dining room looked splendid as he passed it. His own mess deck was another matter: he felt “herded about like a flock of sheep”, and hammocks had to be issued, after a long wait in intense heat, and then somehow slung. He slept quite comfortably all the same. The ration was a hundred cigarettes a week, and the canteen sold oranges, tinned fruit, biscuits and chocolate.

On Sunday 30 August tugs led the ship out of the dock and into the Clyde. It was a wonderful sight: the shipyards “in full swing”, many ships under construction, and crowds cheering from the banks. After a few hours they anchored in the Hebrides while the rest of the convoy assembled. During the night of Monday 31 August they set off on a voyage whose destination, for most of them, was unknown. The next morning they could see the west coast of Ireland, the last land they would see until Freetown.

> *“Once out at sea we joined a fairly large convoy escorted by the battleship Repulse and the aircraft carrier Furious.”*

There were light cruisers, merchant ships and five troopers besides the *Orontes*, and the convoy made headway at twelve knots. Walter found himself a job in the ship's hospital, which helped with the boredom: there was nothing else for anyone to do. After a few days it grew rough, which told them they were crossing the Bay of Biscay.



HMS Repulse, from Walter's album, where he labelled the photograph himself. The Repulse escorted his convoy in the autumn of 1941.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Why the long way round?

In 1941 the Mediterranean was too dangerous for troop convoys, so the troopships went south through the Atlantic and round the Cape of Good Hope, a voyage of weeks. HMS Repulse, which Walter calls a battleship, was in fact a battlecruiser. After escorting a troop convoy round the Cape in the autumn of 1941 she was sent to the East Indies. On 10 December 1941 she was sunk by Japanese aircraft off Malaya, with the loss of 508 of her crew of 1,309, a little over three months after she had accompanied Walter's convoy.

Sources: Wikipedia, ‘HMS Repulse (1916)’ and ‘Persian Corridor’.

At ten o'clock on Saturday 13 September land was sighted and the ship steamed slowly into Freetown. Local boatmen paddled little canoes alongside and dived for pennies, calling “Any more?” Nobody was allowed ashore, but they could see the town among its trees with high hills behind. Film shows were given on board, though the weather was variable, and one rough night a gale ripped the screen off its frame and blew it into the sea.

They left Freetown on 18 September and, twelve days later, at a quarter to ten on Tuesday 30 September, arrived at Cape Town. Just before they did, the convoy split in two, and the other half went on to Durban.



HMTS Orontes, the ship that carried Walter to Bombay. Walter labelled this print in his album, but it shows her passing under Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was never on his route. It was almost certainly a postcard or press photograph that he mounted as a picture of his ship.

CHAPTER

2

Cape Town

Three days of lights and oranges

30 SEPTEMBER – 3 OCTOBER 1941

The convoy calls at Cape Town for three days of shore leave. Walter is struck by the warmth of the welcome and by the abundance after wartime England.

As they steamed into the dock they had a wonderful view of the town with Table Mountain behind it. There were three days of shore leave, and “everybody had a wonderful time”. As the men left the ship at one o'clock, cars were waiting to take them wherever they wanted to go. The South Africans were generous and made them feel at home.

The town itself, he thought, was very like any English town, with its buses, trolley buses, taxis, cinemas, restaurants and theatres. Most things were cheaper than at home. The parks and gardens were beautiful, full of flowers he had never seen in England, and oranges were so cheap that they were “almost thrown at you”.

> *“There was no black out here and it was a wonderful sight to see all the shops and cinemas lit up once again.”*

They all managed a good meal, which for most was badly needed. It was grand, after a month at sea, to see a film again. There was far more to see than three days allowed, but everyone felt much better for the break. At three o'clock on Friday 3 October the ship steamed out of Cape Town harbour, “leaving behind us some very pleasant memories”.

CHAPTER

3

Bombay

The Gateway to India

22 – 28 OCTOBER 1941

The convoy reaches Bombay, where Walter and his friend Ben transfer to the SS Lancashire for the onward voyage to Basrah.

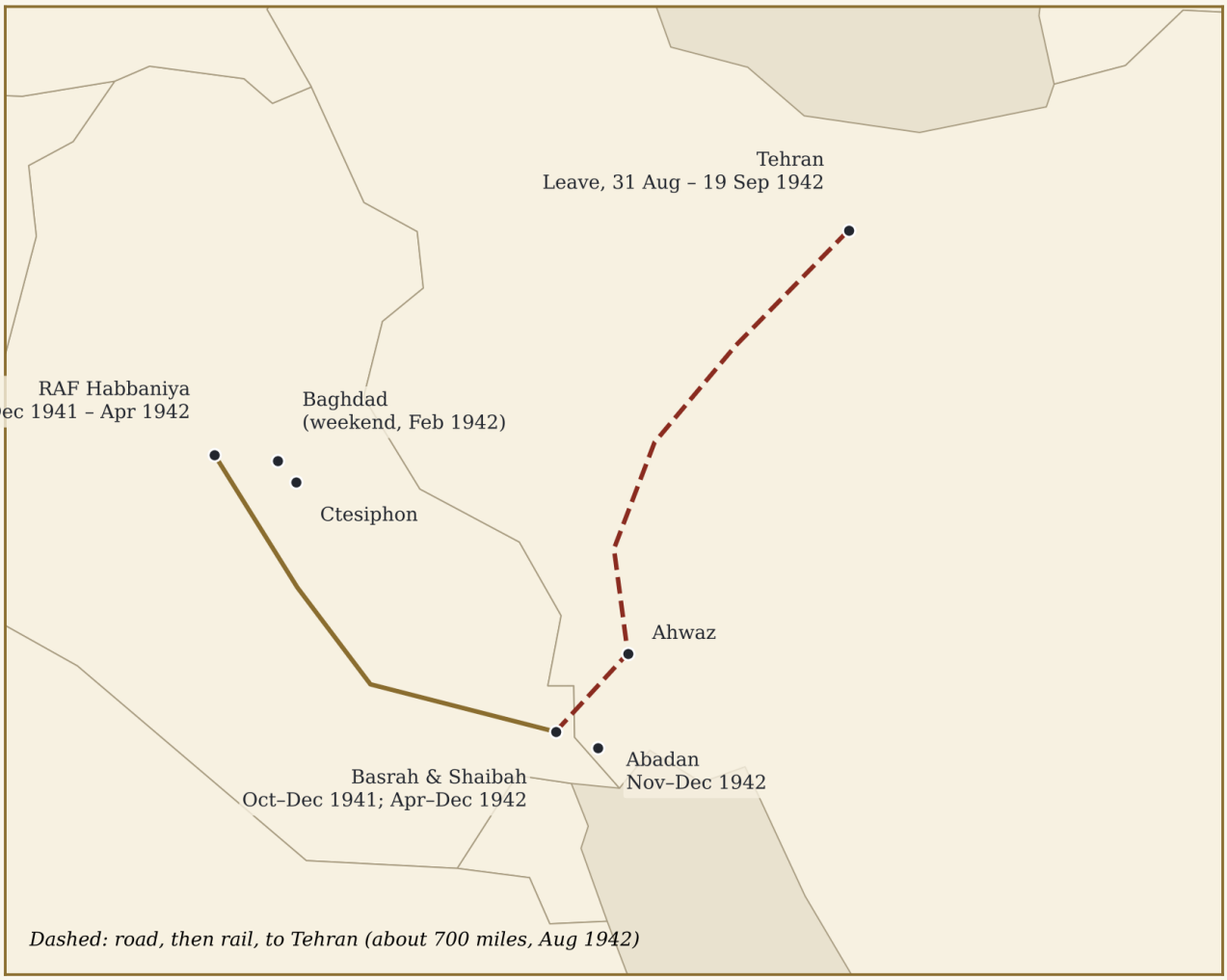
The last part of the trip on the *Orontes* was the run up to Bombay, where they disembarked on Wednesday 22 October after picking up the other half of the convoy off Durban. It was extremely hot, and carrying a kit bag and haversack onto the quay was no easy job. The perspiration poured off him so much that he “literally wrung my shirt out as though it had just been washed”.

They left their kit bags at the customs office and were given a cup of tea and a packet of cigarettes at a service canteen. Then they marched to their new ship in Alexandra Dock, the *Lancashire*, which was to take them to Basra. Everything aboard was beautifully clean and far more spacious than the *Orontes*. His friend Ben had already spoken to the sergeant in charge of the hospital, and the two of them volunteered for work there, which got them their own bunks.

After tea there were passes into Bombay. They took a taxi into town, found an ice-cream parlour, and went in out of the heat. They tried the pictures, which were full, so they wandered round, looked at the Gateway to India and had their photographs taken. Later they had a beautiful fruit salad with ice cream, cheap, which satisfied them most of all.

Two things struck Walter about Bombay: the difference between the Europeans, most of whom seemed comfortably off, with servants and cars, and the poverty of many of the Indian people, whose living conditions he found “absolutely unbelievable”. At night you could see people lying in the streets wherever you went. Some of the buildings and streets, and the native costume, were beautiful.

The *Lancashire* pulled out of Alexandra Dock at eleven o'clock on 23 October. On Tuesday 28 October they entered the river and began the six hundred miles up to Basra, past date palms “just as one sees them in pictures” and the funny little mud huts in which people lived. Then came the oil fields, said to be the third largest in the world. It was Walter's first view of Iraq.



Iraq and Persia. *Walter’s postings and journeys in Iraq and Persia, 1941–42: Shaibah, Habbaniya, Basrah, Baghdad and the road and rail to Tehran.*

CHAPTER

4

The Legion of the Lost

Shaibah

NOVEMBER – 7 DECEMBER 1941

A wrong turn on arrival deposits Walter's party in an Army camp in the desert. Then dysentery lands him in hospital for nearly a month before he is posted to Habbaniya.

They arrived on a Friday afternoon and were off the ship quickly. They marched through the town, and when ten Army lorries were seen at the roadside and the drivers signalled them to climb in, they did. It turned out the lorries were meant for a Light Infantry detachment that had followed them off the ship. They drove fifteen miles across the desert to the Army camp at Shaibah, and all Walter's visions of an Air Force camp disappeared. For miles there was nothing but canvas tents and sand.

They were given tents and made the best of two blankets each. It was hot by day, but at night very cold, and few of them slept. Water was scarce, and the only washing facilities were a petrol tin carried from the one stand pipe. The food was cooked in field kitchens and nearly everything had sand in it. Nobody had any money or cigarettes and the flies were almost unbearable. After two days a warrant officer from their own camp turned up and everybody cheered.

> *“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.”*

The medical branch was told it was going to Habbaniya. Meanwhile they were taken to their own RAF camp at Shaibah, which was a great relief, and billeted in brick huts with palliasses and mosquito nets, “a godsend from the flies”. Within hours they were each issued a free packet of cigarettes and paid one dinar five hundred fils.

Unfortunately, the day before the party left for Habbaniya, Walter fell sick with dysentery. He was carted off to hospital and put on fluids for a fortnight, and for the first few days “felt like nothing on earth”. Towards the end he grew extremely hungry, and was started on a light diet and then a chicken diet, which was very tasty. After nearly a month he was discharged on 6 December. The posting to Habbaniya was arranged for the following day.

CHAPTER

5

RAF Habbaniya

Fifty-five miles from Baghdad

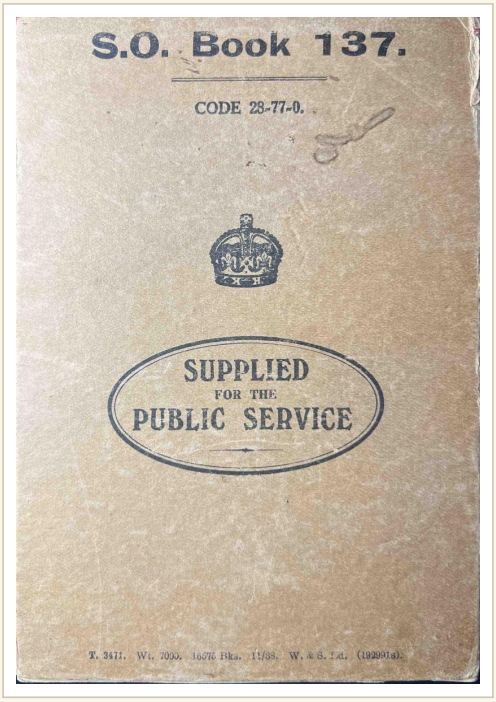
DECEMBER 1941 – APRIL 1942

Walter reaches RAF Habbaniya, a vast self-contained camp in the desert with tennis courts, swimming pools, a cinema and riding stables. He settles into the laboratory, celebrates Christmas, and explores Baghdad with Ben.



The entrance to RAF Habbaniya. The signpost reads LONDON 3287 MILES, BAGHDAD 55 MILES. Walter's own note on the print reads: "3300 miles to Sutton. And home."

Walter reached Habbaniya in December 1941. That night he “slept like a top”. In the morning he went to see the hospital and his laboratory, and found it “a finer place than ever I expected, and very modern indeed”. An old friend from the laboratory at Halton was already working there.



Walter’s laboratory study notebook, S.O. Book 137, ‘Supplied for the Public Service’. Its pages cover sterilisation, culture media, staining and microscopy, and page 9 has a pencil floor plan of his own laboratory.

The mess was extremely nice and the food the best he had eaten since joining the RAF. Each billet had a *chicko*, a local servant, who cleaned buttons and boots, made the beds, brought tea at three o'clock and did all the washing, for 100 fils a fortnight.

> *“Believe me when I say it is very large.” The camp covered some twenty square miles, 55 miles from Baghdad, and ran its own taxi service.*



‘Cheapside’, the half-mile row of shops at Habbaniya. The sign above the entrance reads BRITISH STORES.

There was a large cinema, a swimming bath “as large as the Galleon”, and a row of shops half a mile long which the airmen called Cheapside. Clubs of every kind met on the camp: cricket, tennis, football, hockey, swimming, photographic, boxing and riding. There was a large lake nearby where the boys went yachting, and the hospital kept its own horses; a ride cost 75 fils an hour.



The RAF Cinema, with separate entrances for officers, sergeants and other ranks.



The open-air screen, with the ‘Cinema – Ranks’ sign at left.

Among the papers Walter kept from Habbaniya is a typed poem, passed round the airmen and signed by nobody. It praises the camp as a jewel in the desert, and every verse ends with the same two lines.

HABBANIYA

An emerald set midst golden sands,
This camp of ours — Habbaniya stands,
A monument to Britains might,
Her will to wage and win the fight,
To passers by; it thus appears,
To us inside three bloody years.

An iron fence around this park,
Where fairy lights gleam after dark,
Scent of sweet flowers fills the air,
A fairyland at which to stare,
To passers by; it thus appears,
To us inside three bloody years.

Young airmen dancing ’tween the trees,
Their happy singing fills the breeze,
Officers with faces bright,
Escort sweet damsels out each night,
To passers by; it thus appears,
To us inside three bloody years.

Sweet music rising to the sky,
In tune with song birds fluttering nigh,
A garden fair where all is bliss,
A place the Air Force would’nt miss,
To passers by; it thus appears,
To us inside three bloody years.

Typed poem, author unknown, on a single folded sheet kept by Walter. Spelling as typed.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Habbaniya, seven months earlier

Walter arrived in a quiet place. The previous spring, after a pro-Axis coup in Baghdad led by Rashid Ali al-Kaylani, Iraqi troops had moved onto the plateau overlooking the airfield, and the base was besieged. On 2 May 1941 aircraft flown from Habbaniya, many of them trainers, attacked the Iraqi positions, and the Anglo-Iraqi War began. The defenders were pilots and instructors from the training school, a battalion of the King's Own Royal Regiment flown in at the last moment, RAF armoured cars and the Iraq Levies. A relief column from Palestine then helped to drive the rebels back towards Baghdad. When Walter walked through the gate he was seeing the aftermath.

Source: Wikipedia, 'RAF Habbaniya' (to be checked against a printed history before publication).



A satirical page from Walter's album: Rashid Ali, leader of the 1941 coup, beside a carrion hawk.



Walter's ‘Spoils of War’ page: wrecked German aircraft, captured Iraqi guns and German tanks, captioned in his own hand.

Christmas came quickly. On Christmas Eve the camp held a fancy-dress polo match, played on donkeys, and Walter went as a schoolgirl. “All the boys had a very good laugh, and some of the costumes which were made were extremely good.” Christmas Day belonged to the patients. Boxing Day belonged to the staff, and at six o'clock they sat down to dinner, served, as the custom was, by the officers: soup, fish and chips, turkey with roast potatoes, peas and stuffing, Christmas pudding. “Beer flowed freely.”



Walter in his schoolgirl costume for the Christmas Eve polo match, 1941.



Walter, still in costume, played in goal in a game of football which followed the polo match, while two RAF sergeants look on.

On Monday 5 January 1942 he was initiated into the Buff Lodge “with all due ceremony”, which proved a most interesting and entertaining evening every Monday. Life went on in the usual way, with plenty of sport, and mail arrived fairly regularly.

On Friday 20 February he and Ben managed a weekend in Baghdad. The *gari* arrived at three o'clock on a terrible day with a dust storm beginning. On the way the driver became hopelessly lost in the dark desert and circled until they found a ragged old shepherd with a lantern who knew every inch of the ground and guided them back to the road. Ben gave him a handsome tip of 250 fils.

Their room at the Tigris Palace Hotel had a balcony facing the river. They walked up the main street and through the bazaars, where rugs selling at 15 dinars would have fetched £50 to £100 in England. On Sunday morning they visited St George's Church, reputed to be one of the oldest in that part of the world, and the museum, with relics dating back to 2000 BC. They took an officer and two others to see the silverworkers at Amardah, “really wonderful craftsmanship”. Walter also recognised a former schoolmate from Cranleigh School at dinner in the hotel. They came back to camp “both feeling very refreshed”.

On Saturday 11 April 1942 he was posted to Basrah. He had thought he would not move from Habbaniya and it “shook me very much”. At two o'clock the *gari* arrived to take him to Baghdad and on to the long, dreary journey to Margil. Feeling very despondent, he waved goodbye to Ted and Hoppy as it moved off.

CHAPTER

6

Basrah

The Sick Quarters on the waterfront

APRIL – 30 AUGUST 1942

Walter serves at the Station Sick Quarters on the Basrah waterfront. He deals with a rabies case, endures summer heat, and is granted leave to Tehran.

The Sick Quarters was nicely situated on the waterfront, and the staff could sit and watch the boats come and go. Unlike Habbaniya there was not much amusement on the camp, except a cinema, but it was easy to get into Ashar by car, only five miles away. Ashar was a unique little town whose creeks earned it the name “Venice of the East”. Every Sunday evening a special motor launch took churchgoers there.

One day Walter went in the ambulance to fetch a patient with genuine rabies, in convulsions, from a native village. The ambulance could only get so far because of a wide stream, and they walked some 350 yards through narrow lanes between old rush-work houses. It was his first glimpse of real native life, and he had not realised in what filthy conditions people lived. The man was lying on the ground held down by four people, with some twenty others watching. Once they had got him out, they were surrounded by crying children and women, and the procession started back to the ambulance. The stream was crossed on two planks, and Walter had vivid imaginations of everyone going into the water. They got him in “much to our relief”. The temperature in the shade was well over a hundred.



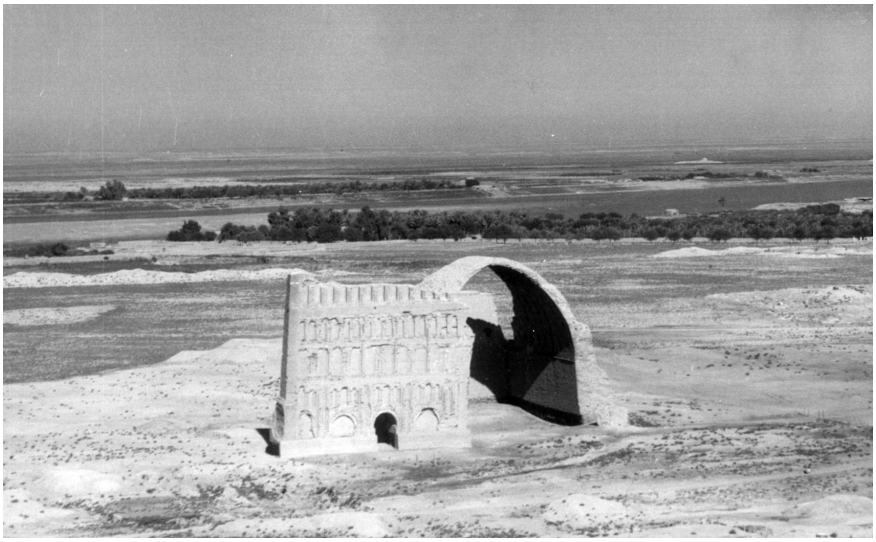
A boatman poling a guffa, the round coracle of the Tigris, from Walter's album.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The road to Russia

In August 1941 Britain and the Soviet Union had invaded Iran to secure the oil and the railway, and the country became the heart of what was called the Persian Corridor. Ships sailed round the Cape to the Gulf ports, and British aid and American Lend-Lease supplies then went north by rail and truck convoy to the Soviet Union. Around 7.9 million long tons of the US Lend-Lease aid, some 45 per cent of the total, went by this route. Walter's week of troopships and cargo ships, each carrying at least ten Boston bombers from America, was a small glimpse of it.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Persian Corridor’.



The Arch of Ctesiphon, near Baghdad, from Walter's album. Taq Kasra is the largest surviving Sassanid monument.

During one week in May 1942 he watched no fewer than six troopships dock, each full of troops, and as many cargo ships, each carrying at least ten Boston aircraft from America. The Lease and Lend Act, he noted, seemed to be in full swing in that part of the world. As summer wore on the heat rose to about 120 degrees in the shade, with humidity as high as 80.

On 15 July he received the bad news that Joan had died. “It knocked me cold”, he wrote, and he had to take things very steadily for a couple of days for fear of a nervous breakdown. He tried hard to forget, but her memory always remained.

On 30 August it seemed hardly a year since he had sailed from England, and on the whole the time had flown by. That day he was told his leave had been granted, and he was to start the following morning for Tehran.

CHAPTER

7

Tehran

Leave in the mountains

31 AUGUST – 19 SEPTEMBER 1942

Walter travels by lorry and train through the mountains of Persia to Tehran for a fortnight's leave. The rest camp is idyllic, and Tehran is the most modern and European city he has seen since South Africa.

At three o'clock on 31 August the *gari* picked them up for the first part of a journey of about 700 miles. The last twenty miles to Ahwaz were the grimmest he had ever done, and by the time they arrived they were covered in sand. There he first tried “Sinalco”, a pleasant drink made from the juice of pomegranates. The wait for the train seemed long, and they were very pleased when it came, as they had a twenty-four-hour journey ahead.

They left Ahwaz at half past seven in the evening for a long journey through the mountains. The carriage was like an English corridor train, but the backs of the seats pulled up to make four bunks. They had a decent dinner of chicken on the train, and Walter slept effectively for the first time on a train. In the morning there was wonderful scenery, and green fields and pastureland again.

They reached Tehran at noon, four and a half hours late. The station was the first modern one Walter had seen since leaving England, “reminded one of Waterloo or Victoria”. The rest camp of about twenty tents lay in the grounds of the British Legation, in the shade of large trees, and Mrs Smith tried to make the boys feel at home. His first glimpse of the town was very impressive. With the exception of South Africa, it was the most European town he had seen in that part of the world: wide streets, large shops, traffic lights, buses and the most modern American cars. Tehran was noted for its beer gardens, small trees dotted about, tables laid, a band on a platform and a piece cut out for those who wished to dance.



Walter kept this ticket: the Théâtre du Soldat Polonais (the Polish Soldiers' Theatre) at the Café Chemchad (Continental), Thursday 3 September 1942, 20 rials, curtain at 8 pm. It carries Persian revenue stamps and doubled as a late pass, valid until 3 am.

> *"It was one of the most picturesque places I had ever seen. The gardens, trees, waterfalls and scenery were simply magnificent."*

On Friday 4 September, which in Persia is the Sabbath, Walter and John went up into the mountains. After about an hour they reached a village at the foot of the mountain called Darband, with gardens, trees, waterfalls, rocks and boulders, caves, alcoves and rock plants. By chance, as they were walking round, Walter bumped into an old friend, Arthur Cassett, stationed at the Aircraft Factory, whom he had not seen for two and a half years since they were rookies together at Manston in March 1940.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Poles in Persia

Tehran in the summer of 1942 was full of strangers. After an agreement between Poland's government in exile and the Soviet Union, General Anders's Polish army and tens of thousands of civilians, many of them children, were evacuated from the Soviet Union into Iran in 1942. More than 116,000 people reached Iran between 1942 and 1945, and many were sent on to Tehran. The ticket Walter kept shows that on 3 September he went to the Polish Soldiers' Theatre, and on his last day he ate at a Polish café in the city. The world he was walking through was a crowded and temporary one.

Source: US Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, 'Polish Refugees in Iran during World War II'.

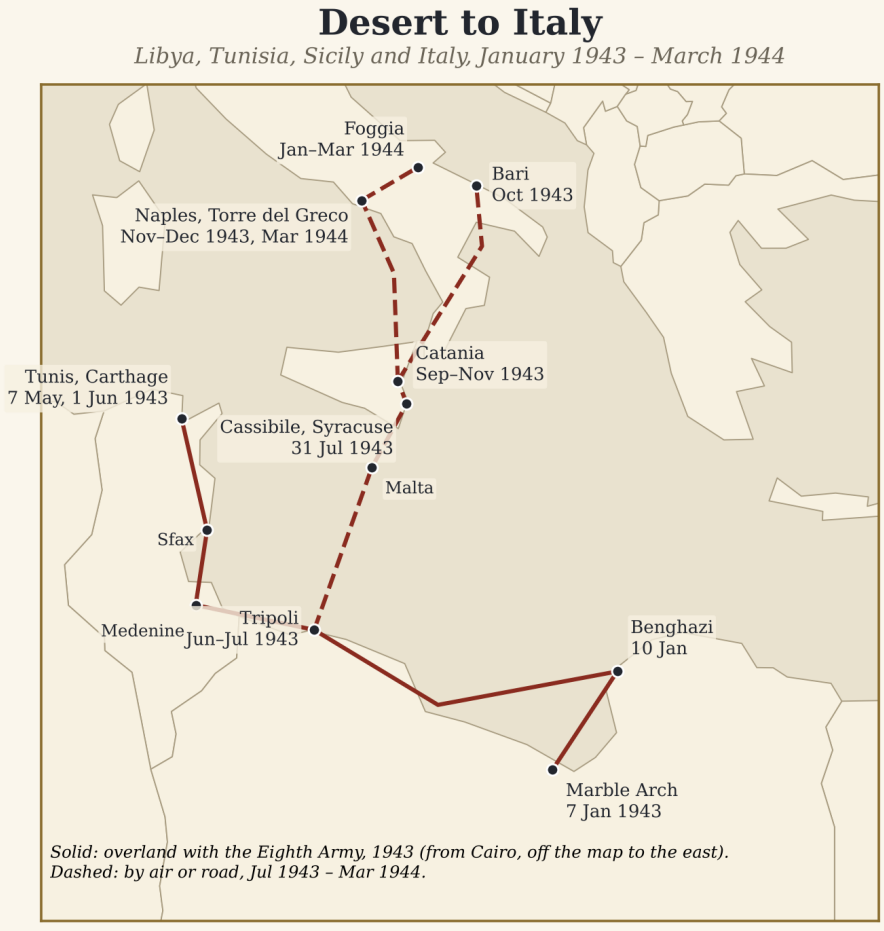
On Saturday 19 September, his last day, he met Arthur again in the afternoon, had a meal at the Polish Café, wandered round the shops and bought some lovely coffee to take back. The next morning the lorry took them down to the station. They were all very thankful to get back to Basrah after the long journey. After a fortnight Walter went sick with sandfly fever and had a week in hospital, got over that, and settled down to work again.

PART TWO

Desert, Sicily and Italy

November 1942 – March 1944

From the oil island of Abadan, Walter flies to Cairo and joins 25 M.R.S., the unit that follows the Eighth Army from the Marble Arch through Tripoli, Tunisia, Sicily and southern Italy. These are the diary's busiest and most dangerous chapters.



Desert to Italy. *The route of 25 M.R.S., January 1943 – March 1944. Journeys by air are shown schematically.*

CHAPTER

8

Abadan and Cairo

Oil, a flying boat and a first flight

3 NOVEMBER 1942 – 6 JANUARY 1943

Walter is sent to the Abadan refinery to help with a malaria epidemic. On Christmas Eve he is posted to the Middle East, flies for the first time in a Sunderland flying boat, and reaches Cairo.

November brought the first signs of cool weather, and everyone was thankful. Walter had been overseas for a year, and on 3 November the senior medical officer told him to go to Abadan for a month, because an epidemic of malaria had broken out and they wanted his help with the blood slides to get patients diagnosed more quickly.

Abadan, he explained, was an island twenty-eight miles long and five wide, “more or less a big oil well”, the third largest oil refinery in the world. Everything on it, including the cars, buses, lorries and cranes, belonged to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. About 2,000 English people lived there, mostly working for the company, with thousands of local workers, and then “troops, troops and more troops, including a large number of Americans who think they know everything”.

Mr Wilson showed him the laboratory, “a grand place”, and gave him complete liberty. It was a great thrill to work in a big laboratory again. Once the malaria had died down he moved on to blood grouping all the RAF personnel, about 1,200 of them, doing some 150 a day and his slides at night. He gained, he said, very useful knowledge from Dr Marsh and Mr Wilson's long experience of that part of the world.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The refinery on the island

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company began building the Abadan refinery in 1909 and had oil flowing in 1912. By 1938 it was the largest refinery in the world. During the war it supplied fuel to the Allied forces and was a logistics centre for American Lend-Lease aircraft being sent to the Soviet Union. In August 1942, while Walter was a few weeks from arriving, Field Marshal Alanbrooke wrote that “everything depends on the oil from Abadan”.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Abadan’.

On the morning of Christmas Eve the medical officer told him he was posted forthwith to the Middle East. This shook him, as it came at an inappropriate time, but he was very pleased and everyone told him how lucky he was. By “a certain amount of influence” he got the posting held until after the unit's Christmas show. Christmas Eve dinner was cold salmon, roast goose or duck, Christmas pudding, trifle and fruit jelly, followed by cheese, coffee and Christmas cake, and a sing-song round the fire with beer.

He was up at four and left Basrah at half past, and from there on, he wrote, he was “treated as a gentleman for the rest of the day”. A launch took about twenty of them out to the BOAC flying boat lying in the river. For the first time of flying he had the privilege of going in a Sunderland. “Punctually at 6.30 the 4 big engines roared, and before you could say ‘Jack Robinson’ we were in the air.” They landed at Lake Habbaniya at 9.15 and set off again for a four-hour hop to Kallai. There was a marvellous lunch, and for the last time they made a perfect landing, on the Nile: a thousand miles in eleven hours.



A Short Sunderland flying boat on the water. Walter's caption on the print reads 'MAIL BOAT ARRIVING'.

The following morning he met Harry Harding, who used to be at Halton with him, and was shown round Heliopolis, "more or less a suburb of Cairo where the more aristocratic people live": decent shops, houses, buses and trams again. On New Year's Day they went to the Services Club, "probably one of the finest in the world", and then to the pictures to see *The Thief of Baghdad*, which amused Walter, being so highly fantastic.

On 6 January he was telephoned about half past nine and told to report back to 22 P.T.C. He knew immediately that his posting had come through. He was flying somewhere, with five blankets and only forty pounds of kit, and was to be kitted out with battledress at once. When his kit was packed and weighed he had to leave a lot behind, including all his treasured photographs. By then they had told him his unit: 25 M.R.S.

They were up at four on Thursday 7 January and left for the airport at five. They were flying to Marble Arch. He had been disappointed not to see the pyramids while he was in Egypt, but on gaining height he saw them beautifully, in the early morning with the sun just rising, "a perfectly wonderful picture". Little did he think that the very next day he should be standing by, and passing right under, the Marble Arch.

CHAPTER

9

Libya

Following the Eighth Army

7 JANUARY – MARCH 1943

Walter joins 25 M.R.S., ‘Culliman's travelling circus’, in the Libyan desert near the Marble Arch. Life is mobile, dangerous and occasionally exhilarating.



Walter in RAF battledress, Libya, January 1943.

At half past twelve they came in to land, and the picture he had seen the evening before became real. They circled and landed just beside the Marble Arch, where only about ten days earlier a terrific battle had been fought. It was an enormous marble arch across the road, said Walter, built by the Italians to commemorate some big battle fought there years ago. On one side you looked out over Cyrenaica and on the other over Tripolitania.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The Marble Arch

The arch was not built for a battle. Fascist Italy built it between August 1936 and February 1937, to a design by Florestano Di Fausto, and it was inaugurated on 15 March 1937 during Mussolini's visit. It stood 31 metres high on the border between Italian Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and marked the completion of the new coast road, which ran under it. It also recalled the ancient legend of the Philaeni brothers, buried alive on the spot to fix the boundary between Carthage and Cyrene. The arch was destroyed in the early 1970s.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Arch of the Philaeni’.

On Saturday 10 January Walter got a wagon to Benghazi and set off with four others on a 250-mile journey. About sixty miles from Benghazi the big end broke, so he hitch-hiked in, arriving about four o'clock. He found a big captured Italian laboratory, which the unit was using, and met Norman House, who used to be at Halton with him. It consisted of four very big laboratories, white-tiled and beautifully finished, with one of the finest libraries he had ever seen, and he thought it a crying shame that such a place should be ruined. He also met S/Sgt Aitken, the pathologist, who gave him permission to be fitted up with a mobile laboratory.



The mobile laboratory trailer, with ‘25 RAF MFU’ and its number stencilled on the rear.



Walter at the open door of the laboratory, with the unit sign and ‘Laboratory’ both legible.

In the evening Jerry paid them a visit, and the ack-ack fire was terrific, reminding him of the blitzes on London in 1940. It lasted about an hour. All the way up the road were notices like “Keep 100 yds apart”, “Do not brew up on the road, get right off”, and “If Jerry straffs you, you won't laugh”. On one

old lorry that must have been blown up, someone had written: “I was not a 100 yds distant — Are you?” The notices were crude, he thought, but extremely witty, and if obeyed they served their purpose.



Staff of the field hospital in front of their tent, with the ‘Operating Theatre’ and ‘X-ray and Resuscitation Centre’ signs.

On Friday 24 January they heard on the wireless that Tripoli had fallen. Until then bread had been non-existent, and fresh meat unobtainable so far out in the desert, so all their food was tinned. They found a good gazelle-hunting ground about thirty miles from the camp, and Walter went out one afternoon with an officer and a couple of other lads. They got five between them, and he shot the biggest. The gazelles went about in herds and could run faster than any animal he had seen: one buck, chased for half an hour, was level with the car at nearly fifty miles an hour. After that they had fresh meat nearly every day, and roast gazelle, he said, was lovely, “very much like venison”.

CHAPTER

10

Tunisia

The Mareth Line and beyond

MARCH – JUNE 1943

25 M.R.S. follows the Eighth Army into Tunisia. Walter has two near-escapes, Tunis falls on 7 May, and near Carthage he sees Churchill pass in convoy.

The following morning all the tents were taken down and they moved off about eleven o'clock. By nightfall they reached the outskirts of Sirte, and the next day had to make Medenine, ninety miles, before dark. The commanding officer found a spot five miles from the village. Then one of the boys saw a bomber heading straight for them, and Walter ran into the only building about.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The Mareth Line

The Mareth Line was a chain of fortifications built by the French in the 1930s across southern Tunisia, running from the sea into the Matmata Hills. Montgomery's Eighth Army, about 90,000 men, attacked it in the middle of March 1943. The frontal attack gained a bridgehead but was beaten back by counter-attacks, and was called off on 24 March. A flanking move by the New Zealand Corps through the Tebaga Gap from 26 March then forced the Axis troops to withdraw. The Eighth Army lost about 4,000 men, the Axis more than 7,000 prisoners.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Battle of the Mareth Line’.

“At that moment there was a terrific explosion”, Walter wrote, “and my tin hat was blown off my head and I was thrown right across the building I was standing in, and the next thing I remember was bricks and mortar falling on top of me.” He got up and felt himself all over, and found he was entirely unharmed. Calling to the others, he saw a man lying among the debris and pulled him out; he was only suffering from severe shock. The crater was not more than ten yards from where he had been standing. Had the bomb dropped another twenty yards up the pathway it would have hit the hospital and caused hundreds of casualties. From the craters it was estimated to be a 500-pounder and a smaller bomb of 25 pounds. “I thanked God for my life.”

Another day his driver swung round so they were level with the road again, and suddenly Walter saw two Army lads waving frantically and jumped to the conclusion that they were on a minefield. “In those few moments I went hot and cold all over and am sure my heart beat went up to 120 per minute.” With God's good grace they avoided all the mines and drew back onto the track safely. The lads told them that only two days earlier a lorry had blown up not fifty yards from where they were.

On Monday 19 March, after a week at El Hencha, a case of smallpox turned up and part of the camp had to be isolated. They made a cricket pitch and had some good games with the surrounding units. Everybody was excited about the fall of Tunis, and on 7 May it was officially announced on the wireless that Tunis and Bizerta had fallen. A few days later the remaining Germans were captured and the terrific battle that had been fought there finished. The unit was congratulated on the fine work it had done on its long journey following the Eighth Army.

On 1 June Walter was granted a day's leave in Tunis. They reached the outskirts by half past four and went on to Carthage, where they stayed the night at 30 M.F.H. On the way they passed the cathedral,

where they were waved off the road and told to stop. Within a minute a large convoy appeared, led by service police on motorcycles and 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 and Anthony Eden, who waved to us as they went by.”*

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Churchill in Tunisia

Churchill had flown to Algiers on 28 May 1943 to confer with Eisenhower, and on 1 June flew on to Tunis, where he addressed the troops. Walter's list of who was in the convoy, with General Alexander and General Eisenhower in the car behind, is his own recollection, but the date and place fit Churchill's visit exactly.

Source: International Churchill Society, ‘Churchill in North Africa, May–June 1943’.

Shortly after dinner Group Captain Lipscomb, who had been his old commanding officer in England, sent for him, and they swam that evening in the Bay of Carthage, climbing down a narrow path through the cliffs to a pleasant alcove. Tunis, being a French town, was full of very smart French girls, and Walter, who had not seen a pretty, well-dressed girl for such a long time, admired their dresses. Tunis itself had not been damaged much, and he was glad to go into a real pub again. The wine was “not at all bad” and very cheap.

CHAPTER

11

Tripoli

Waiting for Sicily

JUNE – 31 JULY 1943

25 M.R.S. waits near Tripoli. Walter visits the Roman ruins at Sabratha and is reunited with old friends, before flying to Sicily.

The camp was only a mile from the sea, and they could swim nearly every afternoon. They got one or two concerts and cinemas, and one day Walter saw Mickey Rooney in *A Yank at Eton*. Two days later, on 14 June, Ralph Reader and his Gang Show came round: “a 1st class show, one of the best I have seen in the desert”.

On 1 July Walter had the chance of a day in Tripoli with his pal Reg and the commanding officer. They reached Sabratha by lunchtime. The commanding officer had things to do, so Reg and Walter looked round the old Roman ruins, which were really interesting. “We took quite a few photos here.” Most of the ruins were well preserved and obviously looked after.



The Roman theatre at Sabratha, with the Mediterranean beyond, 1 July 1943.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Sabratha

Walter was told the theatre went back to 200 BC. It is rather younger: it was built around the end of the first century AD or the beginning of the second, and originally seated about 5,000 people. Italian archaeologists excavated and restored it between 1927 and 1937, when Libya was an Italian colony, and the carefully rebuilt stage wall that Walter and Reg saw dates from then. The theatre stands beside the sea, as in his photograph.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Ancient theater of Sabratha’.

They reached the Tripoli racecourse again at seven that evening, where a hot meal was ready. By now everyone knew they were going to Sicily, and there was a good deal of excitement. On 21 July, as the other unit was also on the racecourse, Harry Harding was with them, and Harry, Dave Summers and Walter were all together for the first time since Halton, about two years earlier.

Then Walter was signalled for urgently and packed his microscope and stains into a box. F/Sgt Smiles decided to come with him. On 30 July they set off for Castel Benito aerodrome. On the 31st they were up at half past five, breakfasted at six, and out on the airfield by half past. A *gari* took them to the aircraft, a Dakota, twelve passengers and a crew of four, and punctually they were airborne.

After about half an hour they were over the sea, and for the next two hours saw nothing but waves. Then Malta came in sight, the first Walter had seen of it, a wonderfully fertile island where hardly a square yard seemed uncultivated. They landed at Luqa. He had hardly finished a cup of tea when Smiles came running in and called out that the plane was taking off at once. They ran hard and just caught it before the doors closed. Flying low to avoid German radio location, they got their first glimpse of Sicily after twenty minutes and half an hour later landed at an aerodrome at Cassibile, five miles from Syracuse.

CHAPTER

12

Sicily

Cassibile to Catania

31 JULY – OCTOBER 1943

Walter serves first in an almond grove near Syracuse, then in a hospital in Catania's Commercial Institute. He passes the place where Hedley Verity was fatally wounded, and shelters from an air raid behind a tree.

The advance party's camp was only 200 yards from the aerodrome, in an almond grove right in the farmland, among some of the prettiest scenery Walter had seen for some time. In the evening Reg took him for a walk round the vineyards, where they picked grapes and ate them “until we looked like them”. He could almost imagine himself back in England.

On 1 August he wrote that life was very pleasant. When you finished work you could walk down to the sea, only half a mile away. There was no sand, but the famous Sicilian coral rocks, which they dived off into fifteen feet of crystal-clear water. He went to bed that night “very satisfied with the situation”, and could honestly say that the first week there was one of the happiest he had spent on the unit.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Operation Husky

The Allied invasion of Sicily began in the night of 9–10 July 1943 and ended on 17 August when Allied troops entered Messina. Syracuse fell in the first days, and the Eighth Army's XIII Corps took Catania on 5 August. Walter flew in on 31 July, in the middle of the campaign, and arrived at Catania a few days after it had fallen.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Allied invasion of Sicily’.

On 11 August the principal medical officer sent him to Catania to fetch equipment from the university. They set off early, passed through Syracuse and were soon high in the hills, where the views were some of the most wonderful he had seen. On the plain of Catania they crossed the famous bridge that had been 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.” Mount Etna stood majestically behind the town.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Hedley Verity

Hedley Verity, the Yorkshire and England left-arm spinner, was a captain commanding B Company of the Green Howards. On the night of 19 July 1943 the battalion attacked across the plain outside Catania. His company was surrounded, he was hit in the chest by shrapnel and left behind, his last order being “keep going”. He was captured, taken by boat to the mainland and on to the Italian hospital at Caserta, where he died on 31 July 1943. Walter's diary links his death to a bridge on the road to Catania.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Hedley Verity’.

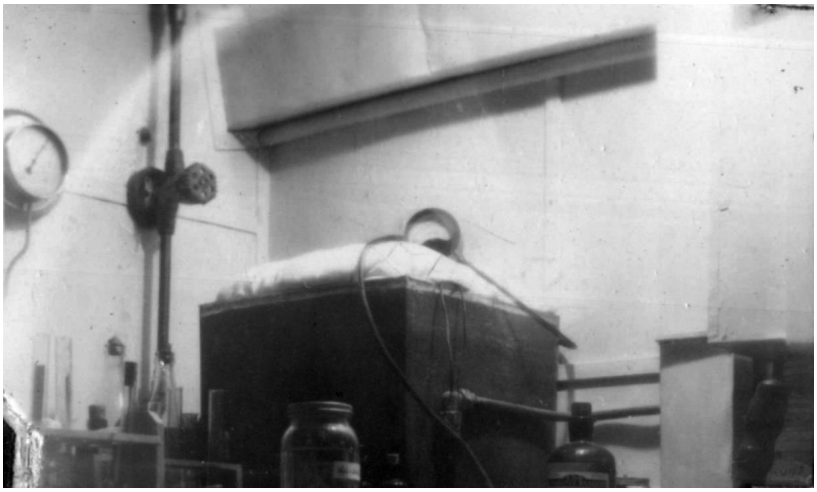
At the university the place had been left just as it was, evacuated in a hurry. The equipment was some of the finest he had ever seen, practically new. Their job was to pick up a balance, which they did, and as many other things as they could lay hands on, afraid that the officer might come round and catch them piling it into the lorry. They stayed the night and went for a stroll in a beautiful park. They had not been out long before they were caught in a raid, and sheltered at the nearest tree. Shrapnel from the Beauforts came clattering down all around them, hitting the trunk just above their heads. They hugged

the tree for half an hour “which seemed like years to me”. Nobody was touched, and for the second time Walter thanked God for his life.

On 1 September they were ordered to Catania to take over a big Commercial Institute and turn it into a hospital. In a week they were completely organised and the whole place looked different. The principal medical officer came round and was amazed at the work they had done. Within a fortnight they had 300 patients, and everyone had to work very hard.



Inside Walter’s mobile laboratory: bottles, glassware and a sink.



Another view inside the mobile laboratory, with what looks like a steriliser or autoclave.

> *“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 and felt at last that my presence was felt.”*

Group Captain O'Malley, the PMO, came round again and told him he was doing his best to get Walter his third stripe. The PMO commandeered a hotel on Mount Etna, 5,000 feet up, as a convalescent home, and Walter managed a weekend there. On the Saturday night they got a dance band and invited about thirty sisters from the surrounding hospitals and their own, and had a really good dance.



Field surgery: the anaesthetist and surgeon with gas equipment.



A surgical team of four operating in a field tent.



Three masked figures around an operating table.



A wrecked German Junkers Ju 52 transport on a Sicilian airfield, with the black cross visible.



Three men beside the unit vehicle, marked ‘25 RAF MFH’, taking tea. Walter is in the middle.

CHAPTER

13

Bari

The Blackpool of Italy

11 – 20 OCTOBER 1943

Walter is sent from Catania to Bari to set up a laboratory. He meets Wee Georgie Wood in a café and returns to Catania in time for his birthday.

On 11 October Walter was told he had to fly to Bari, in Italy, to set up a laboratory for 30 M.F.H. They had been flying for about half an hour when they ran into a terrific thunderstorm, and the plane was pitched and tossed like a cork. Many times he had visions of coming down in the sea and having to swim for it. The pilot decided to turn back.

The next morning was a lovely day. There were twenty-eight of them aboard, including a major general, a brigadier and an air commodore, and many colonels and majors. They landed at Taranto at half past ten and at Bari at half past eleven.

Walter found Bari a wonderful place. The Italians considered it “their Blackpool of Italy”, and it nearly came up to any English seaside resort. It was still run entirely by the Italians, not taken over by the British authorities, and had been by-passed by the troops and suffered very little war damage. All the Italian cinemas were open, showing American films dubbed into Italian, and there was a theatre reserved for British and American troops right on the sea front.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Wee Georgie Wood

Wee Georgie Wood, born George Wood Bamlett in Jarrow in 1895, was a music-hall star who kept a childlike appearance all his life: he stood about 4 ft 9 in tall and had an unbroken voice, and at 13 could still play a five-year-old. His partner Dolly Harmer played his mother in their sketches from 1917. During the war they toured widely for ENSA, reportedly giving more than 500 shows and travelling some 70,000 miles. Walter heard them say they had done 68 shows in 32 days.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Wee Georgie Wood’.

> *“He came walking along the street with Dolly Harmer, and came and sat down at the same table as us. We soon got into conversation.”*

Walter saw Wee Georgie Wood and Dolly Harmer in a very good variety concert, and that same morning he had been wandering round the town and sat down in a café for an ice cream when Wood came along the street and sat down at the same table. They told him they had done 68 shows in the last 32 days, travelling from Cairo right through to Algiers, then around Sicily, finishing at Bari. He was most interesting and wanted to buy them drinks, and to be polite they had another ice with him.

After five days his commanding officer turned up on his way to Foggia. Walter told him straight out that he was fed up and wanted to get back to the unit as soon as possible. It was fixed for Tuesday morning, which pleased him, as his birthday was on the Wednesday and he knew his pals were arranging a party. They had a smooth, comfortable journey back, landing at Catania at eleven.

On Wednesday 20 October, his birthday, he did not do a great deal of work. After finishing at half past twelve he walked round the town with his pal John Walker and bought a few things for the evening. The dinner was arranged for seven. Reg made an excellent job of it, down to the finest detail, with toast with the soup and iced coffee to finish. The chicken was beautifully tender, and the cooks made him a lovely fruit cake and even iced it. There were a few bottles of wine and, as usual, a very good sing-song, and the party finished about midnight, “everyone having thoroughly enjoyed themselves”.

CHAPTER

14

Torre del Greco

Vesuvius from every window

NOVEMBER 1943 – 1 JANUARY 1944

The unit moves to a convalescent depot at Torre del Greco, with Vesuvius in view. Walter visits Pompeii, sees opera at the San Carlo, and celebrates Christmas with his unit.

On 17 November 1943 they received orders to move to Torre del Greco, about six miles south of Naples, a journey of 516 miles, “the most enjoyable we had done”. The convalescent depot was large and modern with every convenience. From the upstairs windows you could look out over the Bay of Naples, and from the north windows straight at Vesuvius, a wonderful sight at night, throwing out lava and flames.

The local people told him 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 than the normal crater. Walter had a room for his laboratory on the top floor, looking out to Vesuvius, and the Italians had certainly picked a beautiful spot.



Walter at work in his top-floor laboratory at Torre del Greco, with Vesuvius through the window.

On Sunday 11 December he took a half day and visited the ruins of Pompeii, only about five miles away. Compared with the Roman ruins at Sabratha, they were “far superior”. There were complete streets with the shops on either side, the market place, swimming pools, arenas and some of the famous

houses with the actual paintings on the walls, some in extremely good preservation. A guide took them round, and it was “very educational”.



Walter at Pompeii, with Vesuvius behind him, 11 December 1943.

Christmas Day was a holiday for them all, and they did their best to entertain the patients. The cooks did it very well, with turkey and pork, Christmas pudding and two bottles of beer a man, and afterwards they sat and ate nuts and raisins until they could eat no more, followed by a sing-song until the early hours.

On 31 December Walter and a pal went to Naples to see an opera. The opera house was a marvellous place, the biggest theatre he had ever been in. The opera was *La Bohème*, and as he had never seen one he expected to be bored, especially as it was in Italian. “On the contrary I was thrilled with every moment of it.” When he first saw the orchestra of 65 players his eyes nearly popped out of his head, and it was a real thrill to hear a good orchestra again. The woman who sang Mimi had one of the best

voices he had ever heard. He enjoyed it so much that they decided to go the next afternoon to see the Scottish opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and this time made sure of a good seat, a box on the second floor.



Walter's ticket for the San Carlo, 1 January 1944: 'Militari', opera season 1943–44, a box seat (posto di palco), row 3. He kept it all his life.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The San Carlo under the Allies

The San Carlo had been damaged by bombing in 1943. After Naples was liberated on 1 October the British authorities requisitioned it. Allied revues were staged in November, and opera resumed on 26 December 1943 with *La Bohème*, so Walter, five days later, was seeing it in its first week. It was an Allied soldiers' opera house: performances were meant for troops, and civilians were admitted only to the gallery and loggia. It had a resident orchestra of 98.

Source: Naples: Life, Death and Miracles, 'The San Carlo reopens' (naplesldm.com).

CHAPTER

15

Foggia

The final posting

6 JANUARY – 17 MARCH 1944

In January 1944 the unit moves to Foggia. Walter's best friend John Walker survives a dangerous operation, and in March Walter is posted to No. 2 RAF General Hospital in Algiers.

They got orders to move on 5 January and at nine on the 6th were on their way to Foggia. About twenty miles on, military police stopped them: no one could go beyond Avellino because the roads were frozen and divisions of the Fifth Army that were on the move had got stuck. All the high hills round them were covered in snow and it was bitterly cold.

Some Canadians found out they were there and offered to put them up for the night in their transit camp. They made them welcome and got a good hot meal, and the next morning gave them such a big breakfast that most couldn't finish it. In the afternoon they arranged a football match with the Canadians and had a good game.

Shortly after nine they were on the move again, with a hundred miles ahead. They made good headway and reached Foggia at half past two in the morning. Walter remembered nothing of the last ten miles, having fallen asleep in the car.

Jack Holland, the laboratory assistant from 30, moved in with him, and it did not take them long to have a nice little lab organised. There was plenty of work, but for a change it gave Walter the chance of some half days. Foggia itself was one mass of ruins. He walked round one day and, as far as he could see, there was hardly a building which had not been bombed or affected by blast. It was said that Naples had been razed to the ground, but although Naples was far bigger, he considered Foggia had been hit far worse in comparison.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Why Foggia?

Foggia was a rail junction with a ring of airfields, and in 1943 the Allies set out to stop its use by the German and Italian forces. Italian sources count nine major air raids between May and September 1943, the heaviest on 22 July and, with the whole city carpet-bombed, on 19 August, and put the civilian dead at about 20,000. The city was awarded Italy's gold medal for civil valour in 1959. Walter saw it five months after the last big raid.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Bombing of Foggia’ (figures are Italian estimates).

March brought signs of better weather, which was a good thing as he had never seen it rain so much as in February, in all the time he had been overseas. His best pal, John Walker, was taken seriously ill and had to undergo a very difficult abdominal operation, which proved very successful, but at one time it was “touch and go” whether he would live, and they were all very worried.

Then, “just to crown everything”, he was told he was posted to No. 2. This shook him badly, as he had never expected it, but the commanding officer said it was the only possible way to promotion, and he understood. The posting took effect in a few days and he had to pack up his lab in a hurry.

Having said his farewells to most people on Thursday evening, he was ready to move first thing on Friday 17 March. He went by ambulance with the evacuations to Naples, to 3 B.P.D., where he had to wait for the boat to Algiers. His heart was “definitely in my mouth that morning”: he had made some grand pals on the unit and was particularly sorry to leave while John was still very ill, though he was glad to hear that before he left John had been taken off the dangerously ill list and was making very good progress.

CHAPTER

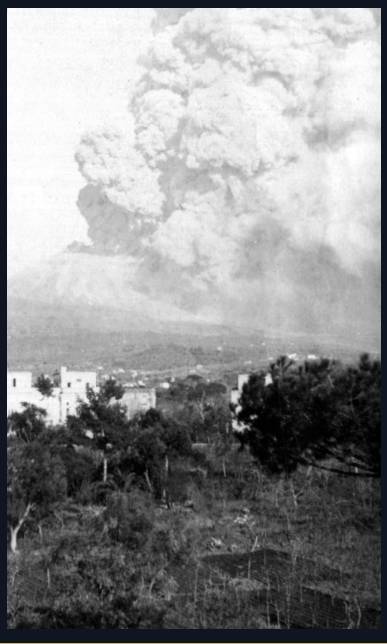
16

Naples and Vesuvius

The eruption

17 – 20 MARCH 1944

Walter waits at the Base Personnel Depot in Naples for transport to Algiers. On 19 and 20 March 1944 he watches Vesuvius erupt from the roof of his billet, five miles from the mountain.



Vesuvius in eruption, March 1944: Walter's own view, from the roof of his billet about five miles away.

Having finally said goodbye to all his friends, Walter set off in the ambulance for Naples, “still hardly believing” that he was leaving 25 M.F.H. after one year and three months.

On Sunday 19 March Vesuvius began to erupt and throw out quite a lot of lava, and according to the local inhabitants of Portici it was the biggest eruption they had had for fifteen years. By Monday afternoon it was still erupting and getting far worse. Thousands of tons of lava were being thrown down the sides and travelling at the rate of one yard a minute in a thirty-six-foot avalanche of white-hot lava. There was a small town right in its path, San Sebastiano, and by nightfall the whole of this town had been destroyed, though all its inhabitants were safely evacuated.

> *“It is difficult for me to describe the sight I saw this night … The whole of the mountain was lit up and all the lava by night showed up bright red as it trickled down the mountain side.”*



A rare aerial view looking down into the crater during the March 1944 eruption, apparently taken from an aircraft.

He was standing on top of the building in which he was billeted, not more than five miles from the mountain itself, and it was a sight that, like many millions of people, he had never seen before. “For anyone who has never seen a volcano erupt, the only thing I can say is 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.”

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Vesuvius, March 1944

The eruption began on 17 March 1944 and lasted about ten days. Lava flowed down the western slopes and entered San Sebastiano on the night of 19 March, as Walter says, and also passed through Massa di Somma. Basketball-sized rocks fell and some places were buried under up to a metre of ash. Twenty-six Italian civilians died, most when roofs collapsed under the ash, and about 12,000 people were displaced. Allied forces ran the evacuations. At Pompeii Airfield near Terzigno, the American 340th Bomb Group lost dozens of B-25 bombers (estimates run from about 70 to 90) to hot ash, with no airmen killed. It is the most recent eruption of Vesuvius.

Sources: Earth Magazine, ‘March 17, 1944: the most recent eruption of Mount Vesuvius’; Wikipedia, ‘Pompeii Airfield’.

PART THREE

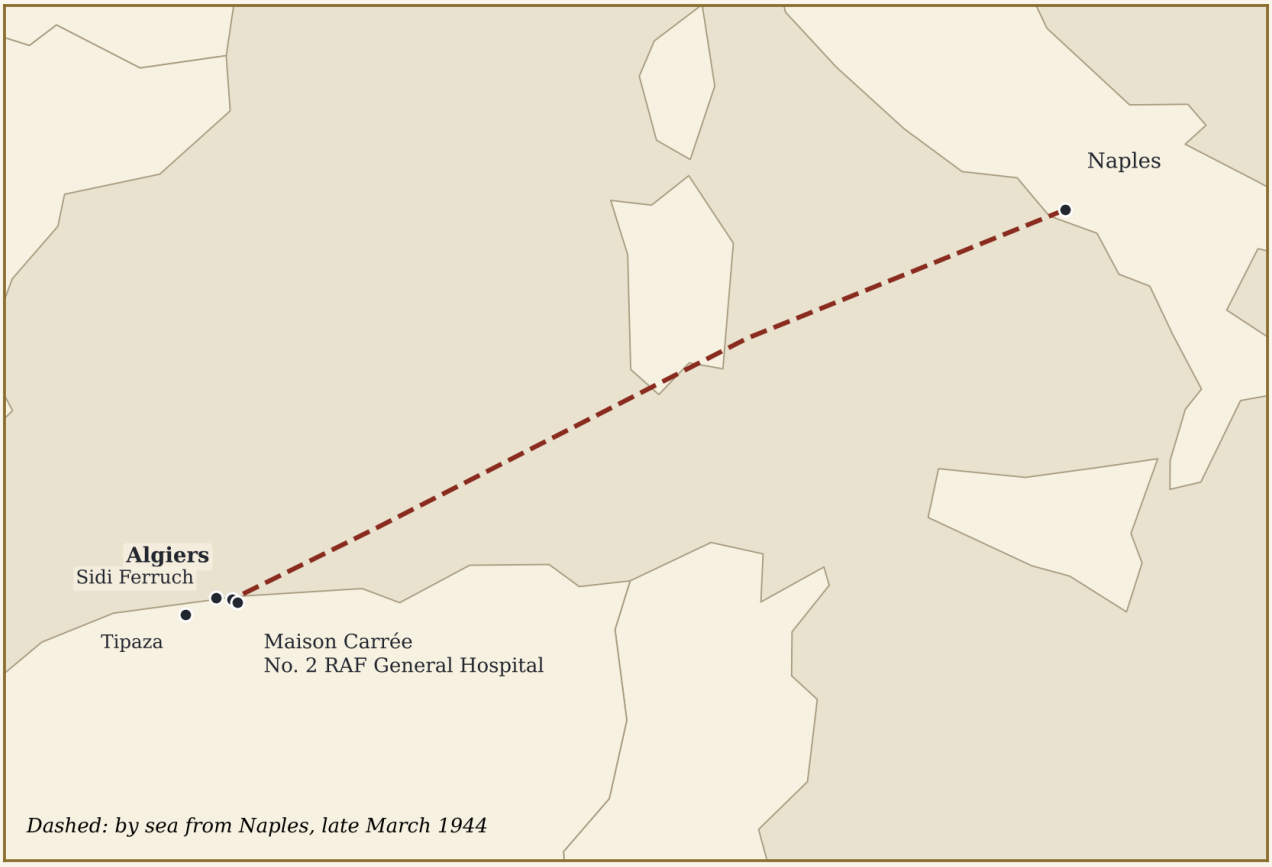
Algiers

March – December 1944

A hospital on a hill above the Mediterranean, cricket and football, a promotion to Flight Sergeant, and a nursing sister whom Walter asks to a dance while still in his football kit.

Algiers

No. 2 RAF General Hospital, 1944 – 1945



Algiers. *No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Maison Carrée, 1944–45. The dashed line is Walter's sea passage from Naples in late March 1944.*

CHAPTER

17

No. 2 RAF General Hospital

Maison Carrée, Algiers

SPRING – SEPTEMBER 1944

Walter arrives in Algiers and reaches No. 2 RAF General Hospital at Maison Carrée, on a hill overlooking the sea and the city. He is put up for promotion, starts the cricket club, and in September is told he is a Flight Sergeant.



The sign at the entrance to No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Maison Carrée, Algiers.

“My first impression of Algiers was rather a thrilling one,” Walter wrote, “because I saw it all lit up at night, and this was the first time I had seen lights in a harbour since being in Cape Town.” Transport took him straight to No. 2 RAF General Hospital, which stood on the top of a hill just outside a place called Maison Carrée. From the front of the hospital you could see right onto the sea front, and to the left right onto Algiers, about four miles away.

S/Ldr Price came in and seemed very pleased to see him. After a short chat he took Walter all round the hospital and introduced him to the departmental chiefs. “I can honestly say that I felt very happy and very pleased with everything.” The squadron leader put him up for promotion the following day.



Walter at the microscope in the laboratory at Algiers.

After a few weeks he was thoroughly at home, had made several changes in the lab and started teaching his assistant, helping him through his laboratory exam. He found there was plenty of sport on the unit, and it did not take him long to get his place in the football team. After a month his promotion came through and he moved into the Sergeants' Mess, which “made a lot of difference as most people know”.

A few days after he was promoted, the Sergeants' Mess had an outing and they had a very pleasant day at Tipaza, Milena and the Tomb of the Christians. On the way back they ran into a terrific swarm of locusts, which hung around for a week or more and were a nuisance to everyone, and of course to the crops.

He paid one or two visits to Algiers but found there was not a great deal to do there except go to a show, though there were always plenty of films and a very nice opera house. The season closed for the summer, and he was sorry, because he had intended to go each week and kept putting it off. There were some very good ENSA shows at the hospital. Most of the chaps on the unit had not been overseas long and were “some of the worst bunch of chaps for moaning I have ever met”. He thought it would have done many of them good to spend a few months in the desert without any entertainment at all. They did not worry him, as he was very happy in his job.



A satirical ‘Heil!’ banner with a caricature of Hitler, Algiers.

By June there had been no cricket, so he tackled S/Ldr Price about it, and after a week or so managed to get the club going. They played away matches because they had no ground of their own, and started far too late in the season, so by the time they really got going it was time to pack up.

In September, about three days before going on leave, he was on pay parade when he was called to the commanding officer's office immediately. He had no idea why, and was racking his brains over what he had done wrong. He marched in smartly and saluted, and the commanding officer got up from behind his table, came across, shook hands and said: “Congratulations — you are a F/Sgt now.” “Well, I could

have fallen through the floor and could not believe my ears for a minute.” The rank was only acting, but it was paid, which he supposed was the main thing.

He and a friend went on leave the first week of September and spent most days swimming at Sidi Ferruch. They were “very lucky to have exceptionally good weather”. They saw quite a number of shows. He still wanted to get right away from the place for a little while. On his return the work increased by nearly a hundred per cent and for the next month or so it was really hard going for the two of them.

CHAPTER

18

Margaret

“More than fond”

OCTOBER – BOXING DAY 1944

Cricket gives way to football. On a Sunday afternoon in early October, Walter walks into a sister's office on impulse, still in football kit, and asks her to the Sergeants' Mess dance.



Margaret Notley, nursing sister, talking to Walter in the laboratory at Algiers.

“Cricket did a natural death,” Walter wrote, “and once more football took its place, and I think it is here that the next chapter in the book should begin.”

One Sunday afternoon early in October he had been playing football and came back to the laboratory to collect a towel and some soap. Passing one of the sisters' offices, he saw a sister sitting at the desk writing. Seizing the opportunity he went in and asked her if she would come to the Sergeants' Mess dance. He must have looked an awful sight in football kit with his hair all over the place, and as it was all done so quickly he must have caught her unawares, and she accepted.

“I realised then that I had formed a great liking for this girl.”

MARGARET BEFORE ALGIERS

The woman at the desk

Margaret Elizabeth Notley was about thirty when Walter walked into her office. Her father, John Leonard Notley, was killed at Ypres in 1917, when she was three, and she spent part of her childhood in Kamloops, British Columbia, with her mother Clara. She trained in London, qualifying as a Registered Sick Children’s Nurse in 1935 and a State Registered Nurse in 1938, and worked at Charing Cross Hospital before the war. In 1940 she was nursing at a military hospital at Hythe in Kent, in January 1941 at RAF Halton, and in 1941–42 she was night sister at RAF Hospital Cosford. A photograph of Ward B.I at No. 2 RAF General Hospital is annotated in her own hand ‘April 1944’, so she was already there when Walter arrived.

Source: Archium family archive (Margaret’s certificates, photographs and autograph book).



Ward B.I, No. 2 RAF General Hospital, April 1944. Margaret is the nurse standing at the front. Annotated on the back in her hand.



Margaret with a dog, c. 1943–44. On the back: ‘In my opinion — the best effort so far.’

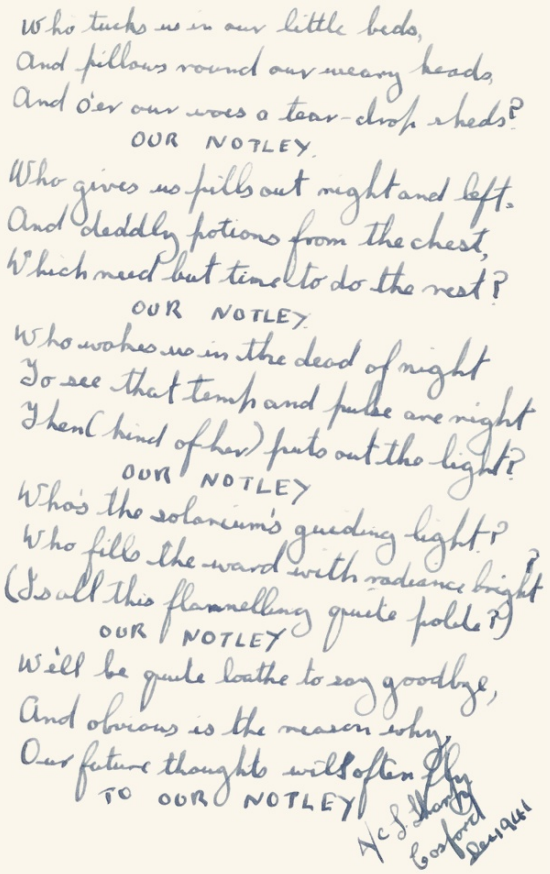
Margaret kept an autograph book through the war years, and its pages show how people saw her. On page 7 she wrote an entry of her own, at Hythe in 1940.

MARGARET’S PAGE IN HER AUTOGRAPH BOOK

‘Taint what we have,
But what we give.
‘Taint where we are
But how we live.
‘Taint what we do
But how we do it,
That makes this life
Worth goin’ through it.

Margaret E. Notley, Hythe, 1940.

At RAF Cosford in December 1941 a colleague, A.C.J. Stanley, wrote her a comic poem called *Our Notley*. Its refrain was “Our Notley, aye our Notley, we’re all so fond of you.” Other entries call her reliable, warm and funny, with an ‘Irish smile’. Patients called her Peggie, and at Cosford, Red.



'Our Notley', written for Margaret by A.C.J. Stanley, RAF Cosford, December 1941 (autograph book, page 32).

The following week he had a return invitation to a dance at the YWCA, which "shook me considerably" as he never expected it. Unfortunately the dance was cancelled, but instead they went to the pictures. It was a very enjoyable evening, and he made up his mind not to let the opportunity slip by without finding out if she would care to come to the pictures with him again. Knowing he was keen on dancing, she asked him if he would like to go to the YW dance the following Wednesday. He was very delighted and thrilled. That Wednesday would not come round fast enough, but eventually it did. He had a half day, met her for tea and then went to the dance. By now they realised they had a number of things in common and both liked one another's company.

He had known her for three weeks, and it was his birthday week, which of course called for celebration. They had a very nice little party, and he was convinced even more that he had "a very lovely girl".



A game of shove ha'penny in the Nissen hut recreation room, No. 2 RAF General Hospital.

As time went on they arranged their half days and days off together, and then he went and got infective hepatitis. “I don't think in my whole life have I been so annoyed with myself”, because he did not feel ill and did not want to go into hospital. Of course, he asked to go on her ward, and he thought he made one of the quickest recoveries from jaundice that anyone ever had. He was in and out in nine days, which to anyone who knew how resistant jaundice can be was exceptionally quick work. “Mind you, had I not wanted to get out so quickly, I am sure I could have had another week at least!”

She was going on leave the next day, so he did not see her for five days. On her return they really began to enjoy themselves, and went to concerts, cinemas, theatre, dances, “in fact everywhere together”. Even though it was the beginning of December the weather was still very warm, and on fine days they went out on picnics, which were a great success.



Walter and Margaret on a wall, Algiers.



Walter and Margaret in uniform on a bench.

The time was passing very quickly now, and after what he called three years of solitary confinement, Walter was enjoying life to the full. “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, and I might add a place I shall never forget as long as I live.”

December rapidly melted away and Christmas drew near. Once again he was in a show on Christmas Day, which proved most successful. After serving the airmen's dinners he went straight to Margaret's ward and helped with the washing-up and the meals. They had some good fun together, and by the time he finished at half past eleven he was just about all in, and finished the day with a cup of tea in the bunk with Margaret. “Although I was dog tired and thoroughly worn out, I enjoyed the day immensely and am sure I would not have done so had it not been for Margaret.”



Walter with a puppy in a deckchair.



Walter and Margaret on their wedding day, 9 July 1945, Algiers.

On Boxing Day he was so tired that he went to bed in the afternoon and slept three hours solidly. In the evening they had their Christmas dinner, followed by a dance. “Naturally I was with Margaret all the time and realised now that I was more than fond of her.” The celebrations finished with a dance on New Year's Eve, which was more of a success than the one on Boxing Day.

That is the last entry. Walter put down his pen on Boxing Day 1944 and did not write again. He and Margaret Notley were married the following summer.

AFTERWARDS

After the Diaries

1945 – 1993

Walter put down his pen on Boxing Day 1944. This is what the family knows of the rest.

The wedding

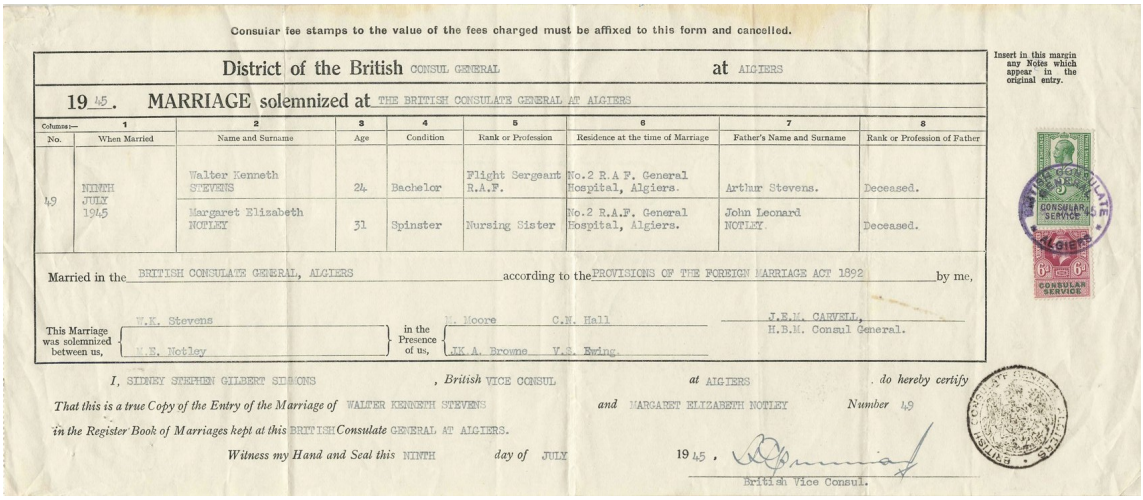
Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945, and sixty-two days later, on 9 July 1945, Walter Kenneth Stevens and Margaret Elizabeth Notley were married at the British Consulate General in Algiers, marriage number 49. The certificate gives Walter as a flight sergeant in the Royal Air Force, aged 24, and Margaret as a nursing sister, aged 31. Its witnesses were M. Moore, C.N. Hall, J.K.A. Browne and V.S. Ewing. Written on the back of the ‘Just Married’ photograph is a line that reads: “14th May 1945. The Victory Dinner. The Sixth Toast — to the future everlasting happiness. Margie + Boys.”



Walter and Margaret leaving the British Consulate General after the civil ceremony, 9 July 1945.



The wedding party, about forty people, on the steps of the consulate.



Consular fee stamps to the value of the fees charged must be affixed to this form and cancelled.

District of the British CONSUL GENERAL at ALGIERS

Insert in this margin any Notes which appear in the original entry.

19 45. MARRIAGE solemnized at THE BRITISH CONSULATE GENERAL AT ALGIERS

Columns:— 1 No.	1 When Married	2 Name and Surname	3 Age	4 Condition	5 Rank or Profession	6 Residence at the time of Marriage	7 Father's Name and Surname	8 Rank or Profession of Father
49	NINTH JULY 1945	Walter Kenneth STEVENS	24	Bachelor	Flight Sergeant R.A.F.	No.2 R.A.F. General Hospital, Algiers.	Arthur Stevens.	Deceased.
		Margaret Elizabeth NOTLEY	31	Spinster	Nursing Sister	No.2 R.A.F. General Hospital, Algiers.	John Leonard NOTLEY.	Deceased.

Married in the BRITISH CONSULATE GENERAL, ALGIERS according to the PROVISIONS OF THE FOREIGN MARRIAGE ACT 1892 by me,

This Marriage was solemnized between us, W.K. Stevens, M.E. Notley in the Presence of us, M. Moore, C.N. Hall, J.K.A. Browne, V.S. Ewing.

J.E.K. CAKWELL, H.B.M. Consul General.

I, SIDNEY STEPHEN GILBERT SIMMONS, British VICE CONSUL at ALGIERS do hereby certify

That this is a true Copy of the Entry of the Marriage of WALTER KENNETH STEVENS and MARGARET ELIZABETH NOTLEY Number 49

in the Register Book of Marriages kept at this BRITISH Consulate GENERAL AT ALGIERS.

Witness my Hand and Seal this NINTH day of JULY 1945,

British Vice Consul.

The marriage certificate, British Consulate General, Algiers, 9 July 1945, entry no. 49.



The same moment from above: Walter and Margaret probably crossing the courtyard to join the guests after the ceremony.



The decorated wedding car, with ‘JUST MARRIED’ and ‘WALTER’ legible.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Princess Mary’s RAF Nursing Service

Margaret served as a nursing sister in the RAF’s own nursing corps, Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service, which was created in the First World War and took its royal title in 1923. In the Second World War its sisters staffed RAF hospitals in Britain and overseas. No. 2 RAF General Hospital at Maison Carrée, where she and Walter met, was one of the larger RAF hospitals in North Africa.

Sources: RAF Museum and Wikipedia (to be checked against a printed history before publication).

Walter's brother

Walter was not the only Stevens brother in uniform. His younger brother, Sergeant John Henry Stevens of the Glider Pilot Regiment, was born on 20 December 1923 at 'Kirkside', Church Road, Sutton, the son of Minnie Stevens, née Rowden. He was killed in action on 24 March 1945 during Operation VARSITY, the airborne crossing of the Rhine, a little over three months before Walter and Margaret were married. John Henry's own story has its own section on the family website.



The Stevens family in the 1930s. Walter is at the left and John Henry at the centre.

Home

Margaret was demobilised, and is recorded on 12 May 1946 as living at 401 Allenby Road, Southall, Middlesex. Walter probably came home at about the same time, and went back to work as a laboratory technician, the profession he had practised across three continents. Their first son, John Arthur, was born in 1946. He is the John of the Introduction, the author's father, who spent his last years working on his father's diary (he died in 2017). Ann Elizabeth followed in 1948 and Susan Joan in 1950. Margaret raised the three children, and in October 1950 she renewed her nursing registrations. Their world in Southall was quieter than the one they had left, and entirely their own.

The sign at Habbaniya had read '3300 miles to Sutton', and Walter's own note on the print added: "And home."



Walter on a white iron bench among the fuchsias at Romans restaurant, near Pamber Heath, Hampshire, in the mid-1980s.

Forty years

In July 1985 Walter and Margaret celebrated forty years of marriage, and on 21 July the whole family gathered in the garden. It is the only known photograph of everyone together: their three children and their families, and the grandchildren sitting on the grass in front. Margaret is holding the youngest of them, Hannah, who was born in 1984.



Walter and Margaret cutting the cake at their 40th wedding anniversary, July 1985.



The whole family in the garden, 21 July 1985.

Walter died on 27 December 1988. Margaret died in September 1993 at St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey, Surrey. They had been married for more than forty-three years, and the diary has been looked after by the family ever since.

> *He ended his diary on Boxing Day 1944 with the words: "Naturally I was with Margaret all the time and realised now that I was more than fond of her."*

From the albums

These are photographs from the family albums that do not belong to any one day of the diary. Most come from Algiers, where Walter and Margaret spent their last year of the war, and one set comes from Margaret’s own collection of the hospital. It is only a small selection.



Walter and Margaret on the rocks at the seaside near Algiers. The album notes place it at Sidi Ferruch. The date is not recorded: Walter first took Margaret out in October 1944, so it is more likely a summer day in 1945.



Margaret in a sun hat on the same rocks.

There are many more photographs of Walter’s war, including the albums from Iraq, North Africa, Italy and the Algiers hospital, on the family website at ***stevens.archium.uk****.*



Margaret laughing, with an Alsatian puppy, Algiers.



Margaret with a puppy, Algiers.



Walter in profile in RAF uniform with sergeant's chevrons, a Mediterranean town behind him.

Margaret’s photographs

Margaret kept her own photographs of hospital life. Apart from Margaret, the people in them have not yet been named, so if you recognise anyone, please tell the family.



A ward party at the hospital, with nurses, patients and staff, from Margaret’s collection. Margaret is in the back row, second from the left.



Two nursing sisters with a patient in a wicker bath chair, outside the wards. Margaret is the sister on the right.



Three friends on the steps of a Moorish-style building, from Margaret’s collection.

Timeline of Walter’s War

28 Aug 1941	Glasgow	Embarks on SS Orontes; convoy escorted by HMS Repulse and HMS Furious
13 Sep 1941	Freetown	First port of call
30 Sep 1941	Cape Town	Three days’ shore leave
22 Oct 1941	Bombay	Leaves the Orontes; boards SS Lancashire
28 Oct 1941	Basrah	Reaches Iraq
Nov 1941	Shaibah	Army camp mix-up; dysentery, nearly a month in hospital
7 Dec 1941	Habbaniya	Posted to RAF Habbaniya
Jan–Apr 1942	Habbaniya	Christmas 1941; Baghdad weekend with Ben
11 Apr 1942	Basrah	Posted to the Station Sick Quarters
15 Jul 1942	Basrah	News of Joan’s death
31 Aug–19 Sep 1942	Tehran	Leave in the mountains
3 Nov 1942	Abadan	Malaria epidemic; AIOC laboratory
29 Dec 1942	Basrah–Cairo	First flight, in a Sunderland flying boat
7 Jan 1943	Marble Arch	Flies to Libya; joins 25 M.R.S.
10 Jan 1943	Benghazi	Captured Italian laboratory
24 Jan 1943	Libya	Hears of the fall of Tripoli
Mar 1943	Tunisia	Near-miss with a bomb; the minefield
7 May 1943	El Hencha	Tunis and Bizerta fall
1 Jun 1943	Carthage	Sees Churchill’s convoy
1 Jul 1943	Sabratha	Roman ruins
31 Jul 1943	Cassibile, Sicily	Flies in from Tripoli via Malta
11 Aug 1943	Catania	Passes the bridge where Hedley Verity fell
1 Sep 1943	Catania	Takes over the Commercial Institute as a hospital
11 Oct 1943	Bari	Meets Wee Georgie Wood
20 Oct 1943	Catania	Birthday dinner
17 Nov 1943	Torre del Greco	Orders to move to the convalescent depot
11 Dec 1943	Pompeii	Half-day visit
31 Dec 1943	Naples	*La Bohème* at the San Carlo
6 Jan 1944	Foggia	Unit moves; delayed by ice at Avellino
17 Mar 1944	Naples	Leaves 25 M.F.H. for No. 2 RAF General Hospital
19–20 Mar 1944	Naples	Watches Vesuvius erupt from the roof
Spring 1944	Algiers	Arrives at Maison Carrée
Sep 1944	Algiers	Told he is a Flight Sergeant (acting)
Early Oct 1944	Algiers	Asks Margaret Notley to a dance
26 Dec 1944	Algiers	Last diary entry
9 Jul 1945	Algiers	Marries Margaret
27 Dec 1988		Walter dies
Sep 1993		Margaret dies

People in the diary

Ben
Walter’s closest friend from Glasgow through Iraq; shared the Baghdad weekend. Surname unknown.

Reg
Walter’s pal in Sicily and Catania; organised his birthday dinner, 20 October 1943.

John Walker
Walter’s best friend at Foggia; survived a dangerous abdominal operation in March 1944.

Jack Holland
Laboratory assistant from 30 M.F.H.; worked with Walter at Foggia.

Harry Harding
Old friend from Halton, met in Cairo and again at Tripoli.

Dave Summers
Old friend from Halton, reunited at Tripoli, July 1943.

Norman House
Halton colleague, met at the captured Italian laboratory in Benghazi.

S/Sgt Aitken
Pathologist at Benghazi who authorised Walter’s mobile laboratory.

F/Sgt Smiles
Flew with Walter to Sicily, July 1943, and nearly missed the plane at Malta.

Group Captain Lipscomb
Walter’s old commanding officer from England, met near Carthage, June 1943.

Group Captain O’Malley
Principal medical officer at Catania, who backed Walter’s promotion.

S/Ldr Price
Walter’s superior at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Algiers.

Arthur Cassett
Old friend from Manston days, met by chance at Darband, Tehran, 4 September 1942.

Wee Georgie Wood and Dolly Harmer
Variety performers Walter met in a Bari café in October 1943.

Margaret Notley
Nursing sister at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, Algiers. Walter’s wife from 9 July 1945.

Credits

Photographs. All photographs are from Walter Kenneth Stevens's own albums and the Stevens family collection, scanned for the Archium project.

Papers. The Tehran concert ticket, the typed 'Habbaniya' poem, the San Carlo ticket and the laboratory notebook S.O. Book 137 were kept by Walter. The autograph book, certificates and nursing photographs are Margaret's. All are in the family archive.

Restored or colourised images. The frontispiece portrait (about 1940) was colourised digitally from a black-and-white original. Two surgical photographs from the Sicilian hospital (Chapter 12) were also digitally processed. All other images are as scanned, apart from cropping and cleaning.

Maps. Drawn for this book from Natural Earth data. Routes are schematic.

The World Around Walter. Background notes draw on Wikipedia (HMS Repulse, Persian Corridor, RAF Habbaniya, Abadan, Arch of the Philaeni, Battle of the Mareth Line, Ancient theater of Sabratha, Allied invasion of Sicily, Hedley Verity, Wee Georgie Wood, Bombing of Foggia, Pompeii Airfield); the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia (Polish refugees in Iran); the International Churchill Society; Naples: Life, Death and Miracles (the San Carlo); and Earth Magazine (the 1944 eruption of Vesuvius). Details are for family reading and should be checked before wider publication.

The diary. The three handwritten volumes are kept by the family. The full text is at archium.uk.

Draft layout — not yet proofread.

In August 1941 a young RAF laboratory technician from Sutton, Surrey, sailed from Glasgow into a war he could not see the end of. For the next three years he kept a diary: through Cape Town and Bombay, the heat of Iraq and Persia, the desert campaign in Libya and Tunisia, Sicily, the eruption of Vesuvius, and finally Algiers, where a nursing sister called Margaret Notley said yes to a dance.

This family edition abridges Walter's three handwritten volumes and sets them beside the photographs, tickets and poems he and Margaret kept.

ARCHIUM.UK