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

W. K. Stevens

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

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August 1941 – December 1944

Rebuilt and expanded from the three handwritten volumes, with photographs from Walter's own albums

Version 2.0 · 15 November 2026 · archium.uk

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.

Like most young Englishmen of his generation, Walter had never travelled far from home before the war. Although some of what he wrote about the people he met in these distant places reflects a different time, it is here because it is what he wrote, and what he saw.

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 the question we all could have put to him as children, before we were old enough to understand why it mattered:

"Grandpa, what did you do during the war?"

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.

Now that his story is preserved we can tell it to our own children (and, hopefully one day, to their children) all in his own words, complemented by the photographs he kept.

May it last for many years as a small but genuine record of the Second World War, and of the lesser-told service of the men who fought it far from the air war over Europe.

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 2.0, 15 November 2026. If you are reading a copy without this line, or with an earlier date, a newer version may exist. Version 1.0 (27 October 2026) was an abridgement. This edition was rebuilt from source and restores much of what that version left out.

What is in it. The diary is followed in order, in the order Walter wrote it. This edition keeps far more of it than the first: the long journeys, the camps, the shows and the dances, but also the bombing raids, the minefields, the sickness, the losses and the dull stretches in between, because they were all part of what he did. Even so it is still a selection. Walter wrote some 38,000 words and no book of this size can hold them all. Where we quote him, his own words are in quotation marks or set apart as extracts, and every extract has been checked against the transcription. 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 a general reference such as Wikipedia has been used, the note says so; they should be checked against printed histories before anyone relies on them.

Spellings and names. Walter spelled places as he heard them (Basrah, Ahwaz, Tehran, Karanfoul) and we follow him. Where we do not know a person's full name we say so rather than guess.

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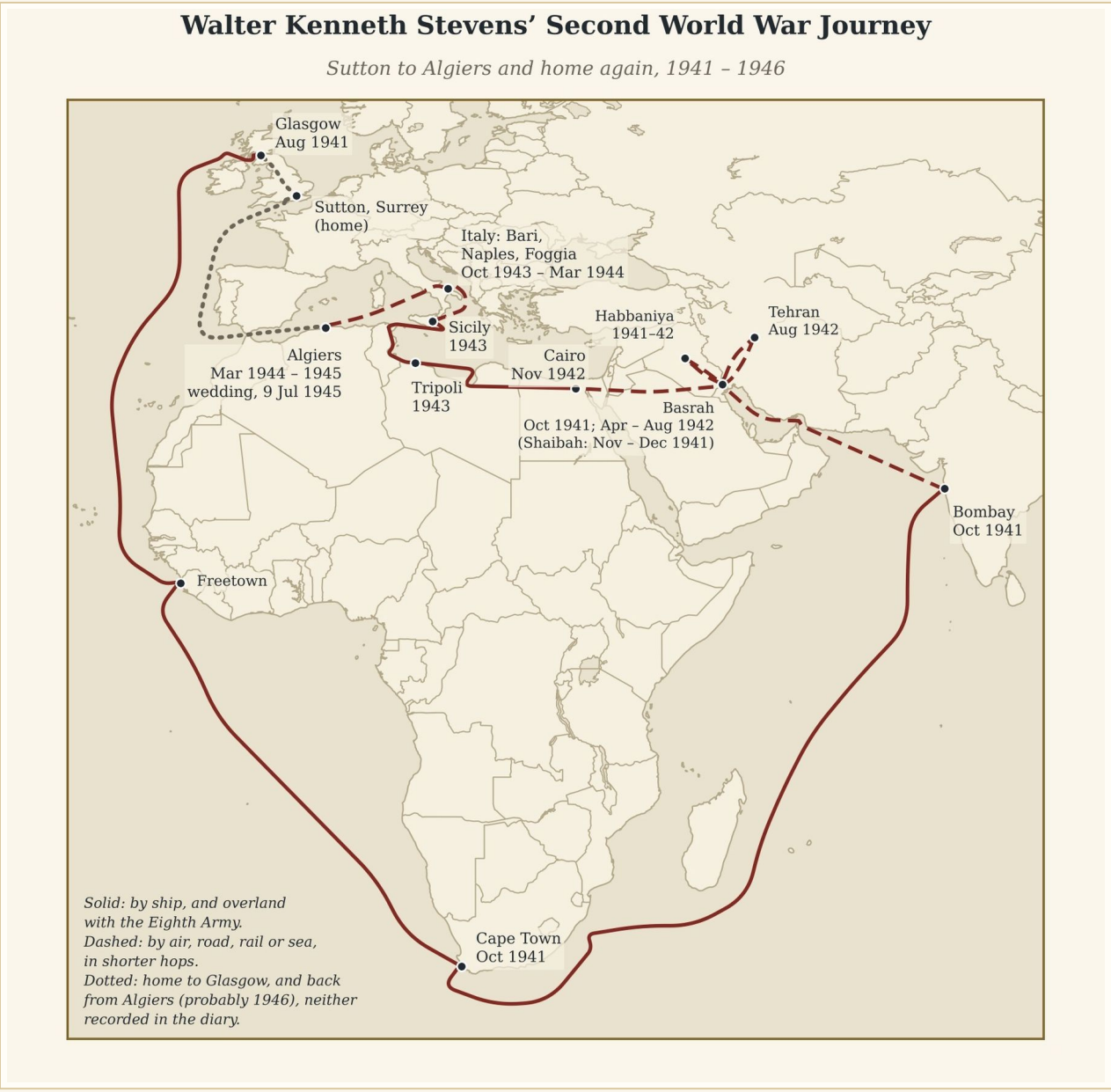


Walter's Second World War journey. Sutton to Algiers, 1941–45: by ship round Africa to India, by road and rail through Iraq and Persia, overland with the Eighth Army through Libya and Tunisia, and by air and sea through Sicily and Italy to Algiers. He married Margaret there on 9 July 1945 and, probably 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. 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 had the impression "of being herded about like a flock of sheep & treated as galley slaves". Hammocks were issued after a long wait in intense heat, and then somehow had to be slung. He slept quite comfortably all the same, and it was surprising, he noted, how soon one got used to it. The food was "reasonably tolerable", and the canteen sold oranges, tinned fruit, biscuits, chocolates and mineral water. The ration was a hundred cigarettes a week, "which lasted out fairly well".

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. At dawn on Tuesday they saw 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 & 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 managed to secure himself a job in the ship's hospital, which "helped to relieve the monotony": 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.

Source: 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 thrown into the water. Walter found them "most amusing"; they spoke fair English, with a few stock phrases such as "Any more?" and "Glasgow Tanners" (a tanner being sixpence). Nobody was allowed ashore, but from the ship they could see the town among its trees with high hills behind it, so high that when the clouds were low the tops were quite covered. Film shows were given on board, though the weather was variable and they were abandoned on several occasions. On one rough night a gale ripped the screen off its frame and blew it into the sea.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Freetown, the convoy station

Freetown was one of the quiet pivots of the war. When Italy entered the war in June 1940 and the Mediterranean was closed to merchant ships, it became the staging post for shipping bound for Australasia and Asia. It had the best harbour on the west coast of Africa, though the malarial mangrove swamps around it earned it the name 'the white man's grave'. At the height of the war up to 200 cargo and military ships could be moving in and out of the harbour. Walter's convoy lay there for five days, and nobody was allowed ashore.

Source: Allen Howard, 'Freetown and World War II' (Cambridge); convoyweb.org.uk, 'Freetown & Takoradi'; African Studies Centre Leiden, Freetown and World War II seminar.

They left Freetown at one o'clock on Thursday 18 September. Walter thought it a wonderful sight to see each ship of the convoy steam slowly through the boom, with their reflections clear on the water. It was the last land they would see until Cape Town. For twelve days they "sailed along merrily", and at a quarter to ten on Tuesday 30 September they arrived there. Just before they did, the convoy split in two, and the other half went on to Durban.



HMTS Orontes, the troopship 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 stretching up 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 there were many cars waiting to take them wherever they wanted to go. The South African people showed great hospitality and “made us feel very much 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. Oranges were so cheap that they were “almost thrown at you”, and had they gone in the right season, he heard, peaches could be had for two shillings a box of a hundred.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

A port of welcome

Cape Town was the great halfway house for the troop convoys. Close to 50,000 Allied ships passed through South African ports during the war, many of them the troopships known as ‘Winston’s Specials’, which carried servicemen from Britain to the Middle East. At the height of the war an average of fifty ships a day lay at anchor in Table Bay. Cape Town and Durban hosted the largest numbers of servicemen, and the hospitality Walter describes was organised as much as spontaneous: volunteers of the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services ran canteens and dances for men off passing convoys.

Source: ‘Race and hospitality: Allied troops of colour on the South African home front’ (Journal of Southern African Studies); South African Military History Society; Kalk Bay Historical Association, Bulletin 6.

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

They all managed a good meal, “which for the most part was badly needed”. It was grand, after a month at sea, to see a picture again, and Walter found it very intriguing to find everything so typically English. The South Africans, he decided, were very patriotic and lived up to their name in every respect. There were many sights to see and so many things to do that three days could not hold them, but everyone enjoyed themselves and 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 would disembark. They picked up the other half of the convoy off Durban. In parts the Indian Ocean was so calm that there was “hardly a ripple”, and as they neared the equator the weather grew very warm, though a gentle breeze helped. Albatrosses and many kinds of birds followed the ship until they left the African coast, and shoals of dolphins were seen.

On Wednesday 22 October they sailed into the bay and dropped anchor at half past ten, staying there until the following morning. From the bay they had a wonderful view of the Gateway to India and many of the beautiful buildings, and the pleasure of seeing the Fleet on coast duty round that part of India. Carrying a kit bag and haversack onto the quayside was no easy job in the heat. 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 in the customs offices, and at a service canteen were given a cup of tea and a packet of cigarettes. In a short while they were marched down to their new ship in Alexandra Dock. This was the *Lancashire*, which was to take them to Basra. From the dockside she looked a terrible ship, especially beside the one lying astern of her, one of the latest troopers, the *Devonshire*. But once aboard they found everything “beautifully clean & far more spacious than the Orontes”. During tea Walter’s pal Ben had spoken to the sergeant in charge of the hospital, and the two of them volunteered for work there, “so getting our own bunks which was very nice”.

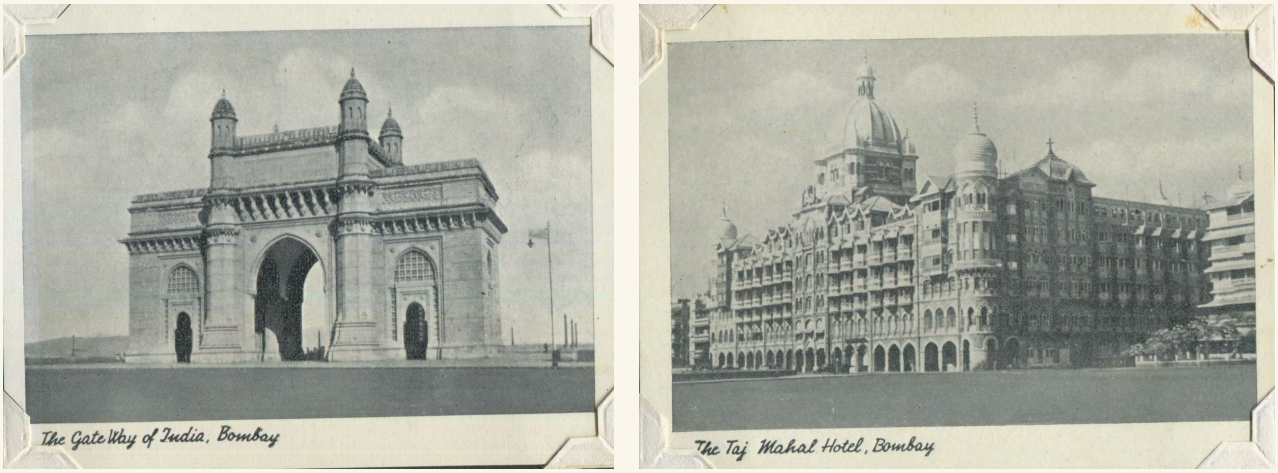
After tea passes were issued and several of them took a taxi into Bombay. They wandered round the shops, found an ice-cream parlour and went in out of the heat, and tried to get into the pictures, which were full. They looked at the Gateway to India and had their photographs taken. As they came from the photographers an English gentleman asked if he could direct them anywhere, and walked along with them to the services canteen, where they had “a beautiful fruit salad with ice cream at very cheap rate”. On the way back to the ship they noticed the very odd ways in which some of the people slept.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The Gateway of India

The Gateway was built to mark the landing of King George V and Queen Mary at Apollo Bunder on 2 December 1911, on their way to the Delhi Durbar. The monument did not exist yet, and the royal couple are said to have been shown only a cardboard model of it. The foundation stone was laid by the Governor of Bombay, the architect George Wittet’s design was approved in 1914, and the Viceroy, the Earl of Reading, opened it on 4 December 1924. It is built of yellow basalt and concrete on land reclaimed from the sea, and for many who arrived by sea, as Walter did, it was the first sight of India.

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘Gateway of India’; Wikipedia, ‘Gateway of India’.



Postcards of Bombay that Walter kept in his album. Left: the Gateway of India, where he had his photograph taken. Right: the Taj Mahal Hotel.

On Friday morning, after a very sound sleep, they started work in the ship's hospital and, after an inspection, were allowed into the town again. This time Ben went to see some people at his firm, and Walter went to find a Major Wastie, whom he knew from Sutton. His wife and child were away on holiday, but the Major asked him to his flat for a drink at half past six. When Walter wandered back to Ben's firm, he found Ben talking to the managing director, Mr Cook, who at once invited them both to tea and dinner.



Bombay, autumn 1941: a musician with a lute-like instrument stands beside a man in a sun hat. From Walter's own album.

> *"We had a really grand evening with him & his wife, who were most interested to know exactly what was going on in England to-day."*

After a grand dinner and a good chat about the home country they did not reach the ship until one in the morning, "with remembrance of a very enjoyable afternoon & evening".

Two things struck Walter about Bombay: the difference between the Europeans, most of whom seemed reasonably well off and could afford servants and cars, although petrol was rationed, and how very poor some of the Indian people were. Their living conditions were "absolutely unbelievable", and at night you could see people lying in the streets wherever you went. Some of the buildings and streets were very beautiful, and with the native costume it seemed to him "really wonderful in some parts".



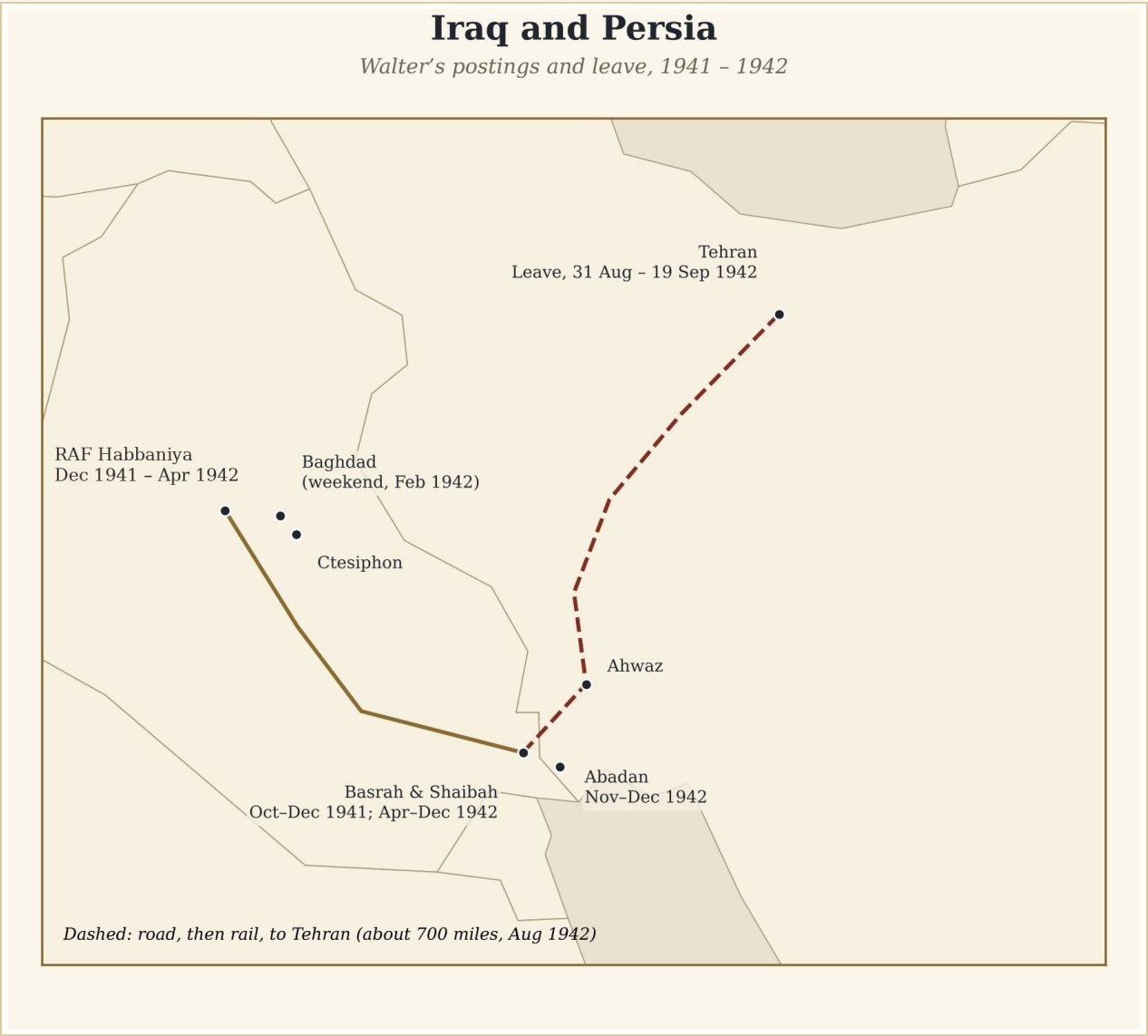


People resting on a lawn in Bombay, from Walter's album.

The *Lancashire* pulled out of Alexandra Dock at eleven o'clock on 23 October, he wrote, although by his own account the ship was still in Bombay on the Friday, so one of the dates must be a slip. At sea he and Ben took up their duties in the hospital and messed there on sergeants' food, which was "100% better" than they had been having. On Sunday morning there was egg and bacon for breakfast, "the first egg we had since we left England".

There was a grievance, too. None of them had any money, and the ten rupees they were paid in Bombay was, he wrote, "an insult to us all". On the *Orontes* all their English money had been taken off them, "& so we were all left destitute", and they wished they had played truant and not given it in.

On Wednesday 28 October they entered the river. They had to travel 600 miles up it, past the country where Bible history was first made, with date palms "just as one sees them in pictures" and the funny little mud huts in which the people lived. It was their first view of Iraq. Next came the oil fields, so carefully guarded, the third largest in the world, which, unknown to them, was Abadan. They were due in on Thursday, but the steering gear broke down and they were delayed a day.



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 about a mile through the town, and when ten Army lorries were seen at the roadside and the drivers signalled them to climb in, they did. Actually, Walter wrote, “these lorries were nothing to do with the Air Force”. They were meant for a Light Infantry detachment that had followed them off the ship, and it was not until they reached the camp that anyone found out. They drove fifteen miles across the desert to the Army camp at Shaibah, and all his visions of an Air Force camp disappeared. For miles there was nothing but canvas tents and sand, and no brick buildings at all. By the time they realised the mistake nothing could be done, for there was no means of communication. They were stuck, and called themselves the “Legion of the Lost”.

They were given tents and made the best of two blankets each. It was hot by day, but at night very cold, and most of them hardly slept, partly from the cold and partly from sleeping on the sand. Water was scarce, and as for washing facilities, “well, there just weren’t any”: they carried a petrol tin from the one stand pipe to the tent for everybody to wash and shave in. The food was “pretty terrible”, cooked in field kitchens, and nearly everything 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.”*

He thought that if they had stayed there very much longer than they did, “some of the boys would have gone out of their minds”. After two days a warrant officer from their own camp at Shaibah showed up, and everybody cheered, glad to learn that anyone knew of their existence.

The medical branch were told they were going to Habbaniya, and they thought they were at last on their way. They were piled into their own lorries and taken to the RAF camp at Shaibah, “a great relief to finally get away from the Army”. The Air Force, he noted, had the Army backed for accommodation, “& 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.” They were all pleased to see brick buildings again and a few hangars. Then word came that Habbaniya could not accommodate them after all, and they were to stay indefinitely. That upset them slightly, he wrote, “to think we had come about 13 thousand miles & then were not wanted”.

On the other hand, the accommodation and food were “a revelation”. Within a few hours they were each issued a free packet of cigarettes, and that afternoon they were paid one dinar five hundred fils. They were billeted in brick huts and issued with palliasses and mosquito nets, “a godsend from the flies”. The camp was fifteen miles from the nearest town, and the only way there was a taxi at 1500 fils, so everything had to be found on camp. There was a barber, a cobbler, a clothing shop where they could get alterations to their attire, a NAAFI with billiards and reading rooms, a swimming pool, and a cinema that changed its films every other night. In the café, which they called the White House, there were beautiful Persian carpets for sale at only £1 each. He would have liked to buy one: in England, with the tax on, it would have been worth £10 to £15. A favourite drink out there, he found, was Russian tea, with sugar and a lemon squeezed in instead of milk.

THE FLIES AND THE BATS

Although it was winter, the flies were “a terrible pest”, worrying them ceaselessly all day and every day. They were on the camp only a few days before dysentery broke out. Measures were taken to stamp out the pests, but still they persisted and “seemed to multiply in their thousands”. When the flies subsided in the evening, the bats took their place; he had heard that bats were numerous out there, but never thought they would outnumber the birds in the day. A week had passed since their arrival and they were still doing nothing, most of them “getting a bit stale”.

Unfortunately, the day before the party left for Habbaniya, Walter fell sick with dysentery himself. He was carted off to hospital and put on fluids. For the first few days he “felt like nothing on earth & really did feel ill”. They kept him on fluids for a fortnight, and towards the end he grew extremely hungry and was at last started on a light diet and then a chicken diet, “which was very tasty”. He had only bacillary dysentery, and was fortunate that his insides were not greatly infected. The hospital, though supposed to be an RAF one, was staffed and run entirely by the RAMC, and “they were all very kind & did their best for the patients”.

It was three months since they had left England, and so far he had received no letters. After nearly a month in hospital he was discharged on 6 December and went back to the camp at Shaibah. His posting to Habbaniya was arranged for the following day.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Dysentery and flies

Intestinal infections were extremely common in Iraq, and a 1944 British Naval Intelligence survey blamed contaminated water, flies, dust and poor sanitation. Dysentery itself came in two main forms, bacillary and amoebic, and the bacillary kind that Walter caught was well known to the medical services of the Middle East in these years. Walter, who spent his working life in medical laboratories, would have known exactly why the flies at Shaibah mattered, and why the camp fought them with sanitation as much as with swatters.

Source: Naval Intelligence Division, ‘Iraq and the Persian Gulf’ (1944), via the Qatar Digital Library; Edinburgh Research Archive, ‘Bacillary dysentery: a survey of treatment in the Middle East 1939–1942’.

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.

At half past five on 7 December a van picked Walter and another airman up at the guardroom and took them fifteen miles across the desert to Margil station, through Basrah and Ashar. The driver was a local man, and Walter had never seen a van move so fast. Many times going through the towns they had narrow squeaks, and he was “very pleased & relieved” to reach the station.

They had been told they were booked a second-class sleeper. On seeing the railway transport officer they learned that all the second class was taken by officers, so they travelled third class, in carriages “with seats very similar to those in tram-cars but did not move”. During the night it got very cold and he was thankful for his two blankets. The train stopped every half hour at stations right out in the blue, miles from anywhere. They could get nothing to eat, and neither of them slept, because of the Arabs who kept getting on and off. They climbed onto the luggage racks to try for a few hours but had to keep one eye on their kit in case it was pinched. At every station people came round selling cakes and buns, but Walter and his friend decided it was safer to leave them alone. They managed to buy a couple of hard-boiled eggs “which we knew could not be contaminated in any way”, and that was all the food they had until Baghdad.





Left: locomotive No. 252 with a carriage on the Iraqi railway, from Walter’s album, probably on the line between Basrah and Baghdad. Right: the station sign at Hillah, from the same album page. The diary does not name Hillah, but it lies on that line.

The train was due in at half past nine in the morning. It arrived at half past two in the afternoon, “just a matter of 5 hours late which seem to mean nothing to them at all!” They were both very hungry. The Y.M.C.A. could give them only tea and buns. The sergeant arranging their transport told them it would not arrive until half past five, and took them to an Army camp where at last they got “a good feed”. Then it was 55 miles across the desert to Habbaniya, and at half past seven they reached camp, “both ready for a good night’s sleep in comfort”. He was shown to a corporals’ billet with sheets, pillows and blankets and a nice soft bed. “It was a happy relief,” he wrote, “to feel that I had finally got to my unit & would be able to start work again.”

That night he “slept like a top”. In the morning he went to see the hospital and his laboratory, and was given a very warm welcome by the boys he knew, and met an old pal from the laboratory at Halton. The sergeant in charge, whom he had come out to relieve, showed him the laboratory. It was “a finer place than ever I expected & very modern indeed”, and Walter was thrilled at the thought that he might be able to get down to some

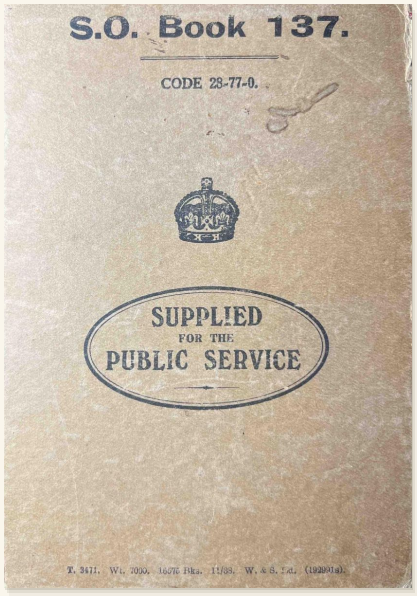
studying again. The mess was extremely nice and the food easily the best he had had since joining the RAF: bread and butter cut nicely, tablecloths, and tea in cups, made freshly in teapots. The corporals had a table of their own, with chickos to wait on them. Each billet had a chicko, a local servant, who cleaned buttons and boots, made the beds, brought tea at three o'clock and did all the washing, for 100 fils a fortnight. After the desert and Shaibah it was "a great relief to come to such privileges & comfort as this".



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."



A laboratory interior from the same album page as the RAF Cinema pictures, probably one of the Iraq laboratories Walter worked in.



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.





Left: a boy polishing boots at an Iraqi camp, probably Habbaniya. Right: fifteen pairs lined up outside a billet door. Each billet had a chicko, a local servant, who cleaned boots and buttons.

A CAMP THE SIZE OF A TOWN

The camp was right out in the desert, 55 miles from Baghdad, which was the nearest town except for a little village about ten miles off called Tolounjit. That place, Walter was told, was "definitely unsafe" to go to. When the Iraqis tried to invade the camp in May, the village was raided and many valuables were secured by "our boys", and the inhabitants had not forgotten it. These tribesmen were "very sleuth in their methods" and would not hesitate to kill any of them on sight.

“Believe me when I say it is very large.”

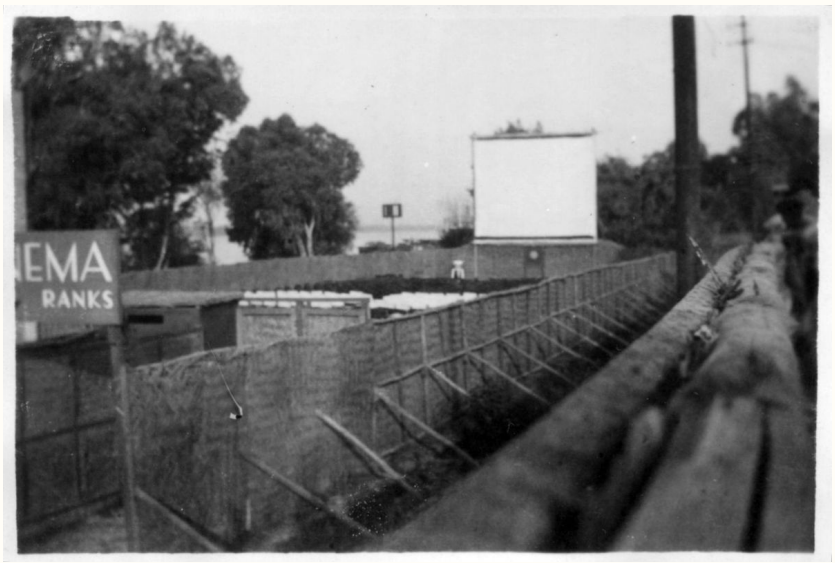
The camp covered some twenty square miles, so large that it had its own taxi service: when you wanted to go to another part of it, you telephoned for a taxi.

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, where you could get most things you required.



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





Left: the RAF Cinema, with separate entrances for officers, sergeants and other ranks. Right: the open-air screen, with the ‘Cinema – Ranks’ sign at left.

Clubs of every kind met on the camp: cricket, tennis, football, hockey, swimming, photographic, boxing and riding.



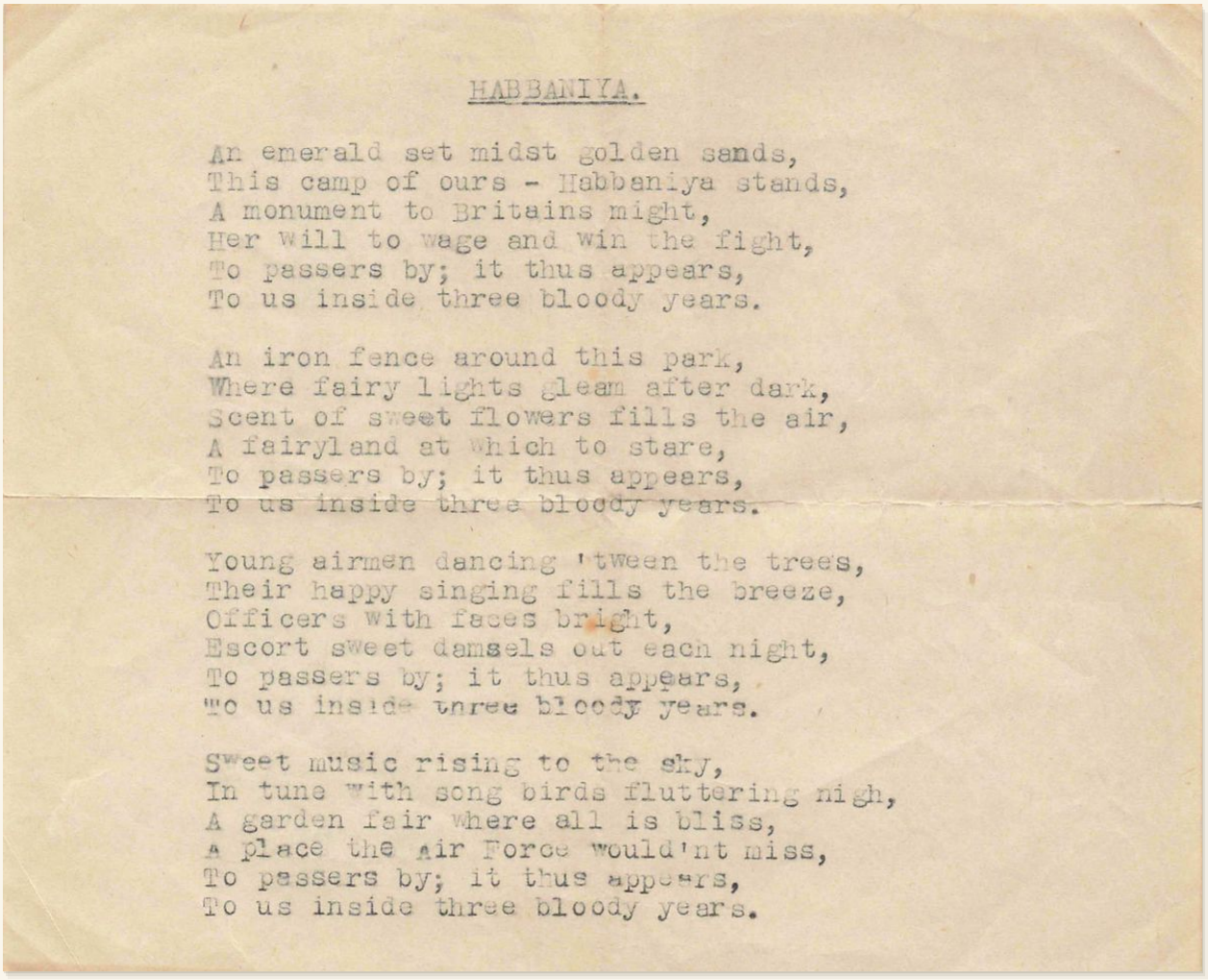
Airmen swimming at an Iraqi camp, probably Habbaniya, from Walter’s album.

There was a large lake nearby where the boys spent a great deal of their time yachting, and the hospital kept its own horses, which cost 75 fils an hour. There were tennis courts and vegetable gardens.





Two recreation rooms from Walter’s Iraq album, probably at Habbaniya. Left: a NAAFI recreation room with cane chairs. Right: airmen relaxing over tea, with posters on the wall behind them. Walter is probably at the centre, looking at the camera.



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.

‘Habbaniya’: the typed poem on a single folded sheet that Walter kept. Author unknown; spelling as typed. It was probably one of many copies passed around the camp.

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’ and ‘1941 Iraqi coup d’état’; Warfare History Network, ‘Habbaniya 1941’.



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, AND THE BUFFALO LODGE

Christmas came quickly. On Christmas Eve the camp held a fancy-dress polo match on donkeys, and Walter 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.” In the evening there was a sing-song in the canteen. Christmas Day was patients’ day, and they went round the wards doing their best to entertain them; in the evening he was invited to a party at the Buffalo Lodge, which was very enjoyable. Boxing Day was the staff’s day. He went for a lovely walk in the morning and played billiards and ping-pong in the afternoon, and at six o’clock, as usual, the officers served the dinner, “the best I had had in the R.A.F.”: soup, fish with chips and sauce, turkey with mashed and roast potatoes, green peas and stuffing, then Christmas pudding. “Beer flowed freely & there were plenty of cigarettes, almonds & raisins, oranges & bananas.”

After dinner a concert by the camp concert party followed, then a sing-song, and the officers came along and joined in. “It was very good fun,” he wrote, and by the time the party broke up it was the early hours of the morning. “And so Xmas passed away & quite an enjoyable time was had by all in spite of the fact that we were so far away from home.” He had been on the station three weeks and had received “quite large helpings of mail”, although some people had not heard from home for months.



A decorated hall, with paper chains overhead and a crowd of airmen and guests, from the Christmas party at Habbaniya.

On Monday 5 January 1942 he was initiated into the Buff Lodge “with all due ceremony”. It proved “a most interesting and entertaining evening every Monday”. Time rolled by, with plenty of sport, and he was quite enjoying life on the whole.









Photographs of the fancy-dress donkey polo match on Christmas Eve 1941, which Walter describes in the diary. Top left: two airmen astride donkeys outside a verandahed building. Top right: Walter, in fancy dress, riding a donkey beside another man. Bottom left: Walter in his schoolgirl costume. Bottom right: Walter, still in costume, in goal in the football game that followed, while two RAF sergeants look on.



A gazelle kept as a pet at an Iraqi station, probably Habbaniya, from Walter's album.

A WEEKEND IN BAGHDAD

On Friday 20 February 1942 Walter and Ben managed a weekend in Baghdad. At three o'clock the gari arrived at the hospital reception room. It was a terrible day and a dust storm was just beginning. Soon the driver was lost. Twice they went round in circles and came back to where they had left the lorry, "all of us looked very bewildered & amazed", shouting and gesturing, with petrol running short and visions of sleeping in the desert all night. Then they came across an old Iraqi shepherd with a lantern and a stick, whom Walter called, in the phrase of the country, a "Desert Rat". Ben decided he had better come with them and direct the way. He knew every inch of the desert, and in a short time they found the main Baghdad road again. Ben gave him a handsome tip of 250 fils.



'Sandstorm in the Desert': a commercial postcard by El-Dorado Photo, Baghdad, kept in Walter's album.

> *“After we had left him at the little village, we found out from the driver that he lived there, so the laugh was on us.”*

Nevertheless, for the experience, and for putting them on the right road, it was well worth it. The old man, he added, was one of the filthiest he had ever seen, and by the aroma he imagined he had never seen a bath.

Ben had booked a room the previous week, at the back of the Tigris Palace Hotel, with a balcony facing the river and its own bathroom. The hotel was supposed to be exclusive to officers and senior NCOs, “but that did not worry us”. They had not been seated at dinner long when a young lieutenant walked in whom Walter recognised as an old boy of Cranleigh School; they had been there together years before. After a very good dinner they went to the pictures as the sand had turned into rain.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Baghdad, nine months after the war

Iraq had been nominally independent since 1932, but the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 let Britain keep air bases there and move its forces through the country. In April 1941 Rashid Ali seized power in a coup, and in May a British-led campaign, which opened at Habbaniya, brought down his government. The British entered Baghdad and Mosul by the end of that month, restored the pro-British regent and secured the oil. Walter walked its streets in February 1942, in a city under heavy British influence. The campaign left a lasting nationalist resentment of the British-backed monarchy.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Anglo-Iraqi War’; EBSCO Research Starters, ‘Anglo-Iraqi War’.





Left: a building on stilts at the Tigris waterfront in Baghdad. Right: a Baghdad street of the 1940s with arcaded shops. Both are probably what Walter saw that weekend.

The next morning they walked up the main street to look at the shops, which were “most difficult to describe & are best done so by photos”, the dirtiest and filthiest he had ever seen, though some of them held articles of extreme value in England and comparatively cheap there. They spent time at the photographers and went to the bazaar for which Baghdad is so famous. Some of the rugs selling at 15 dinars would bring at least £50 to £100 in England, and the silk was of very good value. There were hundreds of tiny shops jammed together in a confined space, grouped by trades, and you went up various alleyways to find certain articles. After lunch they set out for the mosque at Cadhimain, but the weather was against them. On Sunday morning, in beautiful sun,

they visited St George's Church, reputed to be one of the oldest in that part of the world, and the museum, where they saw many old relics, some dating back 2000 years BC. After lunch they took a Lieutenant Mummery and two other officers down river street to see the Amardah workers, whose silverware was "really wonderful craftsmanship"; Walter was very tempted to spend plenty of money. At eight o'clock the gari arrived to take them back, and they were "both feeling very refreshed after an enjoyable week-end".





Left: carpets spread out for sale in a Baghdad street. Right: a bazaar shop, with traders sitting outside. Both are from Walter's album and probably date from his Baghdad visits.

POSTED

Work continued in the same routine day after day. On 29 March 1942 a new draft arrived, among them an old friend from Halton, Corporal Hopps, who joined Ted and Walter in the laboratory. "We were very pleased to see him," Walter wrote, "& seemed to add a new interest to life." The weather was getting warmer. On 3 April came a "great panic": a case of smallpox was isolated, the whole unit was vaccinated and every billet fumigated.

On Saturday 11 April 1942 he was posted to Basrah. "I might add that this shook me very much as I thought that I should not move from Habbaniya." At two o'clock the gari arrived to take him to Baghdad and then 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 a summer of 120 degrees, loses someone he cared about, and is granted leave to Tehran.

The journey south was another long one. At Baghdad he had time for a good feed before the train, and tried for a second-class carriage but, “as usual”, found it impossible. He got in with some Army sergeants who were also travelling south, “a good crowd”, and they had some fun together. For once the dining-car attendant showed a little generosity and let them sleep in the arm chairs in the dining car until five o’clock, which they appreciated as it was “totally impossible” to sleep in the carriage. At five they were woken and given tea, and the train arrived punctually “for once in a while”.

At the Sick Quarters he met a dispenser who had left Habbaniya a few weeks before, and was shown the laboratory, which was only one small room with very little apparatus. Then he met Staff Sergeant Freyd, whom he had heard so much about as a pathologist and who was acting as senior medical officer. Freyd greeted him cordially, and then, “to my great disappointment”, told him he was taking over the duties of Sanitary Assistant. Walter explained his position, but Freyd seemed to think it went hand in glove with lab work. The next day he put it to the flight sergeant in charge of sanitary work for South Iraq, who told him he had already got an aircraftman to do the job. The fellows in the Sick Quarters were a grand crowd, and “if it had not been for them I should have been very miserable”. Flight Sergeant Walker showed him round the camp, and it was then that he realised how true the stories were about Basrah being one of the most deadly places for malaria.

The Sick Quarters was nicely situated on the waterfront, and the staff could sit and watch the boats come and go. The boys managed to find him a bed in the Sick Quarters; otherwise he would have had to sleep in one of the hangars, which were “swarming with rats”, and “the chances of plague setting in could quite easily be foreseen”. 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”. From the photographs they looked very picturesque, but in summer they dried up and all that remained was a terrible smell. The bazaars were very like those of Baghdad, and after a few visits the Arabs got to know you quite well. One Amardah silversmith was “a genuine chap” who spoke English fairly well and had been to the World’s Fair in New York. Every Sunday evening a special motor launch took churchgoers there, and they went every Sunday to “this grand old church”.

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVED

In this part of Iraq, Walter wrote, they were able to study the life of the people more than anywhere else. The more you got to know about them, the more intriguing their habits were, and their way of living was so primitive that “unless seen by oneself it is almost unbelievable that such conditions exist to-day”. He set down what he had been told of how marriages were arranged: how a young man tells his father he wants a wife, and the father goes round asking whether a daughter is for sale, the price usually 50, 60 or 80 dinars, more than 100 for a girl of exceptionally high class; how the girl’s mother interviews her and reports back; how the bridegroom does not see his wife until the ceremony is over; and how the bride is then confined to the house for seven days. The husband then had to support all his relations, in the same house, on what most Arabs earned, about 100 fils (2/-) a day. “That is the way they carry on & the majority of them seem to be quite happy.”





Left: boats at a palm-lined river anchorage. Right: a reed boat and figures at the water’s edge, a commercial photograph by El-Dorado, Baghdad. Both probably show the rivers around Basrah.



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

Although Walter’s words about the people he met belong to a different time, they are given as he wrote them.

One day he 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. “It would be impossible to put into words the sight I saw.” There were rows and rows of these little rush houses, at least a dozen people in each. When someone was taken ill they did not believe in medicine; they did not mind the hospital as long as he came back cured, but their belief was that if he went to the big mosque in Baghdad he would get better. The man was lying on the ground held down by four people, with some twenty others watching, and as they made their way in most of the women and children started crying because they were taking him away. Getting him out was no easy task. They were surrounded by crying children and women as the procession started back to the ambulance, with people surging round the stretcher and trying to hold him down.





Left: women carrying water in jars. Right: a child riding a goat. Both are from Walter’s album and probably show Iraqi village life.

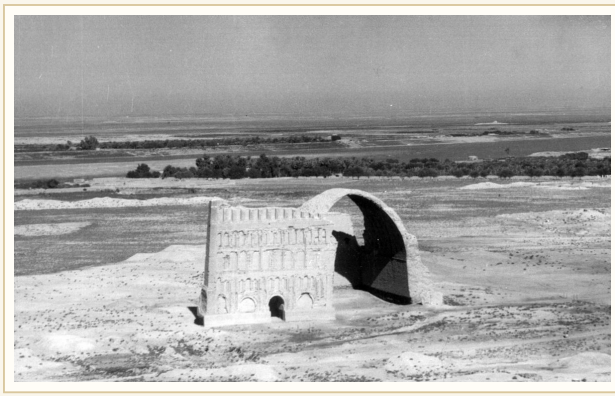
The stream had to be crossed on two planks, and Walter had “vivid imaginations of everyone going into the water”, which he knew to be highly polluted. At the centre the patient started out of his fits, and it was very surprising how everyone kept their balance. All the natives wanted to tip him in to cool him off. At last they got him into the ambulance “much to our relief”. A few days later they heard that he had refused an operation and gone to the mosque. Whether he lived or not they never heard. The job was done in the heat of the afternoon, the temperature in the shade well over a hundred.

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’.





Left: the Arch of Ctesiphon, near Baghdad, from Walter's album. Taq Kasra is the largest surviving Sassanid monument. Right: an aerial view of the ruins, from the same album page. The album does not say who took it.

TROOPSHIPS, A DUKE AND THE HEAT

The Sick Quarters stood so near the waterfront that they could watch every ship dock and depart. 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. "It was easy to see from this that troops were literally poured into the country." The Lease and Lend Act, he noted, seemed to be in full swing in that part of the world, and he noticed that the ships flew the flags of many different nationalities.





Left: a ship alongside a jetty. Right: a cargo ship off a sandy shore. Both are probably at Basrah, from Walter's album.



The war memorial at Basrah, from Walter's album.

That month the Duke of Gloucester came to inspect this part of Iraq. He inspected the Levies, but did not come near the Sick Quarters, although he saw everyone at Shaibah. In the officers' mess no officer under the rank of squadron leader was permitted in during luncheon. Walter thought this "rather an insult", as did many of the officers concerned. "Talk about fuss & ceremony." That morning he had to take a nervous patient to hospital, and it was very difficult to get through, as all roads were closed and the military police stopped all traffic. An Iraqi officer stopped the ambulance and told them they could not proceed. Walter said he was sure the Duke would not stop them taking a seriously ill patient to hospital, and after a lot more arguing the officer let them through. The Duke had come up the river by night, escorted by two high-powered speedboats manned by the Navy, each with a Bren gun, with orders to shoot if anyone got in their way. "Anybody would have thought they were guarding something which was priceless."

As the summer wore on the heat rose, though the thermometer never showed more than about 120 degrees in the shade. The humidity was as high as 80 on several occasions, "& this, as anyone may realise is very high". After a great deal of moaning he managed to get stuff for his laboratory, though he was still very limited. He got off the sanitation duties and settled down quite well, and found plenty of work without any sanitation. Life, unlike at Habbaniya where it was centred on the unit, was centred on the Sick Quarters: the pictures sometimes during the week, Ashar on Saturdays to go round the bazaars, have ice creams and dinner at a café, and on Sunday evening the launch to church.

In the hot weather nearly everybody slept outside, and one Tuesday morning something funny happened. An inspection parade was held on the square every Monday, and as medical staff they were exempt, but their beds

were in full view of it. That day their chicko did not wake them in time, and they overslept, to be awakened by the warrant officer's voice yelling at the men on the square. If he saw them they might be put on parade in future, "which was not our idea at all". All they could do was to lie inside their mosquito nets, which were too far off for him to see into, and, one by one, slip into the Sick Quarters. Four of them managed it. Walter was the last, and just as he was about to go his bearer came out with a mug of tea in his hand for him. "I told him repeatedly to go away but he was too dumb to understand." He had no alternative but to make a rush for it, and as luck would have it, got in unnoticed.

JOAN

"15th July 1942 I received the bad news that Joan had died. It knocked me cold."

He had to take things very steadily for a couple of days, he wrote, "as I was afraid of ending up with a nervous breakdown". He recovered slowly and tried hard to forget it, "but her memory always remained". The medical officer said he could have a holiday in Tehran, but up to the moment nothing had come of it. The diary does not say who Joan was.

There was kindness too. On Wednesday 29 July five of them from the Sick Quarters were invited to dinner by the Matron of the Maudie Hospital, a big hospital about five miles away. Miss Mullows knew most of them from the old hospital, which the Army had since taken over, and Walter was the only new one. They had "a lovely dinner & bags of iced drinks" at her house, and played cards until about half past eleven, when they rang for the ambulance to pick them up. "It was a most enjoyable evening & made such a nice change."

Now that he had his laboratory once more, although the work was fairly limited, he had plenty to keep him busy. The time seemed to pass very quickly and he felt much happier, although there was always that longing to get back to Habbaniya, to a big lab "where the work is more varied & interesting". "Still I suppose I ought not to be too greedy & thank God for small mercies & for a lab to work in at all."

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. It was a very pleasant surprise: he had not expected it for another fortnight, because one of his pals from the Sick Quarters was already on leave and it was not often they allowed two of them away at once.

CHAPTER

7

Tehran

Leave in the mountains

31 AUGUST – 21 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.

TO AHWAZ

At three o'clock on 31 August the gari picked them up for the first part of a journey of about 700 miles. They went first to Shaibah transit camp to spend the night and pick up the convoy to Ahwaz in the morning. The ride out was "one of the bumpiest I have ever experienced", in an open wagon from which on one occasion they were nearly thrown out. Shaibah transit camp was "a very grim place", a mass of tents, but as they were only staying a night it did not worry them greatly. A gale was blowing, the tent had a few forms to serve as beds, and it was obvious they would not get much sleep, so some of them walked into the main camp and Walter went to the pictures. They were woken at three on Tuesday 1 September, breakfasted, and at four the lorry arrived and the party of twelve piled in with their rations. They went to Tanouma and across the ferry, where the convoy formed up, about ten lorries in all.

The first part of the journey across the desert was not too bad, and they made very good headway. About half way they stopped for a spot of food. The last twenty miles were "the grimest journey I have ever done in my life", and by the time they arrived at Ahwaz they were absolutely covered in sand and felt very much worse for wear.

At the station they were told they could not get a train until the following day. "But after a bit of wangling we managed to get them to put an extra coach on the train that was going that day." The train did not leave until seven in the evening, so they had about seven hours to wait. They found out where they could get showers and a shave and made themselves at home on the station. "If we had been in England anyone would have stared at us but in this part of the world it is quite a common thing to see people lying about in the most obscure places." They tried to get food in a canteen, but it had run out by the time they got there, so they got out their own rations and scrounged some hot water for tea. The man in charge of the canteen tried to charge them two rials each for the hot water, but they were wise to him and got it free in the end. "He was a real swindler we found out later but we were too smart for him to catch us." It was here that most of them tried their first Sinalco, "quite a nice drink made from the juice of pomegranates".



Ahwaz railway station, early September 1942. Left: the arched entrance, with the name AHWAZ on the board beneath the clock; Walter may have taken this photograph while they waited. Right: six RAF men in pith helmets outside the station. Walter is second from the right.

THE TRAIN TO TEHRAN

It seemed a long wait until their train arrived, and they were very pleased when it did, “seeing that we had a 24 hour journey to Tehran”. At half past seven they slowly steamed out of Ahwaz station for a long journey through the mountains. The carriage was very similar to an English corridor train, but the backs of the seats pulled up to make four bunks. They managed a decent dinner of chicken on the train, “which was very welcome”, made up the beds, and Walter slept “very effectively”, for the first time on a train. In the morning there were wonderful views, and they were right up in the mountains. It was “a real treat to see green fields and pastureland again”, and had it not been for the high mountains one would not have known it was not England.

They travelled on all day, running up and down to the engine from time to time to get hot water for tea. Since starting they had changed engines, and towards evening, on a very steep incline, the engine would not take it. They got out and went up to speak to the driver, an Englishman. They learned that the whole railway system had been taken over by the Army, and that men who in peacetime were engine drivers and were now in the Royal Engineers were driving the trains. He took them into the cab and explained that the engine had been converted from a coal burner to an oil burner for economic reasons, and this was its first try-out. “Owing to the overload she just would not take it.” Walter asked what they were going to do. There was nothing he could do, the driver said, until the coal train arrived, due in about two hours. “Sure enough it came along on time & we switched one of the engines over with ours & tried to make up for lost time.” It was no good, and they reached Tehran at twelve, four and a half hours late.

Tehran was the first modern station he had seen since leaving England and “reminded one of Waterloo or Victoria”, but the point that struck them was a big swastika painted on the stairway. They found out later that the whole atmosphere in Tehran was more pro-German than pro-British, although the pro-British were the people in responsible positions, “the ones that mattered”.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

The railway to Tehran

The Trans-Iranian Railway was completed in 1938 under Reza Shah, running some 800 miles from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian through the Zagros and Elburz mountains, with Tehran on the way. After the Anglo-Soviet invasion of August 1941 it became one of the main supply routes of the Persian Corridor. The southern section, from the Gulf to Tehran, was taken over by the Royal Engineers, while the line north of the capital came under Soviet control. The engine drivers Walter met were soldiers of that railway service.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Trans-Iranian Railway’ and ‘Persian Corridor’; CNN Travel on the Trans-Iranian Railway; Roger Farnworth, ‘Railways in Iran’.

QUILCHEK

A gari was waiting outside the station to take them to the rest camp at Quilchek, about six miles outside Tehran. All the tents were full, so they could not move in until the morning, and they slept in the dining hall. He woke early and felt quite cold, “grand to feel cold for a change instead of always being hot”. After breakfast they moved to places in the tents where people had just moved out, and he found John Sanders, with whom he was soon thick.

The camp was about twenty tents in the “most beautiful surroundings of the British Legation”. If one could imagine a large estate in England with plenty of large trees, grass and beautiful lanes, with shadows cast by the sun through the trees, the site would be admirably described. At one end it led into the grounds of the Legation, with several lovely houses, and at the other onto the main road at the foot of the mountains. John took him to the house owned by Mrs Smith, where all of them were invited to sit in her lounge, read and listen to the wireless, and use her iron, which was always available in the garden. “She was a very dear lady & tried to make the boys at home as much as possible.”



Tents among the trees at a rest camp in the Persian hills, probably Quilchek.

In the afternoon, as everywhere in that part of the world, there was a siesta. At half past three he and John caught the bus into town, a single-decker which was never satisfied until it was packed, everybody jammed in like sardines. His first real 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. It was a real treat to see proper picture houses and shops properly decorated again.

Tehran was noted for its beer gardens, which were “very fascinating”: small trees dotted about and tables laid, an alcove with a platform where the band played, and in front a small piece cut out for those who wished to dance. Hungry, he was taken by John to the United Services Club, run entirely by voluntary workers, mostly well-to-do English women whose husbands were government officials. The food was “really excellent”, and “no praise high enough can be given to these ladies who help to make our life enjoyable out here”. Afterwards a bootblack gave his shoes a polish so bright that they “might easily be mistaken for patent leather”. Walking round the shops he noticed how many troops there were: British, thousands of Polish soldiers and women of the Polish auxiliary service, Iranian soldiers and airmen, and quite a few Russians. “Never before have I seen quite a galaxy of uniforms.”





Left: a Tehran street hung with flags, with buses, cars and horse-drawn carts. Right: a busy intersection with cyclists. Probably taken on Walter's leave in September 1942.





Left: a decorated gateway in the Pahlavi style. Right: a public building with a long arcade. Tehran, probably September 1942.



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.

They went to the Café Continental, one of the very high-class beer gardens, and saw an excellent concert given by the Polish soldiers. “Although we could not understand the language the music was very good indeed & they had a first class orchestra.” Many of the items were acting with incidental music, “which of course everybody could understand”. There was a curfew at half past ten, and every person in uniform had to be off the street unless he had a late pass, so they had to leave before it finished. He went back to camp “with a satisfied feeling that once again I was living in a civilized world & not continually amongst a crowd of natives”.

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 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’.

DARBAND

On Friday 4 September, which in Persia is the Sabbath, most people took the day off, and instead of taking the car down to the sea for the day they went up into the mountains. John and Walter got their rations and started off about half past eight. They were only two miles from the foot of the mountains, so they walked all the way. It was the first time for ages that he had done any real walking, and after a little while he started to get tired, but soon got his second wind. After about an hour they 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 beyond was some of the most beautiful he had seen in his life, with waterfalls large and small, caves, alcoves, trees and rock plants amid rocks and boulders. It was very rocky and fairly steep and the climbing not at all easy. After another two hours they reached one of the small peaks, “a very long way off from any of the large ones”, and sat down to eat. They did not want to overdo it, and started back. At Darband they got a bus. After a wash and change they set off for the town and the Services Club for a good meal.





Left: Walter sitting on the rocks above a waterfall. Right: two airmen resting by a tree. Walter is on the left. Probably at Darband, 4 September 1942.





Waterfalls above Darband.

As they were walking round, just by chance Walter bumped into an old friend, Arthur Cassett, who was stationed at the Aircraft Factory and whom he had not seen for two and a half years, since they were rookies together at Manston in March 1940. “The opportunity was too good to lose.” They arranged to meet on Sunday night. That evening he and John went to the Charanfoul, another beer garden, and the most popular, because all

the Polish girls went there, and then to the pictures to see *Pinocchio*, "as good as an English one", with an excellent seat upstairs.

LEAVE

The days that followed settled into a pattern, and it was a happy one. On Saturday he made full use of Mrs Smith's iron, and that evening they saw a cabaret at the Astoria, "perhaps the most aristocratic beer garden". They had just taken their seat and ordered beer when the Chinese Foreign Minister walked in. On Sunday they went to a service at the American Mission, conducted by an Army padre for the forces, and took lunch and high tea at the Polish Café. They went back for an American service in the evening, the first of its kind he had ever heard. On Monday John had his last day, so they did a little washing and ironing, ate at the Services Club, and finished up at the Karanfoul, where Walter had a dance with a Polish girl, "my progress was impeded by the fact that she could neither speak English or French". He gave it up "as a bad job". They ended the evening at their little coffee shop, where the coffee in Persia was "really excellent & the best I have tasted since leaving England".





A horse-drawn carriage in Tehran. Left: an airman beside the driver, not identified. Right: Walter in the carriage, with the driver beside him.

On Tuesday 8 September John left for Basrah early in the morning. A party was organised to visit the one cigarette factory in Iran. It stood about three miles the other side of town, and at first they found it difficult to make anyone understand where they wanted to go, but luckily somebody who spoke French directed them most of the way. They walked about half a mile through the native part of the town, and it seemed incredible that within three miles of a modern European town there could be a village with "the same old filthy habits" he had seen so much of at Basrah. Then they came on an enormous building in its own grounds, of obviously German design, which looked more like a hotel than anything but was the offices of the factory. They were shown all round by the manager, an Iranian who had studied in England for three years and spoke very good English. The factory had some 3,500 employees and its own hospital, dentist and "a marvellous canteen". They made two good grades of cigarette and one poor one, which most of the people bought, and cigars as well. The price was ridiculously low compared with any English brand: about 4d for twenty. That afternoon he went with Arthur to collect his photos, "& I thought it so good I had mine taken also".

Wednesday found him with a sore throat and glands, and he stayed in bed all morning, then went to the Services Club for the usual feed and the pictures. It was a French film, and "I was rather bored with it & fell asleep in the pictures." On Thursday he went to Mrs Squires' house in the morning, wrote a letter and listened to the wireless. "It was grand lying on the big settee out in her loggia & just listening to the birds in the trees. Very pleasant morning." In the evening he and Arthur went to a Polish concert at the Astoria, the second he had seen, and enjoyed it more than the first.

On Friday 11 September he spent another very pleasant morning at Mrs Squires', then he and Arthur went to the Olympic Games Stadium. "It was a marvellous place and one of the finest stadiums I have ever seen." Afterwards they had a walk, a feed at the Services Club, some very good games of table tennis, a visit to the Karanfoul, and the pictures. On Saturday there was a cabaret at the Continental, "not very good". On Sunday he went to the American Mission, and afterwards he and Arthur were invited to the house of one of the American ladies, where they had sandwiches and coffee and then hymn-singing.





The stadium Walter calls "the Olympic Games Stadium", almost certainly the Amjadieh Stadium in Tehran, which he visited with Arthur Cassett on 11 September 1942. Left: Walter and a fellow airman at the stadium. Right: the stadium, with the Alborz mountains behind.

On Wednesday 16 September he went on the lorry to Derbham Tappen, to the Sick Quarters, and saw the medical officer he had known at Habbaniya. Then Arthur took him all over the Aircraft Factory, "very modern place & all the latest types of machinery". In the evening, as usual, there was the Services Club and the Karanfoul, where he met Mac, had a drink with him, and finished off at the Polish Café, only just making the bus back in time.

Friday 19 September was "our last day at Tehran so I had to make the most of it". He packed in the morning, met Arthur in the afternoon, had a feed at the Polish Café, wandered round the shops and bought some lovely coffee to take back. Finally he finished at the Karanfoul and "said goodbye to Arthur catching the bus back for the last time after a very enjoyable leave".

BACK

On Saturday they were up early and the lorry took them down to the station. The train journey “did not seem too bad going back & everyone had something to talk about”. They reached Ahwaz at nine o’clock on Sunday morning and were taken up to the rest camp, where they had to spend the night before catching the convoy in the morning. They went into Ahwaz in the evening, “& I was sorry I had no film in my camera as there were some good photos to be taken”. He had a good feed, then went to the NAAFI for some Canadian beer, “the best I have tasted since coming overseas”, and met quite a number of Yanks who seemed “very decent chaps”. On Monday they were on the move by six and the convoy moved off at seven. They reached Tanouma at half past ten and waited some time for the ferry, and before long they were back at Basrah. “We were all very thankful to get back again after the long journey & were able to get cleaned up once again.”

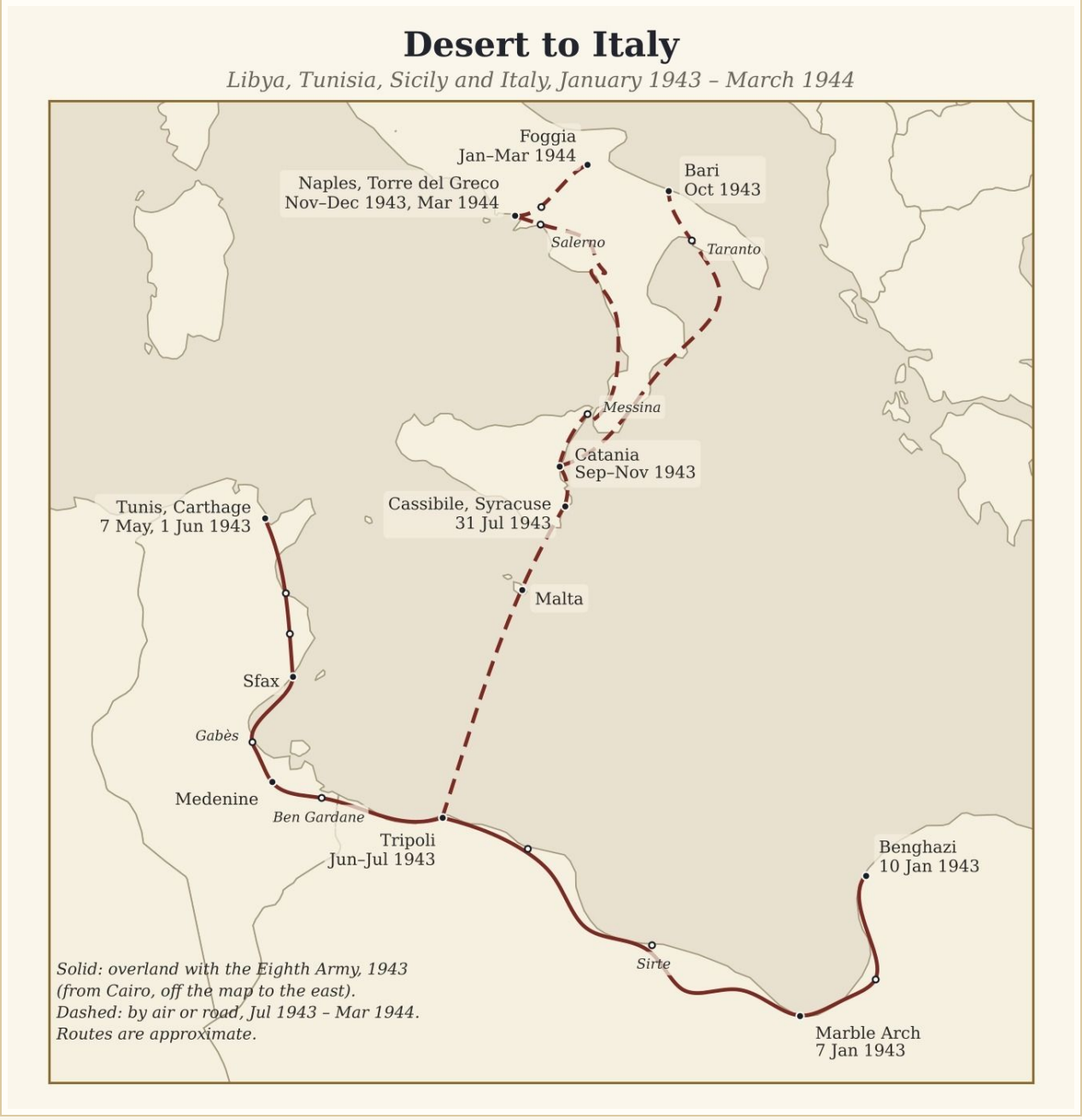
He soon settled down to work, but after a fortnight he went sick with sandfly fever and had a week in hospital. He soon got over that, and once again settled down to work, “which went on quite steadily”.

PART TWO

Desert, Sicily and Italy

November 1942 – March 1944

From the oil island of Abadan, Walter flies to Cairo and joins a mobile field hospital following the Eighth Army through Libya and Tunisia. Then come Sicily, the length of Italy, an opera in Naples and the eruption of Vesuvius.



From Cairo to Naples, January 1943 – March 1944. Routes are schematic.

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 showed signs of the cool weather coming along, “& how thankful everyone was”. Walter had been out there just a year, and on 3 November the senior medical officer ordered him to proceed to Abadan for one month, because an epidemic of malaria had broken out and they wanted him to do the blood slides in order to get the patients diagnosed quicker. He got the medical officer’s car, collected his apparatus and set off by road to Seeba, where he took the ferry across the river to Abadan. At the Station Sick Quarters he met several of the boys he had known at Habbaniya, and a corporal who had been with him at Basta until a short time before. “They soon made me comfortable.”

The following morning the blood slides started rolling in and his work had begun. The medical officer, Flight Lieutenant Sword, gave him an extremely kind welcome and took him up to the A.I.O.C. Hospital, where he introduced him to the pathologist, Dr Marsh, and his chief assistant, Mr Wilson.

AN ISLAND THAT WAS AN OIL WELL

Abadan, he explained, was an island twenty-eight miles long and five wide, “more or less a big oil well”, and incidentally the third largest oil refinery in the world. The whole place was controlled by the Englishmen at the head of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Everything on the island, from cars, buses and lorries to cranes and engines, belonged to the A.I.O.C., and “Abadan is the A.I.O.C.” About 2,000 English people lived there, most of them working for the company, with thousands of local workers, and then “troops, troops & more troops including a large number of Americans who think they know everything”. It would be quite appropriate, he wrote, to say that Abadan was “a white colony in the East”.

The English civilians lived in beautifully air-conditioned bungalows, and in one sense were not feeling the pinch of the war half as much as the folks at home. They were, he thought, “in no way very hospitable to the troops”. It was an impression most of them gave: “that we were not wanted at all, & yet we were the people who were protecting not only their lives, but their jobs & the whole island & valuable oil from falling into the hands of the Nazis”. The island and the refinery were extremely well protected. In the event of an attack from the air, big oil burners could be set alight to cover the whole island in a smokescreen, and a large balloon barrage surrounded the whole area. The refinery itself was a magnificent piece of modern machinery, the first he had ever seen, and he was greatly impressed. “To describe it would be an impossibility, but to say the least, it covered 10 miles.”

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’.

Mr Wilson showed him the laboratory, “a grand place”, and gave him “complete liberty & freedom there”. He went up there every day for the first fortnight, and it was a great thrill to work in a big laboratory once again. After a while the malaria died down considerably, and his next task was to blood-group all the RAF personnel, about 1,200, of whom only about 200 had been done. It was a big task, as the units were split up and men dotted all round the island. “During the next fortnight I worked like a trojan doing about 150 B.G. every day & then doing all my slides at night.” Thanks to the loan of apparatus and tubes from Mr Wilson he got through a good part of them a great deal quicker than would otherwise have been possible. He travelled about a good bit, to Kasbabad, Kuramsha, Seeba and all round the balloon sites.

His month came to an end and he was recalled to Basrah, “very thankful too”, because the last fortnight’s work was showing on him a bit and he was ready for a few days’ rest. Nevertheless he enjoyed it, and “gained some very useful knowledge from Dr Marsh & Mr Wilson’s long experience out in this part of the world”. On 28 November he left Abadan, went to Kuramsha and caught the naval launch up to Ashar and so back to Basrah. The medical officer at Abadan thanked him for the work he had done, and his own boss was pleased to see him back. By then the weather had turned quite cold and they wore blue at night.

AN OFFER DECLINED

On 9 December a flight lieutenant offered Walter the chance to take a commission as a malariologist, and he declined. It meant studying entomology and archaeology, about which he knew very little, and probably being in charge of a party of men trying to find the breeding places of mosquitoes, which did not excite him a great deal. “I was glad to have had the chance but preferred to stay in my own work & carry on as before. It is very nice to have a commission but not much use if you are not interested in your work.”

CHRISTMAS, AND A POSTING

It was getting near Christmas and they were preparing for the festivities. A show was being produced, and Walter was asked to take part. For the next week or so rehearsals were fairly frequent, and most spare time was given to it. They had arranged a party in the Sick Quarters for Christmas Eve, and he had the job of getting most of the stuff for it. Then, “just to crown everything”, on the morning of Christmas Eve the medical officer told him he was posted forthwith to the Middle East. It shook him “somewhat”, as it came at a most inappropriate time, but he was really very pleased and everyone said how lucky he was. By “a certain amount of influence” he managed to get the posting held up until after the show.

Christmas Eve arrived, and they all thoroughly enjoyed the meal that he and Les had got: cold salmon, roast goose or duck with chip potatoes, tomatoes and bacon, followed by Christmas pudding, trifle and fruit jelly. “Then if anyone could eat anymore, there was biscuits, cheese & coffee & Christmas cake.” He knew quite a number of people who would have been glad of a good meal like that. Afterwards they sat round the fire with beer and had a sing-song.

Nobody was up very early on Christmas Day after the late night. Les, Ginger and Walter went for a walk about ten o’clock and returned in time for the Christmas dinner in the Airmen’s Mess, “quite good but not so

enjoyable as the previous evening". Most of them went to bed in the afternoon and slept the dinner off. Boxing Day was spent rushing around preparing for the show, and on the 27th the dress rehearsal "went very badly". On Monday 28 December he rushed around all morning getting his clearance certificate signed, prepared the stage in the afternoon, and in the evening started to get ready about seven. Everyone was a bit nervous, "but when the time came it went over very well & everyone thought it was a good show". On Tuesday morning he started packing, and went down to the airport in the afternoon to get all his kit weighed. The second night of the show "went even better than the first night". He said goodbye to everyone after it and got to bed about midnight.

THE FLYING BOAT

He was up at four and left Basrah at half past by transport for the airport. "From here onwards, I was treated as a gentleman for the rest of the day." He was shown into the dining hall and had a very nice breakfast with the captain of the flying boat. At six the party of about twenty left by launch for the B.O.A.C. flying boat lying 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 they landed at Lake Habbaniya, where a launch took them to the jetty and the Airport Hotel for tea and cakes, and at 9.30 they were off again for a four-hour flip to a place he calls Kallai, not far from Palestine. They were taken ashore in a little launch and cars were ready to take them to the airport hotel, only 500 yards away. There they had a marvellous lunch, "& it was grand to be treated like a real person again & waited on wherever we went". They had exactly an hour for lunch, and then went back to the launch, and were soon in the air on the last lap. It was a marvellous sight as they circled over Cairo, and for the last time they made a perfect landing, on the Nile: "1,000 miles in 11 hours".



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

CAIRO

A launch took them ashore, and the luggage went on another to the Customs office, which reminded him of going through the customs at Ostend. Then he was taken in a lorry to Air Headquarters in Cairo, where they were supposed to fix him up with transport to 22 P.T.C., which he found to be at Almaza, some ten miles outside Cairo, just the other side of Heliopolis. He found them “the most miserable set of lads I have come across”, who would do very little except get his money changed from Iraqi to Egyptian so he could catch a train. He left “feeling very miserable in a large city & not the foggiest idea which way to go, & rather that it was a bad way in which to finish such an enjoyable day”. Luck was on his side. A little way along the road he met a couple of airmen and asked the way to Almaza. They were going that way, and a pal was just bringing a gari round and would probably take them all the way, which he did. “When I found out how far it was, I was thankful.” They soon found him a tent to sleep in and a good feed.

Next morning he reported to the Station Sick Quarters, where he was to work until his official posting came through. The ambulance was visiting the various hospitals in Heliopolis and Cairo, and at Heliopolis he met Harry Harding, who used to be at Halton with him. They fixed to meet in the evening, and Harry showed him all round and took him for a good feed and to the pictures, to see *That Night in Rio*. Helio, he explained, was more or less “a suburb of Cairo where the more aristocratic people live”, a nice little town, and a treat to see decent shops, houses, buses and trams again.

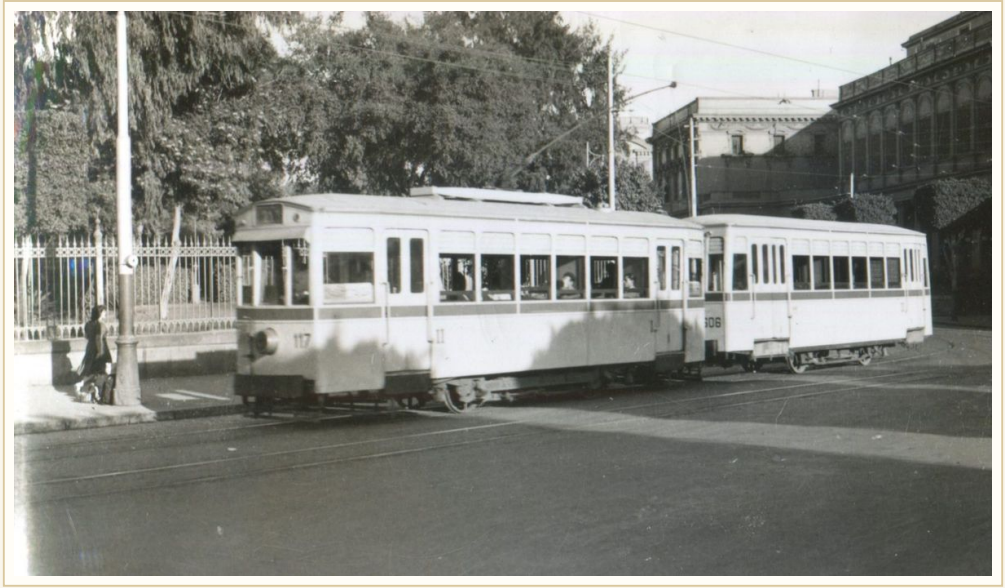


Cairo from a rooftop, from Walter’s album.

On New Year’s Day 1943 he did a few odd jobs and met Harry in the evening, and they went to the Services Club in Helio, well known to the troops there, “probably one of the finest in the world”, and then to see *The Thief of Baghdad*, which amused him, “being so highly fantastic & taken from the stories of the Arabian Nights”. On the 2nd he did nothing all day and was “getting a little browned off with sitting around doing odd

jobs here & there", and asked if he could be attached temporarily to the Sick Quarters at Helio so he could help Harry in the laboratory. That evening they went into Cairo. The trams, similar to those in Belgium and Holland and supposed to be the fastest in the world, ran between Helio and Cairo. They had a good look round, did some shopping, and visited a restaurant for an excellent feed and, "for the first time in 18 months", a pub, where he had a drink.

They decided to get back early, but about a mile outside Cairo the tram broke down. They waited, in vain, and started what they thought was a five-mile walk back to Helio; but after half a mile the tram got going on a bypass. It was absolutely packed, with people riding on the top, between the carriages and on the steps, and he managed to get on. "It was a perilous ride & I thought if the tram was to crash or tip over, there would be very many casualties." They got back to Helio without further hitch, and he started to walk the remaining two miles to Almaza. It was about half past twelve, but luck was with him and he got a lift in a car right up to the camp. He was "really thankful as I was very tired having walked all round Cairo & then part of the way back".



A Cairo tram, of the kind that ran between Heliopolis and the city.

On Sunday 3 January he went into Cairo with Harry, had tea and went to a service at Cairo Cathedral, "one of the most modern I have ever seen", small from the outside but quite large inside, with the main dome more or less in the centre. On the 4th the senior medical officer managed to get him attached to the Station Sick Quarters at Helio, so that he was able to work in the lab with Harry. His diary for that day adds: "Lady Tedder killed in crash on aerodrome." It was grand working in the lab, which was next to the aerodrome, so that they could see the aircraft take off and land beautifully. On the 5th they booked seats at the Metro Cinema in Cairo and saw Greta Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman*, "the best cinema in Cairo & really a lovely place. As good as any in England."



A mosque in Cairo, from Walter's album: probably the Sultan Hassan mosque, though the album does not say.

POSTED

On Wednesday 6 January he was telephoned about half past nine and told to report back to 22 P.T.C. "I knew immediately that my posting had come through." At the movements office they did not know where he was going, only that he was flying somewhere and was to take five blankets and only 40 pounds of kit, and to be kitted out with battledress at once. "I knew then, that I was going out on the desert & probably moving up the line." When his kit was packed and weighed he found he could not take much, and had to leave a lot behind: "including all my treasured photos, the first part of this book & one or two other things which when I got out on the blue, I wished I had been able to bring". By then they had found his unit, which they told him was 25 M.R.S. He did not know where they were.

That evening he was allowed out of camp and went to see Harry in Helio before moving off. He told him all the news, but Harry could not help him. They decided to have the last night out in Cairo and went to the pictures to see *The Invisible Agent*, with a war pictorial on which they saw pictures of the Marble Arch. "Little did I think then that the very next day I should be standing by & pass right under it." He returned to camp to find he had to be up at four o'clock the following morning.

"Now comes, perhaps, one of the most interesting chapters in this book to date."

CHAPTER

9

Libya

Following the Eighth Army

7 JANUARY – FEBRUARY 1943

Walter joins 25 M.R.S., “Culliman’s travelling circus”, in the Libyan desert near the Marble Arch. Life is mobile, uncomfortable and dangerous, and his first lesson is not to pick things up.

THE MARBLE ARCH

Thursday 7 January 1943: they were up at four, had breakfast and left Almaza for the airport at five. Only on arriving did they learn where they were going: “they told us we were flying to Marble Arch by the 7 o’c plane”. The twin-engined Lockheed Hudson took off punctually. He had been very disappointed at not going to see the pyramids while he was in Egypt, “but on gaining height was able to see them beautifully & in the early morning with the sun just rising, made a perfectly wonderful picture”. They saw Heliopolis from the air, and he could pick out landmarks quite easily. They flew on, most of the way near the coast, and after two and a half hours came in to land at a place called El Adem.

“For the first time I realised what devastation we caused when the big push started.” On approaching the aerodrome they could see for miles all around burnt-out German and Italian planes, lorries and vehicles of every sort. One of the lads told them the place had been heavily mined and it was dangerous to wander far. After ten minutes they took off again, with another passenger making eleven in all with a crew of three, and crept out to the sea to follow the coastline. Walter dropped off to sleep and the next thing he remembered was landing at Derna, where the Germans had been pushed out only a fortnight before. Again he dozed and missed Tobruk and Benghazi, and woke to find they had come slightly inland and were following the long road the Italians had built, which stretched the whole length of the Libyan desert, about 2,000 miles. It was the only road, the alternative for traffic being desert tracks lately made, and from the air it was a marvellous sight to see the lorries in an endless stream going up to the front lines.

At half past twelve they came in to land, “& the picture I had seen the previous evening came to reality”. They circled and landed just beside the Marble Arch, where only about ten days before a terrific battle had been fought. The arch was built by the Italians, he wrote, in commemoration of some big battle fought there years ago: an enormous arch across the road, made of marble with numerous inscriptions which he could not understand, being unable to read Italian, with a figure on either side of a wounded man representing the battle. Inside the pillars a winding staircase led to the top, from which there was a wonderful view: on one side Cyrenaica, on the other Tripolitania, the arch being the dividing line between the two.



A desert road with military vehicles and, in the distance, the Marble Arch.

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’.



Walter in RAF battledress, Libya, January 1943.

JOINING THE CIRCUS

They went to the Signals office and were told their unit was about 45 miles up the road and the best way was to hitch-hike. They did so easily, with a ride in the back of a South African wagon on top of a pile of shells, “none too comfortable”. Walter approximated the mileage, and sure enough they spotted the red crosses on the tents and the ambulances. They thanked the South Africans for the lift and went up to the orderly room, where the flight sergeant in charge told Walter there was no laboratory or equipment for him, and took them to the theatre, since the other man he had come with was an operating room assistant. There Walter met a

radiographer who had been at the hospital at Halton with him. They soon made them as comfortable as possible, “& so we finally made ourselves at home with 25 M.R.S.”.





“On the move”: airmen in the back of a lorry. The reverse of the first print reads ‘On the move. Eric, Steve, Lofty, Marty’; Steve is Walter. Libya, 1943.

That evening they received a man who had triggered one of the booby traps and had his hand blown off. Walter watched the operation and saw the hand amputated, and thought how lucky he was to get away with his life. He learnt that mines of all descriptions had been laid all up the lines, and in fact everywhere the Germans had retreated. “It shook me somewhat & I learnt my lesson there & then, not to wander away from the camp & refrain from picking up souvenirs off the ground.” The traps had been laid in all kinds of places, and most of them were most innocent. Cases had been reported of people picking up German water-bottle cans, most useful in the desert, and no sooner than they touched them the whole thing blew up. “Anyway I went to bed feeling none too happy about the state of affairs.”

In the morning he was able to look around the camp. As one would expect of a mobile hospital, everything was under canvas: the theatre, medical and surgical wards, reception room, orderly room, officers’, sergeants’ and airmen’s messes, cookhouse and stores. The ambulances and vehicles were scattered about at dispersal points. The unit comprised six officers, six sergeants and about eighty men, entirely self-contained, and in a very short while they were known as “Culliman’s travelling circus”. It was about ten miles from Nufilia, and Wing Commander Culliman was the C.O., hence the name. Walter met Flight Sergeant Smiles, who was to be his

laboratory officer and who tried to get him a plane to Benghazi to fetch laboratory equipment, but luck was out and nothing could be arranged.

He hung about all day feeling very miserable, and found that cigarettes, razor blades and any NAAFI requirements were very scarce and difficult to obtain so far from a base NAAFI. “I kicked myself for not obtaining a fair supply while I had the chance in Cairo & also wished I had all my kit with me but that could not be helped.” In the evening one of the mobile NAAFI cinemas came round and gave an excellent show, Marlene Dietrich in *The Seven Sinners*, “a great success”. All the boys wished they would come round more often.

BENGHAZI

On Saturday 10 January he managed to get a wagon to take him to Benghazi, and a party of five set off about a quarter to twelve for a 250-mile journey. The road had been strafed very heavily and bomb holes were very numerous, so the going was heavy, but they made fairly good headway and got to Agedabia by nightfall, spending a restful night in the back of the gari. Cooking breakfast out on the desert next morning, bacon and beans, one of the few natives left in the village came up with eggs. She would not take money for them but wanted tea and sugar. They found out that tea was practically unobtainable for the villagers, and if they had the money to buy it cost ten shillings a pound.

After breakfast the brakes seized up on them. They got those right, and then the big end broke about sixty miles from Benghazi. They had to give up and send for help, so he hitch-hiked in and arrived about four o’clock. He found a big captured Italian laboratory that the unit was using, and met Norman House, who used to be at Halton with him. Norman showed him round “this most wonderful laboratory which when working in peace time must have been a magnificent place”: four very big labs, everywhere white-tiled and beautifully finished off. A bomb had been dropped on one half of it, but even so it was quite usable. The apparatus, chemicals and glassware “must have been unlimited”, and the library was one of the finest he had ever seen, though all the books were in Italian. “I certainly wished I could have stayed there & thought what a crying shame that such a beautiful place as this should be ruined.” He learned from some of the natives that in peacetime this public health laboratory had a staff of about eighty, twenty doctors and scientists and sixty technicians.

After looking round he met S/Sgt Aitken, the pathologist he knew in England, and had a long chat with him. Aitken gave him the necessary permission to be fitted up with a mobile laboratory. He saw the quartermaster and handed over his vouchers, and Norman made him at home, and they slept in the offices of the lab. Shortages of everything were just as acute there and cigarettes were unobtainable, though he did manage to get a few razor blades. Next morning he started sorting out equipment and saw the trailer, which it was doubtful whether he should have, “but after much debating the W/Cdr decided to let me have it”. He had supper with Norman and went to bed early.

He spent a day or two getting the trailer packed, and the gari that was to take him back did not arrive: “usual bungling”. He had a look round Benghazi but could not see much “except a lot of shattered ruins”. The

cathedral was “a beautiful place & completely untouched”, and from the top of the laboratory he had an excellent view of a town that in peacetime must have been quite picturesque and was now very heavily bomb-scarred. In the evening “Jerry paid us a visit & the Ack Ack fire was terrific & reminded me of the old 1940 blitzes on London”. It lasted about an hour and then everything was quiet.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

A town that changed hands

Benghazi had been captured and lost over and over in the desert war. The British took it in February 1941 and lost it that April. They retook it on Christmas Day 1941, lost it again in January 1942 and took it for the last time on 20 November 1942, only seven weeks before Walter arrived. After the battering it had taken, the Eighth Army had to be supplied through its damaged port and by road from Tobruk, which is the shattered town Walter describes.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Timeline of the North African campaign’; ww2db, Benghazi; New Zealand Official History, ‘Medical Services’.





The mobile laboratory trailer, with ‘25 RAF MFU’ and its number stencilled on the rear; and Walter at the open door of the laboratory, with the unit sign and ‘Laboratory’ both legible.

ONE HUNDRED YARDS APART

The gari turned up at eleven on the Friday and they started on their long journey back to the unit with the trailer, which cut their speed to twenty miles an hour. They managed only ninety miles the first day, and made camp at a suitable spot. All the way up the road were notices: “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”, and “If Jerry straffs you, you won’t laugh. Keep 100 yds distant”. On an old lorry which must have been blown up sometime it said “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”, as Jerry had no easier target than thousands of vehicles nose to tail, and strafing and bombing convoys was a very common thing out there.

They camped again, well past Agedabia, and next day reached the Marble Arch by lunchtime and went to the M.T. and R.U. to pick up a vehicle of which of course they knew nothing. “So we left there with a sorry feeling.” At Nufilia crossroads they found that their unit had moved on sixty miles inland while they were

away. They stopped for tiffin, and the D.O., who had left Benghazi twenty-four hours after them, caught up in a jeep and went off in search of the missing vehicle. They got out onto the blue, made camp at packing-up time, since no lights were allowed after dark, and next day reached Nufilia, once an Italian settlement, where nobody knew where their unit was. At the water point they got plenty of water and an approximate bearing.

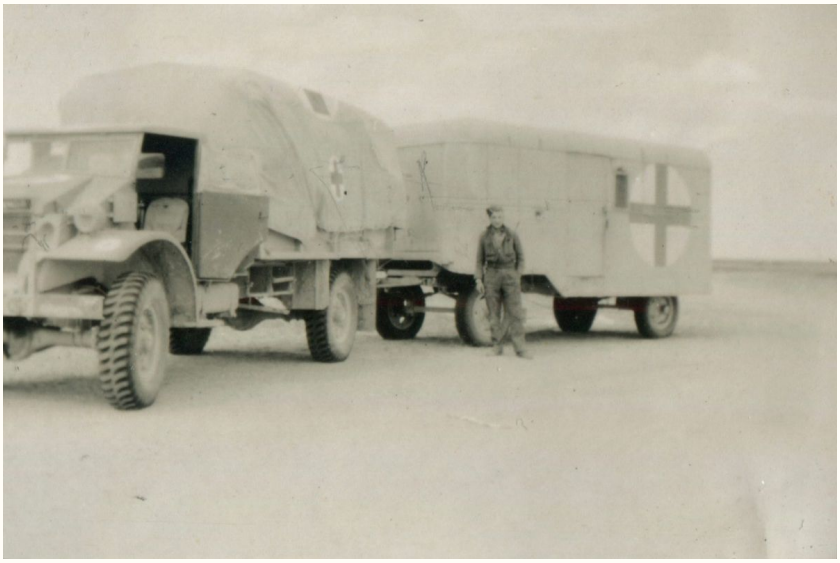
In the afternoon they got bogged in the sand up to the axles. They tried every way they could think of, but the trailer was too heavy for the lorry. Walter went off in the lorry with the driver to find help and they came across one of their own garis in the desert, which came back, and with the extra lorry on the front and a tow chain they got out after three hours. Most of them were irritable and tired, and they packed in for the day. Next morning, sailing along merrily on a plateau, one of the boys saw their own water trailer coming towards them. They were only about thirty miles from camp but going slightly the wrong way and had to cut inland a bit more. While waiting for the others to come back and show them the way, Walter had “the bright idea” of getting NAAFI supplies. The driver, another man and he set off on a road with an arrow pointing to the NAAFI, and found it was for Army personnel only. “Anyway I was not going to be beaten”, he wrote, and asked the military policeman where they could get rations. He was told of a transit camp about three miles across the blue.

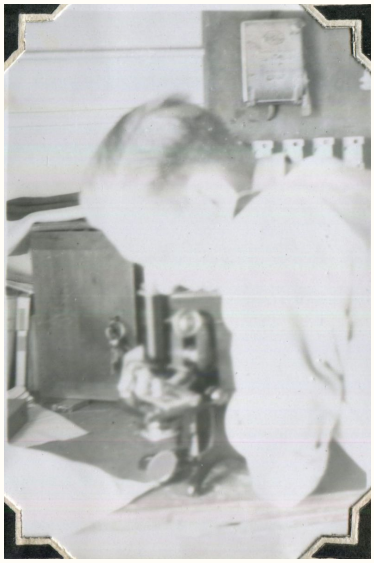
There he told the sergeant in charge the story of how they had to get back to Benghazi. “Ah you are the very people we have been looking for. We have 50 German prisoners here — will you take some of them back in the lorry.” Walter was dumbfounded and did not know what to say, but the sergeant changed his mind and said it did not matter. “Oh boy! was I relieved.” He gave them a chit for rations, and after queuing about an hour they got them, cigarettes included, “so we did not do so badly after all”. They found the trailer again, had tiffin, and shortly afterwards the others arrived and led the way back to camp. A mile from it they had to go up a steep escarpment and got stuck once more, but with the water lorry they were out in no time. “Eventually we did arrive back at camp & very thankful we all were too.”

WAITING, AND GAZELLES

The next few days he spent preparing the trailer and making up all his solutions. There were few patients, but they expected to move further up the line. On Friday 24 January they heard on the wireless that Tripoli had fallen to us, although unofficial news had come through two days earlier. Everybody hoped they would move in. By 31 January they were still in the same area and no move was imminent, though the C.O. said they would go as soon as the squadrons moved up.

NAAFI supplies were still very short and few cigarettes could be got, some weeks relying only on their issue, fifty cigarettes a week. Up to then bread had been non-existent, but somehow some was obtained and they had it for a few days before they went back to the old biscuits. Fresh meat was unobtainable so far out in the desert and all their food was tinned. They were fortunate to find that there was a good gazelle hunting ground about thirty miles from camp, and the C.O. organised parties of about five. “I went out gazelle hunting. We found that we could get these quite easily & so kept up our fresh meat supply.” One afternoon he went out with one of the

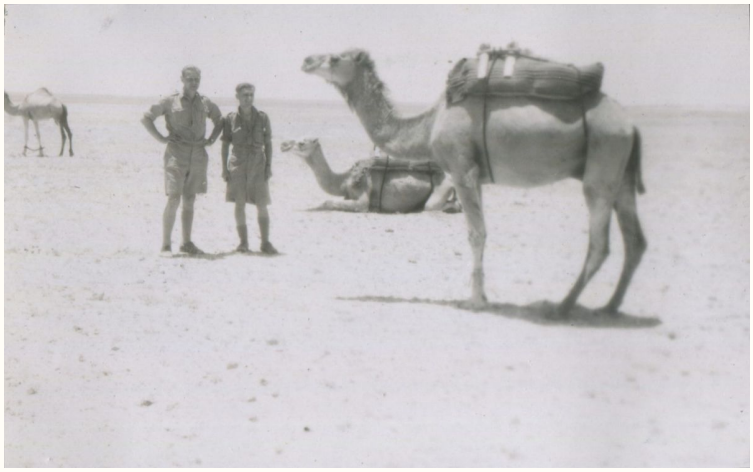




Left: a lorry towing a Red Cross trailer. Right: Walter at his microscope.

officers and a couple of other lads, and they did quite well, getting five between them. “I got the biggest one of the lot & felt quite pleased with myself.”

Gazelles went about in herds and could run faster than any other animal he had seen, and keep it up for long periods. They chased one buck for fully half an hour, and at one time he was level with the car at nearly fifty miles an hour. It was good fun but “really poor sport in a car”, though it would have been impossible to get near enough on foot. Funnily enough, the rifle he was using was a captured German one, “a very nice one too”. As a result of the shooting parties they had fresh meat nearly every day, and “roast gazelle is really lovely & some of the most tender meat I have ever eaten. It tastes very much like venison.”



Two men in shorts with two camels in the desert. Walter is on the left. Libya, 1943.

After three weeks there they finally got the order to move. On the day before, a mobile NAAFI came round and they were able to replenish their depleted stocks of cigarettes, tinned fruit, soap, shaving cream and other necessities, and that same evening a mobile cinema came round, and they saw George Formby in *Spare a Copper*. The following morning all the tents were taken down and they moved off about eleven.



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

ACROSS TRIPOLITANIA

By nightfall they had reached the outskirts of Sirte, "having travelled only 50 miles but across some of the roughest desert I have yet seen". Next day they were off about half past eight and got to the advance party by lunchtime, and after tiffin were on the road again. Being on the main road made a considerable difference, and they did 160 miles that day and made camp. The following morning they got into the green belt and passed through quite pretty country. Near Misurata they passed many well-built dwelling houses, all part of Mussolini's colonisation of Libya: each had a certain amount of land which the owner had to cultivate and sell the produce to the government. Once again they saw palm trees and groves, and at eleven they reached Misurata, which "At one time I should say it was quite a decent town, but now looks rather battle scarred" from fighting only about three weeks before.

At Zliten, over tiffin, natives came up with eggs and lemons, which they bought very cheaply or swapped for biscuits. The commanding officer had expected to go fifteen or twenty miles inland; instead they went about forty, as most of the way had been heavily mined, and they arrived at the chosen spot in a sandstorm. Nothing could be done that night owing to the wind and sand. They were right out in the desert again, about a hundred

miles from Tripoli. On Friday 12 February they tried to put up the tents, but a terrific wind and then rain made them give it up. That night a terrific sandstorm blew up “& we got absolutely smothered in sand”, and by the next morning it had died down enough to put up the rest. “I was very thankful too when they were all up, as it is a very tiring job, especially when there are big marquees besides many others.”

Sunday 14 February brought a restful day and they settled down to camp life, with patients already coming in from the surrounding units. “I quite enjoyed it here in spite of sandstorms. The main thing was, plenty of work to do which made you feel that you were not altogether wasted in the desert.” In three weeks they saw quite a bit of the ambulance planes which landed on a flying field they made on the camp. Several people got a couple of days’ leave in Tripoli, but Walter did not. Then came orders to pack up, and on Friday 5 March they moved off. It was rough going across the desert until Zliten, and then good headway along the coast road, through the green belt, with many little villages. “For the first time on the whole trip up from Cairo, it began to look a bit more civilized again.” There were lovely orange groves, though it was the wrong time of year and no fruit on them. At five o’clock they reached Tripoli after a run of 144 miles, drove right round the town, and saw where bombs had fallen and the strafing and bullet holes on the walls of many buildings, particularly the cathedral, “truly wonderful”. Some shops were open and the civilian population seemed to be coming out of hiding, “but the price of things were very high”.



Four men beside a milestone marked ‘40 Tripoli’: probably on the coast road in Libya, 1943. Walter is second from the right.



An RAF air ambulance biplane marked with a red cross, with its crew.

They spent that night with 24 M.R.S., who had the hospital in Tripoli next to the racecourse, and next morning were off again at half past eight. After about sixty miles they left the coast road and made for the desert, to a place called El Assa, thirty miles inland over “some of the roughest desert I have yet travelled”. They got stuck several times with the trailers. But the C.O. had picked a grand spot, “quite nice & green which helps to break the glare of the desert”, and by midday next day the camp was complete. The C.O. estimated them to be about fifty miles behind the front lines. Walter got his laboratory set up and within a couple of days they were in full operation.

THE RAID ON TRIPOLI

After a week or so he had to go to Tripoli to get serum. Arriving about six in the evening he met Dave Summers, who found him a bed in his billet. About nine the sirens sounded and they knew there would be a big raid. Sure enough, a quarter of an hour later the guns opened up, and “I saw one of the biggest barrages I had ever seen”. The Beauforts were firing tracer bullets and it looked like one big firework display. Radio location seemed excellent, the searchlights picked out the planes almost at once, and when the guns were trained on them “you could see the bullets hitting the planes & really I did not envy the pilots”. They were watching one bomber caught by the searchlights which seemed to be heading in their direction, and then smoke started coming out of its tail.

“I said to the boys ‘If he drops his bombs now we’ve had it’ but he seemed to come on down & passed right by us. 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.”

He got up and felt himself all over and found, to his great relief, that he was entirely unharmed. He shouted to the others to find out if they were all right, and saw a man lying among the debris and pulled him out. It was not light enough to see if he was hurt, so another man and Walter carried him into the hospital, and found he was only suffering from severe shock. They were ordered down the shelter until the raid was over, and then went to see what had been done. At the back of the building he had been in was a huge crater, big enough to put a house in, and another smaller one: two bombs. The crater itself was not more than ten yards from where he had been standing and had blown the whole of one side of the wall in.

“It seemed an absolute miracle how no one was even hurt & I thanked God for my life. It was a very close shave indeed & I never want one as near as that again.” Had the bomb dropped another twenty yards up the pathway it would no doubt have hit the hospital and there would have been hundreds of casualties. From the craters the big bomb was estimated at 500 lb and the small one at 25 lb. After the raid they had to move their beds out of the unsafe building, and quite a number of fellows had a job finding theirs among the debris; Walter’s was all right. He spent a very restless night in the quartermaster’s stores. Next morning they examined the damage and found great lumps of brick and mortar thrown twenty-five yards. He got his serum and oddments from Dave and directly after tiffin made for camp as quickly as possible, arriving at six, “& very thankful I was too”. They heard in the morning that ten planes had been brought down in the raid, “which I thought quite a good effort”.

Life went on in much the usual way and the work steadily rolled in. The start of the final push began and patients were being evacuated to them from the front. On 26 March the D.G. came round on a visit and inspected the whole camp. By then they had been at El Assa just on a month and had really got settled in.

LEAVE IN TRIPOLI

Then his turn came round for leave, and once more he went to Tripoli. They made a record run, three and a half hours, arriving in time for tiffin. Afterwards he and his pal walked round the town, looked at the shops and took a few photos. On the whole he was very disappointed with the shops: most were much of a muchness and “contained little souvenirs which were very expensive & not really worth buying”. They walked along the beautiful promenade among the palm trees, “really picturesque”. He could not take photos of the harbour, as the chances of photographing military objectives by mistake were too great. They visited the cathedral, “a fine piece of architecture”, the Bank of Rome and many other beautiful buildings, and called in at the Union Club, in peacetime a civic centre or possibly the town hall and now a rest room and NAAFI for the troops, for a cup of tea, before walking back to the hospital where they were staying.





Left: a serviceman in a Tripoli garden. Right: Walter in front of a grand doorway.





Left: the Red Castle, Tripoli. Right: an Italian colonnade.

On the Saturday morning they went to an ENSA show in the afternoon, the front row of the upper circle. “It was a grand feeling to sit in a real theatre once more & we thoroughly enjoyed the show.” They played bridge in the evening, and a message was received for them to return to camp first thing in the morning. That cut their leave short by half a day, “& we were disappointed about it because we anticipated taking quite a number of photos”. Directly after breakfast they started back. It was a glorious day, and “the beautiful smell of scent from the mimosa trees was very exhilarating”. They arrived by tiffin time to find everything packed up ready to move. Directly after tiffin they were on the road again and had to make Medenine by nightfall.





Left: the cathedral at Tripoli, which Walter visited. Right: a palm-lined avenue with a minaret beyond.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

A note on the dates

At this point in the diary Walter's month names appear to run about a month early. He writes of moving to Medenine on "5th March", of Gabes having "just fallen", of Sfax having "only fallen to us a few days previously", and of arriving at El Hencha on "Monday 19th March". The Eighth Army broke the Mareth Line at the end of March and took Gabes on 29 March, and Sfax fell on 10 April, so these moves seem to belong to April. The Tripoli raid and the D.G.'s visit may also be a month later than written. This book keeps Walter's own dates in quotation and follows the order of the diary, which is clear even where the calendar is not. Tunis and Bizerta fell on 7 May, as he records.

Source: editorial note. Dates from History of War (Gabès, 29 March; Sfax, 10 April) and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Tunisia Campaign article (Tunis and Bizerte, 7 May).

CHAPTER

10

Tunisia

The Mareth Line and beyond

MARCH – JUNE 1943

25 M.R.S. follows the Eighth Army into Tunisia. Walter has a second near-escape, on a minefield, Tunis falls, and near Carthage he sees Churchill pass in convoy.

MINES

They crossed the border by the tricolour. “In a very short while after starting we saw the tri-colour French flag on the border & soon we passed it & were then in Tunisia.” They travelled on steadily over very bumpy roads and made Medenine just before nightfall, ninety miles, and the C.O. found the spot for the camp, five miles out of the village. Walter was very tired and thankful to get to bed, having travelled just over 200 miles that day. The push was going on steadily, and as fast as the Army pushed on, they followed. Gabes had just fallen to us. Once again they put up tents, and had most of the camp up by the afternoon. They were very busy there, but the stay was short, and orders came to move up to Sfax, which had only fallen a few days before. At half past seven on 15 March they were ready to move off. “This was one of the worst journeys I had ever had but nevertheless we made the 150 miles by nightfall.”

They came to the Mareth Line, where such a big battle had been fought only a couple of weeks earlier. The little village of Mareth was “absolutely gutted right out & there was not a soul about anywhere”. Shortly after they had a puncture and put the spare wheel on. All the way along the road were mines which Jerry had left behind, and “I have never seen so many in all my life”. The whole way along the side of the road was littered with them, dug up by the sappers and left on the verge. They were very deadly, and they all had to be careful not to pull over to the side as one poor chap did, and “was blown sky high by an anti-tank mine which must have been missed”.

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’.

Then their lorry began to fail. The carburettor started sputtering and the lorry came to a standstill. The fitters did everything to put it right and managed to get her going in the end, but “our luck was out that day & altogether she knocked out about 4 times”. The last time the fitters decided to draw on to the side of the road and fit a new pump and carburettor. There were some big “macks” about a hundred yards up the road, which had pulled onto a green patch, and they decided to pull in there out of the way. They managed to make the gari go that distance and pulled in on a little pathway that had been made. “Instead of keeping to this pathway, my driver swung right round so we were level with the road again leaving the ‘macks’ about 20 yds away. 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 he went to speak to the lads, they told him they were on a minefield and only two days earlier

a lorry had blown up not fifty yards from where they were. “Sure enough when we looked round we could see the remains of the lorry still lying there.” It was getting late and they still had about forty miles to do. He was feeling “really sick & bad after the experience I had just been through”, and, it being the second near thing he had had, it seemed to react on him worse than the first. After half an hour they got the gari going again, as they all hoped for good, but they had gone no more than a mile when she refused to go again, and this time they decided to tow her the rest of the way.

They arrived at Sfax in the dark and did not know where to go, for they knew the camp would be some miles out but in what direction they did not know. They went up to the main crossroads to see if there was anyone about. “Our luck was in this time as the C.O. had sent someone back to wait for us until we arrived.” It was only another ten miles. A hot dinner was waiting, but Walter felt so bad that he went straight to bed with some aspirins, and next morning felt a lot better for his rest.

OLIVE TREES AND SFAX

They were in rather pleasant surroundings, “all amongst rows & rows of olive trees for which Tunisia is so famous”, endless square miles of them. The name of the place was Tringia. Apparently each tree was valued at £10 a year when partly grown and £20 a year when fully matured. After the camp was set up they settled down to work and patients soon began to arrive. As they were near Sfax, parties were run into the town to see a variety show put on by the Army, and Walter went with the first party and enjoyed the show very much. Afterwards they had time to look round a town which at one time he imagined had been a very pleasant holiday resort and was now “a bit of a shambles”. Much as in Tripoli, Sfax had a pleasant promenade along the front lined with palm trees. Some of the magnificent mosaic buildings in the main street had been hit badly, and “it seemed a wicked shame that such beautiful buildings should be subjected to such damage”.





Servicemen resting and posing under olive trees, Tunisia, 1943.

During the next few days they were kept very busy, and had heard that this was to be their last move in the campaign, but another move was ahead, and within five days they were on the way again, this time only forty-five miles further on to a place called El Hencha. It was an easy move which they took in stages and did not rush. The country was more open, with beautiful fields of poppies and many kinds of wild flowers. “The colouring was really wonderful & one could almost imagine being on the Scottish moors in England.” On Monday 19 March they seemed to get the camp up quicker than ever and by tiffin time were in full operation.

SMALLPOX, AND THE END IN AFRICA

They had not been there more than a week when a case of smallpox turned up and part of the camp had to be isolated. The only way was to move the majority of the camp to the other side of the road and build a fresh camp, which they did. After the quarantine the others moved over too. “It was an extraordinary coincidence that it was in early April last year that I was in a smallpox epidemic just as I was leaving Habbaniya.” Life went on steadily and they soon got settled in. They made a cricket pitch and had some good games with the surrounding units.

Everybody was getting excited about the fall of Tunis, which seemed imminent any day, and “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 and the terrific battle that had been fought out there finally finished. Now the campaign had finished they had to sit back and wait to move to the next theatre of war, and naturally everyone was making wild guesses where they were going. “Although there was a great number of moans from most of us (which is an airman’s privilege) 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.”

A DAY IN TUNIS

On 1 June he was granted a day’s leave in Tunis, and twelve of them set off in a gari about ten o’clock. The road was good and they made speedy headway and soon made El Djem. It was a 200-mile journey through one or two small towns, with endless miles of olive trees, and they reached the outskirts of Tunis by half past four and went on to Carthage, where they stayed overnight 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 or so a large convoy appeared, led by service police on motorbicycles and armoured cars. “At once we knew it was some celebrity. As the cars went passed 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 was General Alexander, and behind that General Eisenhower, with numerous other higher ranks whom he could not recognise. When they got to the hospital they found that had they been there about two hours earlier they could have seen him speak in the central auditorium.



Inside the amphitheatre at El Djem.





The Roman amphitheatre at El Djem, in Walter's album. The diary names El Djem on the road to Tunis on 1 June 1943, so these may be from the same day.

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'.

The lads at the hospital made them very welcome, and they were glad to have a good wash and a meal after the long run. As he was going in to dinner he met the flying officer quartermaster who had been the warrant officer at the I.P.T.M. when he was there, "so surprised to see him", and they had a long chat. Shortly after dinner he

was sent for by Group Captain Lipscomb, who was there at the time and who was his old C.O. in England. They went for a swim that evening in the Bay of Carthage, and he was struck by the surroundings: one could imagine one was at some seaside resort in Devon or Cornwall. There were cliffs most of the way round, and a narrow pathway down to a pleasant alcove with a refreshment house on one side and little bathing huts, in the style of a chalet, on the other. Naturally the refreshment house was closed, “but one could well imagine what a lovely place it was in peace-time”.

Next morning some of them were up at six for a dip before breakfast, “which was really grand”. He saw the Group Captain, who seemed very pleased to see him again, and Walter was very thrilled, “& only wished I was still under his command”. They had a long chat and the Group Captain wanted to know everything. Then he made his way into Tunis, as the boys had gone on before, and got a lift with the Brigadier Commanding the First Army’s artillery, “so I was well in with the big noises that day”. He walked up the main street and found a party of the others.

Tunis, being a French town, had very many French girls walking about, “& were they smart!” The dresses and costumes were some of the smartest he had ever seen, and he imagined they got them from Paris somehow. A large number of them were extremely pretty, “or at least I thought so, but probably no prettier than any average English girl. 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 had not been damaged much and most of the shops were open, although there was not much to buy except powder and lipstick, but he bought a few things to send home. It was nice to see a real pub again, and the local wine was “not at all bad & very cheap”, used by the French mainly as a cheap dinner wine.

They returned to the hospital for lunch, “all disappointed at having to return & wish we could have had a week’s leave”. Before leaving on the 200-mile journey back they visited the brewery and bought a few bottles of wine at five francs a bottle, went for a final swim, and started back about half past three. They had a very good run and arrived back at ten o’clock.

The next day they packed up camp again, with orders to move back to Ben Gardane. On 4 June they were on their way on another 200-mile journey in convoy, back over familiar roads, over the terrible area by Sfax that had been so full of mines, which was now all quiet, and through the Mareth Line, “as desolate as ever”. They reached Medenine about six and drew on to their old spot for the night. “It was strange to see our old site again & everyone went round to where their old tent used to be.”

CHAPTER

11

Tripoli

Waiting for Sicily

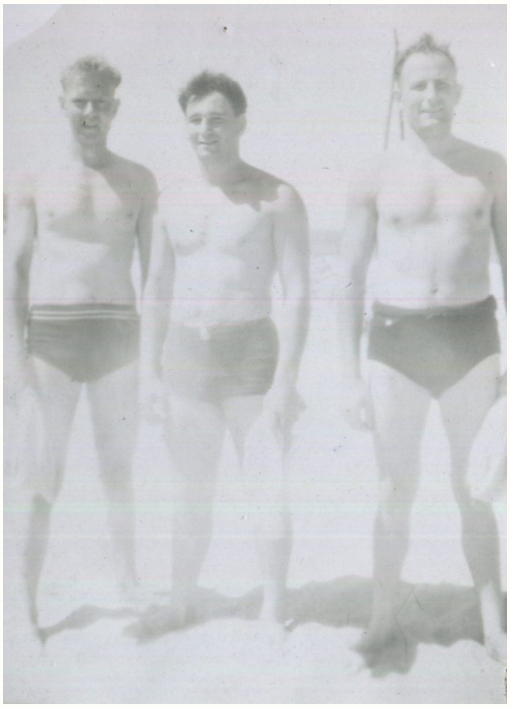
JUNE – 31 JULY 1943

With Africa won, 25 M.R.S. waits on the Libyan coast. Walter sees Roman ruins, meets Harry and Dave together for the first time since Halton, loses his ring in the sea, and flies to Sicily.

BEN GARDANE

They reached the old site by tiffin the next day, a mile from the sea, and after the camp was set up they could swim nearly every afternoon. They were only partly operational and able to get a good rest, “which was what a great many of us needed”. 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: “This was a 1st class show, one of the best I have seen in the desert.”

They stayed longer than anticipated, “& after a time most of us got very browned off with nothing much to do”. By 1 July they were still at the same site, and Walter had the chance of a day in Tripoli with his pal Reg and the C.O. They set out about ten and got to Sabratha by tiffin time. The C.O. had a few things to do, so Reg and Walter looked round the old Roman ruins, “really interesting”: “some of the oldest Roman remains to be seen in this part of the world”, with the amphitheatre supposed to date 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 and obviously had been looked after.



Three men in swimming trunks, on the North African coast, 1943. Walter is on the left.





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 set out again after tiffin and made Tripoli by dinner time. After a scout round the town in the evening they returned to H.Q. and saw “quite a good show” given by 24 M.R.S. Next morning they went into town again, bought a few things, and set off for Sabratha, which they made in time for tiffin a second time. Then he had “one of the most unpleasant journeys since being on the desert”. He and Reg rode in the back of the C.O.’s car and the track was none too good, and the C.O. seemed in a great hurry to get back, “& we bounced all over the place”. By the time they reached Ben Gardane they were covered from head to foot in sand. “Once again we were glad to be back in camp.”

ORDERS TO MOVE

It was not long before orders came to move. After a week or so of camouflaging tins and sorting out parts, they had everything packed up and were on the road again by 20 July, Sicily having been invaded on the 10th. This time four of them travelled in the trailer, and “we set up a record by brewing up chai while the convoy was actually in motion”. At one place they stopped, and their driver came to see how they were getting on and was “somewhat shaken by being given a cup of chai on the spot”.



Four airmen among the ruins. Walter says he and Reg took photographs at Sabratha, so this may be one of his.





Left: stone seating in the Roman theatre at Sabratha. Right: the upper colonnade of the stage wall.

They reached the Tripoli racecourse once again at seven that evening, where a hot meal was ready, “& very thankful we were”. By now everyone knew they were going to Sicily and following the Eighth Army again as in the previous campaign. There was a certain amount of excitement and all were eager to get over the other

side. That night on the racecourse they saw *The First of the Few*, the life story of Mitchell, who designed the Spitfire, “an excellent film”, and everyone went to bed feeling quite contented.

On 21 July a refrigerator arrived and they fixed it up in the trailer. It gave a little trouble at first, but they got it going, and it proved invaluable. As 21 M.R.S. were also on the racecourse, Harry was with them, and so “Harry, Dave & myself were altogether for the first time since we were at Halton together just about 2 years ago”. In the afternoon Walter went for a swim with Dave, and they had a sing-song in the trailer in the evening.

On the 22nd they were allowed in the town in the afternoon, and Reg, a few others and Walter looked round the shops and got tickets for the miniature theatre at 5.15. After iced lemonades and a few sandwiches they went to the show, called *Highlights*, and “thoroughly enjoyed it”, coming back for a good feed in the trailer. On the 23rd the ban was on again, owing to the anticipated move, and some of the lads were beginning to get browned off with waiting about and anxious to get on with the job. Walter went for a swim in the morning and had a good rest in the afternoon, and in the evening watched a football match, “the first one I had seen for a long time”.

On 24 July he felt bad all day with a bad attack of diarrhoea, lay on his bed all day, got up in the evening and saw a show at 24 M.R.S. On the 25th he went to church in the morning and swimming in the afternoon. On the 26th the Advance Surgical Section left in a hurry, as usual, and flew over by plane. Walter played in a football match in the evening. For the next three days they just hung about and “began to get very fed up with doing nothing”.

Then they signalled for him urgently, and he packed his microscope and stains in a box, but had to wait a day for the plane. Flight Sergeant Smiles decided to come with him, and everything was in readiness. That afternoon Walter went for a swim in a very rough sea “& lost my ring coming in over the rocks. This upset me very much & for the time being seemed to take all the edge off the excitement of flying to Sicily.”

TO SICILY

On the 30th final arrangements were made and he and Smiles set off for Castel Benito aerodrome, where they were to catch the plane the following morning. They left the racecourse at six and in half an hour arrived at the airfield. They stayed overnight in the transit camp.

On 31 July they were up at half past five, breakfasted at six and on the airfield by half past. There was considerable waiting about, and by the time they were weighed in and everything checked it was half past seven. A gari took them out to the kite, a Dakota standing on the runway, twelve passengers plus a crew of four, and by the time the baggage was on board it was close on eight. “Punctually on time the pilot taxied to his position & on receiving the signal we were airborne before you could say ‘Jack Robinson.’” After about half an hour they were over the sea and saw nothing for the next two hours but waves, and then Malta came in sight. It was the first Walter had seen of Malta: they circled twice and could see the whole island, flying quite low,

“what a wonderfully fertile place it is”. There seemed hardly a square yard of land not cultivated. They landed at Luqa, one of the aerodromes all joined together by long runways, at half past ten, and were told they could get out and walk round for half an hour. Some of them found a tea shop and had a cup of tea.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Malta

Malta had been besieged from June 1940, bombed almost without a break in 1942, and in April of that year the whole island was awarded the George Cross ‘to honour her brave people’. By 1943 it had turned from a target into a springboard. Its airfields, Luqa among them, and its harbours were the base for the invasion of Sicily, and fighters flown from the island covered the landings. King George VI had visited Luqa on 20 June 1943, six weeks before Walter’s Dakota put down there, while the fighting in Sicily was still going on.

Source: Wikipedia, ‘Siege of Malta (World War II)’; backtonormandy.org, ‘The airfields on Malta’; Combat Archives, ‘Malta Strikes Back’.

He had just finished his when Flight Sergeant Smiles came running in, called out for him, and 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 they were in the air again and out over the sea, this time flying low so that they could not be picked up by German radio location. In twenty minutes they had their first glimpse of Sicily, and in half an hour had landed at an aerodrome at Cassibile, five miles from Syracuse. Having flown that short distance between Malta and Sicily, he thought, it was not surprising how easily the Germans had bombed Malta when they were in possession of Sicily.

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 bridge where Hedley Verity was fatally wounded, raids the university laboratory, and shelters from shrapnel behind a tree.

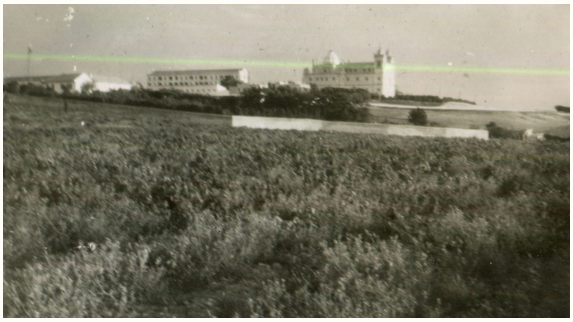
THE ALMOND GROVE

The advance party were only about 200 yards from the aerodrome, so it was not long before the gari came to pick them up, “& once more I was with the advance party”. The camp was in an almond grove right in the farmlands, “surrounded by some of the prettiest scenery I had seen for sometime”. So far there were only twelve of them across, and the rest were still in Tripoli. He set up the few oddments he had in a tent, and at the moment there was not a great deal of work to do. In the evening Reg took him for a walk round some vineyards close at hand, “& we picked grapes & ate them until we looked like them”. He had never seen such big grape vineyards with almond trees intermingled. It was “grand to see real soil once more & no sand which we were used to by now”, and he could almost imagine himself back in England in any farming district. In the next field was a farm with horses, cows, goats and chickens, “& it was a wonderful sight to see the cows coming in in the afternoon for milking”.





Left: terraced gardens in Sicily. Right: a bay with mountains behind.





Left: the Sicilian coast, 1943. Right: a church on a hill above vineyards.

The Sicilian farmers were quite friendly and very willing to do their washing, and the farm had a well, as on most English country farms, where they drew most of their water. “And so, 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.” With so few of them and only three officers, there was no discipline and they were allowed to do more or less as they liked, “& led a comparatively free life until the main party arrived”, nearly a fortnight later.

On 1 August everyone went about their jobs and, when they finished, walked down to the sea, only half a mile away. It was lovely bathing, but no sand: instead there were the famous Sicilian coral rocks which they could dive off into about fifteen feet of crystal-clear water. As time went on they got busier every day. The Air Sea Rescue parties, flying in Walruses, did grand work in picking up pilots who had come down in the drink, and they received a large number of casualties from this source, so that by 8 August they were full up and their little advance party had its time cut out coping with all the patients. Malaria had got a hold on some people and they were receiving quite a few cases, which kept Walter very busy. On 10 August the majority of the main party arrived, and it was not long before their little camp had turned into a big field hospital again.

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'.



Three men beside the unit vehicle, marked '25 RAF MFH', taking tea. Walter is on the left.

CATANIA

On 11 August the P.M.O. told him to go to Catania to pick up some equipment he wanted from the university. They set off early in the morning and soon passed through Syracuse, and it was not long before they were up in

the very high hills around Lentini and Carlentini. The views were “some of the most wonderful I have seen for sometime”, and anyone who saw the hills and valleys as he did must realise what difficult ground our men had to fight over. All the way it was nothing but hills and dales surrounded by orange, almond and lemon groves. At Augusta they saw where the fighting had been heavy, though most places along the way were practically unscathed, and no one would have known that there had been heavy fighting there only a few weeks before. The port was very badly damaged, but Italian seaplanes still floated in the harbour looking untouched.



The sign at Siracusa Centrale, the station at Syracuse.

On the plains of Catania they 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.” They had been warned of the heavy mining by the Germans around the area, and had proof of it: everywhere along the side of the road was strewn with mines the sappers had dug up. They had a wonderful view of Mount Etna, which stood majestically behind Catania. Before entering the town they passed what had been a German air base, which the Americans had bombed so much that it was just one mass of bomb craters. On entering the town they had to pass through some of the worst areas, where the street fighting had been worst, “& the place was in a terrible state, Catania having been in our hands only a week now”. Soon they passed into the better part of the town and could see at a glance that in peacetime it was quite a nice place. The front line at that time was only twenty-five miles north of Catania, “& so as you can guess we were very near to the Jerries”.

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’.

They soon found Area H.Q. and said they had come for medical supplies, and were directed to the University of Catania, where they got in without much trouble. “This place was an eye opener to me.” The whole place had been left just as it was and by the look of it had been evacuated in a hurry. The equipment was some of the finest he had ever seen, and in one laboratory a photographic microscope stood ready for use, worth a great deal of money. “It was practically a brand new place & it was wonderful to see a first class lab such as this.” Their job was to pick up a balance, which they did, and as many other things as they could lay hands on. Time was short, and they were afraid the officer might come round and catch them piling all this equipment into the lorry. “Anyway we got some very useful things & cleared off quickly.”



A tower in Sicily, 1943, from Walter’s album.

They stayed the night at M.T. and R.U., who had taken over a big Fiat works in the centre of the town. They had a good show and something to eat, and went for a stroll in a beautiful park. They had not been out long before they were caught in a raid and 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 ½ hour which seemed like years to me.” All the time shrapnel was falling all round and hitting the trunk just above their heads. “It was a miracle how none of us were touched & for a second time I thanked God for my life.” As soon as the raid was over they went back and he was soon asleep.

After breakfast next morning they started back, and had “a very enjoyable run”. At Floridia they stopped for some very nice ices and drinks, and they got back to camp in time for tea. He reorganised his lab, which by now was coming into shape very nicely. The work was piling up and he was extra busy, with very little spare time for the next fortnight. Jerry visited them occasionally but never dropped any bombs on the camp.

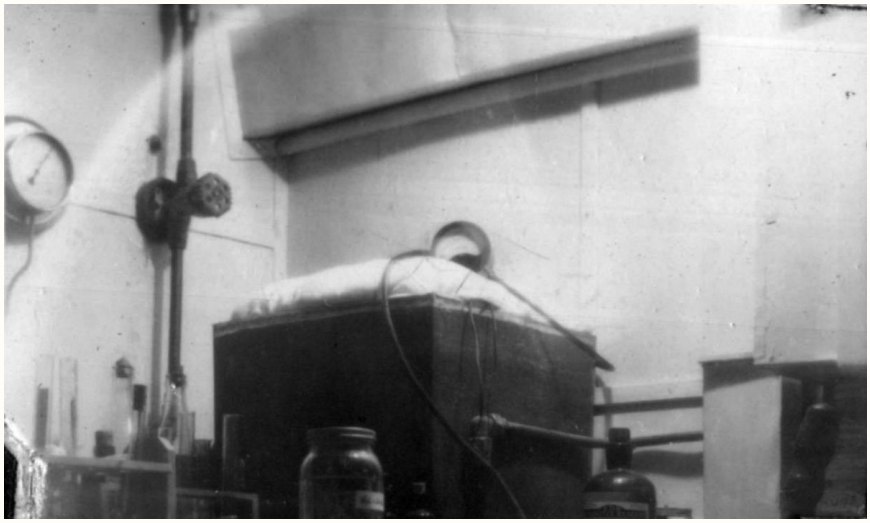
THE COMMERCIAL INSTITUTE

On 1 September came orders to move to Catania and take over a big Commercial Institute, which they turned into a hospital. He had done the run before, but enjoyed the scenery a second time. They arrived at the new hospital at two in the afternoon and “looked forward to getting down to some useful work” when they saw what a wonderful place it was. The building was a triangle: the whole ground floor on one side was experimental laboratories, lecture rooms and museums, and the upstairs lecture rooms were turned into very good wards. The Army had got the place before they arrived and the mess it was in was indescribable; with about thirty Italians it took three or four days to get anywhere near a hospital, and in a week they were completely organised, “& the whole place looked as different again”. The P.M.O. came round, amazed at what they had done and very pleased indeed.

It was not long before Walter had his own lab straightened out, “a very nice little place for myself”. He was pleased with the extra equipment he got hold of, and could get down to good work now that he had an incubator. “It was grand to be in a decent lab once again & a change from the trailer”, though if he ever had to set up in the trailer again, he thought, he would have a job with all the extra equipment. Within a fortnight they were up to 300 patients, and everyone worked very hard with little time off. He was doing fifty specimens a day, “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.” The P.M.O., Group Captain O’Malley, came round and complimented him, and said he was doing his best to get his third.

> *“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.”*
>
> Walter, Catania





Left: inside Walter's mobile laboratory: bottles, glassware and a sink. Right: another view inside the mobile laboratory, with what looks like a steriliser or autoclave.





Left: field surgery: the anaesthetist and surgeon with gas equipment. Right: a surgical team of four operating in a field tent.

The hospital was almost in the centre of Catania, so when they got time off they could go out to the pictures and to ENSA concerts, which were by then in full swing, and look round the shops which were beginning to open up. Life was on the whole returning to normal. There were three cinemas running and a variety show, so you could choose, and if you got there about a quarter of an hour before the performance began you usually managed to get in. All the shows were free and you could sit where you liked. Catania, a large town, had about six cinemas, two of which had opened again for the civilians. Some of the shops were not bad at all, with quite a variety and reasonable prices, and plenty of little cakes and creams, "which they seemed to go in for a great deal out there".





Left: three masked figures around an operating table. Right: a wrecked German Junkers Ju 52 transport on a Sicilian airfield, with the black cross visible.

ETNA

The P.M.O. managed to commandeer a hotel up on Mount Etna as a convalescent home, and Walter got a weekend there which he “enjoyed immensely”. In peacetime it was where tourists stayed on mountain expeditions, about 5,000 feet above sea level, Etna being 10,000. Some people climbed to the top, but he did not feel inclined to, and could see sufficient from the grounds. It was the first weekend in October and snow was just forming on the peak. “Unfortunately all the films I took did not come out very well & were not worth printing & I was very disappointed as they were really beautiful views.” The hotel was designed on very modern lines with every convenience, and what he hated was the water, which was icy cold off the mountains. They had all the civilian staff to wait on them, got some drinks and opened up the bars, and on the Saturday night got a dance band and invited about thirty sisters from the surrounding hospitals and their own, “& had a really good dance”. He served the drinks in the officers’ bar and, he wrote, did very well for himself. “It was a grand evening & I think everyone enjoyed it.”

When he returned to H.Q. on Monday he found, as expected, a whole pile of work waiting, but soon got through it. Work slackened off, and from then on life became more normal: the NAAFIs and canteens in the town were well organised, and they could go out in the afternoon for a good feed and listen to a band before a variety show or cinema.

CHAPTER

13

Bari

Wee Georgie Wood and an ungrateful unit

11 – 20 OCTOBER 1943

Walter is sent by air to set up a laboratory at Bari, is thrown about by a thunderstorm, meets a music-hall star over an ice cream, and returns in time for his birthday.

BARI

On 11 October he was told to fly to Bari, to 30 M.F.H., to set up a laboratory for them. One of the sisters came with him, and they were weighed in at Catania airport at half past six and went out to the plane, a Dakota. They took off at eight, and “I had the best view of Catania I have ever had”, though Etna was mostly covered by cloud. He could pick out their own hospital quite plainly, and followed the road all the way. They flew up the coast to Messina and across the Straits, and after about half an hour 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.” Quite a number of people felt very sick, but he felt quite all right. The pilot decided it was too risky to go further, and they landed at Catania again at half past nine, “& were back where we started”.

The weather was really bad and the pilot would not attempt it again that day. Next morning there was a lovely day for the trip. They had accumulated more passengers, a major general, a brigadier, an air commodore and many colonels and majors, twenty-eight in all, and this time flew out to sea. They hit large numbers of air pockets, but he was quite all right. They landed at Taranto at half past ten and at Bari at half past eleven, and phoned for transport to 30 M.F.H., about five miles down the road. The C.O. seemed very pleased to see him.

The unit was in a building that had been a school, right on the shore of the Adriatic. For the next week he worked hard in their laboratory, “straightening it out & finding out what equipment they required & generally clearing up the place which was in a filthy condition”. There was no trained lab assistant, and the man who was there had very little idea how to run a laboratory, “& it took hours trying to teach him different things”.

In Bari itself he found a wonderful place. The Italians considered it “their Blackpool of Italy”, and he thought it nearly came up to any English seaside resort. Bari was still run entirely by the Italians, had not been taken over by the British authorities, and, having been by-passed by our troops, had suffered very little war damage. On first entering the town one did not get a good impression, but on the main street the whole place seemed to change: large buildings and shops on either side, trolley-buses, trams and buses, and all the shops open with plenty in them. With the right knowledge you could get things very cheaply: a full suit for 10s 6d, an overcoat for 15s, a trilby at 2s 6d. “One’s general impression was that these people did not know there was a war on & did not seem to feel it in any way.” Food was not short, and they could go to beautiful restaurants, listen to an orchestra, “in the same way as you might do in any Lyons Corner Houses in London”.

One theatre, an enormous place on the sea front, was reserved for British and American troops, and there he saw Wee Georgie Wood and Dolly Harmer in a very good variety concert. That same morning he had been in a café for an ice cream when Wee Georgie Wood came walking down the street with Dolly Harmer and sat down at the same table. They told him they had done sixty-eight shows in the last thirty-two days, travelling from Cairo through to Algiers, then round Sicily, and finishing up there. “He was most interesting & wanted to buy us drinks or anything”, and to be polite they had another ice with him.

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'.

Although he could get into Bari fairly often and enjoy himself, "I was very fed up with the unit I was on & had very little co-operation from anyone". After five days his own C.O. turned up on his way to Foggia, which was to be their next move, and Walter told him straight that he was fed up and wanted to get back. The C.O. fixed it for the Tuesday morning, which pleased him, as Wednesday was his birthday and his pals were arranging a party. He was up early and ready by half past six "& very thankful to see the end of that unit — not one person gave me a word of thanks for the work I had done for them during the last week". He told his C.O., "who was annoyed to think that he had ever let me go when there was work waiting for me". The kite took off just after eight and landed at Catania at eleven, and he was back in the hospital by half past eleven.

A BIRTHDAY DINNER

On Wednesday 20 October, his birthday, he did not do a great deal of work. He finished at half past twelve and walked round the town after lunch with his pal John Walker, buying a few things for the evening. The dinner was arranged for seven, and "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 was beautifully tender. "Not for many a long day have I seen such a spread as we had that night." After the dinner they all had to sit still for about half an hour and let it digest. The cooks made him a lovely fruit cake and had even iced it, and nobody could touch it until later. They had a few bottles of wine, a very good sing-song, and finished the party about midnight, "everyone having thoroughly enjoyed themselves".

He got through the work that had mounted up, and then things slackened off. There were rumours of moving to Foggia to join their advance party, but nothing came of it. They organised a football team and got matches with other units twice a week. By then Catania had got back to normal and the streets were always very crowded. They got a good dance hall and a band, and the entertainments committee organised dances once a fortnight. "I will say that the sisters from the Army hospitals turned up in force & we always had plenty to dance with." They had been in Catania nearly three months, the longest at any one place, and most had settled down but would like another move, "so that we should be settled in our new quarters & have everything straight by Christmas". In November they started rehearsing a Christmas show, making an early start in case a move came and they could put it on wherever they were. In the second week of November a mild earth tremor shook the building. "I was sitting in my laboratory & quite expected all the windows to come in at any moment. It was a horrible sensation & if that was only an earth tremor — well all I can say is I would not like to feel an earthquake."

CHAPTER

14

Torre del Greco

Up the length of Italy to Naples

17 NOVEMBER 1943 – 5 JANUARY 1944

The unit moves to Torre del Greco under Vesuvius, drives 516 miles through the mountains in rain and storms, and spends Christmas in a convalescent depot with a show of its own and his first opera.

UP THE TOE OF ITALY

On 17 November they received orders to move to Torre del Greco, about six miles south of Naples. He left with the advance party at nine on the 18th. The first day was supposed to take them to Messina, about seventy-five miles by the coast road, but one of the pontoon bridges was unserviceable and they had to make a long detour inland via Patti and Barcellona and the mountain passes, “constituting us doing nearly another 100 miles”. By nightfall they had done 108 miles, “over very hilly country & with trailers as well, we considered it a very good effort”. Next morning, not more than half an hour out, his driver tried to change gear “& the gear lever came out in his hand!” They soon fixed that and made Messina by lunchtime, and had a brew-up in the car park. Driving right through they could see what a hammering it had had from the sea; there were very few buildings not battle-scarred.

After tiffin they lined up on the dockside to wait for a barge to the mainland. It was about half past three before they had everything on, and “the worst of it was that it absolutely poured with rain the whole time”. They reached the mainland at Reggio at half past four: “And so for the second time I landed in Italy.” They got to Gioia Tauro by nightfall and made camp, having done only seventy-five miles.

On Saturday 20 November they started about eight, knowing that the main convoy would lose the two garis towing trailers, so the four of them with two garis and trailers formed their own party and brought up the rear. They did not see the rest until they reached their destination. The coast road led to the famous mountain passes with “the most picturesque scenery anyone could wish to see”, heavy going for the garis up and down the steep hills, and by half past four they had managed only eighty-seven miles. They found a spot on a river bed near the Paola pass. Having separated from the convoy, they could more or less please themselves and “took everything in our stride”.

On Sunday they made good headway until after tiffin, when they ran into very bad wind and rain and had to take things easily, as it was very dangerous round the steep hills and corners. They passed a place where the Italians had once been in full retreat, and the road sides were still littered with burnt-out guns, tanks and garis of all kinds. That night, as a good storm was beginning, they drew into a big car park on the beach. On Monday they made Sapri by lunchtime and left the coast road to cross the mountains. As they zig-zagged up, “the whole of the bay” opened at every bend, and in the sunshine on the water it was “perhaps, one of the most picturesque views anyone is ever likely to see”.

He was less taken with the towns. “To describe all the towns we passed would be almost impossible, but to say the least for the majority — they are dirty, filthy & smelly & almost certain to be lice ridden. Having seen the places as we did, it is quite understandable why there is so much Typhus in Italy.” They went through Rivello, Lauria, Lagonegro and Sala Consilina, where they stopped for the night. On Tuesday 23 November they made Salerno easily by tiffin, and set out along the coast road through Pompeii, reaching Torre del Greco by four. It did not take long to find the large convalescent depot they were to take over. “Our total mileage was 516 miles & the longest run & I might say the most enjoyable we had done.”

TORRE DEL GRECO

The depot was “a large modern place with every convenience”, and still occupied by the Italians, who took three days to move out. From the upstairs windows one could look out over the Bay of Naples, and from the north windows straight on to Vesuvius, “a wonderful sight at night time, throwing out lava & flames”. The local inhabitants said that as long as it erupted they knew they were safe, but when it stopped there was a great panic, as it was liable to erupt elsewhere than the normal crater. There was very little to buy in the village, and what there was cost a great deal: they had left their old desert rats with the Eighth Army on the other side of Italy and come over to the First and Fifth Army’s side “with the Yanks. Hence the price of everything being so high.”

When the Italians moved out they moved in, and Walter had a room for his laboratory on the top floor looking out to Vesuvius. “The Italians had certainly picked a beautiful spot for a convalescent depot as there was picturesque scenery from all views.”

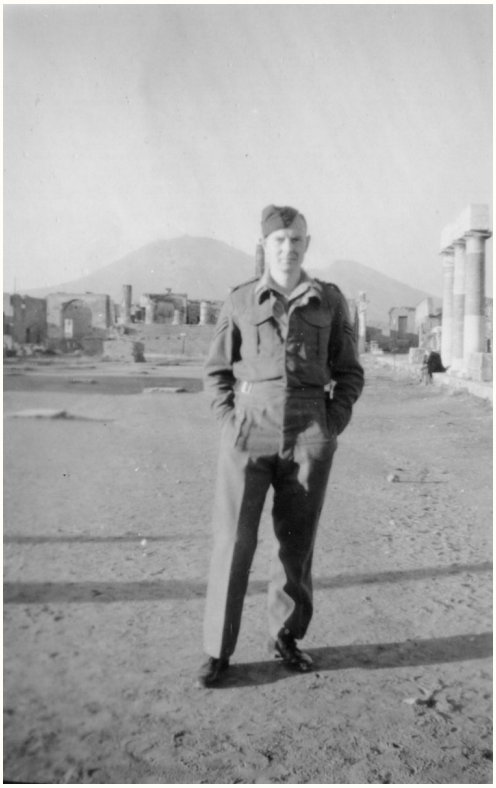


Walter at work in his top-floor laboratory at Torre del Greco, with Vesuvius through the window.

A few days later he had a run into Naples for the first time and “was not greatly impressed by it”. The talk of Naples being razed was, as usual, unfounded: the main shopping centre was practically untouched, though the area round the docks had been hit very badly. The Americans were in occupation, there was plenty to buy but

“the prices were terrific & black market was at its highest”. There were beautiful buildings, the cathedral, the museum, the opera house and one of the kings’ palaces, and the Via Roma was “absolutely packed & was just like going through Oxford St. or another famous street in London during the rush hour”.

They were fortunate to get a hospital with a small theatre already and a stage, and had things arranged to their liking, and rehearsals started in earnest. In the weeks before Christmas the work rolled in steadily, they had several ENSA shows, Geraldo among them, and rehearsed nearly every evening. By Christmas they were practically full of patients. On Sunday 11 December he took a half day to visit the ruins of Pompeii, about five miles away. “Comparing these old Roman ruins with those at Sabratha, they were far superior.” They saw 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. A guide took them round. “I was very glad of the opportunity to go round & it was very educational.”



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

CHRISTMAS AT TORRE DEL GRECO

On 23 December there was a dress rehearsal, with an audience of about twenty who could not come the next night. The concert hall and the best part of the hospital had been decorated and “it really looked grand”. On Christmas Eve he worked hard in the morning to get his afternoon off to prepare the stage. The show was due

to start at half past seven, and they began making up soon after six. “The whole thing went off without a hitch & everyone thoroughly enjoyed it.” After the show there was a party, and at midnight they went into the courtyard and sang carols until someone tried to tip a bucket of water over them and they decided to pack in. The next morning several patients asked why they had not continued, and seemed disappointed, but enjoyed the ten minutes they gave them.

Christmas Day was a holiday, and they did their best to entertain the patients, whose dinner was at midday and for which they all helped serve. Those able to get up went to the dining hall, and several of them stayed on the wards to look after the bed patients. In the afternoon they had a game of football, and returned for their own dinner at half past five: “the turkey & pork we had was lovely”, with Christmas pudding, two bottles of beer per man, a little present at each place, and fifty cigarettes. After the dinner they sat and ate nuts and raisins until they could not eat any more, and had a sing-song until the early hours. Boxing Day was a normal working day, but their little gang had their own party in the billet. They kept up parties every night until they saw the New Year in, “& by that time there was no more drink left & everyone had had enough for a little while”.

On 28 December No. 1 RAF General Hospital arrived and took over their hospital, and as they had no orders to move they were granted three days’ rest. On the 31st he and his pal went to Naples to see an opera. “The opera house in Naples is really a marvellous place & the biggest theatre I have ever been in.” It was *La Bohème*, and as he had not seen opera before he expected to be bored, especially as it was all in Italian. “On the contrary I was thrilled with every moment of it.” They were a bit late, missed the overture, and had to take a seat right up in the gods on the sixth floor, but could see and hear beautifully. “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 sang Mimi “had one of the best voices I think I have ever heard”. The programmes were in English with a short description of each act, so they understood the story quite well. It was “a wonderful feeling to be in a real theatre once again & to see all the plush seats”, and waiters came round at the intervals with sweets and cakes, as in any English theatre.

He enjoyed it so much that they went the next afternoon to the Scottish opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and this time made sure of a good seat, a box on the second floor at thirty lire each. It was a different company and he thought they were just as good.

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).



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.

After the New Year's party the night before, which lasted till about three in the morning, and then the opera, they decided it was high time for an early night. On 2 January Naples was out of bounds, so they could not go to see *La Traviata*, "which was very disappointing", but trips were arranged up Vesuvius and to Pompeii again. For three days they had a good rest, "which I am sure did all of us a great deal of good".

CHAPTER

15

Foggia

A winter in the ruins

6 JANUARY – MARCH 1944

Snow stops the convoy at Avellino and Canadians take it in. At Foggia Walter works through a wet winter, his best friend nearly dies, and he is posted away.

FOGGIA

Orders to move came on the 5th, and at nine on the 6th they were on their way to Foggia. About twenty miles along the road military police stopped them: they could get no further than Avellino, because the roads were ice-bound and the Fifth Army divisions 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.” They made Avellino by lunchtime and drew into a park, and none of them fancied sleeping there, so they did P.T. to keep warm. By some luck, Canadians from a nearby village found out they were there and offered to put them up in their transit camp. They piled into the garis and followed, parked the vehicles in a small square, and were made welcome, with a good hot meal and a billet, and next morning “such a big breakfast that the majority of us could not finish it”. In the afternoon they arranged a football match with the Canadians “& had a good game”.

That evening they were told to stand by to move at nine, and lined up the garis ready to go by moonlight. Shortly after nine they were on the move again with a hundred-mile journey ahead. The roads were clear and free from ice, and they finally reached Foggia at half past two in the morning. “I don’t remember anything about the last 10 miles of the ride & fell asleep in the car.” The 30 M.F.H. there put them up for what was left of the night, and they got down at about four, hungry and glad of something hot to drink. They were up at half past seven, and at nine moved to a large building to take over, which the Americans had occupied, but by midday next day they had moved out. The same procedure followed, of unloading and getting the hospital set up, and the next day they were admitting patients.

The building had been an old ladies’ rest home, very big, with a limited water supply, and Walter had a lab on the first floor “but of course no water”. After one or two shifts he settled down. Jack Holland, the lab assistant from 30, moved in with him and they soon had a nice little lab organised. For a change he had half days, which he had had little chance of before because he had been by himself all the time. In February they were still at Foggia. They were given their Africa Stars, “which did not mean much out here as most people seemed to be wearing them but probably will mean something when we get home”. They played a lot of football and rugby, and on his half days he saw good ENSA shows and pictures.

Foggia itself was “one mass of ruins”. One day he walked round and “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 razed, but although Naples was far bigger, he thought Foggia had been hit far worse in comparison. By the end of February they were still hard at it, with no definite news of a move, “possibly due to the temporary hold up at the Anzio bridge-head”.

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 came with signs of better weather, which was a good thing, "as I have never seen it rain so much as it did here in Feb. for the whole time I have been overseas".

A FRIEND ILL, AND A POSTING

His best pal John Walker was taken seriously ill and had to undergo a very difficult abdominal operation, which afterwards proved 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". After a few days he showed signs of good improvement. "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." The posting became effective in a few days, and he had to pack up his lab in a hurry into the trailer, leaving Jack to do all the work until his successor arrived.

He said his farewells on Thursday evening and was ready to leave first thing on Friday 17 March on the ambulance with the evacuations to Naples, to 3 B.P.D., where he was 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." He was thankful to hear that before he left John was taken off the dangerously ill list and was making very good progress. "Still hardly believing I was leaving 25 M.F.H. after being with them for 1 yr 3 months", he set off. At tiffin about halfway, getting his teeth into a crust, he split a tooth in half. Next day he was fortunate to be near a dental centre and know the D.O., who said there was nothing to do but take it out, "which he did in very quick time".

CHAPTER

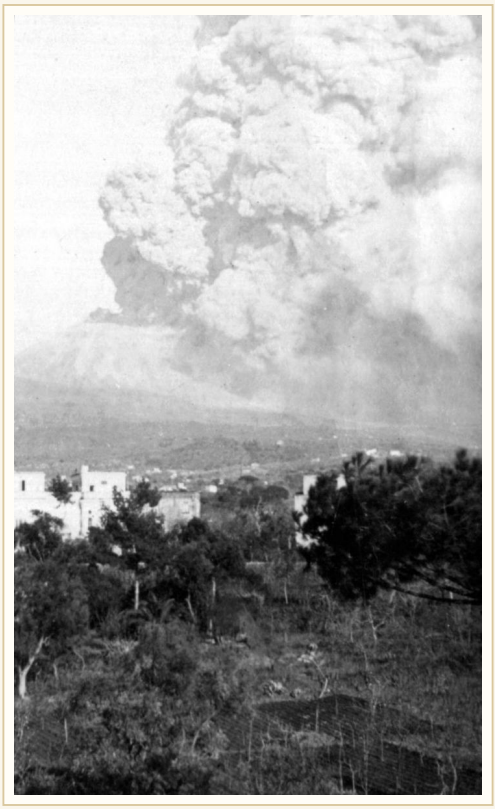
16

Naples and Vesuvius

Waiting for the boat

17 – 20 MARCH 1944

Walter leaves the unit he has served for fifteen months, waits at the Base Personnel Depot in Naples, and watches Vesuvius erupt from a rooftop.



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

VESUVIUS

He arrived at the B.P.D. about half past three, and was told a boat might be in next day, "too good to be true". It was much the same as other transit camps: "bags of parades & all the trimmings which go to make life one continual bind". He met an old pal also going to Algiers who had been waiting five days for the boat and was working at the Sick Quarters, and soon got off the parades by offering his services there.

On Sunday 19 March Vesuvius started erupting and threw out quite a bit of lava, "the biggest eruption they had had for 15 years" according to the local inhabitants of Portici. By Monday afternoon the volcano was still erupting and getting far worse. Thousands of tons of lava came down the sides at about a yard a minute in a thirty-six-foot-high avalanche of white-hot lava. A small town in the way of the main stream, San Sebastiano, was destroyed by nightfall, 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." He stood on top of the building where he was billeted, not more than five miles from the mountain, and saw "a sight I, as many millions of people have never seen before". The whole mountain was lit up, and all the lava showed up bright red as it trickled down the mountain side. @photo WP1211 | A rare aerial view looking down into the crater during the March 1944 eruption, apparently taken from an aircraft. | h=280

“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.” For him to write more about it would be senseless, he said, because he was not a very apt person at describing things at the best of times, and the articles in the *Union Jack* and *Stars and Stripes* described the whole thing far better than he could.

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. The Allied newspapers Walter mentions, the *Union Jack* and *Stars and Stripes*, printed accounts from Naples.

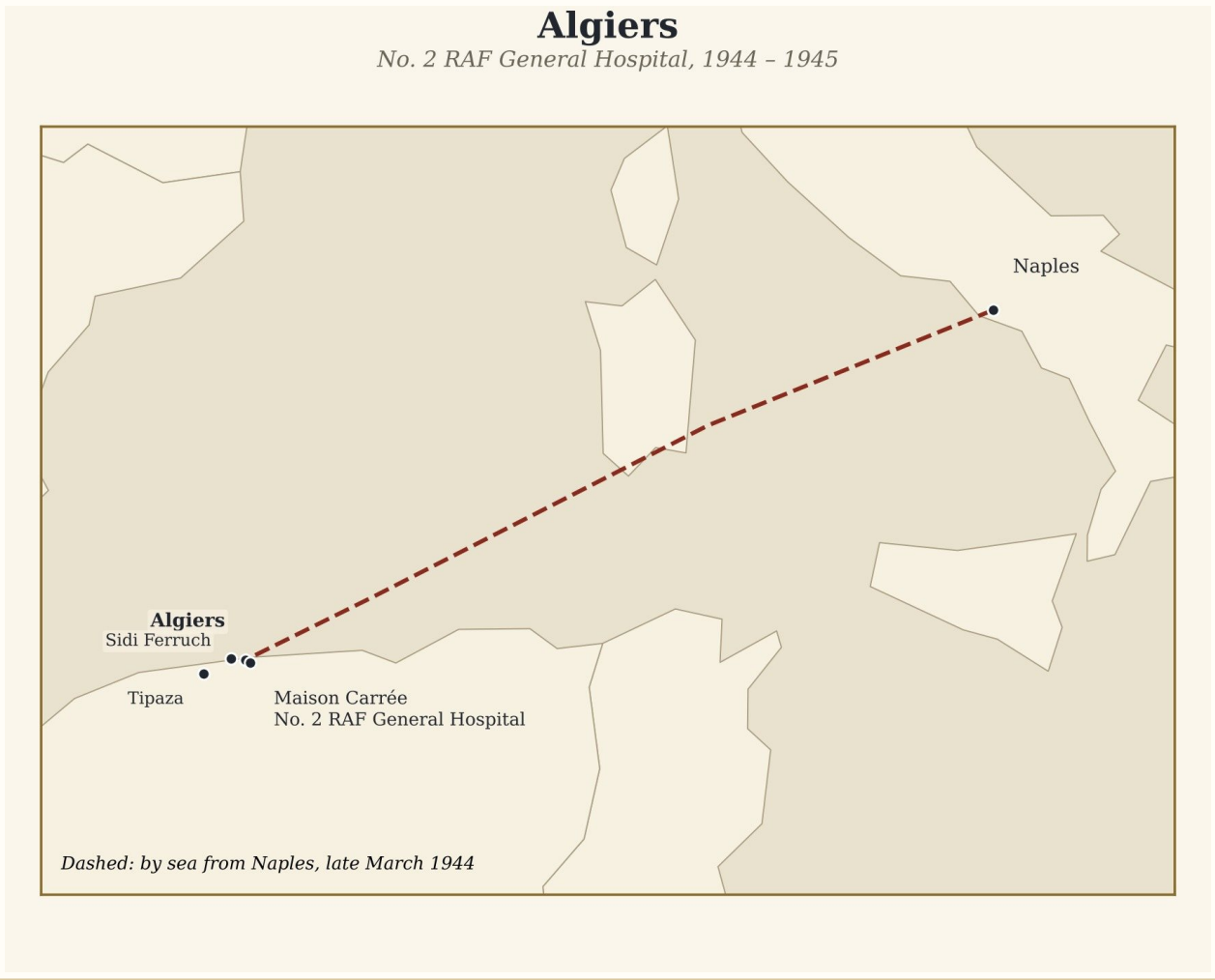
Sources: Earth Magazine, ‘March 17, 1944: the most recent eruption of Mount Vesuvius’; Wikipedia, ‘Pompeii Airfield’.

PART THREE

Algiers

March – December 1944

The hospital at Maison Carrée, the laboratory Walter had hoped for, and a nursing sister who said yes to a dance.



Algiers and Maison Carrée, 1944.

CHAPTER

17

No. 2 RAF General Hospital

Maison Carrée, Algiers

MARCH – OCTOBER 1944

Walter is posted to the hospital where he most wanted to be. He settles into the laboratory, earns his promotion, sees locusts for the first time, runs the cricket club, and is made an acting flight sergeant.



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

My first impression of Algiers, Walter wrote, “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”. They were piled into garis and taken to the B.P.D., which, as usual, was a transit camp like most others, and he was thankful not to have to stay long. He was very anxious to get to his destination and see his new laboratory. “I think I can honestly say that this was the first posting for a long time that I really looked forward to.” Probably because he knew he was going to work for Squadron Leader Price, whom he knew so well.

His movement order came through by lunchtime. Transport took him right 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 one could see right on to the sea front, and to the left right on to Algiers, about four miles away. After finding the wardmaster’s office he went to the lab, at the end of a long corridor. Squadron Leader Price was not in, so he waited and had a look round. It was not as big a lab as he had anticipated, but “very nice & clean”, with plenty of equipment at first glance. Price came in and “seemed very pleased indeed to see me”, took him all round the hospital and introduced him to the departmental chiefs. He found there were quite a few chaps there whom he had known well, all with him at Halton in 1940 and 1941. After going round he came back to the lab and met his assistant. “I can honestly say that I felt very happy & very pleased with everything.” Price put him up for promotion the following day, and it did not take him very long to settle down.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Algiers in 1944

Walter came to a city that had been a prize of the war. Allied troops took Algiers on 8 November 1942 in Operation Torch, and it was the capital of Algeria and the seat of government for all French North Africa. It became a springboard for the campaigns in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy, and the French government moved there in 1943 and stayed until the liberation of France. Allied Force Headquarters was in the Hotel St George, and the French Committee of National Liberation, uniting de Gaulle's followers and General Giraud's, was formed in the city. No. 2 RAF General Hospital at Maison Carrée had been formed in September 1943 with 600 beds, reduced to 300 in November 1943, and remained open until at least January 1945.

Source: Wikipedia, 'Algeria in World War II'; Air of Authority (rafweb.org), 'Medical Units'; ww2db.com, Algiers timeline; French Freedom Papers (USC), 'Algeria and Operation Torch'.





Left: a view over the bay towards Algiers, from Walter's album, probably the view from the hospital hill. Right: a hospital building with gardens in front, probably at Maison Carrée.



Walter at the microscope in the laboratory at Algiers.

They slept in tents, with hospital beds and mattresses, and the food was quite good. After a few weeks he was thoroughly at home, had made several changes in the lab and started to teach his assistant and help to get him through his laboratory exam. “I soon found out that he was a very able & willing worker & we got on very well indeed together.” They also had one Italian prisoner of war, who did all the washing up. After a while the work got so great that he could not keep up and asked for an assistant, which they got him, and in time they taught him one or two little jobs, “& he came on very well indeed”. 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 went into the Sergeants’ Mess, “which made a lot of difference as most people know”. It was not backdated as he had hoped, only to his time of arrival, “which was not very much”.



Tents standing between the hospital buildings, probably at No. 2 RAF General Hospital, from Walter’s album.

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 the area for a week or more and “were a source of nuisance to everyone & of course the crops”. Most people have seen locusts on the pictures, he said, but this was the first time he had seen them in the flesh “& I hope the last”. They were horrible pests: if any windows were left open they flew in and went straight for any food lying about. “Nevertheless in spite of the locusts we had a very enjoyable day & a pleasant change.” Every fortnight the Sergeants’ Mess held a dance, to which most of the sisters came, “& it always made a very pleasant evening”.



Walter outdoors in RAF blue, with sergeant’s chevrons on his sleeve, probably at about the time of his promotion at Algiers.

THE WORLD AROUND WALTER

Locusts and the war

The desert locust was an old scourge of North Africa and the Middle East, and the war years coincided with a severe upsurge. Swarms were feared because they could strip the crops that fed armies and civilians alike, so Britain set up the Middle East Anti-Locust Unit in 1942 to attack the swarms at their breeding grounds, and anti-locust work spread across the region. Walter met a single swarm, on the road back from Tipaza, but the Allies treated the insects as a serious military problem.

Source: Qatar Digital Library, ‘The Forgotten War against Locusts that Helped Win the War’ (British Library records).

He paid one or two visits to Algiers, but found there was not a great deal to do 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, but the season closed for the summer, and he was sorry, because he had intended to go each week and kept putting it off. To buy anything in Algiers was out of the question: the prices were too high, and even the gifts at the gift shop were “a terrible price & in my opinion not worth buying”. As they were about four miles out, liberty runs went into Algiers twice a week, “knowing you could get back to camp easily without any bother. Trying to hitch like it, was an impossibility.” There were some very good ENSA shows at





Left: the Roman arcade at Tipaza, with a figure for scale. Right: a wider view of the ruins above the coast. Both are probably from a day out like the one the Sergeants' Mess took to Tipaza.

the hospital, at one time at least one every week, though as the summer went on they got fewer, and two cinema shows each week.





Left: a Moorish-style public building, probably in Algiers. Right: a wide street of tall apartment blocks, with a child in a sun hat walking away.

Most of the chaps on the unit had not been overseas long "& they were some of the worst bunch of chaps for moaning I have ever met". He thought 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."



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

By June there had been no cricket, so he tackled Squadron Leader Price, who was acting as sports officer, about it, "& he elected me as Secretary of the cricket club". After a week or so he managed to get the club going and they started playing away matches, because they had no ground of their own. Later they got their own ground and matting. "We started the cricket far too late in the season & by the time we really got going it was time to pack up being the end of the season & getting too dark to play at nights."

So the end of the summer came and he had not taken any leave. In September his pal suggested they go away together, but where? In the end they decided on a rest camp about three miles away, "but not awfully keen on the idea". About three days before going on leave he was on pay parade when he was called to the C.O.'s office immediately. He had no idea why, and was trying to turn over in his mind what he 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." The rank was only acting, but nevertheless paid, "which I suppose was the main thing".

He and his friend went on leave in the first week of September and spent most days swimming at Sidi Ferruch. They were very lucky to have exceptionally good weather, "or I'm afraid we should not have enjoyed ourselves at all". They saw quite a number of shows, and on the whole had quite a good time, although he felt he wanted to get right away from the place for a little while. On his return the work bumped up nearly 100 per cent, "& it was really hard going for the two of us for the next month or so". Cricket died a natural death, and once more football took its place, "& I think it is here that the next chapter in the book should begin".

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.

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 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 WORLD AROUND WALTER

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).





Left: Ward B.I, No. 2 RAF General Hospital, April 1944. Margaret is standing at the front. Annotated on the back in her hand. Right: Margaret with a dog, c. 1943–44. On the back: ‘In my opinion — the best effort so far.’

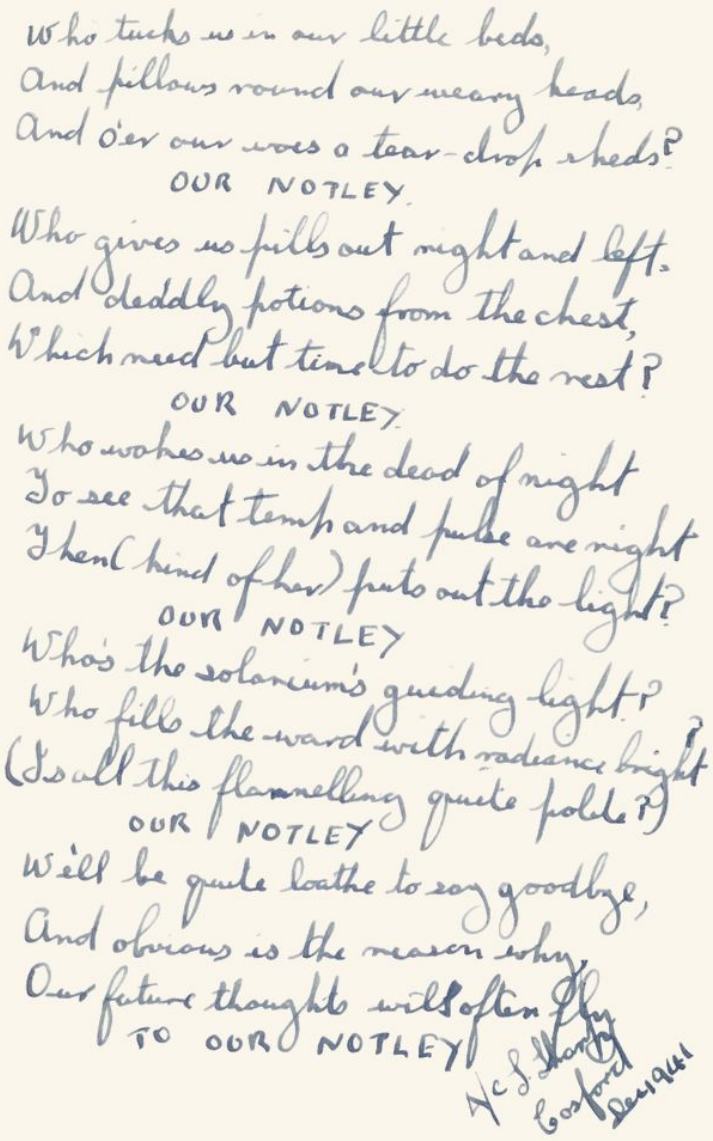
Margaret kept an autograph book through the war years, and its pages show how people saw her. On page 7 she wrote an entry of her own, at Hythe in 1940.

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.


Who tucks us in our little beds,
And pillows round our weary heads,
And o'er our woes a tear-drop sheds?
OUR NOTLEY.
Who gives us pills out night and left.
And deadly potions from the chest,
Which need but time to do the rest?
OUR NOTLEY.
Who wakes us in the dead of night
To see that temp and pulse are right
Then (kind of her) puts out the light?
OUR NOTLEY
Who's the solarium's guiding light?
Who fills the ward with radiance bright
(Is all this flannelling quite polite?)
OUR NOTLEY
We'll be quite loathe to say goodbye,
And obvious is the reason why,
Our future thoughts will often fly
TO OUR NOTLEY
A/C J. Stanley
Cosford
Dec 1941

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

THE DANCE

The following week he had a return invitation to a dance at the Y.W.C.A., which, he confessed, "shook me considerably as I never expected it". Unfortunately the dance was cancelled, but instead they went to the pictures. "It was a very enjoyable evening & I realised then that I had formed a great liking for this girl." 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 if he 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."

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

JAUNDICE

As time went on they arranged their half days and 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." He was in and out in nine days, which to anyone knowing how resistant jaundice can be 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!" Once again he was free to go out with her, but she was going on leave the next day, so he did not see her for five days.



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

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”.



Left: Walter and Margaret on a wall, Algiers. Right: the two of them in the same garden, probably on the same day.

The time was passing very quickly, and “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.”



Left: Walter and Margaret in uniform on a bench. Right: Margaret under pine trees.

CHRISTMAS 1944

December rapidly melted away and Christmas drew near. “Once again I was in a show on Christmas day which, when the time came proved to be most successful.” As is customary in the Air Force, the S.N.C.O.s relieve the airmen of all work on Christmas Day and do what work there is to be done on the wards. “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.” At half past six he left the ward and went to do the first show for the patients, followed almost immediately by another show for the staff. By the time he finished at half past eleven he was just about all in, and 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.”



Walter with a puppy in a deckchair.

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 & realised now that I was more than fond of her.” The Christmas celebrations finished with a dance on New Year’s Eve, which was more of a success than the one on Boxing Day.



Walter writing at a table in his billet, with a teapot beside him and tea, coffee and sugar jars on the shelf behind.

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.

After the Diaries

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

THE WEDDING

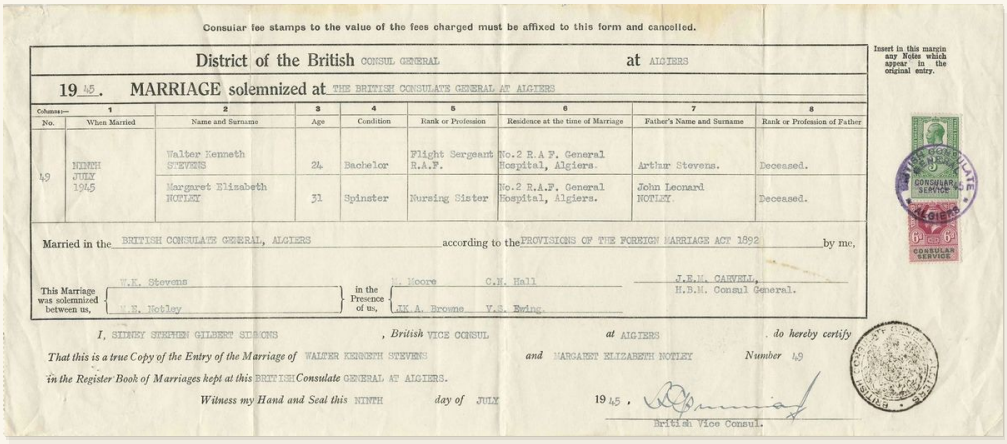
Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945, and sixty-two days later, on 9 July 1945, Walter Kenneth Stevens and Margaret Elizabeth Notley were married at the British Consulate General in Algiers, marriage number 49. The certificate gives Walter as a flight sergeant in the Royal Air Force, aged 24, and Margaret 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.”

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. It began in June 1918, became a permanent branch in 1921 and took its royal title in 1923. In the Second World War its sisters served in RAF hospitals in Britain and overseas. No. 2 RAF General Hospital at Maison Carrée, where she and Walter met, is recorded in RAF organisation histories as a 600-bed hospital that was reduced to 300 beds in November 1943 and stayed in Algiers until 1946.

Sources: Wikipedia, ‘Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service’; Mary Mackie, Sky Wards (2001); Air of Authority, rafweb.org, ‘Medical Units’.



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

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

No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	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.H. CANNELL, H.B.M. Consul General.

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

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.





Left: Walter and Margaret leaving the British Consulate General after the civil ceremony, 9 July 1945. Right: the wedding party, about forty people, on the steps of the consulate.





Left: the courtyard from above: Walter and Margaret crossing it to join the guests after the ceremony. Right: the decorated wedding car, with 'JUST MARRIED' and cheerful slogans chalked on it, including 'Target for tonight', 'Get some in' and '(Mama) shy but willing'.

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.

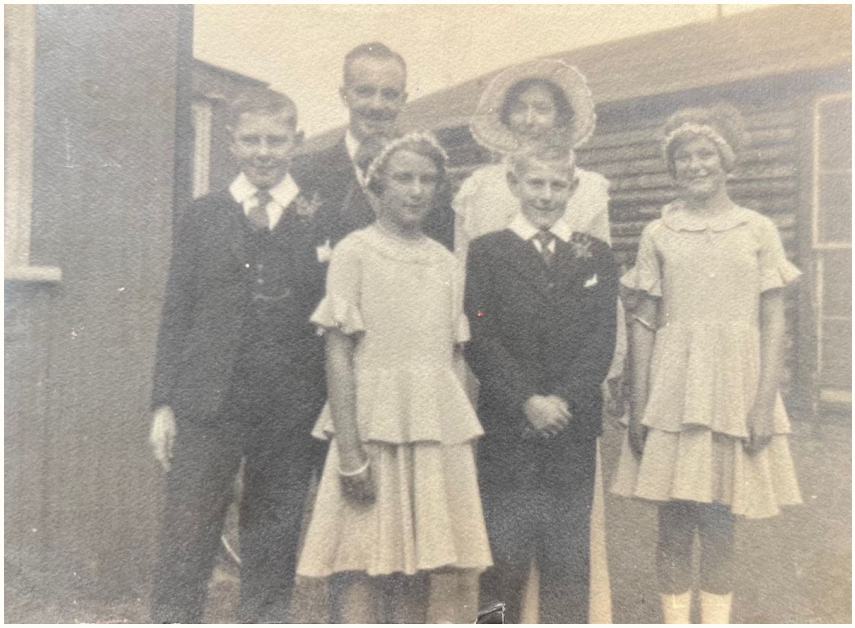




Left: Margaret, in a pale dress with flowers, beside the tiered wedding cake. Right: the wedding reception, with guests gathered round the table and the cake.



Walter and Margaret walking to their wedding reception across a sunny square, with other servicemen behind.



The Stevens family in the 1930s. Walter is on the left and John Henry is 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."

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





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

> *"Naturally I was with Margaret all the time and realised now that I was more than fond of her."*
>
> Walter, Boxing Day 1944

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.





Left: 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. Right: Margaret in a sun hat on the same rocks.





Left: Margaret laughing, with an Alsatian puppy, Algiers. Right: 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. 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.



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.





Left: two nursing sisters with a patient in a wicker bath chair, outside the wards. Margaret is on the right. Right: three friends on the steps of a Moorish-style building, from Margaret's collection. Margaret is on the left.





Left: four nursing sisters posed together; Margaret is seated at the front, on the left. Right: women outdoors, two of them in nurses' uniform; Margaret is on the right, in the headscarf. Both are from Margaret's collection.



A nursing sister with patients and servicemen, from Margaret's collection. Margaret is on the left, in the white cap. If you recognise anyone else, please tell the family.

Timeline of Walter’s War

Dates are Walter’s own unless marked; where his month names seem to slip, as in spring 1943, this is noted.

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; smallpox panic.

11 Apr 1942 · Basrah. Posted to the Station Sick Quarters.

15 Jul 1942 · Basrah. News of Joan’s death.

31 Aug–21 Sep 1942 · Tehran. Leave in the mountains.

3 Nov 1942 · Abadan. Malaria epidemic; the oil company’s 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.

Feb–Mar 1943 · Zliten and El Assa. Sandstorms; the bomb raid on Tripoli (a near miss of ten yards).

Spring 1943 · Tunisia. The minefield near Mareth; Sfax; El Hencha (Walter’s dates run about a month early).

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; raids the university laboratory.

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; 516 miles in six days.

11 Dec 1943 · Pompeii. Half-day visit.

31 Dec 1943 · Naples. *La Bohème*.

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

The friends and officers who recur in Walter’s diary. Surnames are given where he gives them.

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

Les and Ginger. Companions at Basrah, with Walter on Christmas morning 1942.

Mr Wilson and Dr Marsh. The pathologist and his chief assistant at the Abadan refinery hospital, who gave Walter “complete liberty & freedom” in the laboratory.

John Sanders. Walter’s companion for the Tehran leave; he left for Basrah on 8 September 1942.

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

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.

Wing Commander Culliman. C.O. of 25 M.R.S., “Culliman’s travelling circus”.

F/Sgt Smiles. Walter’s laboratory officer; flew with him to Sicily, July 1943, and nearly missed the plane at Malta.

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

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.

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.

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

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

How this edition was made.

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.

The text. This edition (Version 2.0) was rebuilt from a full transcription of Walter’s three handwritten volumes, so that the narrative follows his own words. Every passage in quotation marks was checked against the transcription. Spelling and punctuation have been tidied.

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; Algeria in World War II, Gateway of India, Anglo-Iraqi War, Timeline of the North African campaign, Siege of Malta); the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia (Polish refugees in Iran); the Air of Authority RAF history (rafweb.org); ww2db.com; the French Freedom Papers (USC); Encyclopaedia Britannica; Mary Mackie, Sky Wards; Warfare History Network; the US Holocaust Memorial Museum; History of War; the Naval Intelligence Division’s Iraq and the Persian Gulf (via the Qatar Digital Library); the Edinburgh Research Archive; the Cambridge history Africa and World War II; the South African Military History Society; EBSCO Research Starters; the New Zealand Official History; backtonormandy.org; the Qatar Digital Library (locusts); 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.