Mediterranean Front

The Desert War, #1
The Year of Wavell, 1940-41

by Alan Moorehead, 1910-1983

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Preface

THE WAR in Africa and the Middle East fell naturally into three phases, each lasting twelve months.

At first General Wavell had command from 1940 to 1941, and that was the year of tremendous experiments, of thrusting about in the dark; the year of bluff and quick movement when nobody knew what was going to happen. Whole armies and fleets were flung about from one place to another, and in its frantic efforts to find a new equilibrium the Middle East erupted at half a dozen places at once.

At one stage Wavell had five separate campaigns on his hands—the Western Desert, Greece, Crete, Italian East Africa and Syria—and there were other side-shows like Iraq and British Somaliland as well. Most of this was essentially colonial warfare carried out with small groups of men using weapons that would be regarded as obsolete now.

Looking back, I see what a feeling of excitement and high adventure we had then when we went off on these little isolated expeditions. We did not quite realise the real grimness of war except at certain moments. The honours between the sides were fairly even. The Germans held Greece and Crete; we held Syria, Abyssinia and all Italian East Africa. The Axis and the British were balanced in the desert.

Then General Auchinleck arrived to take command, and 1941–42 became the year of set battles and eventual retreat. It was no longer colonial warfare, but the war of modern European armies fighting out a decisive issue in Africa. This fighting was focused on the desert, and in that flat and limitless arena the war developed into a straight-out issue between man and man, tank and tank, army and army.

There are a thousand considerations to be taken into account, but it will have to be admitted that the Germans had the better army. They had better weapons, more soundly trained men and better generalship than we had.

Despite this stiffening and enlargement of the desert fighting, the war in the Middle East became something of a side issue through this year because Russia, Japan and America had now entered the war. Instead of being an isolated theatre, the Middle East was becoming part of world strategy.

In that black summer of 1942 it even began to look as if the Germans would reach out from Stalingrad in Russia and from Alamein, Middle East, and eventually join hands with the Japanese in India. But Stalingrad and Alamein held, and that was the turning-point of the war.

Then the final year, 1942–43, the year of Eisenhower, Alexander and Montgomery, the year of success. As Montgomery struck from the desert, the Anglo-American forces landed in North Africa. The tumultuous and victorious meeting of the Eighth and the First Armies in Tunisia must go down as one of the great military strokes of history.

The Middle East was secured. The Mediterranean was reopened. And far off in the East the Japanese dynamic had at last expended itself on the borders of India. Practically the whole of the British and American Empires in the Far East had fallen, but for the moment the Japanese could do no more. And at Stalingrad the Russians had begun their great westward sweep. With Africa freed, we could at last look forward to the invasion of Europe.

As each of these three separate years of battle ended in the Middle East I wrote a book describing the operations—*Mediterranean Front*, *A Year of Battle* and *The End in Africa*. These three are now combined in this volume.

The text is essentially the same except that here and there I have made minor corrections and deletions.

When I first began to put the three books together I planned to remove many of the personal references and shape the material into a more cohesive and historical form. But I soon found this quite impracticable. It is impossible to write a definitive history of the campaigns at this stage. Too many matters are still the subject of controversy, too much is secret, so much material remains to be gathered. The war diaries and the dispatches of the commanders have still to be published.

And so these books must remain what they are—a rambling and personal story. I think every major happening is included, and I have tried to bind the sweep of these great events into a perspective. But it is essentially an intimate picture of the Mediterranean war from one man's point of view. There are long digressions, such as the Indian chapters and the description of my journey round the world when I left Egypt in the summer, called at New York in the fall and London in the winter, and ended a little breathlessly in Tunisia in the spring.

These journeys were essentially part of my search to obtain a wider and fuller knowledge of the war, and the digressions will be justified if they establish only this—that the struggle which began in the desert as a simple military issue became in the end a vast imbroglio of politics and warfare in which the whole world was concerned.

Very little here has been suppressed through censorship: I have said almost all I wanted to say. Inevitably there are many mistakes. Since one is writing so close to events, one cannot weed out all the errors, and for those that remain, unknown to me, I apologise. I was present at most of the events described here, and very often I discussed them on the spot or shortly afterwards with the soldiers and their commanders and the politicians. But I must emphasise that one man can see very little of a battle, and the opinions expressed in that highly charged atmosphere are not always complete and balanced.

Throughout these three years I was writing dispatches for my newspaper the London Daily Express, and here and there at perhaps half a dozen places I felt I could not improve on those messages, and I have threaded them into the narrative.

I was also strongly tempted to add an account of the Sicilian and Italian campaigns. But these are not part of the pattern of this book; they belong not to Africa but to Europe, and the invasion of Europe is another story.

Among all the many people who have helped this book to publication I must place first my wife. She shared in many of the adventures. Quite apart from the tedious business of handling the proofs, the results of her correction and suggestion are on every page. A great part of the book is hers. Next I must thank Lieutenant-Colonel J. O. Ewart, of the Intelligence staff, who has patiently combed through these many thousand words and given me his account of the battle of Alamein.

I cannot easily repay my debt to Lord Wavell, for his encouragement to me through these years.

At different times General Montgomery, General Auchinleck and many of their senior officers like the late General Gott discussed their battles with me and gave me access to certain documents and war diaries, and I am particularly grateful to them. I have also profited greatly from the conferences given to correspondents by General Eisenhower, General Alexander, Air Chief Marshal Tedder, Air Marshal Coningham, Admiral Cunningham and their British and American staff officers.

The late Mr P. P. Howe, who was editor to my publisher Hamish Hamilton, did a great deal of work on these books. I must also thank the hundreds of correspondents and reviewers who have used me kindly in the past; and the companion of so many of my journeys, Alexander Clifford. Evelyn Montague of the *Manchester Guardian* has also checked many facts. And there is my editor, Mr Arthur Christiansen of the *Daily Express*, who has kindly consented to the publication of this volume.

Beyond this there were the thousands of meetings I had in the field with the soldiers and sailors and airmen who are the actors of this story, and who unaffectedly and simply described to me what they had done. So many are dead now or wounded, my own colleagues among them. And this brings me to the only possible dedication of this book, which I set down here with much pride and, I hope, without presumption: *To the men who fought.*

Alan Moorehead
London, 1944

Chapter 1

> Operations such as these begin with a phase in which each commander struggles, on the one hand, to obtain information, and on the other to deny it to his enemy. One of the few advantages that soldiers experience in having a desert for their theatre of war is that the auditorium is empty.
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> —EXTRACT FROM A STATEMENT ISSUED BY G.H.Q., CAIRO, JUNE 19TH, 1940.

I REACHED Egypt by way of Greece. Nothing could disturb that timeless apathy in the eastern Mediterranean. In Athens the diplomats talked leisurely around the point of whether Greece would fight or not. They were rather agreed on the whole that she would not. They talked too, of course, the Greeks. They said that every Italian would be thrown into the sea. But they had been talking in that strain for a long time. Anyway, Metaxas had a Fascist régime. Anyway, he was friendly with the Germans who seemed to be arriving in steadily increasing numbers at Athens and Salonica. Anyway, the Greeks were utterly divided against themselves, the army was robbed of all its Venezilist officers and intrigue was festering all the way through the Peloponnese to Thrace. I took a car to Phaleron Bay and swam far out into the gentle sea while they prepared a luncheon of shrimps and strawberries in the taverna on the beach. High on a crag above the lake at Marathon I came on three aged and gaitered British bishops taking tea. They exchanged sonorous reminiscences about the Royal Family, an unusual scene, occasioned, I found later, by the fact that they had been summoned to the Balkans to investigate the possibility of the fusion of the Anglican and Orthodox Churches. Differences only of ritual apparently existed. Seeking relaxation from their discussions, the bishops had motored out to Marathon and there they sat, as peaceful a group of old gentlemen as ever lingered over their tea in the vicarages of nineteenth-century England. Neither here nor anywhere in Greece was there a hint that a second Marathon was coming. This was the end of May 1940. Flying over Crete and the dreaming islands of the Aegean, it was more difficult still to understand or feel the importance of the news from France. Rethel… Amiens… Arras… all the places to which only a few months ago when I was living in Paris I used to drive with my friends for the weekend. All these were falling.

I flew on to Cairo where we bathed in the pool of the green island, Gezira, in the Nile, or watched the cricket. The Turf Club swarmed with officers newly arrived from England, and a dozen open-air cinemas were showing every night in the hot, brightly lit city. There were all the leftovers from the dollar years when all Egypt swarmed with rich American tourists. We had French wines, grapes, melons, steaks, cigarettes, beer, whisky, and abundance of all things that belonged to rich, idle peace. Officers were taking modern flats in Gezira's big buildings looking out over the golf course and the Nile. Polo continued with the same extraordinary frenzy in the roasting afternoon heat. No one worked from one till five-thirty or six, and even then work trickled through the comfortable offices borne along in a tide of gossip and Turkish coffee and pungent cigarettes. Only the radio and the ticker-machine kept monotonously insisting… Lille… Brussels… Cherbourg. Madame Badia's girls writhed in the belly-dance at her cabaret near the Pont des Anglais. Grey staff cars ran back and forth over the Kasr el Nil bridge. The boatmen on the feluccas cursed and yelled and chanted as they have always done. The first Australian division, sent to the Palestine deserts, was cursing and complaining too. They wanted action instead of route marches in the sand. They were said to be so poorly equipped at this early stage that they were using sticks tied with red flags as anti-tank guns and sticks tied with blue rags as Brens. A sergeant, so the story ran, was court-martialled for cynically demanding a new anti-tank gun of the quartermaster, on the grounds that his old one was eaten by white ants. No, the war was not serious in Egypt at this stage. It was merely a noise on the radio.

There were known to be British troops in the Western Desert, of course, but no one doing the round of the parties and the polo in Cairo and Alexandria ever seemed to see them. It was known, too, that they were impatient, and that they nursed an especial hatred of Lady Astor who had recently risen in the Commons to ask why British troops were idling in luxury along the banks of the Mediterranean.

The war correspondents were grouped into a unit known as Public Relations, and they began to gather in Cairo with bright green-and-gold tabs on their uniforms, to seek information. Nothing will quite convey the astonishment and abhorrence with which the elderly colonel and the polo-playing messes received the newspapermen. The officers in charge of Public Relations battled loyally to break down the general and firmly entrenched belief that publicity and propaganda had nothing whatever to do with the army, were in fact anathema to the army. 'The only time I want to see anything about my men in print is when the honours lists come out,' a brigade-major told me sourly. Incredible conversations occurred over the Public Relations telephones:

'Who are you?'

'Public Relations.'

'What in the name of God is that?'

'It's the unit, sir, which—'

'Never heard of you. Might be a bunch of fifth columnists or something.'

And so on. Pure *Punch*. And like every other unit, we squabbled and laughed and complained and muddled along. But for that cold news from France it didn't seem to matter very much. Censors were established by the three services in offices so far apart that a correspondent had to travel a full fifteen miles in order to visit them all and obtain their stamps on his messages. We thought of organising a censorship Derby in which each correspondent would mount a horse-drawn gharry outside Shepheard's Hotel, and set off to get a message stamped by all three censors. Since the censors were frequently at golf or in their clubs or at parties, it was reckoned that four hours would have been fast time for the course which was to have ended at the cable office.

It was while this nonsense was amusing us that the news broke: France fallen; Italy at war; June 10th, 1940. Slowly, painfully, reluctantly, the Middle East dragged itself out of its apathy. For the first time it realised fear over Dunkirk and worse fear too, closer at hand, for Italy's armies loomed menacingly all through Africa and the Mediterranean. How long could Malta hold out? What was to stop Balbo advancing to the Nile? What forces had we in the Sudan and Kenya to withstand Aosta's three hundred thousand in Eritrea and Abyssinia? And above all, how were we to maintain communications with England?

The answer came in the first week. The Italians attacked by land, sea and air. Communications with England were broken. Released from the menace of the French along the Mareth line in Tunis, Balbo hurried his Western Libyan army in thousands of lorries across to the Egyptian border. One after another the lights in the cities round the Mediterranean went out, and in the darkness the fleet in Alexandria was bombed from the Dodecanese Islands. But surely, we thought, Weygand's army in Syria would stand true. He had done the best he could in France. He couldn't, he wouldn't fail to send us all those tanks in Syria, those Glen-Martin bombers, those five or ten divisions of spahis and foreign legionaries,

Moroccans and Senegalese. And Legentilhomme in Djibuti was with us. That would help hold Aosta. Through the rest of June and later still we reasoned like that. The awakening was not quite complete yet. It came in the Middle East not so much when it was realised that the French Empire had capitulated as when, doggedly, the British people turned towards the Empire forces and said: 'All right. We're strong. We'll fight alone.'

Then, at last, it was discovered that we had virtually no forces in the Middle East. All the regiments in Cairo and the Western Desert, all the ships at Alexandria, all the garrisons in Sudan and Kenya, all the raw Australians and New Zealanders training in Palestine and Egypt, all the aircraft that swept occasionally over the burnt-out land—all these amounted to not one-tenth of the forces that Mussolini alone was gathering for his great drive on the Suez Canal. In every department of modern warfare, especially in such equipment as tanks and guns, we were pitifully, hopelessly weak. If you will find greatness in General Wavell, trace it back to the summer months in 1940 when he was beaten on paper before he ever fired a shot. He shut his mouth, confiding in practically no one. He put his trust in the surrounding deserts, he sent appeal after appeal to Churchill for more forces at once, and he held on. It required no great genius, that strategy of simply digging in one's toes and waiting for the enemy to come on. What did require brilliance was the game of bluff on which the General now deliberately embarked.

It was not until some days after the opening of hostilities on the Egyptian border that I got down to the front at Sollum and saw what was happening. Driving out into the desert one early morning from Cairo, I made the first of many journeys to Alexandria, and then turned west along the coast through El Daba, Fuka and Maaten Bagush to Mersa Matruh. This road, some three hundred miles in length, had a relatively good macadam surface, especially on the Cairo–Alexandria section, and running parallel to it beyond Alexandria was the single-track railway. Nothing in the desert justifies either road or railway. El Daba, Fuka and places farther on, like Buq Buq, are merely names on the map. No houses exist there. Bedouin, perhaps, coming on intermittent water-wells, may have given names to these places, but they have nothing to attract either man or beast except this one thing—a spotless white beach that runs steeply into a sea tinted the wonderful shades of a butterfly's wing. To Mersa Matruh went Antony and Cleopatra to enjoy that glorious bathing. On that same beach I found some hundreds of sun-blistered Scots trying to get the desert dust out of their mouths by wallowing naked in the water. Behind them stood Mersa Matruh, and the village at that time was intact. Driving in from the open desert, you suddenly breast a rise and your sun-strained eyes are immediately refreshed by the white township spreading out below and the cool greenish-blue of the bay beyond.

Mersa Matruh had been for years a small watering-place to which the Egyptian pashas and a few of the foreign colony in Egypt used to send their families. Hillier's Hotel, a collection of low, white walls under a flat roof, stood by the water's edge; there was the governor's cottage, the railway station, the church and the mosque, a few shops down the central village street, and not much else. Artesian water, as at many places along this coast, was drawn from wells, and at Matruh the water was good. Yet only a few weary date-palms and a patch or two of coarse grass and saltbush pushed up through the hot, grey ground.

Yellow rocks, saltbush, grey earth and this perfect beach was the eternal background wherever you looked in the north of the Western Desert. Except at spots along the coast and far inland it never even achieved those picturesque rolling sandhills which Europeans seem always to associate with deserts. It had fresh colours in the morning, and immense sunsets. One clear hot cloudless day followed another in endless progression. A breeze stirred sometimes in the early morning, and again at night when one lay on a camp bed in the open, gazing up into a vaster and more brilliant sky than one could ever have conceived in Europe. I found no subtle fascination there nor any mystery, unless it was the Bedouin who appeared suddenly and unexpectedly out of the empty desert as soon as one stopped one's car. There was a sense of rest and relaxation in the tremendous silence, especially at night, and now, after nearly two years have gone by, the silence is still the best thing I remember of the desert. So then the silence, the cool nights, the clear hot days and the eternal flatness of everything was what you learned to expect of the Western Desert.

But the morning I drove toward Mersa Matruh, looking for Force Headquarters, a khamseen was blowing, and that of course changed everything. The khamseen sandstorm, which blows more or less throughout the year, is in my experience the most hellish wind on earth. It picks up the surface dust as fine as baking powder and blows it thickly into the air across hundreds of square miles of desert. All the way through Daba's tent-hospital base and past Fuka it gathered force along the road until at Bagush it blocked visibility down to half a dozen yards. In front of the car little crazy lines of yellow dust snaked across the road. The dust came up through the engine, through the chinks of the car-body and round the corners of the closed windows. Soon everything in the car was powdered with grit and sand. It crept up your nose and down your throat, itching unbearably and making it difficult to breathe. It got in your eyes, matted your hair, and from behind sand-goggles your eyes kept weeping and smarting. An unreal yellow light suffused everything. Just for a moment the billows of blown sand would open, allowing you to see a little farther into the hot solid fog ahead, and then it would close in again. Bedouin, their heads muffled in dirty rags, lunged weirdly across the track. You sweated, returning again and again to your water-bottle for a swig of warm sandy water, and lay back gasping. I have known soldiers to wear their gas-masks in a khamseen, and others to give way to fits of vomiting. Sometimes a khamseen may blow for days, making you feel that you will never see light and air and feel coolness again. And this, my first, was a bad khamseen. I have been through many shorter and lesser ones since, and some even worse, but I hate them all and I hate the desert because of them.

Groping along from point to point, we found headquarters at last, an inexpressibly dreary place. Dugouts nosed up to the surface amid sandbags and rocks. A few low tents flapped pathetically in the wind. Camels plodded about moodily through trucks and armoured vehicles that were dispersed over a couple of miles of desert. Down on the beach in the yellow gloom a group of naked men were trying to wash the dirt away with salt-water soap. One or two grounded aircraft, their engines swathed in canvas, loomed up out of the sandstorm from the airfield across the other side of the camp. Clearly the war was halted by the weather. Inside the dugouts deepening sand covered everything. In the mess-tent

we poured lukewarm beer from cans into gritty glasses, and waited for a luncheon of tinned sausages that was frying in a mixture of fat and sand. There was no ice. Only war could have brought men to this place at such a time, and now we were here we could see less sense in war than ever. The storm eased slightly in the evening, but I slept that night on the ground with my sleeping-bag zipped over my head. Another hot sand-swept morning broke—one of those dreary, lifeless mornings which bring no promise or freshness or feeling of having rested.

The road leading on from Mersa Matruh to Sidi Barrani was still good at this time. Camouflaged water-wagons bound for the forward units were moving along, averaging perhaps six or seven miles an hour. At intervals of twenty miles or so little groups of these supply-wagons turned off into the open desert to the south. Moving by compass across that waste, they would eventually meet brigade, battalion and company headquarters that would be resting briefly at some point that was nothing more than a number on the map. Units were seldom directed to places in the desert. They were simply ordered to proceed on a compass bearing to a certain point, and there camp down. Except in action, there was wireless silence, and communications were kept up by a few light aircraft and motorcyclists.

More and more I began to see that desert warfare resembled war at sea. Men moved by compass. No position was static. There were few if any forts to be held. Each truck or tank was as individual as a destroyer, and each squadron of tanks or guns made great sweeps across the desert as a battle-squadron at sea will vanish over the horizon. One did not occupy the desert any more than one occupied the sea. One simply took up a position for a day or a week, and patrolled about it with Bren-gun carriers and light armoured vehicles. When you made contact with the enemy you manoeuvred about him for a place to strike much as two fleets will steam into position for action. There were no trenches. There was no front line. We might patrol five hundred miles into Libya and call the country ours. The Italians might as easily have patrolled as far into the Egyptian desert without being seen. Actually these patrols in terms of territory conquered meant nothing. They were simply designed to obtain information from personal observation and the capture of prisoners. And they had a certain value in keeping the enemy nervous. But always the essential governing principle was that desert forces must be mobile: they were seeking not the conquest of territory or positions but combat with the enemy. We hunted men, not land, as a warship will hunt another warship, and care nothing for the sea on which the action is fought. And as a ship submits to the sea by the nature of its design and the way it sails, so these new mechanised soldiers were submitting to the desert. They found weaknesses in the ruthless hostility of the desert and ways to circumvent its worst moods. They used the desert. They never sought to control it. Always the desert set the pace, made the direction and planned the design. The desert offered colours in browns, yellows and greys. The army accordingly took these colours for its camouflage. There were practically no roads. The army shod its vehicles with huge balloon tyres and did without roads. Nothing except an occasional bird moved quickly in the desert. The army for ordinary purposes accepted a pace of five or six miles an hour. The desert gave water reluctantly, and often then it was brackish. The army cut its men—generals and privates—down to a gallon of water a day when they were in forward positions. There was no food in the desert. The soldier learned to

exist almost entirely on tinned foods, and contrary to popular belief remained healthy on it. Mirages came that confused the gunner, and the gunner developed precision-firing to a finer art and learned new methods of establishing observation-posts close to targets. The sandstorm blew, and the tanks, profiting by it, went into action under the cover of the storm. We made no new roads. We built no houses. We did not try to make the desert liveable, nor did we seek to subdue it. We found the life of the desert primitive and nomadic, and primitively and nomadically the army lived and went to war.

I make these points at length here because in my belief the Italians failed to accept these principles, and when the big fighting began in the winter it was their undoing. They wanted to be masters of the desert. They made their lives comfortable and static. They built roads and stone houses and the officers strode around in brilliant scented uniforms. They tried to subdue the desert. And in the end the desert beat them.

Already on this midsummer morning when I drove down the road to Sidi Barrani, Marshal Balbo was piling up his great luxurious army along the Egyptian frontier and preparing to roll on across the Western Desert to the Nile. Only a tiny, experienced and toughened little British force stood against him. We came into Sidi Barrani, glaring white in the sun, and the storm was lifting at last. The civilians had long since been evacuated—only a few hundred of them—and the empty houses had been looted by the Bedouin. The first exploratory Italian air raiders had been over the village that morning, and half a dozen dwellings and a general store had been split open. The road was dotted with small, three-foot bomb-craters. There was no sign of the army although half a squadron of British fighter aircraft rested on a remote rise, immobile.

Now we had something almost as bad as the sandstorm to face. The made road ceased in Sidi Barrani. We plunged into knee-deep fine sand that blew up through the floorboards of the car in billowing stifling waves. Every vehicle on the track set up an immense column of dust behind it, creating almost the impression of a destroyer at sea laying a smokescreen. Drivers of passing vehicles manoeuvred to get to the windward of one another so that they would not be overwhelmed in one another's dust. With each man seeking his own track, a full half-mile width of desert was broken up into drifting sand, and sometimes a car plunging through this uneasy surface would crash upon a hidden rock with a force that knocked the breath out of the passengers. Petrol tins burst. Rations flung madly about in the interior of the trucks. I sat there holding the side of the car, hating the desert.

At a saltpan beside the sea, which for some reason bears the name Buq Buq, we came on one of the advance headquarters. It was clearer and cooler here, at last, and the soothing whisper of the waves came across the sand-dunes. Guns, tanks and cars were dispersed about rather like an American middle-western caravan at a halt. In the centre of the dried-up lake stood the officers' mess—a plain trestle-table with a camp stove burning beside it. We took tea there, and as we drank, a whistle suddenly shrilled from the edge of the camp and we ran for the slit trenches. These trenches were to become as famous as the Anderson shelters in London. They were simply narrow graves dug about four feet into the earth. Whenever it stopped for the night, the first job of the crew of every fighting vehicle was to dig one of these trenches. Apart from retaliation, it was the only protection

the desert could give against air raids, and it was nearly a hundred per cent effective. I myself have been in a trench when a bomb has burst three yards away, and come to no harm beyond being partly buried in sand. And so on this day we huddled into the trench and crouched there while a three-engined Savoia bomber, flying low enough for us to see its pilot, swept leisurely over the horizon. We had at that time no effective gun for hitting him. It was just a matter of crouching there and seeing if our camouflage was good or not. He came down to two thousand feet and circled slowly round. The afternoon was now sparkling clear, and it seemed so certain that he must see and dive that it was a curious unlooked-for disappointment when he turned away and nothing happened. We went back to tea.

Now at last we were close to the front and able to see Wavell's game of bluff in action. It was vitally necessary, the general saw, to convince the enemy that we were much stronger than we actually were. This was not easy in so open a place as the desert. Yet it was being done—how successfully we only learned months later. The painfully thin British forces were scattered for hundreds of miles across the desert facing the Libyan frontier. They had one all-important standing order: make one man appear to be a dozen, make one tank look like a squadron, make a raid look like an advance. And so this little Robin Hood force, being unable to withstand any sort of a determined advance by the half-dozen Italian divisions across the border, did the unpredicted, unexpected thing—it attacked. It attacked not as a combined force but in small units, swiftly, irregularly and by night. It pounced on Italian outposts, blew up the captured ammunition, and ran away. It stayed an hour, a day, or a week in a position, and then disappeared. The enemy had no clear idea of when he was going to be attacked next or where. Fort Maddalena fell, and Capuzzo. Sidi Aziz was invested. British vehicles were suddenly astride the road leading back from Bardia, shooting up convoys. Confused and anxious, the Italians rigged up searchlights and scoured the desert with them while British patrols lay grinning in the shadows. Soon, from prisoners we learned extraordinary stories were going the rounds behind the Italian lines. There were two… three… five British armoured divisions operating, they said. A large-scale British attack was imminent. Balbo drew in his horns, cut down his own patrols and called for more reinforcements from Rome. The bluff was working.

Back in Cairo, Wavell, consulting with Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and Admiral Cunningham, knew that it had to work. He had to have time. Every day brought the first convoys of reinforcements nearer Egypt, and without them he knew he would not withstand a large-scale Italian attack. Somehow that attack had to be delayed through the summer. Somehow the enemy had to be kept timid, anxious and in doubt. But there were signs that Balbo would not be deluded for ever. Already after the first few weeks he was cautiously trying out his hand, cautiously testing the strength of the British.

It was at one such moment that I had arrived from Buq Buq at Sollum, geographically the most distinctive spot in the Western Desert. The coast here sweeps round in a great curve to the Libyan frontier. Locked in the arc of this shallow bay lies the lower half of the village of Sollum, a customs post, sheltering among a group of some thirty white-topped stone huts beside the sea. A small jetty has been constructed to accommodate coastal steamers bringing supplies to the

unfortunate people who lived monotonously in this monotonous spot. But easily the most arresting thing, the thing that riveted your eyes from miles away, was the escarpment. This is an immense cliff rising six hundred feet sheer from the Egyptian plain. The cliff, buttressing on its heights the Libyan desert and reaching at its depths the Western Desert, cuts on to the Mediterranean roughly at right angles on a north-south line. South of Sollum, however, it strikes south-east and runs away from the strict north-south line of the Egyptian–Libyan border. Two routes wind up the cliff-face from lower Sollum: one which climbs precariously over the very edge of the sea is a wide modern road. The other, Halfaya Pass—Hellfire Pass was the troops' word for it—is no more than a track. It starts from the coast a few miles east of Sollum, and over broken grey rocks and rubble lifts you steeply on to the Libyan desert. Once on the top there you command a broad vision of the Egyptian coastline sweeping far away to the east. Upper Sollum was then a collection of sun-baked white barracks, the home of an Egyptian frontier force, and a stony airfield. Fifteen or twenty miles away on the coast to the north-west lies Bardia, the first Libyan township, and at this time an important Fascist headquarters. Dividing Sollum and Bardia, and along the whole frontier, Mussolini had constructed a wire fence. This ran southward some hundreds of miles, and was built, it was said, to prevent the Libyan natives escaping into Egypt from the Fascist régime. It consisted of a quadruple line of five-feet metal stakes bedded in concrete and closely woven with barbed wire. It must have been some twenty feet in width. The cost of the fence must have been enormous, its conception absurd, its uses nil. It revealed how strongly a man may be driven by the acquisitive instinct, how ridiculous a lust for property can be. The escaping Libyan threw out his cloak over the barbed wire, and crawled through. The British tank setting out on patrol into Libya simply nosed the fence aside. Yet that absurd fence, like many another absurd Italian device in the desert, seemed to give the Fascist soldier a sense of security, and he patrolled it with the persistence of a goldfish edging along the confines of his glass jar.

It was black night when I joined one of our forward companies on the heights above Sollum. Since they were within range, the soldiers lived in caves among the rocks and slept by day. At night they crawled out and, mounting trucks and Bren-gun carriers, bowled confidently across the face of the desert up to the Italian lines. Reaching the point where their car engines might be heard, they disembarked and crept forward afoot until they came on an Italian outpost. Then with the bayonet they set about taking prisoners of those who submitted quickly, and killing those who did not. It was heady, exciting work. From far across the desert as I stood talking to an outgoing patrol the Italian searchlight would turn full upon us. I was tempted to duck and hide though we were much too distant to be seen.

Fort Capuzzo, some five miles down to the south-west, had just been taken though not occupied by us for the very good reason that we had not the troops or the vehicles to spare to man it. But wrecking-parties were going into the fort each night to deal with ammunition stores and vehicles the Italians left behind. Capuzzo was little else but four white stone walls with crenellated battlements enclosing a central courtyard. Around the edges of the courtyard were the men's quarters. It was a typical desert post of the type that was valuable for keeping

Arab tribesmen at bay. In modern warfare its walls crumpled under even the lightest shell.

It was arranged that we should return the following night and go in with a patrol to see this Fort Capuzzo. To cross there in the daylight meant bringing down certain fire from the Italians. Of course, the company commander agreed unemotionally, it was always possible that an enemy patrol might be entering the fortress in the darkness about the same time as we would be. Additionally, the approaches to the fort were mined. These land mines, like the fence, were another illustration of the Italian passion for defence. The whole distance from Sollum to Benghazi he strewed them across the desert. Later we were to get sufficiently used to them to be able to treat them with contempt. Yet they were good mines. They were about four feet long and divided into three compartments. The two end compartments each contained four pounds of explosives, the central one the detonator. A green lid snapped down over the top of the whole mine. Originally the mines were designed to explode at the pressure of an ordinary wheeled vehicle, but the detonator wires rusted and they were often sensitive even to the footfall of a man. These mines were laid in lines across the roads and around all fortified positions. Usually they were buried just deep enough to allow a thin layer of sand to rest on top of them, but the depressions could be clearly seen as a rule. A mine going off on the driver's side of a vehicle would have sufficient force to break the legs of the driver or even destroy him and the vehicle altogether. Tank tracks could be broken by a mine. So special sapper squads were formed to deal with them, and always when an advance was on you would see the sappers going on ahead. The chief danger was that one would stumble on these mines in the darkness, and that, I remember, was the uppermost thought in my mind as we drove up to Sollum the following night to make our expedition into Capuzzo.

As we crept round the bay in the darkness the whole black silhouetted edge of the escarpment above suddenly erupted with high explosive. It came so unexpectedly that it was impossible to say what it was—mines, shells or bombs. But then a second and a third line of explosions lit the cliff-top and thundered in billowing, acrid smoke across Sollum toward the sea. We stopped the car and watched. It began to look like shelling… yes, certainly Italian shelling. As we watched, a truck came flying down the cliff road and raced past us, then another and another. A staff car loomed up from the same direction and, bumping to a standstill, deposited the brigade-major on to the sand beside us.

'Where the hell do you think you're going?'

'Capuzzo, sir. We arranged—'

The major was tired and harassed. 'All right,' he snapped. 'Just let me know how you get on. I'm getting out myself. Fifty enemy tanks have just gone into the fort, and I'd like to know what else is coming. They're laying down a barrage now along the escarpment.' He need not have told us. Another burst of shells whined overhead and broke the darkness with yellow flashes. So Capuzzo was retaken, then. Balbo was showing his hand. I had wanted badly to see Capuzzo, for it was important war news in those days, but there was nothing for it but to turn back toward our rear positions.

We cut south from the road at Buq Buq and, travelling over a broken track all the next day, we climbed the escarpment deep in the desert. On the Libyan

plateau there we found units of our armoured forces. It was the first time I had seen these men who were eight months later to make their great march to the Libyan Gulf and overwhelm the last of the broken Italian armies at the battle of Beda Fomm. Already they had been months in the desert. Their faces had blistered red in the sun and after so long an isolation from civilisation they were eager to meet any stranger. We were taken to the brigadier and with delight we heard from him that he intended to try to recapture Capuzzo with his tanks that same night. We went forward to a slight rise some four miles out of Capuzzo, and waited there in the blazing afternoon sun for the attack to begin. Before us the tower and the white walls of the fort rose above the lip of the horizon. On the left flank a half-squadron of our medium tanks had broken through the frontier fence and lay silently waiting for the arrival of a heavily armed enemy squadron which, our intelligence had learned, was making its way from Sidi Aziz toward Capuzzo. On the right flank the main body of British tanks which were to carry the main assault at dusk was creeping in open formation toward the fort. At our feet stood a battery of twenty-five-pounder guns. We had been told that was the battle plan. Now in the hot tense silence of the late afternoon we waited for the drama to unroll.

As the sun, growing redder and larger, dipped on Libya, it began to unfold stage by stage. First came the British aircraft to sweep the sky of enemy raiders. They plunged on an Italian flight of three Savoias that was bombing rear headquarters behind us, and put them to flight. Then, a line of black geese in the red sky, the British fighters wheeled over the expectant battlefield, found the sky clear and turned away. The battery before us opened up, not shrilly or loudly for the heavy air seemed to deaden the sound. There was just the steady rhythmical coughing of each gun firing in turn. They were sighting on an Italian battery to the left of the fort, and as each hit registered a great pillar of black sand and smoke flowered upward and spread in the form of a mushroom, making a great stain on the clear blue background of the sea beyond. The Italians did not reply. The British tanks, no more than silhouettes now in the waning light, waited motionless. A desert fox ran across the battlefield. Someone laughed. I went over to our car and got out a pot of raspberry jam and some biscuits and handed them around. The attack would come any moment now. I dredged up another spoonful of jam and felt absurdly that I was again sitting in the Haymarket Theatre in London at a Saturday matinée, and I wanted to laugh. My shirt had gone dirty black with soaking perspiration. Then the tanks attacked. They had half a mile to go, and each tank, shooting as it went, attacked one of the Italian guns spaced around Capuzzo's walls. The enemy guns waited perhaps two minutes. Then they spouted out a deafening salvo that enveloped the whole fort in smoke. Smoke rose everywhere. A full expanding cloud of blown dust split by gun-flashes rolled out across the desert toward us, and one after another the British tanks dived into it and disappeared. In a moment the battle lost all shape. There was only noise and light growing louder and brighter under the pall of smoke. We waited, straining our eyes until it was full night, and then, while the firing began gradually to die away, we turned back to brigade headquarters to find out what had happened.

Nothing good had happened. The Italians had driven our tanks off. The British colonel in command was wounded. One or two of our tanks were wrecked, others

for the moment missing. As we ate bully stew in the mess, ambulances lumbered back over the rocky track.

This, the first action I had seen in the desert, was a defeat. With one minor exception late in the Benghazi campaign, it was the only British reverse at the hands of the Italians that I was going to see for more than a year.

Chapter 2

Graziani has taken command… an attack must be expected.
—STATEMENT ISSUED BY G.H.Q., CAIRO, AUGUST 6TH, 1940.

IN THE full midsummer of 1940, Mussolini saw his great chance. Italy had earned only contempt for her entrance into the battle of France when the battle of France was done. Now, with England preoccupied with home defence, her Mediterranean and African possessions seemed an easy prey. Conquest in Africa would elevate and enrich Mussolini at home, increase his standing with Hitler, and justify Italy to herself and the world. With the French armies in Tunis and Syria removed, there was no saying how many British mandates and possessions and spheres of influence might not fall. There were Malta, the Sudan, Palestine, Cyprus, British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq, Kenya and, richest of all, the Nile valley. Nowhere was there anything like a strong British garrison. Even at sea the Mediterranean fleet was outgunned and outnumbered. In the air the odds were ridiculously to the Fascists' advantage. There were not at this stage more than half a dozen Hurricanes in Africa. So orders went out from Rome to the Italian commanders in Libya and Abyssinia to attack. In Tobruk easygoing Balbo had met his death in an air crash that may or may not have been accidental; 'Butcher' Graziani took command. In Addis Ababa the Duke of Aosta had a score of good generals and ample stores for a colonial campaign.

Soon the Italians had retaken all the frontier points in Libya, like Capuzzo and Fort Maddalena. Kassala, the border town between the Sudan and Eritrea, was captured easily by Italian forces advancing northward. Gallabat, on the Abyssinian border farther south, was the next, together with Kurmuk. Around to the westward the British were driven out of Gambela, a trading post, and southward on the Kenya boundary, Fort Harrington was swiftly overwhelmed. Fascist columns began marching deep into Kenya. There was worse to come. Pro-British General Legentilhomme, the French commander in Djibuti, was ousted from his command by Vichy and forced to flee into British territory, leaving behind a group of French leaders who were willing, even eager, to parley with Aosta. That meant a Red Sea port for the Italians as well as Massawa, and, better still, a guarded flank for their next move. In August Aosta threw two partly mechanised divisions into British Somaliland. They were split into three columns, one striking directly at Zeila on the coast; the other two farther east advancing through the mountains on Berbera, the capital. Two British battalions largely of native troops fought a rearguard action. But it was soon over. A British colony—a poor one, but still a

British possession—was at last in Axis hands. It was the empire's first territorial loss with the exception of the Channel Islands. The propaganda effect was considerable. In England, now enduring the full weight of the first heavy daylight attacks, people began to despair of the Middle East. In Italy Mussolini rode on a sudden wave of enthusiasm and popularity. Italians everywhere after generations of inferiority complex began to tell themselves: 'We are a revived nation. We can fight.' They had felt that a little over the Ethiopian, Spanish and Albanian campaigns. But now they were opposed to British, and to beat the British was a high excitement. Mussolini, no fool, would not deny this rising wave of high morale. Even his lukewarm supporters were eager for more victories. Even Germany was smiling politely and with just a shade more respect. In Rome, then, in that romantic grandiloquent room in the Palazzo Venezia that had seen so many Fascist chances taken and won, the Duce hatched his grand plan for the conquest of the Middle East and the enlargement of his African Empire to more than three times its size.

With France out of the way, the Italian grand strategy had clearly four main themes: a full-scale holding raid southward of Kenya; another northward through Kassala down the Atbara River to the Nile to isolate Khartoum and cut the British retreat from Egypt; an invasion of Egypt direct with motorised columns advancing along the coast to Alexandria and Cairo; and attack in the later stages on Greece through Albania in order to draw off British forces to Athens and thus weaken the resistance against Graziani in the Western Desert. The importance of the two southerly raids was also to keep the British dispersed and weak in Egypt, which was to be subjected to the full shock of the Libyan army. In conception the plan was excellent; in execution deplorable. Mussolini did not even have especially bad luck. He simply once again overstrained and overestimated the Italian people. His thoughts reached upward heroically. The people remained tied to the ground, artistic, erratic, shiftless, individualist and irresponsible.

But all went well at first. The most southerly column plunged farther and farther into Kenya, where General Cunningham's South, West and East African forces were still unprepared for battle. In Eritrea forces were gathering rapidly to sweep on to the Sudan. In Libya, Graziani gave the order to advance. Down the escarpment came the Fascist armies, a host several divisions strong, as brave and confident as a crusade on the march. Wavell's bluff had been called. The Italians had come out at last to do battle, and there was nothing for it but to beat a retreat with the tiny British forces in as dignified a way as possible.

Only two very minor but significant incidents relieved the depressing effect of this new withdrawal. At Sollum British gunners noted that enemy vehicles coming down the winding escarpment road into Egypt caught the sun on their windshields at one exposed corner. A few seconds later each vehicle exposed itself again very briefly on another bend lower down. Our gunners had merely to note each reflected flash from the windshields and then aim at the lower corner. In this way numbers of enemy transports were knocked out and the Italian advance was delayed.

At Sollum also, British engineers had mined a number of buildings and dumps before they retired to a point farther up the coast, taking their detonating wires with them. They were about to start exploding Sollum at this safe distance when

an Italian artillery observation plane appeared over the village, and the enemy gunners directed by the pilot began to lay down a barrage. The situation was piquant. Both sides were allied in destroying the same object. With a nice sense of humour the British commander ordered his men to wait until they heard an Italian gun fire, then, before the shell landed he gave instructions for one of his mines to be exploded. Inevitably the mine went off in a part of the village where the Italian air-observer had not directed his fire. One knew that the enemy observer, utterly mystified, was signalling back to his guns demanding they should correct their fire and asking the reason for the double explosion. Undoubtedly, too, he was getting equally confused replies from his gunners. The farce went on until the British mines were exhausted. The Italian plane flew off and Sollum was released at last from the fury of the two armies. I say these two episodes were significant, for they revealed that the British under fire from a heavy enemy advance showed no panic and, indeed, even at this early stage held the Italian in some contempt. Then, too, our casualties in the withdrawal were scarcely a score of men and vehicles, and not the two thousand which Graziani with grandiose stupidity claimed in his first communiqué.

But no one in Cairo that September knew how far and how fast Graziani was going to go. Wavell had determined to avoid serious engagement until the Italians reached Mersa Matruh, about one-third of the way to the Delta. We had been digging traps and entrenchments in the sand for months at Mersa Matruh, but would they hold? Down the escarpment came more and more water-trucks, guns, donkey teams, tanks, armoured cars. There were thousands of vehicles against our hundreds, divisions of men against our brigades, squadrons of Savoias and Capronis against our handful of Blenheims and Gladiators. Graziani, who could hardly be called a hot-head, pulled up short at Sidi Barrani after the first sixty miles to consolidate and wait for the Greek stage of the Italian plan to mature. Slowly, methodically and with immense labour he began to fortify and build up his lines of communications. By the late autumn he had at Sidi Barrani a sure base from which to embark on the second leg of his advance to the Suez Canal, and some hundred thousand men all well equipped were ready to set out in the cool of the winter. His new road, the Via della Vittoria, linking Sollum with Sidi Barrani, needed only light screenings and tarring for completion. He had abundant supplies of all kinds. He had control in the air—in numbers anyway. The British victory at Taranto, though serious, had not knocked out the Italian navy. The battle of Cape Matapan was still to come.

Mussolini's Greek invasion came in November with nice timing. No one could have foreseen the disaster ahead. It was in Greece that both Mussolini and General Wavell had their major setbacks. Both started in Africa, both failed to wait until they had consolidated their African victories, both went to Greece hastily, too lightly armed and taking too little account of the differences between colonial war in Africa and world war in Europe. The only major difference between the adventures of the two men was that Mussolini himself elected to go to Greece. Wavell was forced to it.

No one could have guessed how deeply Mussolini had been misled by his intelligence services on two vital points. It seems he really believed the Greeks would not fight. That was his first error. He failed to learn the lessons of the

Republicans in Spain, the Finns in Finland. Nor was Mussolini alone in failing to see that war was still made with men first and machines second, and that a people once fired with a passionate hatred and an emotional patriotism are the most dangerous enemy in the world though they lack every essential piece of equipment. His second mistake was in believing Wavell was stronger than he actually was. He did not know that Wavell, apart from a few aircraft, simply did not have more than a brigade or two at the most to spare for Greece at that time. He did not know that the Greeks had said to Wavell: 'Give us a strong force of five or six equipped divisions or no men at all, otherwise, if you send a small force, it will merely provoke the Germans against us without our being able to withstand them.' So what British troops there were in Egypt stayed there to meet Graziani. Part of Mussolini's plan had miscarried. No British expeditionary force was sent to Greece at that moment for the embarrassing reason that there was none large enough to send. We were a small but united command.

It is conceivable that Mussolini might have done better if he had reversed the later stages of his plan: i.e., to have attacked Greece first and then sent Graziani into Egypt. Then possibly Wavell might have been induced to send troops to Greece and left himself exposed in Egypt. That, anyway, was what happened later.

I personally had seen none of the reverses which led up to the triumphant Italian position at the beginning of the winter of 1940. I had left the Western Desert before Graziani advanced to Sidi Barrani and had gone down to the Sudan with the first party of war correspondents. In mid-July we had boarded the biweekly train in Cairo and in stifling heat travelled overnight to Shellal where two riverboats festered in the mud much in the same way as they did when Kitchener passed by on his way to conquer the Sudan from the Khalifa forty years before. One of the boats, I believe, was actually built by Kitchener. They were squalid double-decked affairs designed like houseboats, square shaped, with rows of cabins lining each deck. Rows of flat barges piled with grain or cotton or peanuts and swarming with natives were lashed to either side of the parent boat, and bathed it with the perpetual odour of cooking fat and human offal. A giant waterwheel thrashed out the stale Nile water from the square stern, and there was an open space forward set out like a lounge where we sat and sweated and stuck to the wicker chairs and imagined we were gathering a breeze from the snail-like motion of the boat. For two days and nights we sat there climbing the river between Shellal and Wadi Halfa where the first cataract starts on the Sudan border. A month later I did the same journey in twenty minutes in the cockpit of a Blenheim bomber.

Nothing is quite so slow as the deadly excruciating slowness of the Nile boats. It was before the annual flood, and I gazed across the mud flats at the strip of green on either bank—palms, wheat, reeds, grass huts—that always seemed the same and never revealed any motion in the boat. Farther up, nearer the White Nile sources, a planter told me, one sees the same tree sticking out of the river for three days. One day is spent steaming up to the tree, another in winding around it, a third in watching it disappear on a horizon of dun-coloured lifeless reeds and sleepy water. To do this in cool winter, to do it in peace-time on holiday in the company of women when the moon at night is brighter than an English winter sun—all this would be fine. To do it in midsummer, in war, when there are no

women and the drinks are warm and the flies innumerable, and one is in a hurry and suffering from the mild dysentery everyone gets in Africa, is my idea of slow torture. Yet this journey I see now was an oasis in the rush with which we lived, and we really did enjoy parts of it. Edward Genock of Paramount News stowed his film in the overworked icebox to stop it melting. Ronald Matthews of the *Daily Herald* summoned what bottles of cool Allsop's beer he could. Richard Dimbleby of the B.B.C. found a chaise-longue and a grass fan. I stripped to the waist and read through *The River War*, that classic book on the Omdurman campaign, written by Kitchener's young second-lieutenant in the Twenty-first Lancers, Winston Churchill. Churchill, already beginning his career as a war correspondent, records with powerful accuracy just what the Upper Nile was like when he went up it at the end of last century to take part in the Lancers' great charge at Omdurman. The description holds still, will always hold. With feeling I read: 'This great tract which may conveniently be called The Military Sudan stretched with apparent indefiniteness over the face of the continent. Level plains of smooth sand—a little rosier than buff, a little paler than salmon—are interrupted only by occasional peaks of rock—black, stark and shapeless. Rainless storms dance tirelessly over the hot crisp surface of the ground. The fine sand, driven by the wind, gathers into deep drifts and silts among the dark rocks of the hills, exactly as snow hangs about an Alpine summit; only it is fiery snow such as might fall in hell. The earth burns with the quenchless thirst of ages and in the steel-blue sky scarcely a cloud obstructs the unrelenting triumph of the sun.' Then again: 'It is scarcely within the power of words to describe the savage desolation of the regions into which the line and its constructors now plunged. A smooth ocean of bright coloured sand spread far and wide to distant horizons. The tropical sun beat with senseless perseverance upon the level surface until it could scarcely be touched with a naked hand, the filmy air glittered and shimmered as over a furnace. Here and there huge masses of crumbling rock rose from the plain, like islands of cinders in a sea of fire.'

Despite the heat, one had to agree with Churchill that the transformation of the colours of the river and the desert at sunset had a beauty that was quite unearthly. Churchill, then still in his twenties, abandoned for a moment his Gibbonesque phrasing to describe it like this: 'There is one hour when all is changed. Just before the sun sets towards the western cliffs a delicious flush brightens and enlivens the landscape. It is as though some titanic artist in an hour of inspiration were retouching the picture, painting in dark purple shadows among the rocks, strengthening the lights on the sands, gilding and beautifying everything, and making the whole scene live. The river, whose windings made it look like a lake, turns from muddy brown to silver grey. The sky from a dull blue deepens into violet in the west. Everything under that magic touch becomes vivid and alive. And then the sun sinks altogether behind the rocks, the colours fade out of the sky, the flush off the sands, and gradually everything darkens and grows grey—like a man's cheek when he is bleeding to death. We are left sad and sorrowful in the dark, until the stars light up and remind us that there is always something beyond.'

Much of Churchill's time was spent around Wadi Halfa and that is where now one goes ashore, passes through the Sudan customs and takes the train—

Kitchener's train—on through Atbara to Khartoum. There, Dimbleby was taken at once to hospital with diphtheria. The rest of us, Matthews, Genock and myself, were summoned to Lieut.-General Platt, the man who under the native title of the Kaid was responsible for guarding this territory almost the size of Europe from the Italians.

He told us bluntly at once his position was precarious. Some two thousand men—a little more than one man to a mile of frontier—was the entire army with which the imperial government had provided him. He had the use of four obsolete Vincent aircraft, and down near the Red Sea a couple of squadrons of obsolescent Wellesleys had been loaned by the R.A.F. to keep the British sea-lane free of Italian raiders. That was all. The Sudan Defence Force, though well trained, had no tanks, no artillery, and its thin native ranks were a joke compared with the legions Aosta was preparing to bring against us. Even in the last few weeks an ominous warning had come in the fall of Kassala, and with Kassala one branch of our railway to Port Sudan had been cut. The affair was all the more serious as we ourselves, using the offensive patrol tactics of the Western Desert, had been planning to attack the Italian positions behind Kassala at the time. A cypher clerk had failed to send on the final action orders to the British forces at the vital moment. In the confusion that followed, when the British were regrouping, the Italians themselves had taken the initiative, swooping on Kassala on the very day when the Gash River, since time immemorial, came down in flood. Since the river runs between the town and the railway station, and there was no bridge, this meant that the little British garrison in the town was all but cut off. General Wavell had been up to Khartoum, the Kaid said, and there was some prospect of reinforcements and better staff work. But at the moment things were in a very anxious state indeed.

Nor were we more than a few days in Khartoum when we found how sorely unprepared for war both psychologically and materially was the place. Most of the white men had been in the colony for years, building by sheer hard work in a difficult climate an administration and an economy that was a model of government anywhere. Unlike the administrations of Egypt, the Sudan officials had made their homes there and established families and identified themselves with the country. They had won the confidence of the natives. They had, moreover, a great deal of sympathy for the Italian settlers and administrators across the border who in the few years they had been in Abyssinia were making a titanic effort to produce another model colony as well. Friendships had naturally grown up between Italians and British. Military outposts exchanged gifts of whisky and chianti across the border. Italian officers visited British messes and the British went back across the border where the hospitality was returned. Sir George Symes, the British governor-general, had become intimate with the Duke of Aosta who had stayed at the palace in Khartoum, making friends everywhere with his charm, his command of English, his 'Englishness.' Everyone liked Aosta, and friendships spread among the white staffs of the two races. The Italians from the first had said frankly that war with Britain was unthinkable, and the British had agreed enthusiastically. But now suddenly, on that black day in June, Mussolini declared war, and the former friends found themselves enemies. An Italian colonel had to cancel a social visit to a British unit on the Abyssinian border.

Now all that these administrators had painfully built up through the years was to be torn down and thrown away in warfare. The bridges they had built, the roads they had forced through mountains and across deserts, the railways and fine new houses and waterworks they had forged in this barren waste, were suddenly to be destroyed. The friends with whom they had played polo and drunk were to be cut down. It was, in all truth, unthinkable. Here, remote from the play of politics in Europe, it was hard to reverse one's ideas overnight. Here, where every white man, Italian or British, was an ally in the labour of gathering the natives into civilisation, it was a flat denial of all sense to stir the tribes. So British Sudan and Italian East Africa went to war reluctantly and slowly and with immense misgiving. It was a gentleman's war. There was some undefined but quite real understanding that there would be no bombing of civilians or helpless native settlements. When Balbo, one of the same gentlemanly cut as Aosta, died, his death was announced in the Sudan Herald with black borders around the printed column. I found an unexpressed, undercurrent feeling that the two colonies, Italian and British, were not really concerned in the war, and since their battles could not affect the general situation there was no point in carrying the fighting to extremes. Germany was the real enemy. I was to see through the months ahead how this lax but very understandable feeling was to harden into animosity and how in deadly engagements like Keren real hatred was to emerge. But to the end our campaign in East Africa was conducted on lines that never approached the fury and bitterness of Europe, or left scars comparable with even a single week's fighting in the battle of France or Russia.

Back in the late July of 1940, when the rains were beginning to cool the torrid air a little, there was apathy in Khartoum. The lions and more dangerous beasts had been killed in Khartoum's famous zoo, lest, being wounded in an air raid, the animals might run amok through the streets. The white civilians, many of them middle-aged men, had contrived to collect a few Lewis guns and, banding themselves into a home guard, they trained with astonishing vigour on the flat stony ground across the Nile at Omdurman. But it was an exuberant half-measure, and there was nothing in Khartoum to withstand any sort of an attack either by land or air. Haile Selassie had arrived from England by air a day before us and was installed in a shoddy pink villa surrounded by a garden of lifeless shrubs along the Blue Nile. Thither we were conducted one morning, and in the first bright heat of the day the emperor emerged on to his balcony and gravely shook us by the hand. He himself had still that impassive dignity that carried him through defeat and humiliation in Geneva. His eyes were quick and watchful, and his bearing still imperious. But his surroundings were shabby, his hopes remote and his whole cause a tiny dagger in a world of heavy bombers and battleships.

The ceremony that morning verged on the ridiculous. It was only Selassie's extraordinary restless spirit and his overwhelming seriousness that made the occasion seem at all real. Ethiopian chieftains who had lately crossed the Italian lines to Sudan were brought before him. They were barefoot, clad in unclean, shapeless robes, their fuzzy hair, stiff with grease and lice, was piled on their heads, their bodies were wound about with huge cartridge belts filled with bullets from the wars of another century... bullets for which they had no guns anyway. They prostrated themselves before Selassie, who sat in the bright sun under an

enormous topee, evincing no interest whatever. Genock, surrounded by native boys, toiled round the emperor, filming hard. He crouched, sighted, squatted, took angle-shots and close-ups, while the rest of us stood about saying nothing; and faintly in one's head one heard the Italian jeers. Truly that morning the chances of the King of Kings did not look auspicious. Nor could one find much hope in the contemplation of the youthful Duke of Harar, the emperor's son, who had changed from the pyjamas in which we had first met him into a suit of khaki drill that hung shapelessly on his slight angular body. Presently we went inside the house with the emperor, and drank warm beer laced with lemonade. Selassie unbent toward Genock, an old friend, but they talked mostly about a camera the emperor wanted to sell, and his monosyllabic replies coming through to us by way of an Amharic interpreter advanced neither our information about the present nor our hopes for the future. Through his chief aide, a cultured and attractive little Ethiopian, Selassie issued a proclamation that day saying he had returned to free his country from the Italians. Plans were on foot for getting this proclamation into the dissident tribes in Abyssinia, plus a few guns and golden thalers. But privately the emperor had been surprised and deeply disappointed at the lack of arms in the Sudan and the failure of the British to offer him anything concrete. In London he had understood that he would be furnished with bombers, guns, trucks, tanks, ammunition, and he did not hesitate to express his disappointment to the Kaid in Khartoum. Yes, that was a grey day in the African war, and the affairs of the emperor looked stale, flat and painfully unprofitable.

Matthews and I went off the next day on the long train journey to the front outside Kassala. It was a convivial train. The railway officer in charge had a suite with a bath, and there we would go in the evening to bathe and drink warm whisky until the train stopped at a convenient halt, when we would walk back along the track to our carriage. Food one either brought oneself and gave to one's native boy to cook, or accepted what the railways had to provide. It was customary for the passenger to bring his own drinks, which were kept by the boy in some remote ice-chest on the train and produced before luncheon and dinner. The train brought life to the primitive grass-hut settlements in the interior. Natives swarmed up to the track to post and receive letters, gossip, and gather their merchandise. Passengers as green as we were would jump down and wander through the poor village bazaars and buy daggers made from bits of steel looted from the railway track. Extraordinary things were for sale at every halt—bundles of aromatic twigs used for the cleaning of teeth, camel sticks for guiding camels, sweetmeats violent in colour and taste. But these black Fuzzy Wuzzies, Hadendoas and Nubas were magnificent in physique, and after the riverine tribes of the lower Nile they appeared as a race revived and refreshed. Their teeth were perfect and they smiled constantly. No hawker pressed his wares or molested the stranger. Their tight glossy skins shone with a luminous blackness, and the naked children played with a gaiety and vigour seldom seen south of the Egyptian border. They were as statuesque and natural as animals as they stood stork-like upon one leg, holding the other foot against the knee—a comfortable stance once you can manage it. The grass conical-shaped tukals in which the villagers lived were as natural and attractive as a field of wheat, and a relief to anyone used to the broken-down mud-hut villages of the Nile Delta. There was cleanliness and breath here. The

Mohammedan, stricter than any town dweller, religiously spread his mat on the earth, washed himself from a stone water-jar as it is prescribed in the Koran, and prayed with a sincerity that made him oblivious to all that went on around him. Many of the adults worked on the railway—worked on tirelessly, regardless of growing age but dropping the labour as soon as they tired of it with childish irrelevance. They would go off to the villages for a month or two and then return to work again. I heard from the railway officer of one old man who was told he was too old to work. He protested he was only thirty-five—a point which he could not have proven anyway, since the natives take no numerical account of the years. He was eventually given a job and worked stoutly at carrying sleepers and rails. Then one day the overseer heard him chatting to his mates about the battle of Omdurman. It appeared that he had fought Kitchener there.

Then, too, after months of dry heat in the Egyptian desert, we were seeing rain again—warm scented rain that deluged on the black cotton soil in the evenings, turning the ground into a muck and bringing a sense of relief after the long hot day. And trees appeared again as we advanced on Sennar Dam—thorn scrub, perhaps twenty feet high, the country of elephant and lion and baboons and antelope. Like schoolboys we rode across the roaring buttress of the dam in the cab of the locomotive and watched the snow-white ibises rising in lazy clouds against just such a sunset as awed Churchill here over a generation ago. This was the Blue Nile that flows from Lake Tana in the heart of Abyssinia. Here at Sennar the annual flood is locked and released with such exactitude during the following dry season that engineers can assess almost to the inch how much water is flooding through the irrigation drains of the fellaheen in Lower Egypt, over a thousand miles away. The flood was early yet, but already the water thrashed through the sluices with a roar that drowned conversation. Later, the Blue Nile would rise to such strength that at the confluence at Khartoum the slower flooding White Nile would be forced to flow backwards. Then later again the White Nile that flows out of the rotting swamps in central Africa would gain its own impetus and restore the current at Khartoum to its normal direction. Together, then, the White and Blue Niles would sweep on to the Mediterranean, bringing life to twenty million people. Idly it had been suggested that the Italians might withhold the supply from Lake Tana or even poison the water. The hugeness of Sennar alone denied that nonsense, and later in Khartoum I met a British officer who had explored the reaches of the Blue Nile for the express purpose of proving that theory false.

Near Gedaref we approached the front. Sometimes in this final stretch Matthews and I would go ahead of the train in a rattling petrol-driven trolley. This used to proceed to the next station after every halt to report washaways on the line—a frequent happening that sometimes held up the traffic for days. From the trolley we watched the antelope bounding across the line or stopped and followed the bell-like calls of the baboons through the trees.

Gedaref is a malarial spot where one sleeps beneath netting, and it is wise to wear long trousers and poke the turn-ups under your socks. Here on a cool windy hilltop the British had established divisional headquarters in a wide verandahed villa.

Away southward, four days' march by she-camel, lay one front at Gallabat. Northward at Kasm el Girba outside Kassala was the farthest point you could reach before the enemy. The Sudanese Defence Force was astride the Atbara River there, ready to blow up the bridge if the Italians came on. Gedaref itself was a bigger cluster of grass huts than usual. It was lightly held by native troops dressed in their one-piece knee-length khaki robes, khaki turbans and stout openwork leather sandals. The British officers ate bacon and eggs and marmalade, read the *Bystander* and the *Tatler* and hoped for mail from home. They were hospitable, friendly, experienced men, feeling a little forgotten but apparently ready to carry on in this wilderness so long as it pleased some remote command thousands of miles away. It is never in London that you get a sense of Empire. It is here on the edges where they really do dress occasionally for dinner and cling pathetically to habits that were made in Eton and Piccadilly. It's absurd, of course. And quite unusually stoical and brave.

I was taken to see a group of about three hundred natives whose chief preoccupation up to the war had been horse-stealing and various forms of highway robbery. They were great marksmen, which was notable since before the war they had been forbidden to carry arms under threat of heavy punishment. They had come in readily to enlist, but when they were offered rifles they had shaken their heads emphatically, saying they had never seen such curious instruments before. Overacting heavily, each man had insisted on being shown how to load and fire. Then they were offered targets at three hundred yards. Each man plugged his entire clip of bullets clean through the bulls-eye. Now they were going off under a British officer behind the Italian lines to shoot up convoys.

For the first and only time in the Middle East I rode up to the front on a railway. Nearing Kasm el Girba we saw small bomb-craters pitting one or two of the sidings. The line had not been hit, but Fascist aircraft were up, and once we had to stop and wait while a bomber cruised over. It was feared that at any moment a land raid might come across from the Eritrean border and cut the line. Nor was there any real reason why Fascist aircraft might not have actually landed on the flat desert beside the railway in a thousand remote places. They might have torn up and dynamited miles of track. As it was, even their bombers never ventured low. Regularly at night the people in Atbara in central Sudan used to hear Italian communication planes riding high overhead. These were making the long twelve-hundred-mile flight between Eritrea and Libya. The aircraft used to come down at Kufra oasis in southern Libya to refuel and then continue on over the Sudan to Asmara. The Sudan was defenceless to do anything about it. Little too could have been done to save the vital bridge over the Atbara—the bridge that carried all traffic from Egypt and the Red Sea to Khartoum—had a determined attack been made upon it.

But now, unmolested, we bowled down the line to the Atbara at Kasm el Girba. At that friendly mess we found the war languished. If the Italians failed to come on soon, the rains would start and it would be too late. It did not seem that they would come on. Only a few nights previously a British demolition squad, sent out to tear up a section of the railway track outside Kassala, had come on a squad of Italian sappers engaged on exactly the same job a little higher up the line. The Fascists, moreover, were digging machine-gun posts and breastworks for the

defence of Kassala, and seemed to be in such a state of nerves that the noise of a British patrol at night was enough to make them cover the desert with heavy machine-gun fire. As for us, we were powerless to attack. Containing Kassala at that moment were exactly three companies. The Italians had perhaps a division or more.

Life at Kasm el Girba moved calmly except for the bombing. Down in the river two officers were wading in the mud. Every few minutes they cast a circular native net into the fast-moving shallows. Then drawing the weighted ends of the net together, they hauled fat muddy fish on to the bank. The day before, a seventeen-foot crocodile had been shot, and gazelle meat was available. Far across the plain we could see Kassala clearly—a township partly European, mostly native, clustered under a great black hump of rock that rose startlingly out of the plain like a huge potted jelly that had been turned lately from the mould. That was Jebel Kassala, and a smaller jebel lay behind it—the most notable landmarks for hundreds of miles.

We dined that night in the open, fighting the insects and listening to the B.B.C. intoning from a set perched in a thorn-bush. It was a quiet war. We went back to Khartoum.

Chapter 3

A successful attack was made against Massawa… one of our aircraft failed to return.
—R.A.F. COMMUNIQUÉ ISSUED IN CAIRO, JULY 14TH, 1940.

THREE DAYS later I was seeing all the fighting I cared for. Matthews and I had put in for a flight on a bombing raid and to our surprise it was granted. Such requests had always been turned down in France and England.

We flew down from Khartoum to R.A.F. headquarters, north of Kassala at Erkowit—an intolerable journey of four and a half hours in a rattling Valencia. Erkowit, about three thousand feet up in the Red Sea Hills, had a resthouse to which the overheated white people of the Sudan used to go to relax and cool off a little. It recalls Mexico or the Texan desert. Cactus with long upward-reaching fingers grows out of the grey rocks. Lizards scuttle in the shadows. Donkeys cart you around the barren hilltops. There was nothing to see, nothing to do, but the governor-general of the Sudan and members of his staff had built themselves houses round about, and it was enough just to be cool. Now the rest-house was crowded with wives and children unable to make the usual summer-leave trip to England. Each night the R.A.F. officers used to come to the rest-house from their two steaming landing-fields on the plain below. There would be music and dancing and mild flirtation and drinking. From every direction on the dark cool terrace in the evening would come the voices of the guests shouting 'Walad', which was the signal for a soft-footed native waiter to come up and take orders for the bar. Every day the British bombers would whirl up from the desert and fly off to Eritrea and

Abyssinia. Old and few as the machines were, they were having it pretty much their own way against the Italian air force. And now today a squadron of Blenheims had come down from the Western Desert to lay on a few days of really intensive bombardment in order to distract the Fascists from an important convoy of ships which was due to sail up the Red Sea to Suez. Tired after the flight from Khartoum, Matthews and I went to bed in tents pitched beside the house. We had to be up at five-thirty the next morning since we were promised a flight in one of the raids which were to bomb Kassala throughout the following day.

There can, I think, be no exact analysis of fear or any complete assessment of courage. This raid as I know now was of little importance and less danger. But it was my first, and I went to bed that night with a little constriction in my throat, a faster, uncomfortable beating inside my chest. This was danger, I thought, asked for and accepted and one might be dead tomorrow. Or wounded or crashed somewhere beyond that jebel without water. One of the pilots had shown me a little card they all carried written in Amharic and English. It said something about the bearer being a British officer and asking that he be given food and water and taken to the nearest settlement. 'Since the bastards can't read,' the pilot had said lightly, 'I guess some of the tribesmen will slice you up in the usual way and start asking questions afterwards.' He hadn't seemed worried about it. And, strangely, neither did I. I was just afraid of being hit at all while in the air. I started examining this, searching round and round in my head for a way of dealing with myself, and I felt angry with myself and ashamed. This was the hard moment. In the morning it was not nearly so difficult.

An R.A.F. truck fetched us in the yellow early light, and down at the nearest landing field we bundled into the unaccustomed heaviness of flying kit and parachutes. Already the machines, some ten of them, had been 'bombed-up' and now their engines were turning over in a scurry of desert dust. The wing commander was very precise. He had photographs of Kassala showing clearly the two jebels where the air currents were sometimes difficult; the straggling native village a mass of grass huts; the river Gash, now in yellow flood; the rectangular compound of the railway yards which was our target. Inside the compound were neat lines of concrete tukals built in the shape of the other conical huts. These had been erected by the railway company to shelter native railway workers. Now it was believed that they housed Italian troops and native levies and our object was to bomb them out. Machine and possibly A.A. guns were noted at either end of the compound. We were to dive-bomb down to about three or four hundred feet. The aircraft would go out in flights of three.

I sweated in the hot flying kit as I walked over the far side of the field smoking a last cigarette with the flying officer who was leading our flight. I will give this man a fictitious name, Watson. He was perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three. He was six foot, unusually slim and boyish with dark hair and a serious shy face, and he had been very gay last night at the rest-house. Someone had said to him, 'I hear you are going to do something pretty intrepid tomorrow.' 'Yes,' he had said, 'pretty intrepid.' They had got the word out of some newspaper report and it was a joke among them to use it. I do not think that they ever felt brave. They felt tired or exhilarated or worried or hungry and occasionally afraid. But never brave. Certainly never intrepid. Most of them were completely unanalytical. They were

restless and nervous when they were grounded for a day. They volunteered for every flight and of necessity some each day had to be left behind. They lived sharp vivid lives. Their response to almost everything—women, flying, drinking, working—was immediate, positive and direct. They ate and slept well. There was little subtlety and still less artistry about what they did and said and thought. They had no time for leisure, no opportunity for introspection. They made friends easily. And never again after the speed and excitement of this war would they lead the lives they were once designed to lead. They were no material for peace.

So then Watson and Matthews, the other pilots and I climbed into three separate Blenheims and squeezed down among the instruments. We carried no observer, so there was a spare seat for both Matthews and me with a good view. Matthews was in the left-hand machine, Watson in the centre, and myself in the right being piloted by a laconic young Canadian who handed me a stick of chewing-gum—a welcome thing at that moment. I wanted now only to get into the air. But one of the other machines heaved and stopped in its take-off. A tyre was punctured, and endlessly, it seemed, we waited for the wheel to be changed. Then quite suddenly we were off—Watson first, us next, then the third machine; and soon all three were coasting evenly over the dried-up land in an immaculate V. There was a flight of an hour and a half to the target—ninety minutes of pondering what it would be like. I hated that ride. It was slightly bumpy, and the other machines, so close that one felt their wings would touch, kept rising and sinking out of sight. I watched the other rear gunners spinning their glassed-in turrets in search of enemy aircraft. I traced the path of the Gash River and the thin ribbon of railway that led us to Kassala. I tried to work out the meanings of the dials before me. But it was no good. There was nothing to do, nothing to arrest the mind and lift it up and away from its dread and senseless apprehension.

In despair I fingered my wristwatch again and again, believing it must have stopped. Then, unexpectedly, my Canadian bumped me on the arm and pointed ahead. There was Kassala breaking through the ground mist. There the jebels, there the town, there the railway yards. And in a few seconds we were going down to bomb. It wasn't necessary to wait any more. With huge overwhelming relief I leaned over for a fuller view. As I moved, the three aircraft dipped in a long easy dive and, inexplicably, I was suddenly lifted with a wave of heady excitement, more sensuous than relief from pain, faster than the sating of appetite, much fuller than intoxication. I felt keyed to this thing as a skier balancing for his jump or a surfer taking the first full rush of a breaker. There was no drawing back nor any desire for anything but to rush on, the faster the better. Now the roar of the power-dive drowned even these sensations, and with the exhilaration of one long high-pitched schoolboy's yell we held the concrete huts in the bomb sights and let them have the first salvo. I saw nothing, heard no sound of explosion, as the machine with a great sickening lurch came out of the dive and all the earth—jebels, townships, clouds and desert—spun round and sideways through the glass of the cockpit. Then, craning backward, I glimpsed for a second the bomb smoke billowing up from the centre of the compound. It all looked so marvellously easy then—not a human being in sight on the brown earth below; all those ten thousand men huddled in fear of us in the ground. A burst of tracer shells skidded past the

slanting windows of the cockpit. So they were firing from the ground then, and it meant nothing. Nothing now could interrupt the attack.

Already Watson was shaping for his second run and closer in this time. We followed him into the dive, skidding first left then right at over three hundred m.p.h. to throw off the aim of the gunners below. Then the straightening at last for the final swoop dead on to the target. This time I heard the machine-gun spouting from the leading edge of our machine, felt the lift as the load of bombs was released and heard again the rear gunner blasting from his turret as the aircraft nosed upward into the sky again. Watson was away ahead on a long sweep round the jebels and into Eritrea trying to pick up transport on the roads leading back to Asmara and we followed him hotly. But everything back along the yellow grey country was quiet. Over the border even the villagers were pressed to the ground in terror of the raid. We turned at length, all three of us, for the last attack, flying back over a forest to the west of the town. Coming now at this new angle we found new points to bomb, and faintly Watson's salvo sounded through our motors as we came down for the last time. Looking across as he dived, I saw where his starboard wing was ripped in two places and the fuselage was peeling back under the force of the wind. Then again the earth was turning and pitching as we came out of it and I felt sick. Sick, and nursing a roaring headache. Like that I was borne up and out of it into the pure air beyond the ground-fire, beyond harm's way. I experienced pleasure then, calmer but deeper than my earlier excitement. To have had that dread, to have lost it in excitement at the crisis, and now to have come sailing back safely into this clean open sky—that was much and more than one could ever have foreseen. In a lazy pleasurable daze I sat back through the journey home. I could have laughed at anything then. It was all very intrepid. As we came down toward the home field three more aircraft setting out for Kassala passed us in the air. Three more were warming up on the ground. We made an easy landing. My Canadian slid back the transparent roof. I stepped out along the wing, caught my foot in a piece of splintered fuselage and fell flat on my face on the ground.

While we slept and wrote and enjoyed life at the resthouse Watson went up again that day on reconnaissance far down the Red Sea. At Massawa he came on a dangerous thing: a concentration of Italian warships. His neat square photographs showed at least two destroyers and a cruiser and two or three submarines tied up around the mole. And still our convoy was not safely through the Red Sea. It was decided to organise an attack on the harbour at once, drawing the Wellesley squadron at Port Sudan into the action as well. Watson, having had the honour of discovering the enemy, pleaded to go out on the opening dawn raid the following day. By now his brimming eagerness, his modesty and his laughter had made him specially interesting to us. Among so many it was always valuable in writing dispatches to attach your descriptions to some personality. The story gained point and clarity that way. And since the correspondent was not permitted by the censorship to mention a man's name, it did not matter that there were a hundred others like him. One man stood for all. So now I fixed on Watson. He was a strange lad in that part of his character that had never yet had a chance to develop. Girls scared him. It was naturally a joke among his friends. When his squadron leader married one of two sisters at Alexandria, Watson was induced to act as best man

and in an agony of embarrassment attended the bride's sister at the wedding. There you are, the others told him afterward, there is a fine girl for you. Watson retaliated to his squadron's astonishment by announcing quietly a little later that he was engaged to marry the girl. Now here he was in the Sudan waiting for leave to go back and get married and filling his days with high adventure.

Genock had joined us and saw at once he might use this attack to get a film that had never been taken before—action shots of a dive-bomber taken from the bomber itself. There was no room for him in the first raids so he attached his camera to one of the rear gunners' turrets, focused and sighted it and arranged a button which the gunner had only to push when he went into action. Off went the first flights in the morning. They came against opposition so stiff that the gunner was too busy and too preoccupied to press Genock's button. Genock himself got a seat and went out, but he too found the pace too hot, the action too fleeting and erratic to allow him to focus. Reconnaissance photographs taken after the first day's blitz showed some hits, but still the Italian warships were there. And now the three squadrons—the two in the Red Sea Hills and the other at Port Sudan—felt baulked and stirred up in their determination to have the Italian ships. Watson after two long flights in the one day, including well over an hour over the target, had bloodshot eyes and his wing commander would have laid him off had he not again pleaded so strongly to go on.

Matthews and I flew down to Port Sudan to watch the other squadron operating. The town festered in a humid shade temperature of 110 degrees and sometimes more. In the cockpits of the aircraft patrolling down the Red Sea the temperature rose sometimes to 130 degrees. Many in the town were suffering from prickly heat, the rash which blotches your face and arms and back with red scabs. The water in the pool at the front of the Red Sea Hotel was so warm that it was a slight relief in the evening to emerge from it into the less warm air. In the hotel it was wise to fill your bath in the evening so that by the morning the standing water would have dropped a degree or two below the temperature of the flat hot fluid that steamed out of the tap. One wondered how the crews of submarines in the Red Sea got along.

We watched the Wellesleys take off, great ungainly machines with a single engine and a vast wing spread, but with a record of security that was astonishing. For weeks now they had been pushing their solitary engines across some of the most dangerous flying country in the world—country where for hours you could not make a landing and where the natives were unfriendly to the point of murder—and they had been coming back. Often their great wings were slashed and torn with flying shrapnel. Sometimes they just managed to struggle back with controls shot away and the undercarriage would collapse, bringing the machine lurching down on the sand on one wing like some great stricken bird. But always they seemed to get back somehow. Now again on this second day of the attack on Massawa the control room at Port Sudan got signals that some of our aircraft had been sorely hit. We knew how many aircraft had gone out. It was a strain counting them as they came in, knowing always from hour to hour that there were still due three or two or perhaps just one machine and the chances of the lost airmen ever getting back were diminishing from minute to minute. In the late afternoon we first heard, then saw, the last flight over the sea. They cast their recognition flares;

then two of the three aircraft fell behind. The progress of the leading machine was very slow. It was obvious that since this was the one most badly hit it had been sent on ahead to make its landing as quickly and as best it could. It circled twice, then settled for the landing. Crack went one wheel; down in the sand went the engine; over on one wing went the whole machine. The ambulance, fire-brigade wagons, doctors and ground staff raced across the aerodrome. Out of the machine almost unharmed came the crew.

There were many incidents like that in the days that followed. The old Wellesleys were cracking up and we had no newer aircraft to replace them. They were too slow. Always the Italian fighters would wait over Massawa until one machine more badly hit than the others would lag behind. Then the enemy fighters would come and give it hell. That happened to a young squadron leader who after months of staff work on the ground had asked to take part in this all-important raid. He was given the job of rear gunner and his guns were blown away. The pilot was hit. The airman manning the two makeshift guns that sprouted out of the belly of the machine was mortally wounded. The squadron leader fixed a tourniquet, tightened it with his revolver, and got the dying man to hold it in place. Then he manned the two side-guns until the pilot, lacking blood, was failing. Then the squadron leader took over the controls. That machine, too, came back though they lifted out of it a dead man still holding the revolver that tightened his tourniquet.

I had to go back to Khartoum. Into the Grand Hotel there came Watson at last with a bandage round his arm and a spell of leave. He had got his submarines. The British convoy had got through to Suez.

There was a wedding in Alexandria a little later. Watson went off with his bride for a week. The week after he was on his way back to the Sudan. He was last seen going down on to that spot in Massawa harbour where the warships he had attacked lay wrecked and awash.

Chapter 4

I intend to act offensively.
—ADMIRAL CUNNINGHAM

ALL THROUGH this early period Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham had been becoming more active in the Mediterranean. I had lunched with the Admiral some months before in Malta, and had come away from the meeting so inspired that I suggested to my paper that I should be allowed to join the Mediterranean Fleet as a naval correspondent. This was in January 1940 when as correspondent in Rome I had been finding things slack and had induced the naval attaché there, Sir Phil Bowyer-Smythe, to submit a proposal to the admiralty that I should make a tour of the Mediterranean on British warships to observe how the blockade was being enforced. Both the admiralty and my paper agreed, and at the end of January 1940 I had flown down from Rome to Malta by the Italian Ala Littoria Line. Ala

Littoria aircraft were obliged to stick to set schedules and to cross to Malta from Sicily only a few feet above the sea. They were also required to avoid the Grand Harbour and fly between the island of Gozo and Malta before making a brief landing on the more southerly of the island's airports. Nevertheless there was no doubt that already in January the Italians were keeping a close check on Malta through their pilots, and the Italian consul in Valetta was using this convenient Fascist airline to send Rome all the information he could about our defences.

In Malta the navy had greeted me with an efficiency and understanding for which I was pathetically grateful after so many hostile months in Italy. To get properly served bacon and eggs and tea and toast again before a coal fire and hear the English language all round me was a vision of home. After going round the island's defences (an admiral's barge my transport) I was put aboard the destroyer flagship GALATEA. For ten days we steamed off Italy and round the mouth of the Adriatic picking up freighters, searching them and directing some into Malta. It was all done with a dispatch and judgement and a taste for adventure that promised well for the great months ahead. Though Italy, of course, was not yet at war we travelled blacked out, and action stations were called with precision at sunset. But it was a gay voyage for me with a crew which had the reputation of being one of the most friendly and amusing of any in the navy. I spent hours on the quarter-deck talking with Vice-Admiral Tovey about Italian opera and politics and books. He then had no inkling that he was to be appointed to the command of the home fleet, and was feeling slightly baffled at being left in the Mediterranean while most of his destroyers had been taken away from him for service in more dangerous waters to the north. I spent long hours on the bridge, where the captain, on sighting other vessels, had constantly to take snap decisions which all affected the tortuous diplomatic game Whitehall was then playing in Italy and the Balkans. We picked up all manner of craft—Jugoslav freighters sneaking down the Dalmatian coast, Greek contraband runners lurking in the mouth of the Corinth Canal waiting for us to pass so they could make a dash for the open sea, Italian merchantmen bound for the east, Turks coming west. Once we stopped an evacuating Balkan royal. Always we hoped to grab some Nazi agent and his papers aboard a neutral ship.

Always we were busy, and twice I had to abandon a speech I was making to the ship's company on the quarter-deck when the cry came down from the masthead, 'Ship ahoy!'

For some reason I remember clearly this incident of Mulvaney, the captain's personal servant. In a vulgarly brilliant sunset we had sighted a small sailing vessel heading down the Adriatic. Her master responded neither to flags or Morse, and, since he might have been carrying even a few tons of valuable contraband, GALATEA decided to run alongside and question the stranger, through a megaphone. The admiral's A.D.C., the officer with the most powerful voice aboard, was summoned to the bridge. The great grey cruiser and the tiny freighter, her sails dripping gold from the over-gaudy sunset, drew together. The freighter flew no flag, and her master, now genuinely disturbed, leaned over the bridge-rail not two hundred yards from us. 'Who are you? Where are you going?' yelled the A.D.C. in English. The master shook his head, unable to understand. '*Qui êtes-vous? Où allez-vous?*' Again no response, and GALATEA, not holding the slow pace, slid

past. As we turned to come up on the other vessel's port side, GALATEA's captain said briefly, 'Try him in Italian.' The A.D.C. answered limply he had no Italian, and I was instructed to help by giving the A.D.C. the Italian for the questions he was to shout. It worked well enough. We got the answer back he was an Italian freighter bound from Leghorn to Genoa with a cargo of wheat. It seemed genuine enough, and he was too small fry to cause us further delay, so the captain decided he could proceed. 'What is the Italian for *All right?*' he asked me. 'Just say *Va bene*,' I told the A.D.C. He, not hearing correctly, shouted into wind at the top of his lungs, 'Mulvaney'. Out of the captain's sea cabin shot Mulvaney the steward, rigid at the salute. Over on the sailing ship the Italian master was shouting quite happily, 'Va bene,' and pursuing his course. We all looked steadily at Mulvaney for a moment. 'All right, Mulvaney,' said the captain dryly, 'I just want a cup of tea.'

All this was luxury to me. I had sailed these same waters only a year or two before in dirty downtrodden tramps during the Spanish War. I had been trying to discover whose were the mystery submarines which were sinking our vessels off the north coast of Africa (they were Italian all right). At Algiers I had joined the German tramp ACHAEA, and had had many a talk with her fat captain on the long trip up through the Straits of Messina to Piraeus and the Dardanelles. Even then in 1938 he would end every conversation with, 'It is impossible to continue. The English will not understand. It will be war. You might think nothing of my little ship, but she will be minelaying or patrolling or doing something in the service of the Führer.' Well, ACHAEA wasn't doing much. I had seen her only a month before I had joined GALATEA, when I had made an overland trip up to Venice and Trieste, at the head of the Adriatic. Tied up and mouldering without a crew or a cargo in Trieste docks, I had found ACHAEA and half a dozen other German vessels. They were bottled up there by just such patrols as the GALATEA was making.

I returned to Malta enthusiastic about the British blockade. Admiral Cunningham, then in command at Malta, had me to lunch at Admiralty House. Sitting on the terrace there with his family, I found it easy to talk, as it always is with men of unusual talent. He was engrossed in Balkan politics and the possibilities of Mussolini's devious politics. Like Tovey, he, too, seemed to me restless for action.

When I met him again seven months later at Alexandria that quick, slight, electric figure was in the thick of it. That was in August 1940. The Italian war had been going two months. I had left the Sudan to return to Egypt, and when I got to Cairo I was told to join the fleet in Alexandria. This was something new. Through the last war and the first months of this the navy had set its face against publicity. But now it was seen at the admiralty that propaganda had to be used to counter the German broadcasts, and since the navy was going to be written about anyway it had better be reported at first hand. I was posted to the flagship WARSPITE and went at once to see Admiral Cunningham. Action and responsibility had made small but very definite changes in him. He was obviously enjoying life. He sat at his desk in his sea cabin under WARSPITE's towering bridgeworks dressed in white shirt, shorts and socks. He had colour in the flat cheeks crisscrossed with tiny red veins. His cornflower blue eyes were brisk and alight. He talked no politics. He hinted briefly that we were going to undertake an unusually important

sweep through the Mediterranean, told me that I would get every assistance, and asked me to say there and then what I wanted. I wanted nothing but a handy place to watch what was going to happen, and they sent me up to the searchlight platform just astern of the admiral's bridge. There, occasionally during the days ahead, Cunningham would come across for a few words and to drop information.

We steamed out of Alexandria in the early morning past the five sullen captive French warships at anchor there. Coming out of the overheated mess deck at daylight I saw how big this venture was. The whole Alexandrine fleet was out. It was 6 a.m., and at that moment the sky was flaming pink, the sea jet black, and the whole great steel arrowhead was pointed down the shaft of the rising sun toward Italy. Astern of WARSPITE steamed EAGLE, the old converted aircraft-carrier, and closely following her MALAYA, huge, castle-like and lifting rhythmically up and below the line of EAGLE's wide flight-deck. Starboard and port of us steamed lines of cruisers, some of the great names of this war, GLOUCESTER and LIVERPOOL, ORION and SYDNEY and AJAX. Beyond them in a great protective V that stretched to the horizon were the destroyers. Forward and astern of the whole fleet flew EAGLE's reconnaissance aircraft, looking for submarines and enemy warships and aircraft.

WARSPITE was like a central telephone exchange. There were never less than two lines of flags going up or coming down the signalling masthead, never less than two or three lamps flashing out Morse; never less than half a dozen other ships signalling us with lamp and flag. Orders poured out of Cunningham's office; information poured in. It was a brilliant thing to see the order go out for the whole fleet to change direction, bringing each ship into a different position. Far out on the horizon the destroyers would weave in and out between one another; cruisers would cut suddenly across our bows or drop behind; EAGLE and MALAYA, following doggedly astern, would start upon new directions. For a few minutes ships seemed to be steaming helter-skelter anywhere over the ocean as disorganised as a river picnic. Then it would come out straight again—the wide V, the battleships coasting along steadily in the centre. And always each ship kept swinging starboard and port in her course every so often, to throw lurking enemy submarines off their line of fire.

Three days of this and nothing much happened. The Italians were well aware something was doing. Shadowing planes—usually old Cant flying boats that hugged the surface of the sea—kept following in our wake. As often as EAGLE sent out fighting aircraft to destroy them another shadower would turn up again. There was a story told of how the Admiral summoned one of our giant Sunderland flying boats to deal with one of these tiny shadowers. The Sunderland swept up and over the fleet on her mission. Presently she reported, 'Sighted Cant flying boat.' Then later, 'Destroyed Cant.' The admiral signalled back, 'You big bully.'

Toward the third evening one of our scouting planes returned with the news that the Italian fleet, with two battleships and seven cruisers screened by destroyers, was steaming straight toward us at fifteen knots. It seemed that a decisive action was certain, and that unless we or they changed course we should meet in the darkness about 1 a.m. Here, then, was a major decision for Cunningham to take. He was outnumbered and probably outgunned; he was within a short distance of Italian bases from which new enemy vessels,

submarines and aircraft might be called up within an hour or two. More important than either consideration was the fact that night actions are risky, uncertain affairs, where luck might defeat training and the best gunnery in the world might be overreached in the obscurity of a battle fought in the darkness. One factor helped Cunningham to his decision—every man on this, his own ship, and I believe on every other vessel under his command, was eager for an encounter after training for so many years for a meeting just such as this. But an engagement would deter the fleet from its main object, and, holding that point in mind, Cunningham decided neither to seek nor avoid action. The fleet was to continue on its course, which was then obliquely approaching the Italians. If we met the enemy in the night, then we would fight him.

The decision delighted everybody. Officers in the wardroom, men in the galley, bolted their dinners and hurried on deck wrapping greatcoats over their white tropical shorts and shirts. Torpedoes were swung seawards for action. Searchlights were spun round ready to push their beams across the sea. A stream of signals flashed from WARSPITE's bridge, bringing the rest of the fleet into position for battle before their silhouettes vanished into the darkness. The wind rose sharply, and soon cascades of black water were seething over the bows past the fifteen-inch guns which stood loaded and ready. Stumbling in the darkness round the decks, I passed hundreds of men. They were laughing, whistling, yarning excitedly.

Ten hours later in the first light of the new day they were still there. But the Italians were not. Somewhere in the night the enemy had changed course and disappeared. Our dawn air-patrol found them at length well on their way home to Italy. But a British submarine struck first. Roaming by chance well ahead of the British fleet on an independent course, she had reached the Italian battle squadron in the failing light the night before. Two torpedoes were launched, and before the British commander dived he ascertained through the periscope that one Italian cruiser at least had been hit. It was one of the most important successes of British submarines in the Mediterranean since Italy had declared war. Still after this, had the Italian fleet wanted action on terms greatly favouring itself, there was nothing to stop it. Overwhelmingly large numbers of aircraft could have reached us within an hour. As it was, the enemy waited until it was too late.

During these first three days we were distracting the attention of the enemy from a convoy bound for Malta. The attack when it did come on the convoy was a half-hearted one, as all the Italian attacks were. The steering-gear of one of the merchant ships was damaged, and she made port. All the high brown cliffs surrounding Malta's Grand Harbour were thronged with cheering excited Maltese as the warships steamed in at last with their convoy. After many anxious weeks of isolation these ships brought life and hope to the island. It was solid proof to the Maltese that they were not being deserted. It was the first of the big wartime convoys, the first of many that have been going there ever since.

But outside Malta's Grand Harbour something much bigger yet was happening. Only the night before I had been told that here under the very lee of Italy a rendezvous had been arranged. To buttress Cunningham's relatively weak position in the Mediterranean the admiralty had ordered to his command its newest aircraft-carrier ILLUSTRIOUS together with her forty-odd high-speed Fulmar

fighting aircraft, the two anti-aircraft cruisers COVENTRY and CALCUTTA, with the battleship VALIANT, escorting destroyers and supply ships. These new vessels almost doubled Cunningam's striking power. Better still, they meant air protection from the Italian raiders which had been harassing his ships whenever they put to sea. They had made the voyage from England with nothing worse than light raids. They had passed unharmed through the field of mines which the Italians had declared they had laid from Sicily, past the island of Pantelleria, to Libya. And now, exactly on the appointed hour, while we watched and waited tensely aboard WARSPITE, the huge square hulk of ILLUSTRIOUS heaved steadily over the horizon framed in a background of Malta's brown misty cliffs.

No ship like ILLUSTRIOUS had ever been seen in the Mediterranean before; nothing of its kind, so fast, so modern, so reassuring. Emotionally, sailors cheered as they saw her, and gazed and gazed across the flat steady water much as a schoolboy will look at a new motor car his father has brought home. Then other smudges on the horizon resolved into VALIANT towering above ILLUSTRIOUS and the attendant cruisers and destroyers. Cunningham signalled his welcome to all of them. Then, since we were within half an hour's flight of the enemy, there was a brisk business of getting the new vessels into line. ILLUSTRIOUS steamed into the place of honour behind the flagship, with VALIANT, MALAYA and EAGLE following. The rest of the ships, a grand fleet now, took up position on the flanks. Within fifteen minutes of sighting us, ILLUSTRIOUS had flown off two of the new two-hundred-and-forty-miles-per-hour Fulmars. They set out on a slow flight round the fleet to accustom the Mediterranean gunners to their appearance, but, sighting two Italian aircraft on their way, shot them down and returned to their parent ship. In two minutes they had vanished on electric lifts into the belly of the aircraft-carrier. The whole operation had taken ten minutes. Grinning widely, a sailor walked over to the hangar on WARSPITE which housed two ancient hundred-mile-an-hour Swordfish fighters and scrawled on the doorway, 'This way to the museum.' There was a great feeling of exhilaration around the fleet that morning.

And then the Italians came. They attacked with aircraft, mines and submarines, a new kind of naval warfare. From the Sicilian airfields they kept sending up small waves of bombers, flying very high and fast. Beneath the sea, meanwhile, enemy submarines were reported from several different directions and mines were bobbing to the surface. I was standing on the searchlight platform when the first salvo of bombs came down. A curtain of grey smoke and spray, mast-high, blotted out ILLUSTRIOUS steaming only a few hundred yards astern. Then another salvo, smaller bombs this time, reared up the sea along WARSPITE. Then single fountains spurted from among the cruisers and destroyers. LIVERPOOL's guns were the first to hit back. One after another the other warships synchronised their pom-poms and ack-ack guns into the concert of the fleet's barrage. On WARSPITE you saw first smoke from the muzzles, then flames, then, seconds later it seemed, you felt the impact of the explosion that lifted your feet from the deck.

Far out to the horizon ships were racing to new positions making sudden turns and dashes. The destroyers, like wild cats tearing up the sea, dashed between the larger vessels to get at the enemy submarines. Each depth charge—they were exploding very deep—sent slow trembling blasts across the sea. Here and there

ships were sent off to explode floating mines with their pom-poms. ILLUSTRIOUS was working at speed. Fighter after fighter wheeled off her flight deck, and I caught glimpses of distant air battles.

All this action was scattered and spread over a long period, and, since few had any clear idea of what was going on, the flagship's commander would broadcast reports over the ship's microphone. It was part of an excellent psychological understanding that men fight better if they know what and how they are fighting and with what support. The commander finished each broadcast with the words, 'This is the end.' Once he announced, 'Large numbers of Italian aircraft are expected in five minutes' time. This is the end.' A shout of laughter went from one end of the battleship to the other.

Then late in the afternoon there was an incident that brought the fight to a close. There had been another near miss beside the battleship, and shrapnel was rattling down on the deck when I got a perfect glimpse of the silver wings of five enemy machines flying in the clear sunlight thirteen or fourteen thousand feet up. At once WARSPITE's four-inch guns went into action. One silver plane slowly detached itself from the rest, turned from silver to black, then flaring yellow as it crashed headlong into the sea. As it hit the water a dense pillar of billowing black smoke spurted a hundred feet into the sky. Shell-bursts were ringing the other four raiders very closely now. Soon another machine lost height and speed, and finally spun down, a burning moth before the flame of the late afternoon sun. After it, falling like white ashes through the black smoke, came three parachutists. Along with thousands of British sailors I watched fascinated, as the white dots hovered delicately into the sea to drown. Two British fighters cruised over the dying Italian pilots and with wide graceful sweeps alighted on ILLUSTRIOUS. The fight was finished.

That night the fleet split up, one half going straight back to Alexandria, the rest, including ILLUSTRIOUS and her attendant ack-ack cruisers, following WARSPITE into a new adventure that was to prepare the way for the later victory at Taranto. We were bound for Rhodes.

The Dodecanese Islands were still a mystery at this time. They were known to harbour Italy's yet untried E-boats for which the Fascists had long been hinting great things. The E-boat was something that especially appealed to the flamboyant and individualistic Italian nature. Count Ciano's father, Admiral Constanzo Ciano, had already in the last war stirred every Italian's imagination by his daring strokes in the Adriatic. With the use of small motor boats he had taken torpedoes right into the Austrian anchorages and succeeded almost single-handed in sinking two major warships. When I was in Italy there was much talk of 'death's head' volunteers who were willing actually to sit astride torpedoes and guide them onto their targets. The project meant death if the rider stayed too long aboard the torpedo, or capture if he managed to slip off into the water a little before the explosion took place. But the E-boat was the practical expression of this desire for fast, stealthy night raiding which brought spectacular results if successful and cost little in life or material if it failed. So the E-boat was designed to travel at speeds of over forty knots, launch at least two torpedoes whilst travelling at this high speed, and then race quickly to safety. Its range was small, its crew a handful of highly trained men. In so small a sea as the Mediterranean the Italians hoped

much from these tactics, and at least two hundred E-boats were reputed to be ready when Mussolini declared war.

The Dodecanese was furthermore an ideal pirate's nest to harbour these boats in addition to submarines and aircraft. All of them could make raids on British and neutral vessels trading up to Greece and the Dardanelles from the Suez Canal.

Rhodes, when I had last landed there from a Turkish merchantman in the spring of 1939, was still a dreaming summer island of roses and wine, of fisherfolk and holiday-makers, peaceful monasteries and pine forests. But even then Mussolini was preparing it for war. Two landing fields, one at Maritza, the other at Calato, with satellite fields in other parts of the island, had already been prepared. An energetic governor, Count Da Vecchi, had been sent across from Italy, and in an excess of the usual Fascist passion for building he was busily engaged in tearing down his predecessor's public works and putting up his own instead. There was a fine new opera and cinema house, new quays, new roads ringing the island, and the big hotel on Rhodes harbour, the Albergo delle Rose, had been remodelled in yellowish sandstone on grandiose lines. Only the lovely forts and buildings of the Knights of St John remained the same, though some of them were destined to be turned into air-raid shelters. At the Albergo delle Rose in 1939 I found the bar, the terraces and the beach swarming with Fascist officers and German tourists. I was in fact offered the room occupied only a week or two before by Dr Goebbels and I slept very soundly in it for three nights. Apart from a few Maltese fishermen, who still clung to their British nationality despite the special tax imposed upon them, the only Englishman on the island was the British consul, a tough old sea captain who was much perturbed at the continuous influx of soldiers and the aircraft which he then estimated to number about two hundred.

I attempted to take the ferry northward to Leros, the island which had been especially developed as a submarine base, but was firmly told that the boat was booked out indefinitely. It seemed, too, that Stampalia, the island farther west, was being organised as an additional air and sea base. Rhodes itself sported four submarines, but these were forced to sail out of the town's exposed harbour to the northern shores of the island when any sort of a wind was blowing out of Africa. Here, as everywhere I have been in the Fascist Empire, it was impossible not to admire the Italian genius for fine buildings, roads, ports and public works. They built with skill and artistry, and only that strained nervous atmosphere that followed Fascism everywhere indicated that this was a civilisation of the master for the master which the resident subject peoples must accept and support or else…

Up to the time of my voyage in WARSPITE Rhodes had never been raided. Its aircraft had made one or two attacks on Haifa and Alexandria, but nothing of any importance. And now we were steaming past Crete in a generous warm sea to bait the Italians in Rhodes and see what opposition they could offer to a naval and air force coming unexpectedly on them in the night.

The plan was for the ILLUSTRIOUS and EAGLE pilots to combine in attacking the two airfields at Maritza and Calato, while the cruisers ORION and SYDNEY with two destroyers shelled the adjacent island of Scarpanto lying to the south-west.

An hour before sunrise the fleet was in position. One after another, over fifty miles of ocean, one could see the dark shapes of warships detach themselves from the sea mist. One after another fighters and bombers were brought up to the flight-decks of the aircraft-carriers and flown off until there were some twenty or thirty in the dark sky. This take-off in the half dark was dangerous, and one aircraft, its engine failing at the crucial moment, poised for a second on the lip of ILLUSTRIOUS's flight-deck, then plunged sickeningly into the sea to be cut to pieces by the warship's bows. While this was happening SYDNEY was already in action. She was stealing round the island of Kaso to get at an airfield at the southern tip of Scarpanto when three or four E-boats emerged and, apparently caught by surprise, were forced into action. The E-boat commanders at once went into full speed, heading straight towards SYDNEY. SYDNEY, at several thousand yards' range, engaged and blew the first E-boat in a sheet of flame out of the water before she had time to fire or even aim her torpedoes. An attendant destroyer, ILEX, cut in to protect SYDNEY, demolished a second E-boat, and forced two others, apparently hit, to retire into Kaso. SYDNEY methodically went ahead with her shelling, while her sister ORION carried out a similar bombardment on the other side of the island at Pegadia Bay.

The importance of the action was, of course, that it showed the E-boat could be sighted and destroyed in daylight before it could even get into action. Provided he had air protection, Cunningham thereafter had a clear indication that he could approach Italian coasts with no fear of this new weapon. The point was to be proved even more completely in later actions off Malta and Gibraltar.

The second half of the admiral's plan also went forward with unexpected success—again largely the result of surprise. At Calato the sleeping Italian garrison awoke to find itself beneath a major air attack. The petrol dump and the barracks were blazing and half a dozen aircraft burning on the ground. At Maritza, the other field lying under a monastery in a cup of the hills, five-hundred-pound bombs went straight through the main hangars. Workshops and barracks took fire, and another petrol tank engulfed in the flames precipitated a whole series of explosions which trailed black smoke across the horizon clearly visible to us eighty miles away. Italian airmen, recovering from their first shock, ran from the blazing barracks and took off in time to bring down four of our Swordfish which were trying to return to their mother ship.

We expected some stiffer reprisal than this. It came at 10 a.m. when the Fascist bombers now out in force found the fleet steaming for Alexandria. The first salvo of bombs came straight out of the sun and thrust up a green wall of water to the starboard of WARSPITE. The fleet's guns opened with an aching, shuddering crash. Shells were bursting everywhere over the whole bowl of the sky from one horizon to the other. I was caught typing behind one of the four-inch guns, and the typewriter flew from my hands among a pile of books and pictures that tumbled to the floor. Bits of shrapnel spattered the deck, and I ducked and ran for the fifteen-inch gun turrets where I remained all morning watching the fight. By noon the Italians had had enough, and as they came out of the zone of British gunfire ILLUSTRIOUS's fighters leaped in. They had two Italian bombers down in ten minutes, and three more disappeared, casting off bits of fuselage as they went.

In all we had destroyed some twenty enemy aircraft. WARSPITE's chaplain came down to the mess cabin in the evening to post his text for the day: 'We came into Rhodes.' Next morning we were in Alexandria. Not a single warship had been hit throughout.

I trace the turning of the tide in the naval war in the Mediterranean from that one brilliant week. Many things had been done for the first time—a convoy had been got through to Malta; reinforcements had been brought straight through the Mediterranean instead of round the Cape; the E-boat had been proven of little worth in daylight; the Italian bombers had been shown to be inaccurate, slow and unwilling to press their attacks home; and finally the pirates' nest at Rhodes had been badly shaken up.

With this experience to guide him, Cunningham was soon appearing off Taranto with his fleet air arm to cripple nearly half a dozen enemy warships at anchor there. Throughout the winter he was coming close inshore to bombard the whole length of the Libyan coast. Only the long-drawn-out agony of the crippling of ILLUSTRIOUS by German dive-bombers marred his inevitable progress to the battle of Cape Matapan when another seven of Italy's best ships were demolished.

Matapan was the Mediterranean's last great naval battle. The fate of ILLUSTRIOUS had been an earnest that the whole character of the sea war was changing. German dive-bombers off Greece and Crete put an end to Cunningham's brief but brilliant anachronism that capital ships and aircraft-carriers can operate in a land locked sea. The Italians had never really believed in that principle. The Italian navy had no aircraft-carriers. It relied on numerous convenient air bases in Sardinia, Sicily, Libya, the Dodecanese and Italy itself. For the rest it put its faith in E-boats, submarines, fast light torpedo-boats and destroyers. Its thirty-five-thousand-ton battleships like LITTORIO, though of fine design, evoked nothing from the Italian talent for short, sharp, stealthy action. The Italian navy suffered deeply from inexperience and the Italian high command knew it. It could not hope to use battleships as cruisers and cruisers as destroyers, the way Cunningham did.

So for ten extraordinary months, from June 1940 to April 1941, the British navy ruled the Mediterranean with a daring and judgement that possibly eclipsed anything of its kind at sea before. It was not that the Italian navy was no good at all. It was simply that the British fleet, taking many borderline risks, was brilliant. Cunningham deliberately spread a zest for attack. As he was sailing out of Alexandria to attack Taranto he signalled his other ships, 'I intend to act offensively in the Ionian Sea.' He was deeply admired. Nor did he take his losses during this venturesome 'sea' period of the Mediterranean war. It was when he could no longer act offensively, when he had to convoy to and from Crete and Greece and elsewhere and came at last against overwhelming air power overwhelmingly pressed home, that he lost one good ship after another. From Crete onward it became blindingly obvious that sea and air would have to go together. The fleet could not put to sea without air protection. Except for submarines and light fast surprise raids by destroyers, the purely 'sea' period was done. A bigger, more intricate, scheme of operation binding ship and plane had to be devised. Fleets alone cannot act offensively and get away with it. Neither the BISMARCK nor any other battleship could range the seas, raiding, hunting down

its foes, bombarding up the Main. Which is a pity, for every great captain, Cunningham included, is at heart a pirate.

Chapter 5

> In the Western Desert elements of our forces are now in contact with the enemy on a broad front. In an engagement south of Sidi Barrani we have captured 500 prisoners.
>
> —GENERAL WAVELL'S FIRST COMMUNIQUÉ ANNOUNCING HIS OFFENSIVE INTO CYRENAICA, DECEMBER 9TH, 1940.

BY EARLY winter 1940 Mussolini was already in difficulties in Greece. Cunningham at sea and Longmore in the air were doing pretty much as they liked. Only the army of the Nile apparently was doing nothing. Week after vital week slipped by in November, and still Wavell did not move. People pointed to the Greeks and said, 'They can beat the Italians. Why can't we do something?' November drifted into December, all good campaigning weather in the desert, and I began to hear criticism everywhere in the Middle East. There was a feeling of despondency about the army. One retreat had followed another—Norway, Dunkirk, British Somaliland. People talked of 'Headquarters Muddle East,' and it became the fashion to make jokes about the staff officers in Cairo angling for promotion. And as the Greeks continued through Koritza into Albania newspapers went as far as they could in an effort to say, 'Why doesn't Wavell attack in the Western Desert now that the Italians are tied up in Greece?'

Actually the position in the desert was this. General O'Connor, the corps commander, had placed his old armoured division as a holding force at the front between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani. They had in support an Indian division including some British regiments, nearly a division of New Zealanders, and two divisions of Australians either training or simply waiting in the Delta and Palestine. There were in addition heterogeneous groups like the Poles whom it was not thought desirable to send against the Italians since Italy had never broken off diplomatic relations with Poland. Shipments had lately been arriving of twenty-five-pounder guns, new thirty-ton infantry tanks, and aircraft of various kinds including Hurricanes, Wellingtons and Long-nosed Blenheims.

On the Italian side Graziani had established one Libyan and one Metropolitan division at the front around Sidi Barrani under the command of General Gallina. Reaching inland, south, south-west and westwards in a great arc from the coast, some half-dozen fortified camps had been established: Maktila, some miles east of Sidi Barrani on the coast; Tummar East and Tummar West; Nibeiwa and Point Ninety—all more or less due south of Sidi Barrani; and finally Sofafi, deep in the desert near the Libyan border. As desert architecture goes, these camps were pretty lavish affairs. The general design was a convenient rise perhaps half a mile or a mile square surrounded with a stone wall. Inside the Italians had established messes, hospitals and sleeping quarters by scooping holes in the sand and rock,

putting a stone wall round the holes and surmounting the tops with pieces of camouflaged canvas. Outside the camps they built watching-posts by digging holes in the desert. Minefields were embedded on the eastern, northern and southern approaches. Rough, incredibly dusty tracks linked one camp with another. Sidi Barrani had in addition to its ring of outlying camps two lines of fortifications where they had dug anti-tank traps and furnished niches for machine-guns, anti-tank guns and artillery. In command of the camps immediately adjacent to the central fortress of Sidi Barrani was General Maletti, a veteran of the Abyssinian campaign. He had been given what I suppose was an Italian Panzer division. It had a special name—the Raggruppamento Maletti, or the Raggruppamento Oasi Meridionali—and there is some evidence that when the time came for the race across to the Nile, Maletti and his shock troopers were to be in the van. But for the time being he and Gallina were resting, digging in, building up supplies and waiting for their great new road, the Via della Vittoria, linking Sollum with Sidi Barrani, to be completed.

Back on the escarpment in reserve were two more divisions under General Bergonzoli—the famed Electric Whiskers—and General Berti. These had been acting as garrison troops to Corps Headquarters at Bardia and holding the escarpment. Still another division—General Giuseppe Amico's 'Catanzaro' division—was designed to act as a relief at the front. There were then some six Italian divisions—perhaps a hundred thousand men in all—available to Graziani for use as attacking troops. Facing him between Sidi Barrani and the Nile there were some four British divisions or not more than sixty thousand men. In guns of all classes, in all kinds of transport and tanks except heavy tanks, Graziani's forces enjoyed a numerical superiority of probably not less than three to one and in some cases very much more. In the air he certainly had a three to one numerical advantage. Even if his initial assaults failed, he stood—on paper—little chance of a major setback. Strong garrisons of more than a division each were centred at such key points as Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi, in addition to many strong pockets of supporting infantry in desert posts like Mekili south of Derna.

It was generally assumed that in all Libya Graziani disposed of some quarter million troops against Wavell's hundred thousand based around the Nile and the Suez Canal. It was apparent then that nowhere, not even at sea, did we possess equality in numbers (though both British pilots and sailors had proved in the preceding months that this was by no means necessary for success). In fact, Graziani was sitting pretty—even though he was sitting in the imponderable Western Desert which had once swallowed up a Persian host under Cambyses and brought disaster to many conquerors since then.

The general disposition of his armies was arranged with strong Latin logic. Everything fanned out exactly from a base. From Tripoli, his chief supply port where ships were then unloaded undisturbed by air raids, his lines of communication stretched east to Benghazi and far south into the Libyan desert oasis at Kufra. From Benghazi, his most vital base, the lines fanned out again to Barce, Cirene, Derna and Tobruk in the north on the coast, and in the south below the mountains to the desert fort of Mekili. Then from Tobruk the northern line reached to Bardia and Sollum and fanned south to the border desert post at Jarabub. And now he had created his latest fan stretching into Egypt as far as Sidi

Barrani; thence describing an arc down to Sofafi. Every section hinged on pivot, and the pivots were Bardia, Tobruk, Benghazi, Tripoli. Each sector fitted into the one behind it, so that the successive termini of each of the northern arms of each pivot were Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi. And the southern termini were the chain of desert posts, Sofafi, Jarabub, Mekili and Kufra. Doubtless other fans were planned from Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matruh until the Nile Delta was reached.

The obvious point in this grand strategy was that while you had to mass your main forces on the coast where the good roads and the ships and airfields were, yet you still had to guard your desert flank against sudden encircling inland raids. In the end it was Graziani's failure to hold this principle or realise just how far and fast an encircling raid could go that brought him to utter ruin. It was Wavell's and O'Connor's strength that from the first moment they never relaxed these encircling movements or their pressure on the desert flank. And always governing every engagement from a siege or a pitched battle down to a skirmish were the opposite theories of the two commanders: Wavell with his policy of light fast mobile forces; Graziani with his theory of defensive positions. Wavell stabbed with a lance. Graziani presented a shield.

The story of the Benghazi advance begins far back in November 1940. The Italians as was their custom, had not been patrolling except for occasional heavily armed parties which in a great cloud of dust toured the forward area. Our patrolling was done in small groups, sometimes a single vehicle, and nearly always at night. A lieutenant and a dozen men would drive far out into no-man's-land in the darkness, camouflage their vehicles with nets and salt-bush before dawn, and lie motionless on the floor of the desert throughout the day. More often than not, aircraft would fail to spot them, but at the first sign of superior land forces on the desert horizon they would try to identify the enemy and then quickly escape back to our lines. Thus a considerable amount of information was always coming into British Corps Headquarters. O'Connor was well aware that these fortified camps, like Nibeiwa and the two Tummars, were being built, but he did not know how many were completed or exactly where and what further forts were projected. He tried one frontal tank attack on Nibeiwa, and when some of our tanks came to grief on the Italian minefields and were met by considerable artillery fire it became obvious that these forts were of some strength. Each was reckoned to have about three thousand men with a very high rate of fire power.

But a British Intelligence colonel began to notice among the reports which the patrols were constantly bringing in that those scouts who penetrated the area between Nibeiwa and Sofafi invariably returned with no news at all. No contact was made with the enemy. Puzzled, he went out himself, just he and a driver, and lay in the desert south of Nibeiwa getting the same result. He returned on the succeeding night. And then again and again, each time going a little deeper into enemy territory. Still he struck nothing. Could it be possible that there was a gap—a considerable gap—between Sofafi and Nibeiwa which the Italians had not yet fortified nor were even patrolling? It was improbable that they would blunder like this. But there it was—over this whole area as large as the home counties in England no opposition was to be found. It was reasonable to assume that the Italians had not fortified on the inward western side of their chain of camps. After

all, their own supply columns had to reach each camp from the west, so the supposition was that their minefields and anti-tank traps were concentrated on the outward eastern side. Moreover it followed that their artillery would be facing toward the British. Suppose then that this weak point, this gap between the forts, really existed? Suppose the British were to rush this gap and then, wheeling north, attack the camps one by one from the unfortified inward side? Might not then the whole Italian front be like an egg with a rotten inside? It was not impossible that we might penetrate as far as Sidi Barrani and even reach the coast behind the village to cut it off from its lifeline to Sollum. Given that, what then? Sidi Barrani could be besieged by land, sea and air. The British could push down the coast to Sollum, isolating the garrison of Sofafi to the south and forcing its members to retire up the escarpment on to Bardia.

Everything would depend on surprise. The navy as well as the air force would have to be called in. Even so in November these conjectures appeared visionary and super-optimistic, so strongly were the Italians entrenched, so few were the forces Wavell had to bring against them. But the scheme was one which would have appealed to every man in the desert. O'Connor came back to Cairo and put it up to Wavell—Wavell who was very ready indeed to listen. The generals had one good card—the new infantry tanks had arrived, the famous 'I' tank. Their surprise effect would be redoubled in an important engagement. Wavell sounded out the other two services. Cunningham, reinforced from home, was agreeable. He would send some of his heaviest units ahead of the army to bombard first the outlying coastal camp Maktila, then Sidi Barrani itself, then, if need be, he would get to work on Sollum too. Longmore was less strong, but he had been reinforced also. His pilots had lately been showing a very definite superiority against the large bodies of Italian aircraft which used to come over Mersa Matruh. He also was agreeable. At home Churchill gave support. There were strong political reasons for attempting an offensive. England had endured the worst of the autumn air raids, but now the long nights had set in and Nazi raiders were expanding their damage again at little cost to themselves. Sinkings in the Atlantic were growing. Apart from the repulse of the Italians in Greece there was nowhere the public could turn for some sign of hope and encouragement.

A campaign in the Western Desert was the soundest possible way to remind the people of Britain that they were not alone, that they had outside forces fighting for them and toward them through Africa and Europe. Churchill was more than approving. He was enthusiastic. It remained now solely to choose a date and somehow keep the thing secret. That was the problem. To keep it secret in a land where gossip runs wild; where enemy agents were known to lurk in every port from Alexandria to Haifa and Aden, where so many half-allies were expecting to be 'kept informed,' where such arrangements as the unloading and movement of ships were plain for anyone to watch. How to get at least two divisions and artillery up to the front in the open desert without the enemy reconnaissance planes seeing them? How to get ships out of Alexandria and up the coast unobserved? How to get extra foodstuffs, extra transport, medical supplies and ambulances forward without Cairo buzzing with the news that 'something was going to come off soon'? How indeed to confine the information to a few key men at

G.H.Q. that was strewn over Cairo and Alexandria and split into separate commands for the three services?

Wavell himself was a past master at saying nothing and appearing and acting in exactly the same way before a tea-party or a major offensive. But he was an island in a sea of garrulousness. It was as essential to keep the secret from our troops as from our enemy. There was another simple device—keep the desert and Cairo apart from one another. Communications between the desert and Cairo, as every war correspondent knew only too well, were terrible. Now while the preparations were being made in the desert no troops were allowed back on leave to the Delta where they might inadvertently spread hints and suggestions. Tickets of leave were choked off, not suddenly but gradually, so no suspicion was aroused. Another thing helped Wavell. He had delayed so long now that the public and the services—and presumably the enemy—had given up guessing when he might attack, or had even abandoned hope of it altogether. The flying fields were isolated in the desert and that again helped. Further to confuse the troops in the field, as well as to give them some training and to perplex the enemy, many units were ordered out on manoeuvres long before the actual attack and then withdrawn again. In G.H.Q. Wavell selected half a dozen men who had to have the exact information in advance. He swore them to silence: he ordered them to turn aside awkward enquiries among their junior officers.

But by far the most valuable aid in this campaign of secrecy was the misjudgment of the enemy. All the Fascists knew of the British army at this time was that it had retreated before the Germans in Belgium, Norway and France, and before the Italians in British Somaliland and the Western Desert. To the Italians in December 1940 it was inconceivable that the British could really seriously attack. They were on the defensive and had been all along. Moreover there was an interior rottenness in the Italian Intelligence, something that grew naturally out of the national weakness for exaggeration. There is, as anyone who has lived in Italy will know, nothing especially unethical in this desire to enlarge and aggrandise and embroider. Nearly every Italian I have met has a passion and a talent for bombast and display. He just can't help himself. It is a foible that has led many people into the error of believing the Italian is stupid, which he certainly is not. He proceeds with cold unsentimental logic in his inner reasoning, and makes allowances for the colourful descriptions of his friends and indeed for his own embroideries. He expects exaggerations in himself and everyone else. Nor has this in any way diminished the Italian genius for design and logic. Exaggeration never, as far as I could see, deterred the Italian from reaching decisions as well as anyone else in peace-time. But in war everything is different. Information becomes a commodity in itself. It has to be as exact as the cornerstone of a building or the barrel of a gun. And you could not overnight cure the individualistic Italian lieutenant and captain of his boastfulness. Indeed the war had spurred officers and politicians on to still greater efforts in exaggeration. The Italian communiqués were absurd. Again and again some hit-and-run Italian pilot would return to his Libyan base with stories of how he had shot down ten… fifteen… twenty aircraft, or destroyed two, three or more battleships. The Roman newspapers outdid the communiqués that faithfully repeated these fables. When Graziani destroyed a dozen vehicles he claimed two thousand. Without doubt the Italian high command, knowing that the

cynical public would discount something, always added a few more imaginary and lurid details to every pronouncement. Anyway, they might have argued, we are a mercurial, imaginative people, and one solid victory will prove all our earlier claims correct. Yet the net effect was that the Italian people (I saw this before the war) lived in a state of cynical, distrustful confusion about the news. They were never quite able to say that Mussolini was wrong, since he kept serving them victories and allowed no information in from outside; but still the doubt was there. Furthermore there was the natural desire for victories; the wish that the news would be good. More than anyone the Italian wanted to believe what he was told was right.

And indeed until now the Duce had been able to give him successes. But the dangerous thing was that right through the Italian army down to the rawest ranks a stream of wrong information was flowing. If a few shots were exchanged, the Italian private called it a skirmish and quite groundlessly claimed that he had killed and routed the enemy. If a lieutenant was sent out on a raid, he expanded it in his reports to an engagement. An engagement became a major action or even a battle. From company headquarters to battalion, to brigade, to division, a supply of inaccurate details kept arriving at Italian G.H.Q. Even if G.H.Q. discounted what they heard by half, they were still left in the dark, not knowing where to draw the line between truth and fiction.

So Wavell in that first week of December might reasonably have expected some measure of surprise. His plan was simple in arrangement, simple in detail but somewhat complex at the edges. He could not possibly know how far or how fast he would go—if he went at all. So he planned his offensive first as a major raid. If the raid went well, then his troops would be so disposed that they could pursue the enemy even as far as Sollum, if need be, or beyond—though nobody quite hoped for that. If he got into difficulties, he could again withdraw back on Mersa Matruh. The air force, first, then the navy, would start the action. For forty-eight hours Air Commodore Collishaw, the R.A.F. commander in the desert, would send over almost continuous raids on to the airfields of Libya—high-level and dive-bombing and ground strafing. The object here was to keep the Italian air force on the ground until the British troops took up position and accomplished at least the first leg of their advance. The navy meanwhile would make a dawn shelling of Maktila, the most forward Fascist post on the coastal road, and if the fort was reduced, would continue to Sidi Barrani, where the fifteen-inch naval guns were to demolish whatever they could find there. While this was going on the army would move up.

Two divisions were to be employed—the 7th Armoured Division under Major-General O'More Creagh and the 4th Indian Division under Major-General Beresford-Pierce. The more experienced and more mobile armoured division would form the spearhead of the assault. Having gone through the gap, that unexplained but undeniable gap between Nibeiwa and Sofafi, Creagh would wheel northward sharply and attack one by one with the all-important infantry tanks the Italian camps at Nibeiwa, Tummar West, Tummar East and Point Ninety. He would also endeavour to reach the coast in the neighbourhood of Buq Buq between Sollum and Sidi Barrani, and hold a position there, thus outflanking the Sofafi garrison and cutting the retreat of the Italians, if any, from Sidi Barrani. Other units would

also be sent directly upon Sofafi. Creagh's position might be a very awkward one indeed if he were not supported. Accordingly the Indian division would also plunge through the gap in close support and carry out the mopping-up operations upon Nibeiwa, the two Tummars and Point Ninety. This would bring them to the southern approaches of Sidi Barrani which they were to attack if still able to do so. On the coast units of the British garrison at Mersa Matruh were to emerge from their entrenchments and engage Maktila fortress which by then, it was hoped, would have been much reduced by the navy. On the fall of Maktila the Mersa Matruh force would proceed straight toward Sidi Barrani and attack it from the east while the other two divisions were attacking from the south. Sappers would go ahead of our forces tearing up our own mines and dealing as far as they could with the Italian traps.

The weak point in the whole scheme was that somehow the armoured and the Indian divisions had to be got into position for attack without the Italians knowing it. There was no complete answer to this problem. The only course was to go ahead and see what happened. This is what happened.

On the night of December 7th when the desert air was already icy with the coming winter, the two British divisions made a forced march of seventy miles through the darkness up to points a few miles back from the Italian lines where they could still not be observed from ground level. All through the day of December 8th the thousands of men in full kit lay dispersed and inert on the flat desert. Luck held. An Italian reconnaissance plane came over, but apparently neither saw nor suspected anything. No Italian patrol came out far enough to discover what was afoot. The air was busy with Collishaw's planes passing back and forth to the Libyan airfields and they were having a wonderful time. The score of enemy aircraft damaged on the ground or caught aloft mounted from ten to twenty to the fifties. Everywhere, at Gazala, Bomba, El Adem, Tobruk, Benina and beyond, the Italian air force was being pinned to the ground. Through the night of the 8th, while still the two divisions lay pressed to the desert waiting for the morning, the Royal Navy stole on Maktila in readiness for its bombardment at first light.

In Cairo at 9 a.m. General Wavell summoned the war correspondents into his office. We were a small group of seven or eight and as we filed into the general's room and sat in a semicircle around him he got up from his chair and stood before us, leaning back on his desk. He was in his shirtsleeves. His desk was tidy; his ten-foot wall maps non-committal. He wore no glass in his blind eye and for the first time in my knowledge of him he was smiling slightly. Quietly and easily and without emphasis he said:

'Gentlemen, I have asked you to come here this morning to let you know that we have attacked in the Western Desert. This is not an offensive and I do not think you ought to describe it as an offensive as yet. You might call it an important raid. The attack was made early this morning and I had word an hour ago that the first of the Italian camps has fallen. I cannot tell you at this moment how far we are going to go—it depends on what supplies and provisions we capture and what petrol we are able to find. I wanted to tell you this so that you can make your own arrangements.' I asked if the weather was favourable. The general answered yes. He questioned us then to discover if any of us knew that the attack had been

planned. It was important, he said, since, if the correspondents had not known, then, presumably, no one else except the authorised few had known. Not one of us was able to say he had had any hint of it. The surprise was complete.

There was a scatter then to get to the front—a full day and a half s journey away. And there began for us, on that brilliant winter morning, such a chain of broken communications and misunderstandings and mistakes that no correspondent who took part in the campaign is ever likely to forget. The press arrangements for correspondents in peace-time had been sketchy. In the face of a British victory they broke down almost entirely, though later conditions were greatly improved. It was days before we reached the front. Forever the forward troops vanished ahead of us as we sat stranded in our broken vehicles. Messages went astray for days or were lost altogether. We scraped what food we could from the desert or went without. We hitchhiked when our vehicles broke down. Often we abandoned sleep in order to catch up. None of this, of course, was comparable to the difficulties the soldier in the line was putting up with. But it was a new kind of reporting: exasperating, exciting, fast-moving, vivid, immense and slightly dangerous. And what we had to say had such interest at that time that our stale descriptions were published fully when at last they did arrive in London and New York. It was a job that was for ever a little beyond one's reach. But I personally emerged from it two months later very glad to have been there and much wiser than when I went in.

Chapter 6

We have taken twenty thousand prisoners with tanks, guns and equipment of all types.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, DECEMBER 12TH, 1940.

THE ITALIAN crust had been cracked already while Wavell was speaking to us. In the first sickly grey light of the morning a small frontal attack had been sent upon Nibeiwa, and it blinded Maletti to the far greater danger that was threatening him from behind. Rising up from their hidden positions, British forces began to pour through the gap with new infantry tanks in the van. These fell on Nibeiwa from the rear, while Maletti's men, rushing from their beds, were still engaged with the smaller frontal attack. Italian guns were swung upon the infantry tanks, but the tanks, carrying heavier armour than any seen before in the desert, swept on through the barrage. By now British shells were falling squarely on Nibeiwa itself, combing through the clustered stone huts, the parked lorries, the gun emplacements embedded in the surrounding wall. Maletti, a stoutish bearded man, was wounded even as he attempted to call his men to counterattack. He retired into his tent with a machine-gun and was firing from his bedside when at last he was killed. It was all over in half an hour. The camp's thirty tanks had not even been properly manned. Everything the Italians had built through three hard

months collapsed in bewilderment and chaos in that quiet morning hour when they would normally have been going about the first routine duties of the day.

Following in the wake of the army while it was hammering in the same way and at the same speed on Tummar West and Tummar East, we came on strange pathetic scenes at Nibeiwa. A cluster of broken burnt-out lorries and Bren-gun carriers proclaimed from a distance where the first British attack had fouled a minefield. Coming nearer, we found all the approaches pitted with small square holes let into the surface of the desert, and surrounding these empty cartridge cases and overturned machine-guns—the last remaining evidence of how the Italian outposts, straining their eyes through the darkness, had fired upon the approaching enemy and fled. Here and there trucks which had been carrying supplies and reliefs up to these outposts lay smashed by artillery fire beside the tracks, or were simply abandoned by the passengers who had fled back afoot to the temporary safety of the fort. Minefields were still strewn over large areas of the desert.

Cutting south and west to avoid these, and clinging closely to the tracks the heavy infantry tanks had made, we came at last into Nibeiwa itself. Here and there before the breaches in the walls a dead man lay spread-eagled on the ground, or collapsed grotesquely at the entrance of his dugout under a gathering cloud of flies. Some sixty or seventy mules and donkeys, recovered now from their shock at the noise of battle, nosed mournfully and hopelessly among the debris in search of fodder and water. Finding none, they would lift their heads and bray pathetically into the heavy dust-laden air. Italian light tanks were grouped at the spot on the western wall where they had huddled for a last stand and there surrendered. Others had bolted inside the fort itself and were turned this way and that, indicating how they had sought at the last moment for some formation to meet the attack. Maletti's body covered with a beribboned tunic still lay sprawled on the threshold of his tent, his beard stained with sand and sweat.

Sand was blowing now out of the immense ruts cut up by the tanks, and, walking through it, we went from one tent to another, from one dugout by subterranean passage into the next. Extraordinary things met us wherever we turned. Officers' beds laid out with clean sheets, chests of drawers filled with linen and abundance of fine clothing of every kind. Uniforms heavy with gold lace and decked with the medals and colours of the parade ground hung upon hangers in company with polished jackboots richly spurred and pale blue sashes and belts finished with great tassels and feathered and embroidered hats and caps. An Indian came running to us through the camp with one of those silver and gilt belts—a gaudy shining thing that the Fascists sling around their shoulders on parade. We came on great blue cavalry cloaks that swathed a man to the ankles, and dressing-tables in the ofificers' tents were strewn with scents and silver-mounted brushes and small arms made delicately in the romantic northern arsenals of Italy.

We sat down on the open sand and ate from stores of bottled cherries and greengages; great tins of frozen hams and anchovies; bread that had been baked somehow here in the desert; and wines from Frascati and Falerno and Chianti, red and white, and Lacrimae Christi from the slopes of Vesuvius above Naples. There were wooden casks of a sweet, heady, fruity brandy, and jars of liqueurs of other

kinds wrapped carefully in envelopes of straw. For water the Italians took bottles of Recoaro minerals—the very best in Italy—and these, like everything else, had been carted out to them in hundreds of cases across a thousand miles of sea and desert by ship and car and mule team.

The spaghetti was packed in long blue paper packages and stored with great sacks of macaroni and other wheat foods as numerous as they used to be in the shops of Italy before the war. Parmesan cheeses as big as small cart-wheels and nearly a foot thick lay about in neat piles except where some hungry soldier had slashed one open with his sword. Ten-pound tins of Estratto di Pomidoro—the tomato extract vital to so many Italian dishes—formed the bulk of the tinned stuff, which also contained many excellent stews and delicate tinned tongue and tunny fish and small round tins of beef. The vegetables were of every kind. Potatoes, onions, carrots, beans, cabbages, leeks, cauliflowers, pumpkin and many other things had been steamed down into a dry compact that readily expanded to its old volume when soaked in warm water—a fine food for the desert. We sampled one package that seemed at first to contain dry grass, but brewed itself over a stove into a rich minestrone soup.

I stepped down into at least thirty dugouts, coming upon something new and surprising in every one. The webbing and leatherwork was of the finest; the uniforms well cut and of solid material such as the civilian in Italy had not seen for many months. Each soldier appeared to have been supplied with such gadgets as sewing-bags and little leather cases for his letters and personal kit. The water containers were of new improved design—both the aluminium tanks that strap on the shoulders and those that one fastened to the flanks of a mule or stowed in a lorry. And over everything, wherever I went, fell a deepening layer of sand. For two days now it had been blowing, and before one's eyes one saw stores of clothing, piles of food, rifles, boxes of ammunition, the carcasses of animals and the bodies of men fast disappearing under the surface of the desert. All this richness and its wreckage, all the scars of the battle and all the effort of ten thousand men, it seemed, would not prevail longer than a week or two, and soon Nibeiwa would be restored to the featurelessness and monotony of the surrounding waste.

Moving round in the sand, one stumbled on cartridge clips, rifles, machine-guns, swords and hand grenades that had been flung aside, especially at the entrance to dugouts, in scores of thousands. These hand grenades came to be known as money boxes or shaving sticks or pillar boxes. They were tiny things that fitted easily into the palm of your hand. They had a black cylindrical base, a rounded top coloured vivid red, and one pulled a small leather flap to explode them. I must have seen ten thousand that morning.

I went into the tented hospitals where the British and Italian sick were still lying tended by British and Italian doctors. These hospitals were large square khaki-coloured tents of a good height for the coolness and fitted with ample mica windows. The stores of bandages, splints, liniments, drugs, surgical instruments and folding beds would have served this or any other comparable army ten times over. Here as everywhere there was precision and immense planning with immense quantity of materials. I sat in an operating theatre and drank wine with a soldier who had fought over the places I knew in the Spanish war. He pressed more food upon me and cases of wine—indeed it was he, the vanquished, who had

everything to give and we who were tired and hungry. And somehow out of relief and boredom he had achieved a sense of fatality that had given him peace of mind. He was accepting the prospect of imprisonment much as a schoolboy will accept his lessons as painful but inevitable. Yet the Italian minded the absence of his family and his friends perhaps more than we did.

Never did an army write home or receive as many letters as this one did. For five miles the landscape was strewn with their letters. In the offices of the adjutants I came on bureaux stacked with thousands of official postcards which expressed the usual greetings and to which a soldier had only to attach his name and an address. But most preferred to write their own letters in a thin spidery schoolboy scrawl full of homely Latin flourishes; full of warm superlatives like 'carissimo'… 'benissimo'. The theme forever ran on children and religion. No postcard ever closed without some reference to the day when the family or the lovers would be reunited. They were not the sort of letters British troops would have written. But underneath the (to us) flamboyant emotionalism they were, I suppose, the same.

I read: 'God watch and keep our beloved Frederico and Maria and may the blessed Virgin preserve them from all harm until the short time, my dearest, passes when I shall press thee into my arms again. I cry. I weep for thee here in the desert at night and lament our cruel separation. But in the day I am filled with courage as our glorious campaign sweeps on from one more magnificent victory to another…' The shabby, dirty and not very courageous little soldier explaining away the dirt and the shabbiness to himself with great sounding adjectives, and reaching out to high thoughts and his God to comfort him. He got his comfort, too. He had to. The Italian would not and could not accept the desert and the hardship of this unwanted war. He had little heart for it and still less training. He could only think, 'This is an evil time that must pass quickly.' So he turned to his family and his church with an emotionalism which was pathetic, even absurd, but very sincere. He wrote, too, a stilted literary style, using long Latin words in the same surprising way as the Spanish peasant. Often he put down his message on the back of a highly coloured postcard of extraordinary vulgarity.

Yet it was only really the correspondence of the more sycophantic officers that turned out to be amusing. The men usually did not believe in the war or care much how it went so long as they personally did not get hurt: the officers as a rule were astonishingly Fascist. Their letters, betraying the monotony of their life, would often contain a string of perfunctory entries like: 'English bomber passed over us this morning, but did not see us' … 'Tenente Recagno has received his promotion' … 'Nothing of importance today.' But suddenly they would burst out with: 'But for the cowardice of the English, who flee from even our lightest shelling and smallest patrols, we would have committed the wildest folly in coming into this appalling desert. The flies plague us in millions from the first hour of the morning. The sand seems always to be in our mouths, in our hair and our clothes, and it is impossible to get cool. Only troops of the highest morale and courage would endure privations like these, and even prepare to press the advance to still greater triumphs in the cause of Fascism and the Duce. The colonel at dinner last night made a brilliant exposition of our prospects, toasting in the name of the Duce the defeat and annihilation of the English armies. We shall soon be at Alexandria. We shall soon now be exchanging this hellish desert for the gardens

on the Nile. As I came out of the mess into the starlight last night I found my breast stirred and thrilled with a transcendent emotion, as though I could feel the lifeblood of the new Italy coursing through my heart, urging me on to still greater courage and greater achievements.'

I read one letter which contained a piece of doggerel that, roughly translated, runs like this:

> Long live the Duce and the King.
> The British will pay for everything.
> On land and sea and in the air
> They'll compensate us everywhere.

But there was much hard commonsense besides. One letter-writer insisted: 'We are trying to fight this war as though it is a colonial war in Africa. But it is a European war in Africa fought with European weapons against a European enemy. We take too little account of this in building our stone forts and equipping ourselves with such luxury. We are not fighting the Abysinnians now.'

There was the whole thing; the explanation of this broken, savaged camp. Maletti's panzer division was as tame as an old lion in the zoo. Undoubtedly they had courage, some of them. But they were living on a preposterous scale. The British coming into the camp could scarcely believe their eyes when they saw that each man had his own little espresso coffee percolator with which he brewed his special cup after meals. The British brigadiers in this action had not for many weeks or even months lived as the Italian non-commissioned officer was living. In the British lines there were no sheets, no parade-ground uniforms, and certainly no scent. The brigadier dressed in khaki shorts and shirt. He got bacon for breakfast, bully stew and tinned fruit for lunch, and the same again at night. His luxuries were the radio, cigarettes and whisky with warm water. But wine, liqueurs, cold ham, fresh bread—no, seldom if ever that.

Even the Italian trucks, of which there were several hundred scattered about Nibeiwa and the other camps, carried all kinds of equipment never seen in the British lines. The field telephones, wireless, typewriters and signalling gear were far more elaborate than anything we had used. Booty, in fact, worth several millions of pounds lay here if it could only be reclaimed in time. (It wasn't.)

Sappers were at work, getting vital parts off the Italian machines so that they could keep their own vehicles on the road. We ourselves, already short of transport, endeavoured to takeover one of the great green ten-ton Lancia trucks standing about. But though we inspected dozens, all had either been wrecked at the last moment by the Italians or were hit or had gear too complicated for us to start. Later many hundreds of these vehicles, together with Fiats and the S.P.A. brand, were on the road carrying British troops and supplies to the front. Indeed, as Wavell had indicated, the advance could not have gone forward without them. In guns, too, we had at Nibeiwa a foretaste of the prizes ahead. Many were of old stock and small calibre like the Breda, but ammunition lay about in great abundance.

Of the thirty-odd Italian tanks some half were fit for service and some were already being dragged off to workshops when I arrived. But the light Italian tank

and the lighter flame-thrower were failures, and men asked for death in riding behind their thin armour. Curiously, in all essential things—guns, tanks, lorries, ammunition—the Italian equipment was not good. And vast numbers did not make up for their deficiency. The ten-ton Lancias ran on diesel—as did most of the Italian vehicles—but they had solid tyres which shook the vehicles to pieces after a short time among the boulders on the desert. Moreover, when a ten-ton lorry which was also a good target broke down, ten tons of supplies were held up. We preferred to run on petrol, using five-tonners or lighter machines. If one broke down, then no more than five tons were delayed, and repacking onto a sound vehicle was easier. Nevertheless, from this moment on, more and more captured Italian equipment was pressed into service against the Italians.

Nibeiwa was our first storehouse. As I drove away from it northward in the early afternoon the blown sand cleared for a moment revealing two big desert birds that circled and twisted some twenty feet above the ground until, seeing what they wanted, they dived and settled amid the stench where an Italian mule team had gone down to death with its crew under British machine-gun fire.

Northward, toward the coast beyond Nibeiwa, things had gone with a precision and speed that outstripped all communications. After Nibeiwa, according to the plan, one section of the armoured division had branched off on the lonely desert route in the direction of Sofafi; another had struck for the coast between Buq Buq and Sidi Barrani; and the other had made straight toward Sidi Barrani, mopping up forts as it went. This last northerly column was the one I was following. Tummar West and Tummar East had gone that same first day almost as quickly as Nibeiwa. Nothing, it seemed, could, withstand the new infantry tanks. Travelling only twelve miles an hour, they lunged out of the dust of the battle and were on the Italians or behind them before anything could be done. The Italians in despair saw that their light anti-tank shells just rattled off the tanks' turrets, and even light artillery was not effective against them. The whole of this advance, then, was done with this surprise weapon—surprise, not because the enemy did not know about it, but because they did not know it was in Egypt and they had nothing to bring against it.

Maktila on the coast had been heavily plastered by the navy, and by the time the British garrison from Mersa Matruh came to attack they found many of the enemy already fled. These fugitives turned back to strengthen Point Ninety, the two Tummars and Sidi Barrani itself. But the infantry tanks rode upon them with artillery in support, and by the time I reached the battlefield all Italian forces who had managed to get away had retired into Sidi Barrani and were already attempting to escape farther down the coast road in the direction of Sollum. In spurting dust we drove past the Tummars, a richer arsenal yet than Nibeiwa. For miles on either side of the track the undulating surface of the desert was honeycombed with ammunition dumps, each dump about ten feet by eight by two feet high and spaced a hundred yards apart. These were the shells Graziani had stored against the day when he was to have advanced on the Nile. Every rise was dotted with stationary and abandoned Italian trucks and vehicles of all kinds. Notepaper flew forlornly across the battlefield in every direction, and here and there a gun stuck in the dust in a ring of empty shell cases.

A bitter artillery duel had been fought out with the Italian guns on a height near the coast. And now on the morning of the third day the British flung themselves on the defences of Sidi Barrani itself. Unwilling to delay their advantage until more artillery caught up with them, the tanks and infantry went in together against the first line. This was a series of zigzag trenches on a rise buttressed from other positions among the sand-dunes. As the fine sand whirled up in monstrous yellow clouds visibility shut down first from a hundred, then to fifty yards. The battle locked in choking heat over two miles of rocky desert. Constantly in the sand-dunes the Italians kept up enfilading fire upon the central British thrust. But by 11 a.m. at the bayonet point we had gained the first ridge and Sidi Barrani lay in view. The tanks then felt their way around east and west of the Italians, and suddenly in the early afternoon appeared right amongst them. Artillery posts were charged direct. Everywhere in the yellow light of the dust storm men were running, shouting, firing, diving for shelter. A regiment of Scots charged from the ridge they had gained earlier in the day, and though their best N.C.O.'s went down, the rest came on. Groups of Italians began bobbing up from their trenches, waving white handkerchiefs, towels, shirts, and shouting, 'Ci rendiamo' (We surrender).

The tanks now were upon Sidi Barrani itself and the infantry came pell-mell after them. General Gallina was there with his staff. They knew it was useless. Their surrender was received while still the ragged edges of the battle were sounding with rifle and mortar fire. This was about 3 p.m. Toward evening the Mersa Matruh troops, having pushed all opposition on the coast out of their way, entered the town from the east. Gallina drew the remnants of his army together and, addressing them quietly, an elderly general with a general's sweeping grey beard, he said, 'You have fought bravely.' They took him and his officers off to captivity by aeroplane.

The British now found themselves in a place of utter desolation. Sidi Barrani, so the Italians had been broadcasting, had been a thriving city, its trams running, its shops open, its beaches thronged. Even its nightclubs were said by Rome to be flourishing—a picturesque way of saying that two small brothels of unexampled dreariness were open and doing business. One of the women had been killed and a grave was made for her on the battlefield. In actual fact, Sidi Barrani's twenty meagre houses had never required a tramway and certainly never had one, and the only shop I ever saw there was the village store with a bomb through the middle of it. Nevertheless there did exist one or two substantial white stone buildings on the seafront. But now all was in ruins. At the climax of many heavy aerial bombardments the navy had come and flung round after round of fifteen-inch shells upon the village. No house maintained its roof; none had its walls intact. Everything within was a mass of whitish grey rubble. Shell-holes pitted the scrawny streets and twisted the barbed wire round the port. A shell seemed to have blasted each window in such a manner as to leave every wall with an aperture like a huge keyhole driven through it. Wrecked vehicles lay about, and a great quantity of petrol and crude oil drums—some of which, being hit, were burning yet and staining the sand a grimy stinking black. On the outskirts there were many guns—Bredas, eighteen-pounders and anti-tank weapons. Some of these, by a new Italian device, were mounted upon turntables which in turn had

been set upon lorries with the object of giving them the mobility of ordinary desert transport. Together with the booty at Nibeiwa and the other camps I counted over fifty captured tanks, over five hundred captured vehicles.

The troops who had swept through from the east had found the same eloquent story of surprise—half-eaten breakfasts (served with silver pepper and salt stands, china plates and cups); clothes half bundled into boxes and then abandoned. And there was the same business of bedside lights, book-racks, tents emblazoned with flags, officers' cloaks thick with decorations, quantities of freshly baked loaves, cases of chocolate, sweetmeats, coffee, jam, cigarettes, tobacco both Italian and English.

Down by the Sidi Barrani sea-cliffs an important base hospital had been established under canvas. The Italian staff in the hospital had vanished, leaving an appendicitis patient cut open on the operating table. Instruments were still sticking in the body when it was found.

Exhausted by hard travel and sightseeing, we camped down by the hospital for the night. Savoia bombers came over and we did not wake.

Starting fresh in the morning, we came at once onto the Via della Vittoria, the new Italian road that ran straight and true to the Libyan border, over those sixty painful miles that once were strewn with deep dust and boulders. At the point where it met the British road at Sidi Barrani the Italians had erected a six-foot cement monument decorated with the fasces and carrying an inscription which declared 'despite wind and sand and the wiles of the enemy' Egypt and Libya were inseparably joined together under Fascist rule. And indeed the Italian engineers deserved praise. All through the late summer and autumn they had slaved with labour gangs at that road, and now the track was heavily metalled and waiting only for a covering of light metal and bitumen. It was banked and graded with the precision of an auto strada, and of a good width and flanked by deep ditches for the draining. Here and there culverts led off to sidetracks and offered an opportunity for the heavier vehicles to turn. Steamrollers which had come from Italy to put the finishing touches lay along the highway, and as we progressed we found more monuments that proclaimed how such and such a unit had finished a section in record time. On one crest rose a stone bust of Mussolini bearing a quotation from one of his Genoa speeches, 'He who does not keep moving is lost.' British soldiers ahead of us who had no taste for irony had bowled the head over into the sand.

Now only ten miles west of Sidi Barrani we saw signs that Creagh's dash to the coast to cut the retreat of the Italians had succeeded. Italian lorries caught unawares by British tanks lay twisted in smoking ruins on the road. Guns stood about dejectedly. All the roadside camps and storage dumps were deserted and bore signs of having been passed over by an invading army. Diesel oil drums were tumbled about, spilling their contents on the sand. Every few minutes we had to make a detour to avoid more Italian vehicles left by their drivers astride the road. Food, ammunition and oil dumps followed one another among the sidetracks, all marked with Italian direction posts. Dugout villages roofed with camouflaged waterproof sheets pitted the landscape. The Italians had dug in so completely and comfortably that this was not Egypt any more—it was a part of Italy. They had found and developed a water supply with genius. They had all but completed a

pipeline from Bardia. Soon, no doubt, they would have produced market gardens in the desert. At Buq Buq, which I remembered as a Bedouin waterhole dug in the sand, there stood now a line of high pumps like those used for filling locomotives and two large underground storage tanks.

It was approaching Buq Buq that we came suddenly upon a sight that seemed at first too unreal, too wildly improbable to be believed. An entire captured division was marching back into captivity. A great column of dust turned pink by the sunset light behind them rose from the prisoners' feet as they plodded four abreast in the sand on either side of the metalled track. They came on, first in hundreds, then in thousands, until the stupendous crocodile of marching figures stretched away to either horizon. No one had time to count them—six, possibly seven thousand, all in dusty green uniforms and cloth caps. Outnumbered roughly five hundred to one, a handful of British privates marched alongside the two columns, and one or two Bren-gun carriers ran along the road in between. The Italians spoke to me quite freely when I called to them, but they were tired and dispirited beyond caring. I found no triumph in the scene—just the tragedy of hunger, wounds and defeat. These were the men of General Amico's 'Catanzaro Division,' I discovered.

Soon we pieced the whole story together. Creagh had reached the coast two days before. His tanks and Bren-gun carriers had burst over the last desert rise onto the new road to find themselves confronted with the Catanzaro Division, which was then moving up on normal relief to Sidi Barrani. The Italians were smoking and singing, since none had expected action so far back behind the front. The British joined action at once, and a smart tank and artillery battle was fought out in the saltpans between the road and the sea. When their tanks failed, the bewildered Italians simply gave themselves up, and here they were upon the Via della Vittoria, marching to Sidi Barrani and away out of the war without having fired a shot.

Thousands more were clustered round the water points at Buq Buq, a more broken collection of men than I had ever seen. Many were Libyans. They sat upon their haunches in disordered groups awaiting turn to draw water from the cisterns and receive an issue of their own cheese and tinned beef which had been gathered from one of the Italian food dumps nearby. A company of British troops was guarding them—a company that could have been overwhelmed at any moment. But there was no fight in these Italians, and their fear of the waterless desert overmastered any wild idea they may have had for gaining freedom. They were confused, too, and had no inkling of the smallness of the British forces.

In the morning three Libyans approached the unarmed war correspondents' camp which we had pitched among the white sand-dunes beside the sea. They were so utterly dejected and miserable no one thought to take their guns away from them, and they sat watching us stolidly and pathetically while we finished breakfast, wanting only to be taken prisoner. We put them in our truck and drove them back to the prisoners' depot by the water wells.

Now at last we had caught up with the front. In the far south Sofafi had fallen with rich loot. It was voluntarily abandoned by the Italians before it had been attacked, and its garrison was making up the escarpment toward Bardia under R.A.F. bombardment. Other British troops were moving across to cut them off.

Others again were pressing on Sollum and Halfaya Pass. There was artillery fire along the escarpment at Sollum, and once again I saw the cliffs curtained in smoke and aircraft battling in the sky above. Two Caproni fighters lay upended grotesquely beside the road. More and more prisoners were coming in, bringing with them many guns, tanks, vehicles and truckloads of captured documents. These last were fascinating. One of Bergonzoli's orders of the day, written just before the British attacked, read: 'The emblems of the British Army that tried to bar your way are trampled underfoot. The first steps of the march to Alexandria have been covered. Now onward! Sidi Barrani is the base of departure for more distant and much more important objectives.' Then again, how truly, 'Surprise is always the mastery of war.'

Light rain fell. There followed a wind so sharp and piercing that one could not imagine it had ever been hot in the desert. Goose-flesh pockmarked our bare sunburnt arms, our faces felt blue and bloodless, and the sand came up, stinging, icy and cruel, to bite into our bare knees and arms and stun our eyelids until we could bear it no longer and reached for our towels or waterproof sheets to bind round our heads. Our food and petrol gave out, and we spent hours each day ranging round the desert in search of abandoned Italian dumps. At night six of us slept huddled in one car for warmth. Edward Kennedy of the Associated Press of America lost his voice. Alexander Clifford of the *Daily Mail* caught sandfly fever and jaundice and we left him one day huddled in blankets in the lee of a sand-dune by the sea. For an hour that night we could not find him as we hunted through the sand-dunes. When at last we made camp together we succeeded in building a fire of brushwood. On it we cooked the one good meal I can remember of this stage of the campaign—a spaghetti stew of Italian tomato, Italian bully beef, Italian Parmesan cheese, washed down with Italian mineral water.

Standing on the top of the dunes that night we watched for an hour the R.A.F. turning one of their full-scale raids on Bardia. Looking across the wide intervening bay in the darkness, we saw it all stage by stage—the first bombs, the answering fire; the hits, the misses; the flames as the aircraft came away; drama as rounded and directional as a motion picture and watched with the detachment of a spectator in the stalls. Parachute flares with their fresh blinding light hung in the sky above the town, while bombs fell at the rate of two a minute in a regular pendulum motion—right, left, right, left. The A.A. fire in reply turned right, left, in search of the unseen raiders; then, losing contact, broke into crazy patterns over the sky. 'Like a bullfight,' someone said. 'And Bardia the bull.' Two flaring lights opened high above the town and descended straightly. Two planes gone; two picadors. Then more swerving light in the sky; more interplay of light and the counterthrust of bomb noise against gun noise. Then the great flash as the ammunition dump went up and a slower flame advanced steadily up into the night. The bull. The surviving planes homewarding sounded over our heads. It was finished and we went to bed on the sand.

At last on December 16th—one week after the fighting had begun—Sollum fell; and with Sollum, Halfaya Pass, Fort Capuzzo, Sidi Omar, Musaid and a new line of forts several kilometres long which the Italians had built on the lip of the escarpment. Halfaya's old rocky track had been graded and surfaced, and as one mounted to the top the old familiar view spread out below—the sweep of Sollum

bay round into Egypt; the village below and the western cliffs reaching round into Bardia. Breasting the top of the pass into the high Libyan desert, a wind of such sharpness and force swept upon our open truck that the driver was momentarily forced to stop. No one without glasses could travel looking ahead into that sand-laden wind that hit everything raised above the floor of the desert with the force of an aeroplane slipstream. British camps loomed up among the debris of the broken Italian forts.

We returned and entered Sollum where already half a dozen British warships and merchant vessels were discharging water and stores for the army. The Italians here had erected a barbed-wire compound to house British prisoners, and now it was full of their own people. In the desert, too, we found a camp exclusively for captured Italian generals, who plodded about dispiritedly in the sand. Upon every wall were scrawled caricatures of Englishmen, jibes at Churchill and Vivas for the Duce. Prisoners in their extremity were offering the equivalent of an English pound for a loaf of bread. Their units were inextricably mixed and confused, since in their flight the Italians had broken up, and many small groups had struck out for themselves in that last frantic rush to gain the safety of Bardia.

It was within a day or two of Christmas, and since it did not seem possible that the advance could continue at once, we decided to return to Cairo for a few days' rest. But first we set out for one last visit to the front around Bardia. We were too cold and miserable to be much interested, but we felt we should do it. On the way down the Via della Vittoria all but one of our trucks broke down. Standing in the tearing wind we drew matches for who should go on. Clifford and I won. We left the others to hitchhike the best they could back to our base camp, and we crept on into Sollum. The Italians were lobbing shells into the village, and we turned back into a wadi below Halfaya Pass, where we camped under a thorny clump of palms. We smashed a wooden petrol case and lit a fire under the rocks. Someone produced a tin of plum pudding and half a bottle of whisky, and as we ate and drank, the Italian 'flying circus' came over. This was a flight of about twenty Savoias protected from above by a similar number of fighters. They bombed haphazardly up and down the escarpment just above our heads, and in the night they came again, their flaming exhausts making weird flashes above us as we crouched in that frozen wadi. Clifford had not eaten for three days and clearly we could not go on. In the first grey light we turned back.

So then the first stage was ended. A rough score could be totted up. Some thirty thousand prisoners, including five generals, were in our hands. Hundreds of guns, lorries, tanks and aircraft were captured. Equipment worth millions of pounds had been won. The attempted enemy advance to the Nile had been smashed, and the last fighting Italian soldier had been flung out of Egypt. The enemy numbered their dead and wounded in thousands. Our casualties stood at the incredibly good figures of seventy-two killed and 738 wounded. The Italian egg had been cracked and it was rotten inside. It was largely a victory of the infantry tanks and scarcely one of these had been lost. Of the six Italian divisions that had been mustered for the capture of Egypt, less than half remained, and these, largely without guns and equipment, were crowded back into Bardia, which was even then being surrounded by our armoured forces. More than this, the Italian morale was

broken and the prestige of the British army restored. I went back to Cairo for one of the pleasantest Christmases I can remember.

Chapter 7

General Bergonzoli is still missing.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, JANUARY 8TH, 1941.

ON CHRISTMAS morning I drove across the Bulaq Bridge in Cairo to the Church of England cathedral which stands, a pile of very modern yellow brick, beside the Nile a little distance down from the embassy. After the service a great congregation streamed out into the bright sunshine. Among the brigadiers, the diplomats, the army nurses, the wives—few of these: most had been evacuated—and the soldiers, General Wavell stood chatting with his friends. People paused as they passed to gaze with open curiosity at this quiet thick-set man whose name now stood higher than that of any soldier in the empire. He never failed to impress and puzzle slightly everyone who met him, but all the same there was nothing very much to be learned from the first meeting with the general. His voice was high, rather nasal, and unless he was actually engaged upon some definite business he seldom said anything at all. His dark deeply tanned face was lined and heavy to the point of roughness. His thinning hair was grey, and the one good eye left him from the last war gleamed brightly from a face that was usually as expressionless as a statue.

Wavell had just published a book about his old master, called *Allenby—A Study in Greatness*, and the London *Times* was reprinting a series of lectures he had delivered a few years before on generalship. He was essentially a well-bred, well-groomed writer, without humour, without sparkle, and more concerned with getting his subject written than with making it palatable for his audience.

But the book and lectures were valuable in revealing an unsuspected sensitivity and daring. Whatever Wavell was before the last war, he had gained from Allenby a talent for taking responsibility with suppleness and decision and for drawing others after him. In this year in the Middle East he won respect by his silence, and a good deal of admiration through his habit of confidently deputing authority to others. Wilson, O'Connor, Creagh—all of them were bound very strongly to Wavell. One other thing he had, and that was modesty. Now in his fifties, after half a lifetime of military training and planning, he had the great fortune to be able to put his ideas to the test. There was nothing very new about them—to use secrecy and surprise to the utmost, to hit hard and quickly and keep following up, to establish strong lines of communication, to be mobile—all sound military practices. But Wavell brought them to life by his own particular ingredient—a touch of daring.

I recall very clearly each of my meetings with him—more clearly perhaps than I recall meetings with any other public figure. First, there was Wavell standing on the forward deck of a troopship at Suez in February 1940, welcoming the first

Australian contingents and saying very clearly and firmly: 'I am glad to have Australian troops under MY command, and I am sure MY orders will be fully carried out.' The capitals are the general's. Then, Wavell in blue overalls climbing out of an aircraft in the desert, where he had just made a low reconnaissance of the enemy front line. Wavell walking dourly alone under the trees at a race meeting at Gezira. Wavell sitting in his shirtsleeves in the war-room at G.H.Q., taking a conference and saying very little or nothing. Wavell in stout whipcord breeches sitting opposite me for three and a half hours on a Sunderland flying boat journey to Crete. For an hour he fished papers from a pigskin case and made notes upon the margins, reducing those notes to paragraphs and those paragraphs to one-line headings. Then for half an hour he browsed quietly through a volume of Browning's love poems and slept a little and read his verse again. Finally, he chatted with me a little, and when Crete came in sight he was back on his notes. It was almost the same on the way home. It was his invariable practice to invite his companion to talk while he asked the questions. Nearly always our short conversations opened with his 'Getting along all right?' He remembered all our complaints (there were many) and those that did get through to him were settled. The troops liked him. At Keren in Eritrea, at Merj Ajoun in Syria, at Capuzzo in Libya, you would often find him, just before an important engagement, sitting in a tin hat at an artillery observation post. He encouraged the front-line habit among his generals and liked them to stay in the field.

When he left the Middle East he left behind the feeling that he had not been an especially able domestic administrator, but the sweep and movement of his campaigns had raised his name high as an aggressive general. His talents were in the field. He had two important phases—the period of the Greek campaign (I can write of this later), and now during this winter of 1940–41, when all his abilities were sunning in success and approval from his prime minister, his generals, his troops and his public.

After the reconquest of the Western Desert, the character of the fighting in Libya changed radically. The surprise element was now gone. It was to recur only once more and very dramatically at the end of the campaign. The Italians were back on their fortified bases. They still outnumbered us, they were dug in, and they were expecting us to come on. Graziani's theory of roughly parallel lines of coastal and inland defence on set positions was coming into play. Both Bardia and Tobruk were surrounded by strong double perimeters which it had taken the Italians several years to construct. The desert bases—Jarabub, Mekili and Kufra—were remote. It was the British now who were on long lines of communications with all the problems of water and petrol supply before them. The winter, too, had risen to a harshness that made additional hardships for advancing troops. Through the long nights Graziani could reasonably expect the arrival of reinforcements by sea at Tripoli.

The marshal's policy was very simple—in fact it was the only one he could follow. He would hold Bardia and Tobruk, and so long as they lay across Wavell's lines of communication the British would be unable to push on. Should Bardia and Tobruk fall, then a line could be established against the invader southward from the neighbourhood of Derna to the desert post of Mekili. Here the country was riven by immense wadis and rocky heights ideal for defence. Should even this

line fall, then an easy retreat over two good mountain roads could be made to Barce and Benghazi. If Benghazi was not reinforced by this time, then the whole Italian army could withdraw intact down the coast road to Tripoli. When we were far extended there in the Libyan desert, Graziani would meet us and destroy us.

Every one of these plans miscarried. They miscarried because the tactics Wavell now put into effect were of so brilliant a nature that they must remain throughout this war at least as a model for the reduction of strongholds in the desert. Briefly the plan was this: no matter how weak our forces were, every enemy stronghold had to be surrounded and cut from its supplies until we were strong enough to make a frontal attack. Conversely, no position was to be attacked until it was surrounded. The navy and the R.A.F. would leave no enemy position on the coast in peace even for a single day. Thus Bardia was to be surrounded, plastered from sea and air, then attacked directly. As soon as the attack was favourably launched, the encirclement of Tobruk would start, and the reduction of the town be essayed in the same way. And so on to Bomba and Derna. Beyond that no one yet cared to conjecture anything definite.

To accomplish this, Wavell regrouped his forces with rare psychological insight. He was still going to use only two divisions—throughout the whole campaign he never had more than two divisions in the operational area. The experienced and fast 7th Armoured Division would undertake the inland swoops and the encircling movements. The India division, having well done its job at Sidi Barrani, would be withdrawn, together with the New Zealanders, and they would be replaced by most of the untried Australian divisions. In this Wavell aroused a very definite animosity among the New Zealanders, who had been thirsting for action. They were additionally hurt when their transport was taken away from them and given to the Australians. But with the Australians Wavell's action brought him immense popularity. They had been growing increasingly, even dangerously, restive after their year's enforced idleness. Wisely now these men, already noted as shock troops, were to have their chance while their health was at its freshest, their morale at its highest and their aggressive qualities most eager. The New Zealanders, with their reputation of being solider and more disciplined holding troops, would be a valuable rock on which to fall back if anything went wrong. Many of the technical services—machine-gunners, signallers, railways operators and supply columns—were to be given to English or allied units. The navy and the air force would dispose of equal or even greater forces than in the December advance.

Bardia as a defensive position was much stronger than Sidi Barrani. The town itself, a picturesque Fascist settlement of white-walled houses and straight streets, stood high upon the cliffs sheer above a small, almost landlocked bay. Coastal boats of shallow draught could enter and discharge their supplies in the storehouses on the flat delta of the Wadi Gefani. This wadi effectively protected the town from the landward side and indeed left the town isolated on a spit reaching over the sea. Attacking troops had first to penetrate a ring of forts and an anti-tank trench stretching round Bardia from one coast to the other, and then cross the Wadi Gefani. It was not easy. But the armoured division was astride the road westward to Tobruk, and the morale of the Italian troops was not high. They numbered some thirty thousand men under the command of Bergonzoli, who had

lately been carrying on a high-flown wireless conversation with the Duce in Rome, the theme of which was 'Bardia will never surrender.'

All through Christmas week Australians kept pouring up the desert road from the Nile Delta—a vast procession stretching three hundred and fifty miles from Cairo to the front. The Via della Vittoria was quickly cut to pieces, and bus-loads of troops came up onto the escarpment matted in dust, the eyes of each man two dark slits peering out of a grey mask under a steel helmet. Before New Year's Day they were in position and shelling the Italian perimeter. Patrols were nightly going into the Italian barbed wire. On January 2nd shallow-draught gunboats from the China station bore down upon Bardia's harbour, and all through that night the navy and the R.A.F. raked the town and its surroundings with probably the heaviest bombardment of its kind that had ever been seen in the Middle East. The day, as I remember, had been full of warm, yellow, winter sunlight. Now in the evening, like flights of migrating birds, British bombers kept sliding across a sunset magnificently red. And far into the night the red fires in Bardia expanded and continued the sunset. Waiting at our camp in Mersa Matruh, we knew the attack was coming, and the desert had an almost tangible atmosphere of expectancy and strain.

At dawn the Australians attacked. They had chosen a spot in the perimeter to the west of the town, and here the sappers ran forward under machine-gun fire to bridge the anti-tank trench by blowing in its sides. The infantry tanks and the infantry were soon across, and, with this spearhead always pressing nearer to the heart of the enemy defences, the battle started along a ten-mile front around the Italian chain of forts. The effect of the British assault was as though one had tightly gripped an orange, at the same time piercing it with a fork. This went on all through January 3rd.

On January 4th the day began for me at 3 a.m., when the correspondents started from Mersa Matruh aboard an army truck. For miles along the road into Sollum we watched the final British artillery barrage being laid down along the five-hundred-foot cliffs that supported Bardia on their crest. In blinding icy dust we crawled up Halfaya Pass and continued on aslant the artillery fire into Libya. Italian shells, mostly of small calibre, were crumping steadily away to the west. At force headquarters, a labyrinth of underground Roman passages, a young staff officer barked laconically: 'Whole of the southern defences encompassed and we're breaking in from the north… ten thousand prisoners taken and God knows how many more coming in… four enemy schooners stopped outside Bardia, three more captured… enemy artillery getting weaker… no, I don't know where the hell the enemy air force is; we haven't seen it all day.'

We drove on along the broken border fence to the Australian headquarters, a Roman labyrinth twenty feet below the surface of the desert. The Italian gunners were getting the range there, but unevenly and spasmodically. Right and left of the camp explosions were going up in short gusty clouds of black smoke. The staff officers, deaf to it all, were diving in and out of dugouts with messages, shouting out over the telephones new orders for new positions to the men at the front about to take Bardia.

We drove on down the Capuzzo road, and there it was again, the sight I was beginning to know well—the unending line of marching prisoners with their weary,

stony faces. They were herding like a football crowd into roughly thrown-up barbed-wire compounds each holding two or three thousand men. Down the road leading to the fighting more British troops were pressing on in trucks travelling at breakneck speeds. Over Capuzzo British spotting planes ranged back and forth checking the last Italian gun positions from the white flashes that spouted up for ten miles along the coast. Capuzzo itself, as we drove past with the troops, was empty, more torn about than ever. Our lighter truck got on ahead of the troop-carriers as we approached Bardia. Shells were shrieking down along the whole length of the road, though never hitting it exactly as we went through. A sharp smell of explosive washed across the track in sudden bursts as each new mushroom of smoke billowed up—sometimes two hundred yards away to the left, then, erratically, far out to the right below the spot where an Australian battery was belching black fumes at the speed of half a dozen bursts a minute. Surrendered Italians were huddled on either side of the road, sheltering from their own shellfire. Others made desperate by their hunger rushed across the open to us. They swarmed round our truck in hundreds, crying: 'Food… water… cigarettes.' We flung out biscuits and they scrambled for them in a heap on the ground, forgetting the shells in their frantic hunger.

We were reaching the most forward troops now, down a road that drove through empty Italian trenches. Rifles and machine-guns were lying unmanned along parapets; dead and wounded were mingled together in ditches. Clearly the majority of Italians had surrendered as soon as their positions were invested. Over toward the coast another long line of prisoners moved across the desert without a guard, blindly seeking shelter, blindly looking for anyone to surrender to. In a branch of Wadi Gefani, half a mile from Bardia, the front-line Australians in full kit were awaiting the order to go over the top for the last time. They lay about in groups in the dry riverbed, smoking comfortably. You could almost trace the trajectory of the Italian shells as they screamed a hundred yards above and hit empty sand on the back edge of the wadi above us. The commanding officer limped up and took a drink from me gratefully. 'It's my birthday today,' he said. 'Just remembered it.' He was wounded.

It was 3 p.m. now and very near the end. I crawled up the Bardia side of the wadi and looked over. There it was, the white township with its church spire and the road leading in across two bridges. Just in front of the church, six hundred yards away, the last Italian gun was mouthing white flashes toward us. The final assault started just after 3 o'clock—British heavy tanks moving through a belt of machine-gun and even anti-tank gunfire right up to the gates of Bardia. I watched them go on spurting out shells from every gun. Crouching as they ran and calling out their war-cries, Australian infantry followed up and joined the Bren-gun patrols which had already advanced under the lee of the town in the early afternoon. I could see only a hundred or two of infantry now, and even these disappeared from view as the Italian gun turned upon them. Then that last gun hiccoughed and stopped altogether. The attack swept past it and eastward from the town.

It was easy then. We grabbed a place in a line of Australian Bren-gun carriers moving in on the town, outdistanced them at the gates, and drove down the burning main street to the town hall, where the leader of the Australian company

which had just occupied Bardia stood wiping black sweat from his face. They had been in possession just over an hour. They had gone in in extended order through the neat right-angled streets, firing bursts into the houses. But only one machine-gun near the church hit back. All round us now Italians were coming out of caves and houses to surrender. Prisoners swarmed in every direction, and even in the light of the fires which were licking up the white walls of the houses it was impossible to distinguish enemy from friend. All they wanted was food, shelter from fighting, and a guarantee of life.

One Australian officer with eight men walked up to the mouth of the biggest cave in the cliffs. As he stood at the entrance with cocked revolver, over a thousand Italians came out into the daylight, holding up their hands. Half a dozen guards were told off to get them away. Except for a few who escaped by schooner or stole across overland by night, no Italians slipped through the British net. The great majority were captured unhurt, since the Italian machine-gunners had continued firing only so long as the Australians were out of range. As soon as the Australians began to set up their own guns to retaliate, the Italians came out with white towels and handkerchiefs.

I walked down through the burning town, stopping here and there to peer into the houses. Everything had been cleared out down to the last drawer. A table was laid for ten in the officers' mess, but there was no food anywhere. We went to the harbour. Down in Bardia's lovely blue bay (where a group of naval ratings had been captured) several ships lay half-submerged and deserted. Through the clear water you could see slime already clinging to the sunken cabins and fish darting among the stanchions and sodden timbers. Thousands of tins of bully beef littered the sea floor like scattered silver coins. Birds were already nesting in the slanting masts showing above water.

The shooting and shelling stopped at last as we came back to the centre of the town. The fires in the back streets fed quietly. A little handful of us stood about in the gathering darkness, waiting for the other units of the Australian army to come up and occupy finally the cliffs and outlying forts. It was deathly quiet now after the battle. It was hard to realise we had won and it was over.

Straightaway we set off on the frigid all-night drive back to Mersa Matruh, where we could send off our messages. Often in the darkness (no car lights were allowed) we swerved to avoid lost and bewildered Italians roaming over the desert trying to find their units. Many knew nothing of the rout of the Italian army. Many slept beside their guns or turned over and shouted to us in Italian for food or water or news. We picked up a wounded Italian officer and drove him along to one of the dumps where they were collecting prisoners. 'We should never have been fighting you,' he kept insisting. 'All this should never have happened.' Four of his men hoisted him shoulder-high in the darkness and carried him off to some dressing station they knew about.

Australians, cigarettes in the corner of their mouths and steel helmets down over their lined eyes, squatted here and there among the prisoners, or occasionally got to their feet with a bayoneted rifle and shouted, 'Get back there, you,' when some Italian started to stroll away. These men from the dockside of Sydney and the sheep stations of the Riverina presented such a picture of downright toughness with their gaunt dirty faces, huge boots, revolvers stuffed in their

pockets, gripping their rifles with huge shapeless hands, shouting and grinning—always grinning—that the mere sight of them must have disheartened the enemy troops. For some days the Rome radio had been broadcasting that the 'Australian barbarians' had been turned loose by the British in the desert. It was a convenient way in which to explain away failures to the people at home. But the broadcast had a very bad effect on the Italians waiting in Bardia for the arrival of the Australians. I saw prisoners go up to their guards to touch the leather jerkins our men were wearing against the cold. A rumour had gone round that the jerkins were bulletproof. More than anything for the defenders of Bardia the last few days had been a war of nerves. And now the Italian nerve was gone.

We drove on slowly, endlessly, chilled to the bone, past streams of ambulances and supply-wagons going up to the front where they were badly needed. By midnight we were down the escarpment. Just before dawn we were approaching Mersa Matruh, Richard Dimbleby driving to relieve our chauffeur. Six of us and our kits were jumbled somehow in the back of the tiny 8-cwt. truck, too frozen to move, but beyond sleeping. Only Dimbleby slept. The truck struck two concrete drums placed across a newly completed bridge and plunged into space over the ditch beside the road. Painfully but unhurt we picked ourselves out of the wrecked vehicle and stood beside the road.

Out of the gloom emerged an engineer who stared glumly at the wreckage for a moment. Then in a tired hurt voice he said: 'I've been working for a solid month in this bloody hole. I built that bridge. I finished it today. I was just putting up a nice little memorial to say, *Bridge begun by the 21st Company of Engineers, December 1940, Completed January 1941*. I don't suppose it matters now.' Then, more bitterly: 'Or would you like to add something to the inscription? Would you like to say, *Destroyed by War Correspondents, January 1941?*' But kindly he gave us tea and we were packed up and taken into Mersa Matruh. And there we wrote and slept. We had been travelling two days and nights.

Chapter 8

Early this morning our attack was launched on Tobruk.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, JANUARY 21ST, 1941.

ALREADY WHILE Bardia was falling Tobruk was being surrounded. Those elements of the 7th Armoured Division which had guarded Bardia's outlet to the west cut back deep into the desert once the Bardia battle had been joined. They arrived presently at El Adem, one of the Italians' three main air-striking bases, just south of Tobruk. Here eighty-seven aircraft lay burnt out or broken on the ground. Many of the machines had been just sufficiently damaged by the R.A.F. to keep them on the ground while the offensive was going on, and now, unwilling to abandon valuable engines and air-frames, the Italian air force had set fire to them. Several blocks of fine concrete workshops, hangars and living-quarters stood

beneath El Adem's high wireless tower. Climbing it, we had a view on to the white roofs of Tobruk itself.

The machinery captured here was the first real booty that had fallen to the R.A.F., and the field itself was destined to become a valuable air junction for the British forces. But at the moment it was under shellfire, and when I arrived there, only a handful of British troops were keeping guard over the workshops. A sheikh with seven magnificent solid gold teeth came riding out of Tobruk to meet us. The town was running short of water and food, he said, and he had had enough. He had escaped the Italians and was returning to the desert with his wives, his camels and his sons.

Keeping just beyond the point where the Italians were laying down a barrage, I drove on up to the coast to the west of Tobruk. We hit a fine road some twenty miles outside the town, and now at last the colours and contours of the desert were subtly changing. A low yellowish scrub sprouted here and there, and the overnight dew lying heavily upon the desert had brought forth thin tender shoots of grass. The colours were greyer than the Western Desert, more liquid and softer. The sun lost the edge of its harshness, and one's eyes, strained from the glare of the yellow sand in Egypt, were rested. As we pushed on westward toward Derna and Bomba, Bedouin tribesmen ran from their scrawny sack-and-kerosene-tin settlements beside the way, crying, 'Sayeeda,' which means, 'May you be lucky,' or perhaps 'Go with God.' The war was bringing them loot. We found they had already rifled a hospital and two roadhouses which the Italians had erected in the empty desert. This road was a wonderful thing, solidly tarred, well banked and straight, and running a thousand miles to Tunis. Mussolini had all but driven it through to the Nile. And it was a strange sensation to ride here on this sound motor road through enemy territory, one Italian army behind us at Tobruk, another in front at Derna. Yet beyond Bedouin we saw no one, not even our own troops. It seemed impossible that the Italians should not try to rush this gap and break the siege on Tobruk.

At Gazala we judged it wiser to go back. True, the Derna garrison, immobile and undecided, was too fretful to patrol even the intervening cliffs, but the night was approaching and we had not one gun between us. To encircle Tobruk again we made the great loop southward through a desert as empty as the sea. We came only upon occasional British units that had pushed forward into the waste. These men, charged with the job of forever slamming the back door on the Italians, had all but lost touch with civilisation. They had little contact with the rest of the army. They lived on bully and rationed water. They were never out of the danger zone. Nor was it possible here to tell enemy from friend in the distance, and convoys sighting one another on the horizon would manoeuvre and reconnoitre like ships at sea. Once, seeing a long line of tanks descending a chain of sand-dunes to the south, we put on speed and fled. It was not worth the risk of enquiring whether they were British.

Back at Bardia we found the Australians had already moved into position for the siege of Tobruk. A great quantity of new twenty-five-pounder guns was moving up the road, and the supply convoys stretched back to Sollum where half a dozen British merchant ships were dumping ammunition and foodstuffs and taking off prisoners. The problem of Tobruk differed only in detail from that of Bardia. The

perimeter of the town was larger here—some thirty miles round the outer line of forts, nineteen round the inner. Tobruk itself, more than double the size of Bardia, housed a garrison of some twenty thousand, and for the first time civilians were enclosed. The town's long straight harbour was the most valuable port between Alexandria and Benghazi. Given it, we knew we could supply our forward troops from here and push on perhaps as far as Benghazi.

The town of Tobruk itself, like Bardia, was perched on a spit of white cliffs that formed the seaward flank of the harbour. Italian naval forces were established there, and from the half-sunken cruiser SAN GIORGIO and other vessels the Italians had brought ashore several naval guns. 'Bardia Bill' had been the troops' name for the big gun with which the Fascists had pounded Sollum. And now Tobruk gunners were carrying on the tradition of Italian artillery, which was the one department of Italian arms that survived this campaign with honour. At Sidi Barrani and Sollum, at Bardia and Tobruk and again later at Derna, it was the enemy artillery that stuck to the end often long after the infantry had fled. The Italians used old guns, some dating from the last war. Many of their shells were duds and their precision instruments far from precise. But especially when firing upon fixed targets they showed a skill and endurance beyond the level of the rest of the Italian army.

Heavy responsibility fell upon the gunners, for from this time forward the Italian air force dwindled and finally disappeared altogether from the sky. Day after day went by and fewer and fewer Fascist airmen came against us. There was still some strafing of the troops, but now Hurricanes flying only thirty or forty feet above the ground were ranging back and forth over the whole of eastern Cyrenaica, blowing up staff cars and transports, machine-gunning troops and gathering information of the movements of the enemy. By the time Tobruk fell, the Italian air force was utterly defeated, and it was never afterwards restored to superiority. When the enemy came again in the air it was largely with German machines piloted by Germans.

Longmore's policy had succeeded brilliantly. From the first he had concentrated on damaging enemy aircraft on the ground by low-level machine-gun attacks. This put the enemy machines out of action long enough to enable our troops to come up and seize the airfields. Around Tobruk I had already seen nearly a hundred aircraft caught in this way. From the town appeal after appeal was going out to Italy for help. From Mussolini came back only promises and encouragements. Il Duce had no warships able to risk encounter with Cunningham in the Mediterranean—the tonnage he had a-plenty, but not the men. His Libyan air force had already seriously drained the air armada at home both in men and machines. Graziani, back at Tripoli, still had more than double the numbers of the one and a half divisions we were sending against him. But much of their transport and equipment was lost in Libya, and his generals, discouraged and bewildered at their failures, were eagerly electing to hold a line farther back rather than sally out rashly to the relief of Tobruk.

There were good grounds for believing that Tobruk might hold. Its troops were seasoned and well dug in. They had learned lessons from Bardia. The British were extended and it was reasonable to assume that their infantry tanks would soon be forced back for overhaul. Graziani was still clinging to his theory of defensive

positions. Even so, it seems impossible that he would not have come out to meet us in pitched battle if he had known how few we were. Fantastic statements came pouring out of Rome. Four hundred thousand men, they said, had been sent into Cyrenaica by the British. Cut that figure by five times and it was still a gross exaggeration. Yet it is possible that the Italians really believed they were outnumbered.

One longed to meet and talk of these things with such a man as General Bergonzoli. He had eluded us on the escarpment. When the troops entered Bardia they found he had flown again, though when and by what route no one could say. Some believed him to be in Tobruk, where an Italian admiral was in command.

The weather now was holding a steady sharp coldness, the days tempered with sunshine, the nights starry and bitter. But toward the twentieth of January a sandstorm of such violence blew up that telegraph poles were uprooted, trucks overturned, and troops huddled to the ground, wrapping their blankets over their heads. Nothing in living memory approached it, the veterans said. I tried to drive out of Bardia, but it was impossible to see even either side of the road, and we came back to the flimsy shelter of a bombed house where soon everything was deep under layers of sand. In this tempest where an enemy might come up to within ten yards unseen, the Italians at the more remote outposts in the perimeter kept firing off rounds every few minutes. Obviously they were seeing imaginary shapes in the eerie half-light. All this was excellent.

Then on January 20th the R.A.F. and the navy were upon the town with an even greater weight of explosive than fell on Bardia. It was the same all over again. At dawn the Australians attacked. They broke the perimeter and applied the general squeeze, English and Free French units coming in from the west. By that evening the attackers had reached every objective, and the troops in the vanguard were eight miles inside the perimeter. The attack continued under brilliant artillery fire all through the night. By noon of the following day the first troops were in the town and mopping up along the dockside.

This was our biggest capture yet. In the harbour some dozen ships lay sunken or awash, among them the MARCO POLO, fine passenger vessel, and the cruiser SAN GIORGIO, now so battered that she looked like that last photograph of the GRAF SPEE going down. On the waterfront valuable stores of water, petrol, foodstuffs and ammunition were discovered in buildings sheltering under the portside rocks. The docks and some of the heavy cranes were intact. Black trails of smoke floated from burning buildings across the harbour and the town. A lorry park was found outside, covered with more than two hundred vehicles ranging from ten-tonners to tiny 'Toppolino' Fiat touring cars. The channel of the harbour was open, and soon British destroyers were feeling their way in with stores and water to speed the army on their way. With the capture of this port we had achieved here much more than Bardia, and there was begun on that morning a tradition of the British occupation of Tobruk that is likely to emerge as one of the vital phases of the war.

The surrender was accepted in the town by an Australian brigadier. The Italian admiral commanding and his staff, all shaven and immaculate in white, and a group of four haggard generals, received him. It had been a bitter engagement. The dead were still lying out, and the wounded were everywhere. It was no time for

mincing words. 'You have landmines laid in and around the town,' the Australian said. 'I will take reprisals for the life of every one of my men lost on those mines.' Quickly the Italians led Australian sappers to the mines and they were torn up. Booby traps were revealed, storage dumps opened, some two hundred guns handed over. More than fifteen thousand prisoners were gathered in for the long journey, some by sea, some by land, back to Alexandria. We had now in all some hundred thousand prisoners, but Bergonzoli had got away again. Twenty per cent of the prisoners were found to be suffering from some form of chronic dysentery.

Sickness, death and wounding enveloped Tobruk. Inside the town fires blazed. Shops, homes, offices, were torn up and their furniture and household goods strewn across the roads. Walking through it, I felt suddenly sickened at the destruction and the uselessness and the waste. At this moment of success I found only an unreasoning sense of futility. The courage of the night before had been turned so quickly to decay. And now the noise and the rushing and the light had gone, one walked through the street kicking aside broken deckchairs and suits of clothes and pot-plants and children's toys. A soldier was frying eggs on the mahogany counter of the national bank. A new fire leapt up in a furniture storehouse in the night, and the wine from the vats next door spilled across the road. Stray cats swarmed over the rubbish. In the bay a ship kept burning steadily. By its light the wounded were being carried down to the docks.

Chapter 9

The capture of Derna was completed this morning.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, JANUARY 30TH, 1941.

AFTER TOBRUK the character of the campaign changed again. It had been fluid at its start, then static at the Bardia and Tobruk stage; now it was fluid again. This was desirable for the British cause, since it was manifestly to our advantage now to keep the enemy on the run. At all costs he should not be given time to form a line.

Nobody expected that Derna, a hundred miles by road to the west, would be able to make a substantial stand. Nor after Derna was there any strongly fortified place before Benghazi. But the country here humped itself up three thousand feet into the range of the Green Mountains—the Jebel Achdar—and was difficult. After Derna the road through the mountains split into two branches, one taking the more northerly route past ancient Cirene, the other in the south passing through Slonta and Maraua. The two roads enclosed the rich moorland area where Mussolini had settled thousands of his model colonists. At Barce, the western junction of the two ways, the settlement scheme flowered out into a rich valley. Thence a coastal road and an inland railway ran down to Benghazi. The rains were at hand, the distance great and the dangers of ambush considerable, but already there were strong hopes that we would arrive at Benghazi.

It was resolved then to send two Australian brigades directly along the coast toward Derna. Before the town the two brigades were to split, one to take Derna and proceed beyond it to Giovanni Berta, the other to take the cross-desert route south of Derna to the same destination. At Giovanni Berta the brigades would split again, one taking the higher road to Barce, the other the lower. Then both would advance on Benghazi together. And, in fact, it all fell out better than anyone hoped: Derna fell on January 30th, Cirene February 3rd, Barce February 7th, Benghazi February 9th.

More than anything else it was a war of engineers and artillery. Sometimes the Italian gunners would stand for a day or two firing upon fixed targets along the roadway. Often their engineers would explode great slabs of the mountainsides to block our path, or demolish bridges and hairpin bends along the roads. Everywhere they could they laid landmines—I met one company of sappers which had degaussed fifteen thousand, uprooting many of the metal boxes and stacking them beside the roadway. Time and again Italian labour gangs flung themselves upon some job of trench digging or building gun emplacements, only to find it was too late. The Australians advancing quickly upon them would discover nothing but freshly turned earth and equipment thrown away by the enemy in their flight.

The kilometre stones told the story of the accelerated pursuit very clearly. An Italian gang had been set the rather futile job of destroying these stones so that we should never know how far we were from the towns ahead. Outside Derna the numbers were chipped off and the stones themselves uprooted bodily and dumped across the roads as tank-traps. A few miles farther on the Italians contented themselves with merely chipping away the numbers. Then, with time getting shorter and the Australians hard upon them, they merely painted out the numbers. Finally, the kilometre stones outside Benghazi stood in their places untouched. The engineers' chisels were flung aside in a ditch.

Time was everything, and in that hectic three weeks between the fall of Tobruk and the taking of Benghazi the Italians were never given a moment's rest. Through every daylight hour Hurricanes were swooping on them at three hundred miles an hour, or the Blenheims were bombing. Fighting patrols with anti-tank guns were forever running far ahead of the advancing army and taking garrisons by surprise. The Italian system of communications, always their weakness, broke down altogether, so that sometimes whole brigade staffs fell into our hands before they guessed we were within fifty miles of them.

Soon transport was the only thing that held the British back. The roads were good, but there were many detours to avoid mined bridges, and the trucks were overloaded. As each vehicle fell out, ordinance units set to work to replace it with a captured lorry. Since the majority of these captured lorries were in poor condition, the advance of the whole army was constantly checked and delayed by breakdowns. We never went a whole mile in some places without seeing some broken vehicle tossed aside in a ditch. In the end the brigade convoys, something over thirty miles in length, struggled through the mud with a collection of every type of vehicle in northern Africa; some with broken springs and bodies lashed with fencing wire; others being towed in groups of twos and threes and even more; others which were a conglomeration of the good parts of several vehicles thrown together. Motorcycles, touring cars, road-menders' trucks and vehicles for drawing

tractors and tanks—all were forced into service. In the end every able-bodied man got through.

The country the men were asked to penetrate after Tobruk was vastly different from the desert. Derna was an oasis of banana plantations and pomegranate groves, of lush vegetable gardens and leafy trees. Beyond, in the Green Mountains, you might have thought you were on the Yorkshire moors. A fresh mountain wind blew and with it came heavy rain and hailstones. The reddish-brown earth undulated into green valleys and hilltops dotted with shepherds' flocks and neat white colonial homesteads, all built to the same standardised pattern, all modern, all surrounded with neat hedges and home gardens. The villages were trim, hygienic and attractive—if your taste runs to ordered rows of white cottages and streamlined town halls and sewerage works. All this was a great change from the desert. It relieved us of the problem of water and presented us with another difficulty—mud… red, clinging, loamy mud that frothed up round the axles of the cars and sent them skidding round in the opposite direction to the one in which they were going; mud that bogged tanks and stained the men up to their waists; mud that got into your food and your eyes and your hair; mud that was cold and very very dirty.

But the first hundred miles were the best. In fair weather we rode on past Bomba toward Derna on a perfect road. Little by little the scattered bushes grew to shrubs and even at last to clumps of trees and a few palm groves. Bomba fell easily. But on Derna aerodrome, a great red plain lying above the thousand-foot sea cliffs with the town below, the Italians stood and fought. Wadi Derna, a ragged valley that struck into the hills, was for a few days death to enter. A few companies of Australians charged the aerodrome above with the bayonet and made themselves masters of its storehouses and buildings. The two sides were so mingled at first that the leading Australian platoon lodging in a hangar heard Italian voices through the night. In the first light of morning they saw, not three hundred yards away, four Italian tanks. The tank crews were cooking breakfast. Scarcely daring to breathe, the Australians whispered urgently down their field telephone for anti-tank guns, and the Italians were blown up before they finished breakfast.

The aerodrome with its twenty wrecked machines was now ours, but unexpectedly about forty Italian guns firing from the other side of Wadi Derna turned upon it an uninterrupted cannonade of shellfire. The shells kept bursting and bursting as though they would never stop. I crouched beneath the flimsy protection of a hangar door, with a Libyan prisoner who kept saying to me: 'I don't want to stay here. I've surrendered. Why don't they take me back behind the lines?'

'What does he say?' asked the Australian sergeant.

'He says he doesn't like it,' I translated.

'Tell him we don't like it either,' said the sergeant.

I told him.

'Then,' the Libyan protested, 'why don't we all go back?' It did seem at that time a first-class idea.

This was a bad shelling while it lasted. And it lasted three or four days. The Italians had every building on the aerodrome registered, and the buildings were

the only cover. One evening they shelled a platoon of Australians back from the open into the administrative block; then they hit the block and shelled the Australians out the back door and up the hillock behind. Once again the Italians got onto them, and the Australians were pursued with a chain of bursting shellfire across the aerodrome into another building and out of that.

Watching from only four hundred yards away, where it was quite safe, that incident seemed funny to the rest of us. I do not think it is funny now, but it was then, at a moment when one was keyed to meet the tension at the front and the small manners of living were diminished or forgotten entirely.

One lived there exactly and economically and straightly, depending greatly on one's companions in a world that was all black or white, or perhaps death instead of living. Most of the things it takes you a long time to do in peace-time—to shave and get up in the morning, for example—are done with marvellous skill and economy of effort at the front. Little things like an unexpected drink become great pleasures, and other things which one might have thought important become suddenly irrelevant or foolish. In a hunter's or a killer's world there are sleep and food and warmth and the chase and the memory of women and not much else. Emotions are reduced to anger and fear and perhaps a few other things, but mostly anger and fear, tempered sometimes with a little gratitude. If a man offers you a drink in a city bar, the offering is little and the drink still less. You appreciate the offering and often give it more importance than the drink. At the front the drink is everything and the offering merely a mechanical thing. It is never a gesture, but a straight practical move as part of a scheme of giving and receiving. The soldier gives if he can and receives if he can't. There is no other way to live. A pity this is apparent and imperative only in the neighbourhood of death.

We would spend the day at the observation post of our sixty-pounder guns that were demolishing the enemy batteries one by one, and return to our lodgings in a deserted garage on the aerodrome at night. It was exposed and under fire, but the walls were fairly solid and the Italians did not seem to be interested in it. One night while the blitz was on we achieved, in honour of the artillery major and his captain, a dinner of wine, vegetable stew, sauce, fruit, tea and brandy—a rare meal at that time.

The fall of Derna depended greatly upon the fall of a certain Fort Rudero, which the Italians were using as an observation and sniping post. In the first advance one Australian company was all but wiped out trying to take it from the seaward side, and another company attacking it from the wadi inland had to be withdrawn. The final attempt came one forenoon, when the red earth was washed and new after a heavy shower at night. The barrage had begun afresh, and a staid slow fight of Savoias—the last we were to see—had been over bombing until it ran into a lone Hurricane coming back from patrol into Libya. The Australians forgot the shelling, forgot momentarily the wounded nearby and their hunger, and raised a cheer as the Hurricane dived straight through the Italian machines and sent one dropping with that breathtaking fateful slowness to the red desert. Its bursting flames rose from behind the wreckage of the other broken aircraft on the field.

The Italian shells were falling twenty and thirty yards away from us, tearing off bits of the hangar, blasting our eardrums and raising billows of red dust from the quickly drying earth. Through the noise and blast another Australian company

advanced toward us—dark little figures marching slowly with heads down in little lines across the open airfield. 'Good troops,' the brigadier had been saying back at brigade headquarters, just before this engagement, 'will never be stopped by shelling.' Yet this was hard. The Italian artillery observers could actually see them. The little lines drew level with the hangar and passed on up to the ridge beyond which no one had yet advanced. For a moment I watched them pause in the full face of the enemy shelling on the open crest of the ridge and then they disappeared over the top of it. By the time I had crawled up to the ridge in a lull in the firing they had crossed the valley to the next rise, the one that ran straight down into Derna only three miles away.

I joined a Vickers-gun unit that was shooting the Italian positions just ahead of the advancing Australians. The British sighted first on an enemy observation post, silenced it, and then turned their fire on some trucks. My ridge and the ridge on which the Australians were advancing lay parallel. The intervening valley was filled with Italian shellfire. We gave it an hour or two and then followed. It seemed certain that Rudero, the objective, had fallen. We went on foot, taking a wide sweep round to the right away from the Italian positions, and came up under the fort with a party of Australian water-carriers.

Rudero had not fallen, but there was something strange and quiet about the place. After the heavy fighting along the beach yesterday its guns had not spoken. We were clinging now to the side of a cliff so precipitous that it was not easy to stand upright, and the soldiers in this sector had been here twenty-four hours without food or water. As soon as they had eaten, the company was ordered forward to take the fort. We clambered first onto a pinnacle of the cliff where all Derna broke suddenly into view, a thousand feet below... the most startlingly pleasant sight one could conceive after so long a time in the desert. We were looking right into the town as from an aeroplane. Row after row of stout, snow-white houses reached down to the graceful sky-blue harbour. A steamer, bombed by the R.A.F. and fired by the Italians, lay sinking at the jetty. Close by rose a high modernistic hotel and beyond that was the main street leading to the lighthouse. One or two cars were going along this street. A few people were moving in front of the shops. A great grove of spreading palms made a cool green pool of colour in the centre of the town.

While we gazed down, the Australian riflemen had gone ahead through the barbed wire and surrounded Rudero, a rough stone pile perhaps five hundred yards square. No sign of the enemy appeared and the soldiers relaxed a little. Some of them made in a bunch toward the side door. Once more then the enemy had vanished in the night. Concerned that he would miss a good picture, an officer with me, who was taking photographs for the War Office, called the men back and asked them to re-enact their passage through the barbed wire. Readily the men agreed. Twice the photographer rehearsed them through it, and then, the pictures taken, we all went up to the fort together to see what the enemy had left behind.

It was full of Italians. While we had posed for photographs fifty yards away outside, they had stood there with their rifles waiting dumbly to surrender. They lurked in the cellars and the stone passages; they stood in the central courtyard surrounded by the wreckage of our shell-bursts. They smoked, they stood packing their kits, or kneeling to get a last drink of water from a broken wooden barrel.

The Australians, recovering from their surprise, presented their bayonets and ran through every room and dugout until the prisoners were herded together in the main courtyard. They even unearthed a couple of white puppies born just before the bombardment began. Revolvers were grabbed from the Italian officers and rifles from their men. It was all done very quickly, and soon a platoon was on its way down the other side of the ridge to silence an Italian machine-gun post that was still pinging spasmodically up the hill. Farther back, six hundred yards away, I could still see odd groups of Italians on the run, but suddenly our artillery got onto them and they disappeared in clouds of blown dust and rock.

Three of us—the photographer and two war correspondents—were asked to escort the three senior Italian officers back to our own lines. The Italian major was obviously overstrained and tired. He leaned heavily on his dignity. The junior lieutenant, scarcely more than a boy, had wept under the machine-gun fire and again when he had asked me whether he would be shot out of hand or later. (It was a lie deliberately fostered by the Fascist command that Australians took no prisoners.) So then the six of us—the three Italian officers and we three—set off together afoot. The major was so confused he led us straight onto a field of Italian landmines and we circled back to the main road just in time.

I was beginning to chat freely with Tenente Alberto Pugliese, a lawyer from Rome, when a round of machine-gun bullets tore through the space between us. I was the first to hit the ditch beside the road, with the tenente on top of me, and there we lay while the bullets ripped up the road a foot away. Clearly the Italian snipers had that spot marked. Every time we raised our heads bullets started spurting past again.

'It's your machine-gun,' Pugliese said.

'It's not,' I said.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll stand up, and if they don't fire when they see my uniform, we'll know it's Italian and I'll ask them to stop. If they do fire, we'll know it's British. Then you stand up and ask them to stop.'

I looked at him hard, but he was apparently serious. 'You stay right where you are,' I told him coldly. Not for anyone on earth was I going to stand up. My further embarrassment was saved by the arrival of an Australian officer who called us to come on. We ran for it then until we had cover and were behind our own lines. Pugliese and the others went off toward the rear by truck with their two fox-terriers, Tobruk and Derna (Bardia, their third dog, had been killed).

These officers were typical Italians, voluble and assertive once they were certain no reprisals were going to be taken upon them. Pugliese had argued with me in the ditch: 'We would have gone on shooting, but where was the point when your guns are twice as good as ours? Anyway, we could not have gone back to Italy after this failure. As for Italy—well then, if what you say is true and the Germans are taking over the country, then good, the farce is over. But don't think there will be revolution yet. There are many like me who have got nothing out of Fascism, but we don't dislike it enough to rebel against it. Even if we hated it, what could we do about it?'

Yes, what could they do? The machine had started turning and only exhaustion now would stop it. They could surrender to us. But never to themselves.

We drove back to force headquarters that night to send our messages. It was a strange sensation, writing dispatches away here in the blue, never knowing whether they would get back to Cairo, let alone London and New York. We had been away now so long without word from the outside world that I, for one, had lost my 'news sense'—that sense of proportion you have that tells you whether a thing is worth writing or not. Everything here to us at this minute was vital and crammed with interest. But was it interesting to the Home Guard in England, to the sheep farmer in Australia and the commuter in New York? You just couldn't know. So in the end I used to find myself putting down what I had seen and felt without trying to make a rounded 'story' of it, and without the slightest idea of whether it was worth publishing or not.

The circumstances in which we wrote were strange. We typed on the backs of trucks, on beaches, in deserted houses, in gun emplacements and tents. We hoisted our typewriters on kerosene cases, on bathtubs and rolls of kit, on humps of sand and the steps of cars, or just perched them on our knees. We wrote by candlelight or lamplight, or with an electric torch shining onto the paper. And in the end we could write anywhere at any hour of the day or night—anywhere, that is, except during a bombardment, for I tried it and failed miserably.

And now, driving through a thickening sandstorm, we groped about in the collection of galvanised huts for a place to sit down and write. We found the Intelligence hut at last, and a corner of the table there, and wrote. That night we slept in another iron shed, dignified with the name of Force Headquarters Mess. Other strays like ourselves had wandered in, and we bedded down around the concrete floor as soon as dinner was done. The wind ripped part of the roof off during the night, sheet by sheet, and rain splashed in. The banging of iron against iron was like an air raid, only more irritating. Bomba was a desolate place. We were glad to get back to the front.

Two nights after this, shortly before midnight, the Italians stopped firing. They had held on gallantly. Now their ammunition was running out. They packed what they could of their equipment and escaped quietly down the coastal road in the darkness. The first Australian patrols entered the town the following morning. The road that plunged off the cliff into Derna had been cruelly blasted, but the sappers had it clear enough before the day was out, and the troops rode down.

We did not ride with them. We missed all this. It was one of those wrong decisions, inevitable sooner or later. We had thought that Derna would hold a day or two longer, and while the town, unknown to us, was actually being evacuated by the enemy, we were driving far southward across the desert to visit the armoured division at Mekili. It was an all-day run over a fresh rolling stretch of semi-desert in brilliant sunshine. We should have been warned that we were making a false move, for along the bad open stretch at the beginning which was under enemy observation we were not fired on. Following likely tracks, by compass and by guessing and by questioning a Roman Catholic priest who suddenly appeared across the desert, we found Mekili at last and the armoured division. They had had none of the spoils that fell to the men on the coast and were very short of supplies. We exchanged a couple of cases of Italian mineral water for a tin of army biscuits, and spent the night pleasantly beside the broken fort.

The armoured division had fought a quick engagement here, and now that the Italians had fled, the officers did not know what was to be their next objective. But they suspected. Already the plan for the great desert march that was to come had been discussed, and a brigadier hinted something was in the wind. But next morning a signaller came casually to our truck and said: 'Derna's gone.' I poked my head out of my sleeping-bag. 'What?'

'Just heard it on the B.B.C.,' said the signaller.

We could not believe it. It seemed impossible that the B.B.C. thousands of miles away had beaten us to the news of something only fifty miles from us—something which we had waited for days to happen. We packed, jumped into the truck, took a compass bearing straight across the desert, and set off for the coast. As we drew into another British camp on the way, a wireless was blaring out across the desert: 'Derna fell last night.' It was true, then. The official communiqué, as always, had beaten us. And we had made a first-class blunder in leaving the coast front.

Miserably we drove on through the midday heat, arguing about our compass direction. I was convinced we were driving straight into the enemy lines; the others thought we were heading for the Nile. This is just something the desert does to you. In the end we hit our objective dead centre—a dry water well—and ran on at a speed that bumped our reserve petrol tins into shapeless empty lumps of metal. The silence of the coast when we got there made it all too painfully clear—Derna had fallen. We were met in the town by the other correspondents who had been there for hours. Competition among us was strong. It was, in a way, the most galling moment of the whole campaign.

Chapter 10

Benghazi is in our hands.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, FEBRUARY 7TH, 1941.

DERNA WAS all that its distant view had promised. The main road wound between palms into streets of high cool buildings and spreading bougainvillea and flowering shrubs. Big gardens lay round the hospital, and the governor's palace stood among shaded lawns and fountains at the edge of the sea. The local Arabs had gone through the town and the bazaars, looting, the night before, after the Italians had left, and there had been a paying off of old scores in the few hours before the arrival of the Australian army. Front doors had been broken open and furniture looted and destroyed.

Everything in the European quarter was modern—modern and standardised to the nth tiresome degree. It was strange to come down from the desert into this super-suburbia where the curtains and the chair coverings came in three natty shades; where the dining-room suites in real old mahogany and three-ply were in strict neo-Fascist tradition, and china Cupids stood upon the standardised mantelpieces. Some three or four designs had been selected for the houses, and

the colonist apparently just picked the one he liked best, ordered a set of furniture, and moved in. Much of the stuff was good and comfortable, but the tinsel and the regimentation broke through. Yet nothing could have destroyed everyone's pleasure in these gardens, or the luxury of a roof from the rain, and a hot bath.

We selected a white single-storey villa close to the sea, richly hung with flowering bougainvillea, and moved in. Except for minor looting, everything had been left as it was, and soon we had good wines on the table and a fire going. I wallowed in the bath, washing away a week's dirt, and, walking naked into the next room, was somewhat taken aback to find a telephone with its owner's name let into the base of the instrument—'His Excellency Marshal Graziani.' Several soldiers tramping in long columns through the town that night slipped aside to splash a bit in the marshal's bath, while we drank his wine and ate from his dinner service.

Old Electric Whiskers had bobbed up again. He was in command here, they said. But once more he had vanished.

For three nights we slept in Derna on made beds. We lived luxuriously, and friends would drop in to taste our cooking and selection of wines. Two officers driving up from the rear left cards on us, and we sent them a couple of bottles of the marshal's better brandy. Each day we would drive out to the front that kept eating steadily into Cyrenaica. Since we had come down off the cliffs we had to ascend them again outside Derna, and here the Italians had chosen to blow three large holes out of their fine road that wound up the mountainside. Once over those we were well on our way to our rendezvous with the other brigade at Giovanni Berta. The advance was going so quickly now that it was not always possible to tell whether the forts and villages off the main line of advance had been taken or not. In this way, Clifford of the *Daily Mail*, Captain Geoffrey Keating, our conducting officer, and myself came to the fort of Ain Mara, just before Giovanni Berta.

We had been cruising along in our truck for an hour or two behind the advancing Australian troops, enjoying the freshness and greenness of the hills and the sight of occasional farmhouses. As there had been no contact with the enemy since the previous night, we decided to cut across from the front line to the left of the main road. The rough track, through high scrub and rocky red hills, took us to an ancient Turkish fortress. From that high point an Arab shepherd showed us the landmarks in the no-man's-land that lay ahead. Ain Mara, we had heard back at advance headquarters, was to have been taken that morning, and we swept its two stone forts carefully through glasses. No soldier showed on the ramparts and no flag flew from the watchtower. A few Arabs in brilliant red cloaks made tiny spots of colour on the cultivated hillside. The colonists' white houses just over the crest of Ain Mara ridge seemed deserted. Shellfire sounded well around to the left—doubtless where the other brigade was coming up. The first brigade was somewhere out of sight on our right as we began to bump forward over the rocks to the fort. Twice we jumped from the truck and scrambled for shelter among the underbrush when low-flying bombers went by. Then, watching for landmines, we drove up the broad gravel path to the nearest of the two stone forts.

Clearly, the Australians had not arrived. I kicked the gate open. The cobblestoned courtyard was empty. A key stood invitingly in the door of the

guardhouse. Over the place was the unnatural hush you got sometimes at the front. It seemed even to drive the birds and the animals away. Then a turbaned head shot up over the stone wall opposite, followed closely by two more. I called out to them, and three Libyan soldiers scrambled quickly over the wall and came forward, grinning and repeating, '*Buon arrivata.*' Then things began to happen more quickly. From holes and caves in the rocks, men, women and children began pouring out over the hillside. Every group waved a white flag—bits of sheeting torn from the Italian officers' beds. The biggest flag of all was tacked to a sapling and borne down the road by an Arab sheikh—a fine, grey-headed old man wearing an Italian army tunic, and supported on either side by two native non-commissioned officers. The men from the village fell into step in a ragged crowd behind them.

Ten paces from us the sheikh halted, hitched his banner up a little higher and flung out his right hand in salute. He made us a formal speech in Italian that went something like this:

'On behalf of the village and the fort I welcome you to Ain Mara. Your enemies the Italians have fled. After lunch yesterday they retreated over the hills beyond Giovanni Berta, and now we formally surrender the fort to you. We are most thankful you are here. We have been waiting three months for this happy day. Long live liberty. Long live England.'

I really think he meant it. He led us onto the main fort, ceremoniously produced the keys, and flung back the door. In we all went, though there was nothing much to see. The Italians had taken everything of value. From the battlements one looked down on the ploughlands of Ain Mara's green valley where the purest and freshest spring in all Cyrenaica flowed from the rocks. The Fascists had been at work on a powerful new pumping plant here. Here, too, was the spot where they used first to sight raiding British aircraft and raise the alarm in Derna.

As we came down from the fort to join the main road by another route, the women of the village gathered on the rocks ululating shrilly, a simple greeting, but embarrassing. We rejoined the road ahead of the main column of Australians at a point where the Italians had blown Ain Mara bridge. A patrol of sappers had just arrived. Afoot we scrambled up the culvert to meet them, and then stood rooted where we were as a hearty Australian voice roared across the stream: 'You are standing in the middle of a minefield.' It was only just possible to see the long sinister outline of the boxes at our feet as we tiptoed past them up to the wrecked bridge. A few minutes later the sappers walked boldly onto the field. One after another they prodded at the mines, knelt and flipped back the lids, dug the detonators out with their fingers and flung them away. In seven minutes they had thirty useless mines stacked beside the way. Overnight they had the bridge restored.

And so it went on after this, the Italians forever seeking somehow to delay and harass the steady oncoming lines of tanks, lorries and guns. Giovanni Berta fell, and the two brigades rode on again. Tert on one road offered nothing against us; nor did Abragh on the other. Luigi di Savoia collapsed, and we came into Cirene, once a place of a million Romans and the birthplace of the man who went to the help of Christ on the Cross. Nobly still its ruins rose out of the hillside, the marble tinted pink when I saw it in the late afternoon. Below law Roman Apollonia on the sea: all this valley was rich in antiquity.

Graziani had lately made his headquarters here in the cumbersome hotel that stood massively on the hill beside the delicate Roman columns. Here, as everywhere, there had been much looting. The Arabs had turned at last on the Italian settlers left defenceless by the retreating Italian army. In the gap before the arrival of the British they had cut loose to pillage and burn and loot and destroy. With tears the Italian settlers implored us everywhere to stay and guard them. Even their women were not safe, they said. They brought us gifts of fresh eggs and loaves and fruit and cheese and wine.

The whole problem was presented neatly to us here in Cirene. In the barracks on the hill above the modern village we came on two Italian gendarmes still armed. They had rounded up some twenty Arab looters and locked them in barracks without, so far as one could discover, food or water. For days the Arabs had been confined there with these guards watching them. And now what to do? We had no guard to leave. Manifestly men could not be imprisoned without food or water. Nor could enemy soldiers be left at large with their rifles. The choice of action was not mine to take, but I did not agree when the British officer in charge took the rifles from the gendarmes and liberated the Arabs, who immediately ran delightedly across the compound, shouting: '*Viva Inghilterra!*' This treatment could have been interpreted by them as no other than licence to continue their looting, and I suspect they were already at it before we left the village.

For my part, war or no war, I would have left the gendarmes with their rifles, for the old hates among the Arabs were running high. Many in this fertile region had been dispossessed of their lands or thrown off the communal holdings to make way for the Italian settlers. The fact that the Italian was developing Cyrenaica beyond the Arab's furthest capabilities was no compensation to the Arab. He was being forced to work and even to pay taxes. The coming of the British was taken by some to mean that all the Italians had built up would be immediately handed over to the Arabs. Obviously that could not be, since the farms, the butter factories, the waterworks and sewerage and the power plants would have collapsed into chaos in three months.

But the Senussi tribesmen had waged bitter war with the Italians and they were not forgiving. Was it not Graziani himself, Graziani the butcher, who had taken the chieftains of the Senussi in chains and had them flung down upon Kufra from an aeroplane? True or not, the story was believed, and fed by the natural wild spirits of the youths, the Arabs were now carrying the knife into the Italian settlers' homes.

It was no easy problem for General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, who had just been appointed military governor of Cyrenaica. But at this moment the problem was secondary, and we were concerned only to push on. Slonta fell, and Maraua, and now every man knew that it was Benghazi itself that was our object.

Clifford, Keating and I, with our driver, a lad from south Wales, ran on again in our Morris truck to the head of the column travelling down the southern road. For a time we kept with the Bren-gun carriers, scouting on ahead, and as prisoners were being roped in, we acted as interpreters. The danger of mines ahead was the chief concern, and when one prisoner protested to us that there were neither mines nor opposition of any kind between us and Barce, the Australian colonel commanding said: 'All right. Tell him to get into that truck and drive two hundred

yards ahead of us. Tell him if he tries to make a bolt for it we will machine-gun him.'

We told him. The man was haggard and very afraid, but he had no choice but to obey. And if we had taken a hint from the wisdom of the colonel, then Clifford and Keating and I and our driver might have been more comfortable that night. But at that moment a major of the armoured division suddenly appeared with a fighting patrol of armoured cars. He had cut across from the open desert to the south. And now this major offered to patrol ahead of the Australian army, and we were invited to go along.

Steadily the tracks of the retreating enemy got warmer along the road. An Italian colonel and staff officer who were trying to round up their utterly disorganised forces were captured. Then we came on whole bunches of Italians. They said the road ahead was clear for some miles at least. Hurricanes had just passed that way, making a frightful wreckage on the road where they had caught and overturned several lorries full of men. The vehicles were uprooted bodily from the track, and the unwounded passengers frantically waved white handkerchiefs at us as we passed by. The road now in the early evening turned into wooded undulating hills.

And then at last we were on the enemy. A group of Italians in green uniforms were laying mines in a bend in the road. They dropped the mines and fled into the bushes at the sound of the leading armoured car and our truck following next in line. There were two more armoured cars following immediately behind us. We could still see and hear the Italians in the bushes, but, having seen so many surrender already, it did not seem worthwhile giving them a burst of machine-gun fire. British officers and men jumped out of the vehicles and began tearing up the mines to make the road safe for the Australian troops now advancing up the road some miles farther back. As they worked, the Italians, about half a dozen in all, emerged onto the road a little higher up and stood watching us. It was strange they did not surrender. 'Give them a burst,' someone began to say, and then from the hill ahead a long whining scream of bullets came at us down the roadway. We were ambushed. The enemy were in force. Breda guns, two-pounders and mortars crashed their shell dead among us. Clifford and I made for the wooded bank on the left, but it was hopeless—the enemy were firing almost at point-blank range, two or three hundred yards away. The rest of the British patrol also tried to make for cover, some of them shooting as they ran. One Breda-gun burst set the armoured car next to ours ablaze, killing the men inside. I heard the muffled scream of another man, hit half a dozen times in the legs, being gallantly dragged back along the gutter by his comrades. The enemy's tracer-bullets made long crisscross sheaths of light down the road.

Then I saw Keating, full in the face of the fire, running down the line of empty armoured cars trying to get a first-aid kit. Our driver had been cruelly hit on the arm by an explosive bullet as he had leapt from the truck. I ran over to him, tearing off a bandage from a sore on my knee, but he was huddled crookedly in the shallow drainage gutter, quickly drenching in his blood. Clifford joined me, and together we tore off his greatcoat and cut away his sweater and shirt. But then the Italians creeping closer saw us—the last of the British left around the cars. They blew our truck to bits while we lay four yards away trying to stem the

wounded man's flow of blood. Then Keating, who had somehow got up the roadway, joined us with a first-aid pad which we fixed in the wounded man's arm. The fire was very close and very heavy and our cover not more than eighteen inches, so we had to stop and be still from time to time. Then a piece of shrapnel struck Keating in the forearm, while a bullet tore a ragged hole in his leg. He fell forward softly upon the driver in the shallow trench. Clifford was nicked neatly in the behind. Another bullet passed through the folds of the sleeve of my greatcoat, and, certain I was hit, I remember waiting frigidly for the pain to come.

By now the line of cars was blazing, and although the enemy could see Clifford and me alone, trying to bind up the wounded men, they concentrated all their fire upon us. It was madness then to stay. We dragged the driver into a bush—I pulling him by the heels, Clifford pushing his shoulders. Keating, who continued directing us, urged us to go ahead while he looked after himself. He, too, succeeded in following slowly. Forcing the driver to his feet—he was in great pain, but trying very hard to help us—we crouched and dodged from bush to bush. All this was at dusk, and as we crossed each open space the Italians unloosed their fire again. Three hundred yards back in a ditch we were forced to stop and dress the wounded men again. Then with my arm round Keating, and Clifford's supporting the driver, we began a long bad walk back to our own lines. The shelling eased slightly after a few minutes, and soon our only concerns were whether we would make the distance and whether or not we would be fired upon by our own troops. But with a rush of gratitude I heard English voices in the darkness, and, raising our voices, we got an answer.

Even as we hoisted the wounded onto a Bren-gun carrier, Australian patrols were coming up to encircle the hill and take it. In a chill bare cottage by the roadside a doctor operated upon the two men under the light of hurricane lamps. Someone gave Clifford and me a swig of water and some cold tunny-fish. In the night an ambulance came and took our wounded off. Clifford and I lay on stretchers and slept.

We went back next day when the hill was won, to salvage what we could from the wrecked truck, but it was next to nothing. Smashed cameras and typewriters, bedding rolls riven with bullets, suitcases battered into shapelessness, lay strewn about. Even our fine Parmesan cheese was pitted like a Gruyère, and a tin of army biscuits had all but reverted to its original flour. Razors, glasses, compasses, revolvers, water bottles—everything was smashed.

We had no food now and practically no clothes. Apart from my greatcoat, all I was able to salvage was the uniform of an Italian sailor—stuff I had got at Tobruk—and in that uniform I stayed until the end of the campaign.

We were sitting forlornly there among our wreckage when the other war correspondents arrived, and we clambered aboard their vehicles. There was no time to lose. The advance was going very quickly now.

Barce, when we first sighted it, was erupting with a series of heavy explosions. The Italian rearguard, working with time-bombs, were smashing the waterworks, the electric-power plant and anything else they could lay hands on. Smoke, black, white and red, billowed up in great mushrooms over the neat white town. It did not seem to matter to the Fascists that the thousands of Italians they left behind would have no water, light or heat. Across Barce's wonderfully fertile valley that

might have been anywhere in Dorset or Devon, the colonists' trim white houses were stretched in rows to the horizon, all of them sheltering little groups of frightened, anxious people. The steep road before us winding into Barce had been blown at many places and sown with mines. Half finished anti-tank trenches made scars across the mountainside.

An Australian officer and six men went down afoot and restored order to that lovely valley. Settlers escorted them to the town's best hotel for a hot dinner, and soon the hastily reformed town council was getting the life of the town back to normal. The rest of the Australian army, who would not wait for the repair of the coastal road, cut inland over earth tracks beside the railway running directly into Benghazi.

We came to the railway in the darkness and pouring rain, and groped along it until we got to a deserted railway station. An Arab boy with a lamp lit us through the empty ticket office and upstairs to the bare stone-floored rooms, where presumably the last stationmaster had lived. His reports showed that the last train had gone through at 3.10 p.m. two days before. The telephone to Benghazi was still working, but when we tried to ring through there was no answer—just a confused buzzing on the line. We built fires in the house to make tea and a stew.

As we ate, more troops came in—about half a dozen of them. They were in high spirits. They had been generously served with wine by the peasants, and now they were determined to go on to Benghazi by themselves without waiting for orders. They had picked up an ambulance somewhere in Barce and now they wanted petrol from us. One of the men was festooned with captured Italian revolvers. He was full of good noisy humour, and he twirled the revolvers round and round on his forefingers. We gave them a little petrol, and the ambulance set off crazily in the darkness. Amazingly, we saw it still going the next day.

Deep in the night I woke and heard a loud tearing noise on the railway outside. Some of the others heard it too and sat up. It was a heavy rumbling in the rain, and whether it was a runaway truck or some ghost train in the night I do not know—we were too sleepy to care.

A kind of frenzy possessed the Australians now in their utter determination to have Benghazi at once. I cannot conceive that anything would have stopped them from that Wednesday night on. But now hail and rain came that turned the countryside into red mud and slush. Every few kilometres the tracks were blown away by the Italian rearguard, which was fighting only for time and still more time in which to organise and make a stand. Australian engineers slaved at the head of the column until men in their ranks were forced to drop out through sheer exhaustion, while others came forward to take their places. Soon it developed into a contest between the engineers and the squads of Italian minelayers and dynamiters. All that first day after Barce, while the storm still gathered force, the Australians kept flinging boulders into craters along the roads or breaking open new roads along the goat tracks. Kilometre by kilometre—yard by yard sometimes—the troops moved forward. It was a forty-mile-long column of vehicles that crashed over tank-traps and plunged headlong into valleys and across ruined gaps in the railway line. Nowhere could the Italians destroy the way sufficiently to hold them more than an hour or two.

At El Abiar, where the Delmonte division used to be quartered in barracks nearly half a mile square, we came on the brigadier in command bolting cold poached egg and toast, while he kept on issuing the same order to every officer who came in: 'Push on. Push on.' I lunched in the officers' mess on hot rum and cold bully beef. The room showed every sign of panic-stricken flight—swords flung away, meals left on the table, shaving things strewn about. An Italian orderly was protesting: 'I don't know what happened. They have all gone off and left me.'

We went on again. All the way down the track vehicles were fighting with the mud. Prisoners began to pass by, cold and weary men, utterly confounded by the debacle, who stared in astonishment at the convoys of British vehicles that appeared suddenly out of the driving rain. At Regima we were held up again for an hour on an icy hill. Everyone's nerves were strained now as the end of this interminable thousand-mile journey from Cairo was in sight. We bumped on again past two blown-up railway yards, and round by a goat track, and suddenly a burst of cheering went up from a gun-crew travelling ahead of us. Benghazi lay in view.

It stood there clearly, a long line of white rooftops by the sea, a cloud of smoke shot with flame rising from the centre of the town. Nearer on the coastal plain were the red and grey roofs of Benina—Benina, through which Mussolini for a year past had provided most of his bombers and fighters with their ammunition for the destruction of Egypt and the army of the Nile. All of us had been bombed by aircraft from Benina. Now that whole airport was deserted and in ruins. Through glasses I counted twenty-two wrecked aircraft on one end of the airfield alone. A water-tower had been blown bodily out of the ground by the R.A.F. Half a dozen hangars, each large enough to accommodate a goods train, were shattered and savaged into a state of uselessness.

In the airport's living-quarters, where we slept for a few hours, Italian pilots had lived well with their private baths and neat dressing-tables equipped with double mirrors and scent-sprays. But all was in wild disorder by the time we got in. Electric light, heating and water had been sabotaged only thirty hours before. While we rested here Italian couriers came posting out from Benghazi to beg for a parley. The emissaries followed—the lord mayor, a Roman Catholic bishop and a few police officers—and the Australian brigadier, known from his vivid red hair as 'Red Robby,' received them in a draughty airport building. The Italians came to offer the complete submission of the capital, of the naval base and of all military establishments, of the Italian, Arab and Greek populations of all the surrounding country, and anything the British chose to regard as theirs. The Italian army, navy and air force, they said, had fled. The brigadier sent them back with promises of protection. The carabiniere, he said, could retain their rifles to keep the peace and prevent looting.

It hailed and rained, and even the red mud itself seemed to be flying in the wind that night. A bleak windy morning followed and we drove into the town, Benghazi. It was, in the end, the unsung soldiers of the line who had the honours that morning. While it was still very cold and grey they got down from their trucks in the streets—just one company—and marched into the square before the town hall. They were unkempt, dirty, stained head to foot with mud. They had their steel helmets down over their eyes to break the force of the wind. Some had their hands botched with desert sores, all of them had rents in their greatcoats and webbing.

They had fought three battles and a dozen skirmishes. They had lost some of their comrades, dead and wounded, on the way. They had often been cold, hungry and wet through in these two months of campaigning in bitter weather. The townspeople crowding round the square had half sullenly expected brass brands and a streamlined military parade. Instead they got this little ragged group of muddy men. They hesitated. Then a wave of clapping broke down from the housetops along the pavements and across the square. One felt like clapping oneself in that highly charged moment. The applause was thinnish and no doubt would have greeted any other conqueror who had come in. But at least it was spontaneous and unasked for, and an earnest that the people would peacefully accept British rule.

The troops stepped out into the centre of the square and swung round with a full parade-ground salute as the brigadier drove up and alighted on the town hall steps. The mayor of Benghazi, wearing a tricolour sash across his chest, was waiting for him, surrounded by civil guards, officers and the bishops. They listened tensely while the brigadier issued orders through an interpreter. 'I reappoint you and all civil officers in their present positions. You will continue with your normal work. Get the people to reopen their shops and businesses. Your civil guard will act in conjunction with my own garrison troops.'

In five minutes it was done. As I came away from the square a tobacconist was pulling down the shutters from his shop. Everywhere people saluted my khaki cloth cap. I walked down to the Albergo d'Italia and ordered coffee with a roll of bread. Someone put half a lire in the café music-box. And then it came again, that same feeling of unreality and futility. Suddenly I felt very tired.

I went upstairs to a room with a bed and clean sheets. There was a hot meal waiting—a meal I had not prepared myself in a ditch by the roadside. And it all seemed very uninteresting. More than anything I wanted to get away quickly and to see and hear no more of the campaign and the fighting and the booty.

The quietness and peace of Benghazi were extraordinary. Fifteen days ago the newspapers had stopped publishing; the banks had closed and most of the businesses had shut down a week since. Three days previously the buses had stopped running. A Fascist gunboat had cleared out, and some thousands of civilians, their cars stacked high with household goods, had fled toward Tripoli. Benghazi's garrison had followed hard on their heels. The small force left behind had started blowing up oil stocks, burning papers and wrecking instruments too cumbersome to take away. Refugees had begun pouring down the road from Cirene, Barce, Tolmeta and Tocra, and wild rumours had spread through the town about the British advance—rumours that were all too true. Some had panicked then and rushed their women and children into the country. One passenger plane that was not airworthy had tried to make a getaway and crashed, killing forty people.

Looting began among the townspeople themselves. The R.A.F. came over on the last of many raids, and by the Wednesday the frightened people had sworn they could hear the Australian guns getting nearer. Yet there was little damage in the town at that time. Many of the portside houses bore marks of shrapnel bursts, but the civilian quarter, including the Arab markets spreading a square mile, was intact.

I went down to the Hotel Berenice where I had stayed just before the war. Graziani had used it as a headquarters. Like most of the other principal buildings in the town, its corridors had been faced with an additional stone wall as a protection against bombing. Little remained there to show how the marshal had worked for his abortive campaign against Egypt. The cathedral just behind the hotel was safe, but in the harbour, noisy then with its thunderous surf, I came on two sunken Italian destroyers that were hit on the day of the R.A.F.'s first long-range raid on the town the September before. Half a dozen other vessels, small supply ships mostly, lay about at their moorings, either beached or awash. In the town, water and light supply was working—an unbelievable luxury to men who had had weeks on a gallon of water a day and had grown used to seeing the stub end of a candle at night. Here and there posters of Mussolini had been defaced. A group of Arabs had hastily stitched together a crude Union Jack, and were parading in through the town while they gave vent to a weird and horrible victory chant. The churches and monasteries continued placidly.

I lingered on for a day or two aimlessly waiting for transport back to Cairo. I was determined not to face that journey of a week overland. When I did leave, I left by air in strange circumstances and with a feeling of intense relief. But there was first another job to do. When we were in Benghazi we got word for the first time of the battle of Beda Fomm, which had been fought by the armoured division while we were coming along the coast. Now we drove south to see what had happened.

Chapter 11

You were here too soon; that is all.
—GENERAL BERGONZOLI.

UNKNOWN TO us, while we had been following the Australian army, a manoeuvre that was destined to alter the whole character of desert fighting and put an effective end to the campaign had been carried out by the British armoured forces inland. It had been foreseen by Wavell and O'Connor that the mere occupation of Benghazi would not mean the destruction of the still very strong forces which Graziani had under his command. These would simply escape down the coastal road toward Tripoli to fight another day. So it was resolved that an attempt should be made to cut them off. This would involve a forced march of some two hundred miles at speed straight across an open desert that was largely unmapped, in circumstances so unfavourable as to be almost prohibitive. No army had ever crossed this wasteland south of the Green Mountains before. Even the Bedouin seldom attempted it. The camel tracks led nowhere. The surface of the desert was rough in the extreme. The vehicles were already badly strained, and it would be necessary to steer by compass, carry all supplies without hope of replenishment, and leave the rest to luck. And all had to be done against time.

But the generals were encouraged in their resolve to go forward when units of their armoured forces made contact with the enemy at the Beau Geste fort of

Mekili, fifty miles south of Derna (where I had met them during the fall of Derna). A squadron of British tanks there came unexpectedly upon a large force of Italian tanks and mechanised infantry, and, unwilling to wait until reinforcements came, gave battle at once. Some twenty Italian tanks were destroyed in the running engagement that followed, but the main body of the Italian army slipped away before it could be encircled. This was galling. It had seemed at headquarters for a moment that the battle of Cyrenaica might have been settled there and then. Now there was nothing for it but to risk this adventure across the open desert.

It seemed obvious that this, the main effective striking force left to the enemy, would return to Benghazi through the mountains, perhaps interfering with the advance of the Australians on its way. If all went well for us on the coast, however, it was reasonable to assume that the Italian commanders would not stay to fight but would make back towards Tripoli, where they would have time to form an effective line. The only real question at issue was, 'Could we get to the coast in time to stop them?'

On February 4th two columns were ordered to move out on the big march from Mekili—one to strike toward Soluch, thirty-five miles south of Benghazi, and the other toward Beda Fomm, close by near the coast. The trucks were stacked to capacity, the men's drinking water cut down to the equivalent of about a glass a day, and the regulation halts for food and sleep reduced by half or more. There was only one order of the day: 'Get to the coast.'

The wind blew shrilly and bitterly at first. Then a storm of full gale force sprang up against the last convoys. While the forward units were often battling against fine sand that reduced visibility sometimes to nothing, those that followed on were faced with frozen rain that streamed down in front of the wind. Standing in their trucks like helmsmen, the commanders of vehicles had their fingers frozen claw-like around their compasses. Through day and night the long lines of tanks, armoured cars, Bren-gun carriers, trucks, ambulances and guns bumped onward. If a vehicle fell out, that was just too bad: its drivers had to mend it or jump aboard another vehicle and press on. The going was the worst the men had known after a year in the desert—bump over a two-foot boulder, down into a ditch, up over an anthill into another boulder—and so on hour after hour.

They travelled bonnet to tailboard in the darkness and spaced out again for protection against air raids in the daylight. O'Connor's own car broke down when he came out to urge them on. At places it was impossible to do more than six or seven miles an hour. The drivers, muffled up to the ears and strapped in leather jackets and goggles, became unrecognisable under a caking of sand or mud. Several times they had to deploy and fight against Italian outposts. Yet they did it in thirty hours. Two hours later would have been too late. The Italians would have slipped through.

On February 6th the report that the two columns had reached their objectives was followed by the dramatic news: 'We have contacted the enemy on the coast. Three large columns are moving south from Benghazi.'

The road from Benghazi, in fact, was packed with enemy vehicles. It was the last of Graziani's forces, escaping with all his eight senior generals, and with some 130 tanks, 300 guns of all calibres, more than 20,000 men and many hundreds of lorries and trucks. The British were outnumbered five to one in tanks, five to one

in men and three to one in guns. They were up against a fresh and desperate enemy.

At midday the British opened the battle along a broken desolate stretch of the coastal plain, some ten miles in length. The tanks swept forward and all three columns were engaged. The artillery deployed and opened fire. For the last time the Italians turned and fought, fought out of desperation more fiercely than they had ever done since the war began. This in fact was the only time they honestly gave battle, battle to the death or surrender.

The British commanders, meeting under shellfire, hastily made their plans, and, since there were some hours of daylight left, those plans were simply to go straight ahead, cut the enemy's retreat in the south, and smash him in the centre. In the southern sector thirteen British cruisers gave chase to the main body of Italian tanks and destroyed forty-six of them. Mines were laid in the southward path of the remaining enemy formations, and as they ran upon them they were attacked again.

In the centre the Italians were themselves attacking fiercely. But British artillery had got the range on the coastal road from which the enemy were operating. By nightfall burnt-out tanks, trucks and guns were lying everywhere, just great smoking steel carcasses on the sand.

Twice the British tanks exhausted their ammunition and had to go back for more. All night the shelling continued, while one after another Italian field-guns were registered by their flashes, straddled with shot, and finally hit. General Tellera was in command of the enemy. He turned, as every Italian general had done before him, and looked for some loophole through which to escape. 'I cannot believe,' he told his staff before he died, 'that the full strength of the British has got here so soon, or that they can have blocked us to the south.'

But he was wrong. In the darkness the British regrouped for the final crushing blow. One section spun fanwise round his north flank and reached the sea. Another, rushing south, straddled the road to Tripoli. When the morning came with the threat of heavy rain these jaws began to close. The Italians counterattacked then. Their infantry still remained confused, undirected, inactive, and much of it still embussed. But their artillery spoke out violently, and a charge of such resolve was made upon the British that one tank succeeded in reaching a brigade headquarters before it was shot up.

Then the jaws shut. Bofors and twenty-five pounders raked the sea plain from one end to the other. Everywhere the Italian attack was fought to a standstill and broken up. There was carnage in the centre of the battlefield. British machine-gunners and light units went in to support the tanks. They picked off one target after another, until for ten miles the road was littered with upturned smashed vehicles that had crashed into one another or upended themselves grotesquely in the air.

All through the second night the mopping up went on along the beaches and the marshy plain. White handkerchiefs began appearing as the Italians in thousands came out of hiding in the rocks. General Tellera was hit by a bullet and died on the field (his body was given full military honours later in Benghazi). General Cona took over. He had a more forlorn hope than ever Weygand had in France. The fighting had been carried with grenade and rifle and bayonet into the sand-dunes.

It was there that the British found Bergonzoli at last, and many other generals and staff officers. The rejoicing message went back to headquarters: 'Bergonzoli in the bag.'

By Friday morning it was all over, and the British were sweeping on to occupy Agedabia and Agheila, nearly two hundred miles south of Benghazi. Only a few Italian tanks and a few score vehicles had escaped the battle of Beda Fomm. And now we had in our hands seven generals and their staffs, about twenty thousand more prisoners, 216 guns, 101 tanks and vehicles in hundreds. And Cyrenaica was ours. In all this fighting, here and on the coast from Sidi Barrani to Beda Fomm, the entire British casualties had not exceeded three thousand in dead, wounded and missing. It was complete victory—even though the world never had time to realise it before the reverses set in.

Graziani's army of Cyrenaica was destroyed forever. Of the quarter million Italian troops in all Libya something more than half were either killed or in our hands. At least two-thirds of his equipment in ships, aircraft and land weapons were destroyed or captured. Nineteen Fascist generals were prisoners. An area of land as large as England and France had been lost by Italy. The Suez Canal had to a great extent been removed from the war zone. The morale of the Italian soldier was broken. Wavell and his men had been lifted to immense prestige at home and in America. All this had been done in precisely two months.

And the fall from power to weakness, from bravado to humility and despair, was displayed with brutal clarity in a mean little farmhouse in the mean little village of Soluch where I found my way after the battle. Pushing through the thousands of prisoners who stood about aimlessly in the mud, I went past the guards about the farmhouse door, and there, squatting in the unfurnished corridors or standing in the shoddy yard outside, were the captured generals, the brigadiers and the full colonels. I went from one to another—General Cona, the commander-in-chief; General Bignani, leader of the Bersaglieri; General Villanis of the artillery; General Negroni, chief of the technical services; General Bardini, head of the motorised division; and General Giuliano, chief of staff to Cona. In the yard outside, sitting in the backseat of a car with a rug wrapped round him, was Bergonzoli. He was ill; I stood outside and saluted him, and he opened the door and leaned forward to speak to me.

'Yes, I had supposed you would want to know how I kept on eluding you since last December,' he said. 'The others asked me that. Well, I walked out of Bardia on the third day of the battle. I saw it was hopeless, and with several of my officers we set off, walking by night, hiding in caves by day. It took us five days to reach Tobruk. We passed right through the British lines. We were so close we heard your troops talking. We saw their watch-fires and smelt their cooking. My staff major, a heavy man, was forced to drop out through exhaustion and I suppose he was captured.

'After Tobruk fell, I flew out aboard the last remaining plane to Derna. Derna was in some ways our best stand of all, but when at last many of our guns were out of action and we had no more ammunition I got my troops away at night and with them drove off in a Toppolino car down the coastal road to Benghazi.

'We had no time to prepare defences outside Benghazi. In any case, it was an open town. We had no wish to expose the women and children there to any more

misery. We decided to leave with our army for Tripoli. You were here too soon, that is all. Your forward units found us on the coast on Wednesday morning when we were in an exposed and dangerous position. But we gave battle at once. Our tanks and artillery and men were tired and at a considerable disadvantage on the coast, but they came quickly into position and gave battle magnificently. We launched two counterattacks that were very nearly successful. Our tanks against superior numbers broke right through the English lines. Our second attack was made when our forces were largely decimated and our ammunition almost exhausted. And always, here as everywhere else, we were grossly outnumbered. So when our second attack was unable to prevail we had no choice but to make an honourable surrender.'

All this was spoken in Italian through an interpreter, but when the interpreter translated, 'I ran away,' Bergonzoli snapped in English, 'Not ran away, drove away.' I have compressed here all the pertinent things he said in answer to the correspondents' questions, and this was the theme of it—'We were outnumbered.'

Poor little Bergonzoli. I had expected a blustering, piratical sort of general. But here he was, a soft-spoken little man with a pinched swarthy face that had aged unbelievably since his great days in Spain. His famous 'barba elettrica' was a neat, bristly beard parted in the centre. A large diamond flashed on his left hand as he waved it for emphasis. He wore a plain, undecorated green uniform. Among the Fascist generals, he was certainly the bravest of the lot. One could not help perversely wishing that after so many risks and chances he had got away in the end.

He was taken the next day to hospital in Benghazi, as it was thought he was suffering from appendicitis. But the day after that they brought him to the aerodrome at Berka on a stretcher, and lifted him into a Bombay transport plane. Then, with the six other captured generals and myself squatting on our luggage on the floor of the aircraft, we took off for Cairo.

It was a fearful trip: cold, bumpy and long. Under his fierce crop of whiskers Bergonzoli lay there looking ashen grey, not moving or speaking. He was exhausted into numbness. We flew on for four hours non-stop over the territory we had conquered—past Barce and Cirene, Derna and Mekili, Tobruk, Bardia and Sidi Barrani. The other generals too were far from well, and when they were airsick it was too much for me.

We were a wan and unhappy crew when we put down for a few minutes outside Alexandria. Then we took off again up the Nile Delta for Cairo. As the Pyramids showed through the mist, one or two of the generals turned listlessly in their seats to look at this green valley where they had dreamed they would arrive as conquerors. But they seemed to care little about it any longer.

We came down at last and they were taken away. A British ambulance, squat, trim and efficient, was the last thing I remember of the Benghazi campaign. It shunted up to the aircraft. Bergonzoli was lifted down carefully. And still he never moved.

Chapter 12

In all other sectors our penetration into Abyssinia is enlarging.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, APRIL 1ST, 1941.

I FLEW back to East Africa for the fall of Addis Ababa. Once or twice only in my life have I been seasick. Yet any sort of air journey makes me feel uneasy. If it is at all rough, then it is hopeless—I just give up and lie back, pea-green in the face, while my stomach rages and my ears buzz with a terrible low humming. Five years of travelling by air round Europe haven't made any difference. A year in the Middle East hitchhiking with the R.A.F. has made things worse if anything.

But there is one trip I can almost enjoy, and that is on a flying boat up the Nile Valley on a still day. You can make straightaway for the smoking room and order a drink. The Nile water squirts pleasantly past the windows as you take off from Cairo. You look down on the Gezira Sporting Club on its smug green island in the Nile, and the numberless reeking streets of Cairo, and you are cool and remote. Even the meaningless and utterly boring shapes of the Pyramids achieve a faint distinction from the air. All the rest of the journey is just the green ribbon of the Nile and the desert roasting itself under the 'unrelenting triumph of the sun'. You are not obliged to look at anything, since there is nothing to see. So you sit back and smoke and imagine yourself in some noisy but not too dreary club, and presently you are at Khartoum.

For this journey the British Overseas Airways Corporation exacts a fee of nearly £40, and to my mind it is not dear. The same trip takes you four days by boat and rail.

From the flying-boat anchorage upstream they drive you past a landmark called 'Gordon's tree' into the town of Khartoum which Kitchener laid out in the form of the Union Jack. Every writer on Khartoum recalls this harmless piece of Victorian jingoism—probably because it suggests the whole of the Sudan so strongly. The place is not jingoistic. It is just a well-run empire country club. They tend to pick Blues rather than dons for the Civil Service. But Big White Carstairs flourishes here in his most amiable form, a friendly hospitable man and not a bore. It is a country where every white man is something. He is Jones of the railways or Gibson of cotton or a white hunter or a district commissioner or a soldier. Almost the lowest rank any white officer can hold in the Sudan Defence Force is Bimbashi—major.

The only notable political disturbance that has occurred since the British took over was when the Sudanese objected to Egyptian officers in their army. But the motion picture, *The Four Feathers*, which was filmed in the Sudan with a good deal of painstaking attention to accuracy, is banned in the country. It is felt that it might upset the white man's station since, you may remember, a good deal of the picture is devoted to showing what the Fuzzy Wuzzies did to white prisoners when they caught them during the Omdurman campaign.

But British rule is on the whole benevolent and progressive, and certainly the best advertisement for empire I have seen. Which is strange, for the lush rich colonies seem not as a rule to have attracted diligent enthusiastic men, while the pitiless Sudanese deserts abound in the type that is just born to administer and

control. This you see when you are driven on your arrival to the Grand Hotel, the place where the administrators come to take their refreshment and listen to the B.B.C. Here on the terrace, which is perhaps two degrees cooler than the smiting sunshine outside, you meet ivory hunters and coffee planters from Juba and Wau up the river. On that terrace I was introduced to the pleasant custom of taking a bottle of iced beer for breakfast. From there I saw my first wild hippopotamus floating down the White Nile.

It was always pleasant to get back to the Grand Hotel, though now when I drove up in the early summer it was much altered. There was great movement in the lounge and the terrace was crowded. Soldiers and airmen moved about everywhere—General Legentilhomme of the Free French and one of Haile Selassie's aides-de-camp, a naval officer from Port Sudan and a South African brigadier—all these in addition to the habitués. And Wavell and de Gaulle coming from opposite directions were expected on the morrow. Two Tomahawks flew by, and staff cars kept driving up to the hotel. Down the road headquarters had filled a whole great red-brick block and the place buzzed like a hive. You no longer knew each officer by name—the staff had multiplied out of all knowledge and lurked behind strings of initials placarded upon its office doors.

Khartoum was at war in all seriousness now. Keren was about to fall, and Keren to the people of the Sudan was the hub of the war. Many had been killed and wounded there. For six weeks the Italians had thrust the imperial forces off those immense slopes. And now at last we had cleared the roadblocks and won the governing peaks. The vital attack was about to be launched and there was not even time for me to make the two or three days' car journey there across the desert through Kassala. It was a little difficult to assimilate all this at a moment's notice, and people bandied about the placenames too quickly for one to follow. Sanchil and Agordat meant nothing to me. I decided then to cut my losses and abandon any attempt to report Keren at first hand. Addis Ababa, after all, was the prize, and it did not seem to me that even if Lieutenant-General Platt took Keren he could carry on down the Dessie road to the capital before the Africans under Lieutenant-General Cunningham got there from the south.

So I booked at once on the next flying boat to Kenya. In order to reach Abyssinia I was going right round Italian East Africa, a distance of 3000 miles. It was taking a chance, since I knew nothing of the transport on from Kenya; and Addis Ababa might fall while I was on the way. Covering the war in these huge countries we always tried to be at one of two places—at the front, or back at headquarters. Either way you got the news. But if you were caught halfway you got nothing, and even if you did have any information you usually had no means of sending it.

And now I had to kick my heels three days in Khartoum waiting for the next flying boat south. Keren fell all right. A holiday was proclaimed in Khartoum, and the Anglican bishop ordered the church bells to be rung. Under the eye of Wavell the attack had gone down the pass and the six-thousand-foot heights had fallen to the British. It was indeed a notable victory.

The air force, it was said, were so short of machines that the hoary Vincents were being used as dive-bombers. They were used on a mail run first thing in the morning, an R.A.F. pilot told me, and then they went delivering stores and ammunition by parachute to the imperial troops who were perched in almost

inaccessible positions on the heights. After that the same machines with the same pilots went bombing throughout the day until it was time to go back on the mail run again.

The fighting on land, too, had been very heavy. Many of our troops had received slight flesh wounds from a three-inch mortar the Italians were using, and these festered and became flyblown before the men could be got down to the dressing stations. Temporary casualties then were high.

Viscount Corvedale, son of Earl Baldwin, had been down there speeding up desertions from the Italian lines. He had rigged up a big loud-speaker at the front to broadcast across the valley to the enemy. The British commanders demurred at first at this new-fangled idea, on the ground that it would draw fire. Apparently it had the reverse effect. It used to stop the war. Corvedale would play selections from Italian opera and then put across a short talk full of bad news about the Italian army. The Italians, fascinated, stopped shooting to listen. Corvedale got deserters, as he richly deserved to. Everything here to do with propaganda and the fifth column was in fact being handled with a dispatch and vision that had not yet reached Cairo.

Selassie and his patriots were away up near the sources of the Blue Nile, holding parades among the disaffected tribes and issuing golden thalers and rifles in regal abundance. The emperor still had no tanks, but his cause was going ahead by leaps and bounds. An aeroplane was flying provisions to him, and the disappointed, pessimistic little man I remembered from the previous year was become a guerrilla leader and the throne of the King of Kings was waiting for him only a hundred miles away in Addis Ababa. Keren had opened the way at last.

Gloomily in Khartoum I read the reports saying that our men were pressing on to Asmara and Massawa. Those were two good stories I was throwing away for the sake of this doubtful and difficult journey across Africa. I tried to cool my impatience by doing one of the most soothing things I could think of—walking down to Khartoum zoo again in the evening. Once again I sat there with a book in the stuffy twilight while the birds and the animals came softly round me and the deer nuzzled up to my hand. The place was pure Walt Disney. I sat before a round pond overgrown with vivid purple weed, and it was twenty minutes before I realised that two big-billed pelicans squatting in the water were not concrete statues. They arose and peered at me narrowly as I sat reading. Then they went away, believing perhaps that I was of concrete too, for I sat very still, unwilling to disturb the twenty or thirty creatures that had come around me in the dusk for company—or a lump of sugar.

At five the next morning I was off. I felt terrible despite the cooling fan above my head, and went downstairs where a group of guests in evening clothes had fallen into a discussion the night before and were still continuing it. Two sleepy brigadiers emerged. A large man whom I had turned off the flying boat by claiming a priority seat was moving around the lounge alternately threatening to take legal action against Overseas Airways and to deal directly and more forcibly with the man who had been responsible for his misfortune. He had been doing this all night, the porter told me, and I would be advised to slip out circumspectly. It seemed the man would be forced to wait in Khartoum another week, and that would cost him several thousands of pounds over a business deal. I offered to

leave my kit behind so that he could be accommodated. But when that was refused by Overseas Airways I was unwilling to do more, for this was my last chance of reporting the fall of Addis Ababa.

Already I was very late. It was a relief at last to step into the flying boat with the two brigadiers, and soon we were bowling up the White Nile. I dozed, feeling awful. Then, just short of Kosti, the aircraft turned round and went back to Khartoum. An engine had failed. We trooped miserably back to the hotel to wait another day. The man who had been left behind laughed bitterly when he heard the news. I fancy it would have been all the same to him if we had made a proper job of it and crashed.

The next morning at daybreak we were off again, breathing cool air above the endless desert, coming down occasionally into the steaming heat along the Nile. I was looking forward to seeing the natives along the way. Especially I had read of the Dinkas and the riverine tribes of the Sud country where the people were slim and tall and hipless. The naked girls were reputed to be of unusual beauty, and every bookstall in Khartoum sold photographs of the extraordinarily sexual native dances. The girls with their high firm breasts and long legs danced with a passion and a gaiety that had something more than the rhythms of America. Neither at Malakal nor at Juba did I see much rhythm, nor was there any noticeable passion either. At Malakal I made the flying boat ten minutes late by walking off into a native village in search of rhythm and passion. My only reward for the angry glances of the crew and the other passengers was that I had seen family life in the raw among the grass huts. Two girls had giggled as they passed me, their hair matted with grease and piled in a two-feet pyramid above their heads, fantastically Parisian. A naked man scowling sourly had offered to sell me a chicken.

At Juba, where the heat was past all bearing, a dozen piccaninnies were really having fun in the warm river. They yelled and cheered and dived about madly as the flying boat roared up to its mooring in the racing yellow current. As soon as we trailed half-heartedly ashore they bundled themselves into filthy shorts and shirts—just dirty little boys again. Nothing, it seemed, could prevent the native from wearing clothes now. Clothes were a distinction, and it didn't matter much if they did bring disease and ugliness. In parts of the Sudan the officials were trying to confine the men to a loincloth and the women to a scarf about their necks. But it was an uphill fight trying to persuade the native to be native.

In Kenya the authorities had accepted the inevitable and had managed to get a sort of uniform accepted. This for the men was shorts and a shirt, and for the women a simple one-piece cotton frock. Only in the outer villages did the native walk about in his naked savage grace, and even he did not regard this condition very highly, for he was off to an Indian clothing store as soon as he had the money. Glamour was being pushed out of Africa by a mass of cheap printed cotton. Even the grass huts were getting galvanised-iron roofs.

But in that section between Malakal and Juba, the Sud country, where the White Nile breaks into endless sluggish tributaries and swamps, you feel lost in a strange world, as different as the moon. Green reeds flourish, and the water channels meander over the brown earth with the intricacy of the veins in an old man's hand. The rotting vegetation from the swamps, called Sud, mats itself into floating islands that are borne off downstream, sometimes carrying elephants and

even native villages upon them. And for weeks the captive men and animals might live afloat, while the banks slide slowly by, until at last in the quickening stream, the Sud breaks up and is carried off in small pieces.

'There was a general and his wife who were once lost down there,' the steward told me as I leaned over the rail and looked down. 'They had an aeroplane in which they used to fly home to England on leave. On this occasion the general's wife said they hadn't enough petrol. The general said they had. And he took off and landed fair in the middle of that green mush you see down there. It took weeks to get them out. They were alive all right. The plane had upended and tipped them out.'

We looked down on it again, a place reeking with fetid heat and disease and bad biting insects.

'Funny how arguments get you,' said the steward. 'After their accident that couple took this flying boat home on their vacation. And, can you beat it, when they were smack over this spot they started arguing again over whether they had had enough petrol. The general still thought he had.'

Nor is Uganda, so fresh and green and varied from the air, like anything you may see in Europe. A thousand grass fires spouted smoke into the air, like a place that has just been heavily bombed, or the factory area in the Ruhr or the north of England. We came down at Port Bell on Lake Victoria, which is so large that even flying over it you sometimes cannot see either shore. Coasting on over innumerable green islands and rocky bays, I acutely remembered Scotland.

The two brigadiers were also bound for Addis Ababa, so we joined company and decided to get off at Kisumu rather than take the longer, more official, route round by Mombasa. Kisumu is remarkable for me principally because it was my first acquaintance with a place where by law you cannot pay for another man's drink. The law ran through Kenya, and was designed to stop the soldiers from spending too much on drinks they didn't want.

With the ease available only to men with red tabs on their shoulders, my two brigadiers got a car from the local authorities, and we set off along the equator for Nairobi in the morning, an eight hours' drive. Here, at this height and at this season, the country flourished like a garden. Here again there were tall trees and greenness and a high mountain wind. We drove through endless plantations of tea and coffee, of grain and pyrethrum, of mimosa and bananas. Gazelles grazed in the open, and the white ibises flocked in every swamp.

We got into Nairobi in the evening, a garden town that looks like Surrey and has a golf course at Brackenridge that is somewhere on the South Downs. Almost anything you hear of Nairobi, I imagine, is true. At this time it was filled with soldiers—both men and women. The women in khaki, an unknown thing then in Egypt, had apparently arrived in numbers from England and South Africa and were acting as chauffeurs and secretaries. The lounge of the New Stanley Hotel was one solid rendezvous. Every soldier had his girl. A good thing, too, after Alexandria and Cairo, where nightly thousands of sailors and soldiers roamed around the blue-black streets in search of company, in a land where white women were outnumbered a hundred to one, and even that remaining one was on the point of being evacuated. Nairobi was far from being evacuated. It had developed a spirited night life, as we found when we hunted for transport onto the front.

A plane was going up the following day. There were two seats. That meant that I was left behind. It seemed I was destined always to be late. Harar had fallen two days ago. The road to Mogadishu in Italian Somaliland had packed up under the weight of transport, and it was simply not possible to get into Abyssinia overland. I had to wait for the next army plane with a vacant seat. Too add to my unhappiness, Asmara fell, and it began to seem more and more likely that I should miss the fall of Addis Ababa as well. For a full week I pleaded, argued and organised, and in the end I got away.

But the time was not all lost. You cannot entirely lose time in Nairobi. It is so improbable a place, such a survival from some lost world along the pre-war Riviera, that you pause at first unwilling to believe. Somehow a small group of people in the town had achieved a life that is something between a romance in the *Girls' Own Paper* and a good healthy boys' adventure yarn. The lovers are frequently tall, good-looking counts and earls; the ladies more often than not move glamorously about in Paris evening gowns and furs. They *do* drink champagne, they *do* dance through the night occasionally on soft-lit terraces, or go riding under the moon. The men *do* go out on safari with beaters and servants, and emerge later from the forest bearing the skins of savage animals. And there is a carnival of intrigue which produces many a dramatic scene involving elopements and fights and runaway marriages between nobles and chorus girls; and, just occasionally, a little genuine tragedy.

All this is known, of course, to any student of the pre-war Sunday papers, but to see it here in full cry is an unusual experience. The case over which the people of Nairobi were engrossed when I arrived was the murder of the Earl of Errol. His body had been found in a gravel pit after a lively dinner party, and one of the guests, Sir Delves Broughton, had been charged with the murder. He was later acquitted, but at that time the case was exciting almost as much attention as the war in Nairobi.

Big-game hunting was flourishing; and, dining at Muthaiga Club, I was offered trout freshly caught in the mountains, together with some last bottles of a particularly fragrant Rhine wine. Not since that last bright summer in Paris in 1939, when the wealthy of the world came flocking to spend their money lest they should not visit Paris again, had I seen women so well groomed, wearing so many lush furs. Baboon pelts and leopard skins were particularly popular. Great log fires burned in the grates of the club chimney places, though the nights were scarcely sharp. The men wore dinner-jackets or dress uniform. The conversation tended to hunting. In the day one had golf at Brackenridge, or swimming or riding or fooling round the game reserves where giraffe still roam haphazardly. Normally one looked in at a roadhouse for an apéritif around eight in the evening, and after dinner perhaps went down to Torr's to dance. They say the altitude at Nairobi makes people slightly crazy, but after the desert I found it all delightful, as though the world were enjoying one long holiday.

As for the army, that was different. The South Africans were very keen. Most of them hated lingering on in Nairobi, and wanted to follow their fellows to the distant front. I was a good deal astonished to find trained subeditors at the censorship, and a cable service to London that took only two or three hours. My messages were censored quickly, critically and accurately, and to enable me to

visit the various area offices, which all seemed to be half a dozen miles apart, I was given a Ford truck and a driver. The advance had gone so quickly and so far that communications with the front had all but broken down; but here in Nairobi they were superb. The place was small enough to be efficient.

And so a happy-go-lucky week went by until at last I saw the R.A.F. commodore in command, and he put me aboard one of the old Junkers planes that used to run on the South African passenger line, and was now ferrying men and supplies to the front.

Chapter 13

> The Emperor entered Addis Ababa yesterday, the anniversary of the entry five years ago of the Italian troops.
>
> —CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, MAY 6TH, 1941.

AS I reached Nairobi airport in the morning a friend dropped me the information that Addis Ababa was falling. I scrawled a hasty message to my paper and gave it to a runner who carefully stuffed it in his turban. That was the nearest I ever got to using a cleft stick.

We flew a thousand miles over Africa that day. We came down for petrol among the northern wastes of Kenya and flew on over the Juba River (where a battle had been fought) into Italian Somaliland to Iscia Baidoa, where an ostrich darted suddenly under the wheels of the machine and we rose unsteadily over the grass huts again. Then onward interminably northward. I woke once to see a mob of giraffe racing in panic below us and many wild camel strewn through the wadis. Then we were over the Ogaden, that much be one of the most desolate and savage regions of the world, a place where the dead earth has been twisted and warped into long ugly ridges of stark yellow rock, and the heat reached up to us thousands of feet above. We came down onto the burning sand at Gorrahei, but there was no one there and no petrol, and the pilot decided to take a risk and try to make Harar that night.

We rose then majestically into Abyssinia, and the deserts changed suddenly into green mountains and lakes, and wild cold rain thrashed against the wings of the machine. It was nearing sunset now, and this was the difficult bit when the Italian raiders came over and we were an easy mark. Great ragged bits of rain cloud filled the sky, and we twisted this way and that to find a passage through the storm. Mountains loomed up suddenly around us, and we came low down into the valley that leads into Harar. At last, in a tremendous sunset that was full of yellow light behind purple thunderclouds, we flew over Harar itself, a walled town upon a wet green rise, and landed in the mud of a landing field some miles beyond. It was cold there and wet, and no one came to meet us. Half an hour later soldiers found us in the darkness. They had been hunting us with the radio all afternoon to warn us not to land at Harar since the field was wet and dangerous.

Well, here we were, and since no truck could risk being bogged on the field, there was nothing for it but to struggle across a mile of mud with our baggage in the darkness. A truck bumped us into Harar, where Corps Headquarters had been set up in the European quarter. It was much like the newer settlements of Libya. White stone buildings rose out of the native town. Broad fine roads ran east and west. And flies innumerable and persistent clustered like blackcurrants upon every living thing.

From far up the road at the front near Addis Ababa the news was good. Aosta had sent an envoy into Diredawa that day. It was not the armistice, but the capital had been declared an open undefended town, and we were entering it in the morning.

There then began for me a ten days' struggle for transport. No plane was going onto Addis Ababa. No convoys were going. A private car I could not have, since hostile banda tribesmen were swarming along the roads and attacking single vehicles. Intelligence were willing to help to the extent of allowing me to send two hundred words a day over army signals, but everyone was too busy and too harassed with their own job to bother about a stray journalist.

I slept at last in a friendly R.A.F. mess outside the town, too tired to care much what happened, and too disappointed at having missed after all this weary travel the thing I had come for—the entrance into Addis Ababa. There it was happening under my nose, only three hundred miles away, and it availed me nothing that I had come three thousand miles already. Actually communications to the outside world were so bad that it did not matter whether one was in Addis Ababa or not, but I did not know this then, and I went to bed that night with a feeling of crushing disappointment.

Another day of hanging round Harar waiting for a plane got me nowhere, so I decided to join a small convoy that was leaving that night under the command of a security major. With luck it seemed we might get through in twenty-four hours. We started in the darkness from the Italian hotel—three trucks and a staff car. Before midnight we were in wild mountains where the forest came down upon the road on either side, and heavy rain splashed across the track. The going got worse and worse, and at 2 a.m. the drivers were exhausted and we were forced to stop. In the morning we woke to find ourselves far out in unconquered territory on completely the wrong road. I was not yet grown used to disappointments, and my feeling of bitterness at our mistake half blinded me to the rest of the events on that absurd morning.

For some reason that was clear to nobody but himself, the security major persisted in continuing on the wrong road. We drove for an hour over country of wild precipices and valleys and came out at last under a high stone fort that was thronged with enemy native soldiers. A white flag had been flying there, but now, as we approached, it was hauled down. That was the moment when I personally would have chosen to turn the cars and retreat at speed. After all, this territory had not been conquered, and we had not ten rifles between us. But the major, one of the bulldog type, rode on up to the gates where some hundred natives armed with knives and rifles were awaiting us in heavy silence.

We got out boldly, and as we walked toward them one of the natives who sported trousers instead of a white robe came slowly forward. Clearly he and his

people were puzzled. Their white Italian officers had left them and they knew the enemy was expected. But here was the enemy come in a mere handful, and there must be rich booty in those trucks. Was this all the enemy? Or were there more? You could almost hear this native in the trousers thinking.

But the major gave him no time to think deeply. While our trucks were being turned on the muddy road, the major shot out a stream of quick questions in English. The native answered slowly, partly in Italian, partly in English, partly in Amharic, and the rest in sign language. This was Graua, he said. And who were we?

'A South African patrol will be here to occupy the fort in half an hour,' the major said firmly. 'In the meantime see there is no trouble.' It was a nice piece of bluff.

Rather overacting, I was pushing through the natives to see inside the fort when the major called me back shortly. 'Get in quickly,' he said to me quietly. 'They will start something in a minute.'

Inside two minutes we were in the cars and away. Twice shots sounded distantly as we came round out of the valley. I do not know if they were for us or not. But it was nice to be on the road again, and as we passed through the smaller villages on the way back the elders were assembled gravely along the roadside among the flies. They arose as one man in their flowing robes and bowed deeply to us. Here, as everywhere in Abyssinia, they carried umbrellas.

By two in the afternoon we were back whence we had started the night before and on the right road.

From Harar to Diredawa the highway drops more than two thousand feet. It is an immense gorge, and when you run out among the modern Italian huts and buildings on the flats below at Diredawa you are oppressed with the stale heavy air. The Italians moreover had blown this corkscrew highway at all the most dangerous places, and the passage through at that time was not easy.

Diredawa, the place where the road meets the Addis Ababa–Jibuti railway, had been converted by the Italians into their biggest airport. The R.A.F. had been blasting the place for the past six months or more. From there the road executes an interminable series of small switchbacks through the thick scrub until, always descending, you are upon the Awash Gorge—the place where the Italians were expected to make a stand—and didn't. Then you rise steadily again and the landscape opens out flatly until you are at Addis Ababa, more than seven thousand feet above the sea. All this we passed over in the next twenty-four hours, and in the early afternoon we drove into the capital itself.

If Nairobi was slightly crazy, this was a complete madhouse. Outwardly all was quiet enough among the wooden huts and the white Italian buildings and the endless eucalyptus groves. Only an occasional shot sounded from the outskirts. But most of the Empire forces had gone off chasing the Italian army down the Gimma road, and there was only a small garrison force left to control the capital. These were outnumbered ten to one by Italian soldiers, many of whom had their rifles and were still restless. Some seven or eight thousand of these men, of whom a number had prudently changed into civilian clothes, were huddled into the centre of the town in fear of their own native troops. In all the surrounding villages the Ethiopian warriors who had lately been bound to the Italian cause—some of them terrible old men with long knives—were now out for vengeance. And driving

briskly through these villages, you saw all too clearly that the one ruling thought among the tribes was to get into Addis Ababa quickly and have at those Italians. War was war in the minds of the warriors, and at the hour of victory it meant a certain amount of knife-play and booty and beating up. They seemed to be to me very discontented as they stood about leaning on their barbed spears and testing the edges of their knives.

In the outlying Italian settlements there was already hell to pay. The banda had seized this golden chance to storm the Italian settlers in their farms, and appeal after appeal was going up from our former enemies for British help. In one village the besieged Italians had spread a notice on the ground to attract the attention of airmen. It read: 'Come and save us from the Abyssinians.' British armoured cars were hurried to another settlement where they had to fight their way through the tribesmen, pack the cars with white women and farmers, and fight their way out again. At other points empire troops and Italians were fighting side by side against the angry natives.

It was all very confusing, this overnight transference of allegiances, and my Cockney driver asked darkly, 'Oo the hell are we fighting anyway—the Wops or them niggers?' I simply did not know.

The Italians inside Addis Ababa had been badly scared, and three zones had been marked out for them—one definitely safe from the Ethiopians, another probably safe, and a third definitely not safe. Into the first area they crowded thickly. This region of the town included the Albergo Imperiale, a large rambling hotel in which I booked a room. Some hundreds of Italians had taken possession of the lounge when I arrived. With that unquenchable truculence and brazenness of the Italian, they had tuned the wireless into the news bulletin from Radio Roma and were listening to a recital of British defeats and a vilification of Churchill. That went on for three days while I was in the hotel. There were even some cheers and much laughter, despite the British officers in the lounge, when Rome radio related the enemy's recapture of Benghazi.

I can conceive of no other people in the world emerging so quickly from fear to impudence. I know of no people except the British who would accept such a slight with such indifference. But to someone like myself who had lived in Italy the incident jarred. Admittedly most of the officers in the lounge could not speak Italian and did not know that they were being laughed at. But the security of the town was involved, since these people were taking heart from the Rome propaganda, and in many ways it might have made them more difficult to deal with. Not that these settlers were bad types, nor was it necessary to reduce them again to that pathetic despair of so many thousands of other Italians I had seen in Libya. But we were protecting them from the natives who ought to have been their friends, and it did seem that the Empire's forces were entitled to some gratitude. So in the first flush of my indignation I went off to report the matter. I regretted it later. It was, after all, no affair of mine.

It was raining fairly heavily now, and the town was bedraggled and dark with its early curfew, its closed shops and half-foodless restaurants. There was no bread in the hotel, and the food was very meagre and unpleasant. But big army storehouses were found in the town. They were packed with materials of all kinds—some full of uniforms, webbing and boots, others stacked to the roof with

tinned meats, vegetables, fruits and biscuits. Others again piled with spare parts, tools and electrical instruments. There were dumps of paper, leather, timber, steel. There were petrol dumps both for road vehicles and aircraft, and arsenals containing every type of small arms, larger pieces and ammunition. All had been stored for the army, and there was enough here to have kept the army going for perhaps another year.

The Duke of Aosta had rebuilt the emperor's new temple into a sort of mammoth pagoda that looked like a national art gallery. He had cleaned out most of his things from the marble halls inside, though I found a fine bronze head of Dante in the entrance hall. The emperor's old palace seemed to have been neglected, for its ramshackle wooden rooms were empty except for scattered papers of some routine department. Some attempt had been made to do up the main council chamber, where the throne of the King of Kings once stood. The Fascists had had the idea of converting this room into a sort of demonstration of their power. They had erected a number of emblematic shields made of three-ply wood. Upon each of these was painted the name of one of Mussolini's victories in the conquest of Ethiopia—'Diredawa', 'Harar' and so on. Someone had taken these down by the time I got there, and had stacked them neatly with their faces to the walls.

The walls of the council chamber had been given over to some colourist with a taste for the new Fascist art: bounding amazons and young athletes hurling spears and banners into the air, a vigorous pantomime. And now over it all floated the Ethiopian flag; the chieftains had come into the capital to kiss it, and weep emotionally as it had been hoisted up aloft.

The emperor was still a hundred miles away at this time, engaged upon the conquest of Debra Markos near the source of the Blue Nile. He had been sent the news of the fall of Addis Ababa, but it was not thought politic to bring him in just yet. There were too many Italians still in the town, and too many factional disputes among the Ethiopians themselves to make it really safe.

Down at the other end of the town from the palace, Mussolini's railway terminal stood forlornly on the edge of a cow paddock, and the South African engineers were amusing themselves by getting steam up in the twenty or so locomotives the Fascists had left behind. I watched them get two underway, and these were hitched to half a dozen wagons and sent chugging off down to the Awash Gorge, where the Italians had blown the bridge—a spectacular structure that once rose several hundred feet above the river and now lay in a mass of twisted tumbled wreckage.

I took a car up the mountains that rose still higher above Addis Ababa and looked down over its eucalyptus groves that all but embedded the buildings, and gave the place the air of being a large and well-wooded cemetery.

It was late, and by the time I got back there was no food left in the hotel. I walked around until I came upon a small restaurant, well boarded up, but with lights showing through the chinks. They took me in reluctantly at the back door, and the place was full of Italians—soldiers, I judged, who had changed into civilian clothes. The waiter explained in English (he had lived in America) that there was no food. I asked for coffee. It came hurriedly, and the entire company sat and watched me drink. I ordered more, and still they stared. They did not want me, but

I was hungry. I knew there was food, for my driver had gathered himself a dozen eggs that day and quantities of green bananas and vegetables. I had not asked how he got them, but he had said, 'Plenty more where these come from.' And now I said to the waiter that I wanted some wine.

'There is no wine, signor.'

'Then some bread and butter.'

'But there has been none for three days, signor. We have nothing.' He called his wife in from the kitchen to support him and she wafted a rich smell of onions and frying meat into the room. The others in the restaurant, about twenty, kept watching me. I did not want to take their food, but I was as hungry as they were, and I did not see why they could not share it with me.

'All right,' I said, 'have a cigarette.' Every Italian had been asking for cigarettes. I brought out a packet of fifty Player's. The waiter came forward at once. 'Go on,' I said, 'take two.'

I handed them right round the room. Everyone reached forward for them. Some took two or three. It was the same as years ago in Spain. It was the lack of cigarettes that people minded almost more than anything. Some of the Italians smoked at once; others put the cigarettes carefully away in their pockets.

The waiter leaned over my table and said he was in America for five years and that he had smoked Camels. Here is Addis Ababa there were no cigarettes for the civilians, he said.

One of the Fascist officers in plain clothes came over to the table and asked the waiter to translate. 'I told him I was in America,' the waiter said. 'Sit down,' I said to the officer in Italian. 'Perhaps you know how to get some wine.'

'You speak Italian?' the officer said.

'No. I just know a few words—just enough to say I am very hungry.'

The waiter went into the kitchen and came back with a plate of stew and half a bottle of red Chianti. 'There is really no bread, signor,' he said. 'We cannot get any even for ourselves.'

Soon the whole restaurant was eating and talking and smoking, and I was battling with my Italian to keep the Fascist officer in conversation. It did not take long for him to open up.

'We knew the end was coming,' he said, pulling out a copy of the *Corriere del Impero*—the last issue that had been printed before the British came in—'when they stopped saying we were invincible and started printing things like this.'

I read: 'Consider as light the burdens you are enduring today and the bigger burdens you must expect to endure tomorrow.' The paper spoke of more towns in England being 'coventryed'.

'Most of us were for the armistice,' the officer went on. 'Now the rains are starting we might hold you for a few months in Gimma and Gondar, but what is the good of that? It will not give us back Ethiopia. It will not bring us help from outside. They kept saying the Germans were coming. It's too late now anyway, unless the whole war finishes. The duke, too, he thought it was useless going on after Keren. I know, for I was on his staff here in Addis. The papers for the armistice were drawn up. Then just a week ago there were new orders from Rome. We had to hold on. We were to give up Addis if necessary, but we were to hold on

everywhere else we could. They said that the Germans were preparing immediate offensives in the north, and we should soon be relieved.

'And it seemed true when they retook Benghazi. The armistice papers were torn up. All Aosta's generals were told to hold on. Even in Massawa the admiral was told to continue the negotiations for the port as long as possible, though he was no longer in a position to fight. All this was urgent, they said in messages from Rome. It was necessary to hold up as many British Empire forces as possible to prevent them going north to strengthen Egypt. They did not exactly tell us this last bit, but we guessed it. And, anyhow, we had to obey.'

So there it was at last. I went back to my hotel working it out. The Abyssinian war was not done yet. It was going to drag on with siege after siege and skirmish after skirmish. None of it would be as important and decisive as the fall of Keren and Addis Ababa, and the British conquest could not be weakened now. And suddenly I saw there was nothing here for me among this guerrilla fighting. At another time it would have been an exciting adventure to travel with the army through this wild country, winning all the time. But the battle for Egypt was being fought out right now in the desert, and the battle for Greece would begin soon. I had to get back as quickly as I could.

Chapter 14

> The Duc d'Aosta has sent in emissaries to seek terms of surrender for the whole of the Italian forces in the area.
>
> —CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, MAY 18TH, 1941.

IN THE morning I met General Cunningham, and his A.D.C. took me down in his new white Alfa-Romeo to try and get me aboard the general's plane. That fell through, and I set out in a Ford staff car with two drivers, a white and a native to try and catch the same aircraft at Diredawa. Having dropped the general, it was flying on empty to Nairobi, where I could arrange to join the flying boat back to Cairo.

We left Addis Ababa at noon. The afternoon went by pleasantly as we cruised along at a steady fifty miles an hour, taking pot shots with our revolvers out of the car window at jackals and hyenas that kept crossing the track. Brilliant birds swept through the forest at every waterhole, and there was some wild creature at every turn in the road—a hyena or a gazelle or more jackals. Once a school of several score of baboons vanished into the bush with a flash of blue, red and gold.

The general's plane swept over and past us. Once of twice banda tribesmen, lean, half-naked and looking ferocious, ran out toward us from the bushes, but we were gone before they could start anything. Once we were forced to wait with some men of a Gold Coast regiment who had been fired on and had disappeared through the bush mopping up. They came back presently with about a hundred armed prisoners, but we went on again.

By evening we were over the Awash Gorge, and taking turns at the wheel we came on past Miessa and Afdem. We were in the switchback section now, and our pace slowed to twenty miles an hour. As the car breasted each rise, the headlights showed straight into the sky and the driver for a second could see nothing. Then as the bonnet fell suddenly down the opposite side of the rise he had to move quickly, for the track in falling turned to the left or right. There was only a split second to bring the wheel round. Often we splashed through streams and passed trucks bogged in the mud, and it was necessary to feel a way cautiously around them.

At 2 a.m. we reached Diredawa at last, and drove up to the lighted signal-wagon in the airport. They knew nothing of the general's plane or its projected journey to Nairobi on the morrow. It was perhaps at a satellite landing field in the forest about twelve miles out.

We set off over a deeply sanded track and in an hour got nowhere. We returned to Diredawa, got new directions and set off again. At 4 a.m. we were stuck in the sand and hopelessly lost in the scrub. We could do no more then, and, too weary to undress, we flung ourselves down on the ground to sleep until daylight. Two hours later I half turned over on my blanket, wakened by some noise that was not the usual chorus of the forest. It was grey light and I lay for a moment waiting. Then it came clearly—a full deep-throated lion's roar, perhaps two hundred yards away. The two drivers heard it too and sat bolt upright. I was not out for adventure. I was just a reporter wanting very much to get his story back to a cable station. Inside five minutes we had the car out of the sand and were bowling off in the opposite direction to the lion. We heard him faintly twice in the distance—clearly he was very hungry—and then judged it safe to try and get our bearings for Diredawa.

I had given up all hope of catching the general's plane. All I wanted was a cup of coffee. We chose a likely-looking track and in five minutes had run straight upon the satellite landing field and there stood the general's plane. I rushed over to the tents in the middle of the thorn scrub and found the pilot in bed. 'Oh no,' he said, 'you're out of luck. The orders have been changed. The aircraft isn't going.'

We drove on up to Diredawa and Harar and fell asleep in the hotel there. Next morning I was promised a seat on a Junkers leaving from Diredawa. We drove down to the airport in good time in the morning. The Junkers was late in arriving. It was decided to postpone its departure for Nairobi until the following day. This I did not mind, for I had talked to a young South African pilot who was also going to Nairobi. He was flying a Glen Martin straight through from Nairobi to Cairo, he said, and invited me to go with him. I would be in Cairo in three days.

That night I slept under the mosquito nets at the Diredawa hotel. Next morning, as the plane was warming up for its take-off, I was told that there had been a hitch. I could not go. The plane was overloaded.

I went back to air headquarters at Harar thinking hard, hard things about the South African air force. I would try no more here. I would drive onto the Jijiga field and try to contact an R.A.F. mail plane that called there from Aden. Air headquarters wired Aden asking them to pick me up at Jijiga, and I felt better.

We drove on now over a lush green countryside, where wild duck were so thick upon the lakes they could be shot with a rifle. Slim, graceful Ethiopian girls, with

bundles and baskets on their heads, were walking along the highway, their brilliant robes caught in a knot over their breasts, leaving their copper-black shining shoulders bare. Naked children swarmed in every grass-hut village. The sun shone out at last through the rain clouds, and the men were out with their oxen turning back the rich black cotton soil with wooden ploughs for the summer sowing.

We came up through Marda Pass, where again the Italians had tried to make a stand and failed. Beyond that the bridges were down, and I counted nearly five hundred South African Ford trucks waiting to get through. The convoy had been on the road for nearly a month, and the men's cursing in Afrikaans and English filled the valley from end to end. They did not know yet that Addis Ababa had fallen, and they were beyond caring much anyway at that moment. The rain began drizzling down again, and just over the next line of hills we could see Jijiga. My plane was due to leave for Aden in the morning. The roadblock, they estimated, would take anything up to twenty-four hours to get through. In desperation I made straight across the half-broken bridge and got through.

It was pouring hard when we got into the airfield, a small township of white tents, with a squadron of Junkers bombers—they were actually being used as dive-bombers—lying in the rain beyond. The commanding officer, a colonel (these South African air force officers had army rank and wore army uniform) received me kindly. 'But a mail plane from Aden?' he said. 'There used to be a mail plane. But it doesn't come any more. I don't know how you are going to get out. You just might get a ship from Berbera in British Somaliland if you can get yourself down there. All the other roads out are blocked.'

It was too much. I gave up then. I saw myself trapped forever in this wet, impossible, benighted country. My messages were stale already to the point of uselessness. My wife and baby had been left in Cairo, and the last news I had had of Egypt was that Bardia had fallen and the Germans were advancing into the Western Desert. There was nothing I could do about it. I was utterly cut off and utterly without ideas. And I was utterly sick and tired of travelling around in the mud and getting nowhere.

I squelched through the rain down to the mess, where about forty South African pilots were raising a terrific din. The war in East Africa for them was over. Some were going down to South Africa to take over the new Glen Martins and see their families and girlfriends again. And just that morning, after a two weeks' drought, a large consignment of whisky had arrived. Nothing could have suited me better. I was swept into the party. And while the rain drove steadily onto the canvas roof through the afternoon, the evening and half the night, we sang choruses and told stories and played stupid very funny games and finished a case of whisky. I slept blissfully that night on the camp bed of a pilot who had crashed the day before.

These young South African pilots were wonderful types—big men, steady, intelligent and enthusiastic. Only a few days before, one of their Hurricane pilots had been forced onto a landing field in enemy territory. Another Hurricane pilot landed beside his comrade, and the two men tried to take off in one machine. The first pilot clung to the edge of the cockpit and was blown off at the first attempt. Then he clambered upon his companion's shoulder, and, riding like that, they came safely home together.

There was another story of a young South African Irishman who had been put on a dull communications flight with one of those big Valencias that do ninety miles an hour if they are lucky. Each day the aircraft had to pass over an Italian fort, but the pilot was forbidden to bomb while he was on communication work. It was tantalising, this Italian fort. One night the Irishman and his crew got a dustbin. They broke up an old sewing-machine and threw the bits in. They collected old bolts and nails and scrap-iron. And they rammed it all down into the dustbin with a charge of cordite on top. They constructed a homemade fuse, and carted the whole contraption over to the Valencia.

That night when no one was about they took off. Over the Italian fort the pilot yelled: 'All right. Let her go!' The crew lit the fuse, swung open the side door and shoved at the dustbin. It did not budge. It was too heavy for them. The fuse kept burning. Desperately they shoved and tugged again as the aircraft turned and made another run over the target. This time it fell out and the lightened plane lifted with a sickening lurch. The dustbin fell squarely in the courtyard of the fort where still no one stirred. The South Africans could see the fuse burning. Then came an immense deafening roar. The Valencia was flung hundreds of feet upward, and sneaked off quietly home to its landing field. When, later, troops reached the Italian fort, its entire garrison—over fifty men—was found dead.

In the bright sun of the next morning at Jijiga a Blenheim bomber sailed down upon the airport, and as the pilot climbed out he said to me: 'Is your name Moorehead? I am supposed to pick you up and take you back to Aden. And if you want to go onto Cairo, you will probably be able to arrange a lift for tomorrow.'

Inside an hour we were in the air and flying out of Abyssinia and into British Somaliland, and high over the mountains past Hargeisa. I sat in the rear gunner's transparent turret, with only the clouds round my head, and it was the finest ride in an aeroplane I had ever had.

We ate lunch in flyblown Berbera, where a native boy pulled a punkah over our heads and bits of plaster fell off the walls from the shell-holes made by the British navy before the town was reconquered. It was hot, smelly and surrounded by desert, and I still cannot see why any man should wish to conquer Berbera, let alone Mussolini, who has—or rather had—enough deserts already.

We crossed in an hour to Aden. One more disappointment there. The squadron flying up to the defence of Egypt was so overloaded already that it could not take another passenger. But a troopship was waiting in the harbour to leave for Suez first thing in the morning, and the news from the Western Desert was better. The Germans, it seemed, had run themselves to a standstill.

I sat down in the R.A.F. mess and wrote these notes on the Abyssinian campaign:

'Most of the preconceived ideas of colonial warfare went west in Abyssinia. The strategy of defensive positions was proven false. Speed and the fifth column broke the Italians. We concentrated superior firepower at a few unexpected places. Then we hit and went right on hitting so long as there was anything to hit—tactics which Hitler used in France and is using now in the Balkans. Before East Africa drops out of the war altogether, let us not forget why we won here.

'It is the story of three battles. It begins among the reeds and swamps of the Juba River that cuts British Kenya from Italian Somaliland. When Napoleon or

Caesar wanted to hold a river (I am quoting one of the staff officers who designed this battle) he put a light screen along his own bank and kept his main forces in the rear. He let the enemy establish a bridgehead and send his troops across. Then he swept forward with his cavalry and cut the invaders off.

'The modern Caesar did not believe in that.

'He spread the mass of his army along both sides of the Juba River. General Cunningham forced a passage over the stream at two points, cut through the Italian lines, and his two columns converged on one another till they met behind the enemy and formed a triangle with the river. Then a third column smashed straight across the Juba and joined the triangle at its apex. The Italian Somalis, who fought more bravely here than anywhere else, were never allowed to reform.

'In one increasing wave the British swept up the coast through Kismayu, Brava and Mogadishu. Then they wheeled left across one of the world's most hellish deserts. The lines of communication lengthened from 500 to 1000, then to 1500 miles. Great slabs of unconquered territory lay on either side, and still Cunningham pushed on.

'At one time the advance went at more than sixty miles an hour. Lorries, guns and staff cars roared up the road to Jijiga as though it was a cross-country race. As the anti-tank guns breasted each rise at one place they blew the enemy out of the valley below, and charged after them to blow them out of the next valley. It was untechnical, unprecedented, and it knocked the Italians into bewildered surrender. They stood at last at Marda Pass between Jijiga and Harar. Who wouldn't? An uncovered grassy plain leads up to a line of steep hills. Guns in the hills covered our approach for ten miles, and the hills themselves were honeycombed with machine-gun nests and traps. But the British wheeled upon the flanks and won the position. And central Abyssinia was ours.

'Now propaganda began to work. Stories of defeat at Juba and Marda Pass began to filter through to the Italians who were making a strong stand on the 6000-feet cliffs at Keren, in Eritrea. We spread those stories day and night—by pamphlets and broadcasts from Nairobi in many languages, by front-line broadcasts at Keren, by Selassie's fifth column and by British missions in the interior. The effect was tremendous.

'In hundreds, then in thousands, the enemy conscripts began to desert. The Fascists, bewildered at the rot spreading everywhere, gave up their untakeable fortress at Keren. And that actually was the finish. After Keren, where we had fairly heavy casualties, until Addis Ababa fell, there was not any more large-scale fighting. Harar and Diredawa were confused, halfhearted affairs. The last engagement at Awash was hardly a fight at all. The Italians blew up the 500-foot railway bridge there, and banged off a few mortars across the gorge.

'But the Duke of Aosta saw there was no hope. He flew an envoy—strangely, it was an Italian naval attaché—into Diredawa to gain time while he drew up papers for complete surrender.

'Then came Benghazi, Yugoslavia and Greece—and a new set of orders for Aosta. "Hold on," these said in effect. "Tie up the British in Abyssinia as long as you can."

'The Duke hit upon the ruse of handing over to us the capital, with all the embarrassment of looking after its thousands of white women and children and

his disarmed soldiers. He guessed we would not abandon them to the natives. We did not. Addis Ababa was a hindrance to us. We were diverted from the job of immediately pursuing the main Italian forces down the Gimma road and northward up to Dessie. And now the guerrilla fighting will go on. But it is peace for a time in most of Abyssinia. I make these points about the campaign that might be worth remembering in Europe yet:

'First: subject peoples will rise against the Axis if given enough support. Second: the Air Force and the Army worked here as one instrument, under a single high command. Third: we used only a few well-equipped men to risk a lot. It was actually just two brigades that made that final advance on Addis Ababa, and half of those were native troops.'

It went on for months after I wrote this. Dessie fell on April 20th, and the Emperor folded up his red tent at last and entered the capital. Amba Alagi, 'the second Keren,' fell on May 26th, and at the end of a column of seven thousand prisoners who marched out to surrender came Aosta himself. Resistance round the southern lakes collapsed. Gimma hung on until midsummer, and then Gondar alone was left holding out in the rain to the north. There will probably always be someone holding out somewhere against somebody in Abyssinia. But for all effective purposes the conquest of Italian East Africa took us about six months. It was a more permanent success than Cyrenaica and in many ways as brilliant.

Going aboard my troopship in Aden, I was bombarded with questions about the Middle East by hundreds of officers and troops who had been months at sea with little or no news on their voyage out from England. In the short voyage to Suez I was forced to become a lecturer. My platform was the hatch, my audience men who had never seen the desert or Africa before. I spoke several times a day. They were so eager for information; so quick to learn and tie me in knots with questions. I wonder where they are scattered now.

Chapter 15

Benghazi is indefensible from a military point of view.
—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, APRIL 3RD, 1941.

IN THE spring, at the moment of his triumph, Wavell was forced to decisions more difficult, more dangerous and more important that any he had faced before. After the first rosy glow of optimism had passed, it was seen that the capture of Benghazi had not reduced British difficulties in the Middle East, but multiplied them.

The first decision that had to be taken, and taken quickly, was whether we should advance to Tripoli. Tripoli was another good seven or eight hundred miles by land, and nearly all of it desert. The men who had reached Benghazi were tired, and many of the vehicles and weapons altogether worn out. Benghazi was already being mined and bombed so heavily by the newly arrived German aircraft that it was untenable by the navy and unsuitable for the time being as a supply port.

True, units of another armoured division were now arriving in the Middle East, but the men were untrained in the desert, and in any case the campaign against Italian East Africa had already been launched and materials as well as men were needed there. Then again, of what use these extra eight hundred miles of desert coastline? Valuable, of course, if Weygand in Algeria and Tunis threw in his lot with ours, but the French were a long way from doing that. Benghazi as an invasion or air striking-point was almost as near Italy as Tripoli, and both were farther off than Malta, which we already held. It would require a large garrison—a larger one than we could spare—if we did seize the rest of Libya.

Those were the main points against going on—points that were thrashed out by O'Connor and his generals as they studied their maps in the damp and gloomy bedrooms of the Hotel d'Italia in Benghazi, and by Wavell in his office by the Nile, and by Churchill and the War Cabinet in London.

But there were two big advantages in continuing the advance at once—first, the Italian army was in poor condition to resist even at the gates of Tripoli, and would probably collapse against any sort of opposition; and, secondly, we should prevent the Axis from landing reinforcements and coming on again.

There remained the political factor, and that probably tipped the balance against continuing. Greece, though still attacking, was wearying, and the Germans were preparing to march against her. Greece, in fact, sent an urgent request for help the moment Benghazi fell. If the Nazis attacked through Bulgaria, then Greece would fall and with it our last chance of getting an easy foothold in Europe. That was the vital thing. A foothold in Europe. There alone could we land with the approval and help of the local people. Once in Greece, an expeditionary force might prop the whole tumbling structure of the Balkans. Bulgaria might stiffen her attitude toward Germany, Yugoslavia would be encouraged to turn down Hitler's demands, and, last and most, Turkey might finally drop her neutrality and come in with us. The mountains of Greece were high. We had held a line there in the last war. Could it not be done again?

Neither Wavell in Cairo nor the War Cabinet in London alone were competent to decide. So Mr Eden and Sir John Dill got in an aeroplane and flew to Cairo to thrash it out. They talked to Wavell, Cunningham, Longmore. They flew to Ankara and sounded out Sarajoglou and the Turks, they went on down to Athens. Then they came back to Cairo, well pleased with what they had seen and heard. General Smuts flew up from South Africa to give his advice. Little by little the opinion grew that we could risk this adventure, that we could organise another and better Gallipoli in the Balkans. It was not one man's opinion. It was certainly not Wavell's, but Wavell naturally was the man who would have to carry out the job.

And so, while the Middle East was still mellow with its victories and optimism still glowed in the arguments of the generals and the faces of their soldiers, it was decided that we should march out upon Germany in the battlefield of Europe.

Through March Egypt hummed with activity. The Greeks had asked for at least six divisions. Very well, then, we would give them five, anyway, and the help of the Fleet and twenty squadrons of aircraft and food and oil. Sixty thousand men were ordered to the ships—Australian and New Zealand infantry, British gunners and technicians and mechanised units. What if Germany was steadily eating into Bulgaria and putting it out that she had three hundred thousand of her best men

ready to fight us in Greece? What if Hitler was announcing that he would take the offensive if the British landed? Turkey would stand at our right hand. Eden had flown to Cyprus and had had another most satisfactory meeting with Sarajoglou, and the two statesmen had been loudly cheered in a patriotic Turkish–British demonstration at Nicosia. The Yugoslavs would hold and aid us. Moreover, the snow still lay upon the Rhodope Mountains, blocking the German way south, and the Greeks were stoutly attacking still in Albania.

There was something else. The invasion of England was in the air. Hitler was declaring he felt youthful and eager in the spring. The German radio was more than hinting. Should invasion come, then the blow would be lessened if the Germans were also engaged at their back door in the Balkans. Both the Australian and New Zealand governments fully saw these points, and promised all the help they could in the coming campaign.

And finally America and the world could not fail to be impressed if we honoured our pledge of help to the Greeks.

That was March in Egypt, then—optimism, great mental activity and all the surge of ambition and hope that precedes adventure. In contrast to the opening of the Benghazi campaign, there was no secret about the expeditionary force to Greece. The Egyptians were gossiping about it in the bazaars. New war correspondents were being lined up in London for the 'new front.' In Istanbul it was the major question of the moment and every politician discussed it. In Athens the German minister was kept fully informed, and his military attaché was duly there on the quays at Piraeus when the first troopships arrived. Another member of the German legation went through the New Zealand camp on the slopes of Hymettus, chatting with the troops in perfect English. (Greece, remember, had never broken off diplomatic relations, and the German legation remained in Athens through the war there.)

The troops themselves knew all about it. They had been mustered at Alexandria and Port Said and were looking forward to a change from the eternal desert. New soldiers had arrived from England and were eager for the fight on the romantic soil of Greece. They had good weapons. There was talk of advancing through Europe to the relief of England. Courage and hope ran high.

Wavell alone was non-committal.

Three weeks later Belgrade was in ruins, and most of Cyrenaica was lost. Six weeks later the swastika was on the Acropolis, and what was left of the British expeditionary force was evacuating on a bombed sea. Nine weeks later the Germans held Crete.

Against that Addis Ababa was ours. Tobruk held. Sections of the German forces had been decimated. And the German plans, whatever they were, had been held up and disrupted. These were some consolation. But, it might have been added, had you never gone to Greece, you might still have had Benghazi and Crete too. You might have seized the Dodecanese and taken Syria with ease. You might never have had a revolt in Iraq. You might have extended the mauling of the Italian army by the Greeks in Albania, for without your intervention the Germans would not have entered Greece so soon.

There were a dozen, a hundred 'mights'. Rising out of the welter of mights was only the courage of the men who had fought for Greece and Crete and the desert.

It was that courage that in the end lifted the Middle East out of the despondency caused by the Greek campaign. That and the holding of the Russians in Russia.

Now, after the event, it is clear that there were one or two major misapprehensions ruling in the spring of 1941. First we did not even then know that the Italians were so weak or the Germans so strong. We underestimated the ability of the Germans to reinforce Libya and advance across Cyrenaica. We, perhaps deliberately, overemphasised the danger of the invasion threat to England. Politically we misjudged Turkey. Militarily we underestimated the German dive-bomber and the power of his airborne divisions.

The German offensive in the Middle East followed the most careful political planning and the most exact military preparation and timing. The German design was force and overwhelming firepower applied in restricted areas. The chief interest of the enemy lay in dispersing Wavell's already widely divided armies to the utmost. Accordingly, in strict logical sequence Raschid Ali was encouraged to his *coup d'état* in Baghdad in early April; the Italian fleet was sent out to Matapan to draw the British navy off while Benghazi was retaken; the Turks were threatened; the Italians in Abyssinia told to hold on to the last, and in the Far East the Japanese were persuaded to create new diversions; more pressure, too, was put on England's nerves. It was thereby hoped that England, threatened in the west by the Germans, and the Dominions, threatened in the east by the Japanese, would withhold supplies and men from Wavell; that within the Middle East itself Wavell would be forced to buttress Benghazi in the west, strengthen his forces attacking Italian East Africa in the south, and rescue the R.A.F. garrisons in Iraq in the east, while his unsupported expedition in Greece was destroyed by the main German army.

And in some measure this scheme succeeded. Undoubtedly extra reinforcements that would have gone to Greece were retained for the protection of the Nile after Cyrenaica had fallen. The British forces in Cyrenaica had been stripped to the bone. Then, too, the South Africans and Indians attacking Abyssinia and Eritrea were prevented by the continued Italian resistance from coming north to support the garrison of Egypt, Australia was compelled to divert troops to Singapore, and we had to land Indians at Basra to deal with the Iraqis. As later in Syria, the Germans had no intention of really supporting Raschid Ali, and he, poor little mutineer, was left in the lurch after he had served his purpose.

The presence of the Germans in Libya was not altogether a surprise. It was well known that Badoglio and the other Italian generals were removed to make way for the new commanders sent down with troops from Germany. It was known that the Luftwaffe had occupied the air-striking bases in Sicily, and their bombers and fighters were appearing in increasing numbers over Malta and Benghazi with much more resourceful tactics than the Italians had ever shown. Our own R.A.F. kept reporting the continued and increasing arrival of troopships at Tripoli.

There were several brushes between the Germans and our patrols in the desert between Benghazi and Tripoli. The first of these involved six armoured cars—three Germans, three British. The story runs that the two groups of cars were bowling down the coastal road beyond Agheila in opposite directions, and actually shot past one another. 'My God,' said the British commander, 'did you see who they were? Germans.'

The three British cars turned about and made toward the enemy, one car coming straight down the road, the other two deploying in the desert on opposite sides of the road. The Germans followed exactly the same procedure. The result was distinctly unusual. While the two cars on the road were blazing away at one another, the other four got stuck in the sand on either side. Eventually all extricated themselves, and, still firing vigorously, the three British cars crossed through the Germans again and both sides regrouped themselves, still three cars a side, much in the manner of the game of oranges and lemons. There had been no hits, no casualties. It did not seem that anyone was going to get a clear result, so both formations retired with dignity to their own lines.

But Agheila fell, and Agedabia. And then German Erwin Rommel, the Nazi commander, with his one German armoured division, supported by the residue of the Italian forces, put Wavell's tactics into reverse. One section of his army fell unexpectedly upon Benghazi; the other crossed the desert south of the Green Mountains from west to east and engaged the British at Mekili. It was the sort of military coup a commander can expect once in a lifetime.

The British in Benghazi had reduced their garrison to a skeleton. Most of the fighting vehicles were back in the Delta being repaired. For a hundred miles they had little or no support. And the suddenness of the attack spread confusion. Light British tank forces that went out to engage returned to their base near Benghazi only to find that while they were out the petrol dump had been exploded—in error. The tanks without fuel had to be abandoned.

Round Benghazi there were no defensive lines at all. There was nothing for it but to blow up equipment and munitions that could not be got away, and retire in as good order as possible until we had time to make a stand and discover the strength of the enemy. But the supply convoys that were toiling up that wearisome road from Tobruk and Egypt could not be turned about in a moment, nor could the troops suddenly be regrouped for defence. The British forces were still stressed for advance, not defence. Communications broke down. Units became isolated.

General O'Connor and General Neame sent their immediate staffs and their baggage back by the main road and themselves followed a shortcut. They found themselves blocked by a large convoy. A squadron of Nazi motorcyclists, far in advance of the main German army, drove up. The British driver who first saw them was shot dead at point-blank range, and the German motorcyclist who had shot him was in turn killed outright. But the other motorcyclists closed in, and travelling up the line of vehicles they came on the generals' car. It was the worst possible luck. With tommy-guns pointing at them through the car windows O'Connor and Neame were compelled to surrender, and were promptly taken back to the German lines. Only a few days previously O'Connor had been knighted. No army could easily afford the loss of so shrewd a tactician, and this little Irishman, with his energy, his quick forceful manners and his charm, was loved in the desert. It was a bad blow.

While the British on the coast and in the mountains were still giving ground and seeking to get some cohesion into their command, the Nazis' desert column arrived suddenly at Mekili, where the British garrison under General Gambier-Parry was in no condition to receive them. Gambier-Parry was taken in his tent, and Mekili collapsed.

It was now seen that no line could conveniently be held short of Tobruk, and on Tobruk now the Empire forces converged. From Egypt itself what reinforcements there were available were hurried up to meet the enemy on the escarpment. The Germans and the Italians, in the full tide of their success, flung themselves headlong on Tobruk. They were flung back. The Australians and British with their backs to the sea had recovered from their surprise. They manned the long outer perimeter and fought with that desperate and deadly accuracy that was soon to become memorable in Greece and Crete.

Shaken but not yet rebuffed, the enemy left a containing force round Tobruk and swept on easily to Bardia and the escarpment. But the advance had now spent itself. Indeed, some units had outrun their course, and prisoners in groups of some hundreds began to fall to the British. Rommel, hardly expecting so quick an advance, had not equipped or provisioned his men for a long drive into enemy territory. No food or water convoys could keep up, and soon his advance units were in desperate need. Provision-carrying aircraft were not enough. Germans were captured in a state of near insanity for lack of water.

Upon Tobruk, then, Rommel turned the full power of his considerable force of Stukas, Heinkels and Messerschmitts, and there began a series of violent raids which in the next three months reached the amazing total of one thousand. Heavy guns were drawn up to pound the outer perimeter. Heavy tanks and eight-wheeled armoured cars were turned upon the perimeter itself. Cut off, short of water and food, lacking sleep and many of the crudest amenities of life in the field, the Tobruk garrison fought back. Attack after attack was launched against it, and though one penetrated a little distance into the outer perimeter, making a blister in the British line, every onslaught was halted.

At the end of a month the enemy abated their direct attacks.

At the end of two months they were abandoning their heavy dive-bombing raids and were resorting to shelling. They began digging in themselves. Unable to make a surgical operation upon this angry ulcer in the side of their lines, the Germans decided to seal it up.

At the end of three months the ‘rats of Tobruk’—Lord Haw-Haw’s description—were taking the offensive with nightly fighting patrols. Nor was Haw-Haw’s other description of them as ‘the self-supporting prisoners’ quite accurate. Tobruk pegged the German advance. Always it lay athwart the enemy’s lines, restless, threatening and defiant.

Inside the garrison the men lived a strange restricted life without liquor or women or picture shows or amusements of any kind. They had no fresh vegetables. They were pestered by heat, sand and flies. They had no ice. They were bombed every day and every night. The ships that brought them supplies of bullets and bully beef were sometimes sunk in the harbour. But they learned to make a life out of this confinement. They played cricket on the sand. They swam. The cooks and orderlies and batmen amused themselves by collecting old pieces of Italian pre-war cannon and ammunition. These they rigged up as best they could on bits of rock and concrete. Having no precision instruments, they poked their heads up the barrels of the guns and sighted them that way before the charge was put in. They achieved elevation and direction by removing or adding another rock to the base of the cannon. And in their spare time they banged away at the enemy,

alongside the modern twenty-five-pounders—banged away so effectively that the Australian general in command was forced to give them official recognition and an honoured place in the firing line. Anti-aircraft guns were lacking, so the garrison turned small arms upon the raiders, and one officer alone brought down six with a Lewis gun. Never was a more timely stand made; never one more vigorously continued.

Of many good stories of Tobruk here is the one I like best. A tiny Greek freighter was loaded with German prisoners in Tobruk harbour and told to proceed to Alexandria. Three knots was the speed of the freighter and three knots was her absolute utmost. Dive-bombers attacked the vessel, and though an escorting British minesweeper did what she could, and the German prisoners rushed on deck waving white towels and tablecloths, the little freighter disappeared beneath tons of exploded water. When the raid was over, the minesweeper drew near again. Smoke was belching from the funnel of the Greek—from the funnel and the ventilators and the bridgehead. And she was doing nine knots.

It is ridiculous of course to assert that the Germans in the course of a few days regained all that Mussolini had lost in two months in Cyrenaica. Even a juicy morsel of the desert like Cyrenaica is of little value unless one destroys armies there. That Wavell had done with a vengeance. Our retreat cost us under three thousand men and fewer vehicles. Nevertheless, the loss of Benghazi was a bitter surprise and it affected our enterprise in Greece.

Chapter 16

> The enemy, by the employment of greatly superior numbers, had obtained complete command of the air, and by repeated attacks had made unusable the one available good port, the Piraeus at Athens... Consequently re-embarkation had to take place from open beaches against continuous enemy pressure on land and heavy and repeated attacks from the air... Rearguards which cover this withdrawal may have to sacrifice themselves to secure the re-embarkation of others.
>
> —CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, MAY 1ST, 1941.

TWO UNLOOKED-FOR events of the greatest help to the expeditionary forces to Greece had occurred at the end of March. On the 27th, General Simovitch made his coup d'état in Belgrade, bringing Yugoslavia over to the Allies; the following day Admiral Cunningham joined the battle of Matapan and sank seven Italian warships.

At that moment it appeared that fortune was really with us and that the Greek adventure would go forward with success. But then there followed, one after another in the first week of April, the fall of Benghazi, the *coup d'état* of Raschid Ali in Baghdad and the opening of the German attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece. The future clouded over.

Our expedition was landed principally at Piraeus and Volos. The force consisted of 24,100 British, 17,125 Australians and 16,532 New Zealanders. About 60,000 in all. They were fully equipped with sixty- and twenty-five-pounder guns and there was also an armoured brigade; the infantry were transported in trucks. General Wilson was in command.

I myself was going across with other war correspondents. On the morning of departure Clifford and Edward Ward of the B.B.C., my wife and myself gathered gloomily for a drink in the Hotel Cecil at Alexandria. None of us were optimistic about the campaign ahead. We ordered champagne and drank a toast to 'the new Dunkirk at Salonika'. I don't know how far that feeling went through the army, but we had it pretty strongly at the time. Morbidly, I remembered Lawrence writing in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* of a moment in the last war that seemed unpleasantly like this: 'Meanwhile I heard of Allenby's excellence, and of the last tragedy of Murray, that second attack on Gaza which London forced on one too weak or too politic to resist; and how we went into it, everybody, generals and staff officers, even soldiers, convinced that we should lose.'

No. We definitely did not feel cheerful that morning. With a mixture of disappointment and relief I got a last-minute cable from London ordering me to Addis Ababa instead.

The wind freshened in the bay, and we stayed on in our bedroom playing bridge while the others had to leave. When they had gone it was in my mind that anything might happen and we might not meet again.

When the correspondents reached Athens a colonel came to warn them against optimism, and Clifford, with more justice than he knew, remarked: 'All we need now is a rubber boat, a false set of whiskers, and a Bolivian passport.'

Yet still events favoured the expedition. Practically all the troops were landed without mishap. It had been decided from the first that the Greek armies should continue to hold the line against the Italians in the west—a thing they were eminently capable of doing. The Greeks also should man the forts guarding Salonika from the north and north-east, along the Bulgarian border. The British would hold the central sector—the line reaching parallel with the Yugoslav border, from the Gulf of Salonika to Florina. And when Simovitch revolted it began to appear more likely that the Turks would come in to support our right flank and perhaps even launch a side attack upon Bulgaria, which by this time was nothing more than a German camping ground. Hurricanes flew low over Athens and there was rejoicing among the Greeks at the arrival of their strong ally.

But the events of that first week in April went by almost too suddenly to be believed. The Greeks on the Salonika front, valiant as ever, turned back the first German wave, and the main enemy attack swept westwards into Yugoslavia. Belgrade was beaten down, and it was soon apparent that the Slavs had nothing but valour to offer against the Germans. Pressing on through Skoplje the Adolf Hider division joined hands with the Italian Bersaglieri from Albania, disrupting all Yugoslavia and cutting Simovitch's army from the Greeks in the south. Meanwhile the British were hurried up from Volos and Athens, and a line was quickly formed stretching from Mount Olympus to Edessa and Florina. But now the Germans, wheeling south from Yugoslavia, advanced down the Vardar valley and fell upon Salonika. Nine days' fighting gave them the town. Still Turkey did not move.

The Greeks then found themselves in danger of isolation in the west, and began to withdraw from their positions in Albania, with the Italians hard on their heels. We had to close the gap on the Yugoslav border. On the mountains of Florina the Adolf Hitler division and the imperial forces clashed; the standardised shock-trooper against the individualistic colonel. Tank was opposed to tank; the German three-inch mortar against the British twenty-five-pounder.

And while the battle was still locked with horrible carnage in the field, it became apparent that the Germans had overwhelming mastery of the air, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, we could do about it. The Germans had come to Greece determined to conquer the country mainly with the use of the Stuka, the bomber and the fighter—the dive-bomber was actually taking the place of artillery—and we had come to Greece unprepared to meet them. Our advanced striking bases were pitifully few in number, and those there were came immediately under a blitz that knocked them out of action almost overnight. Hedge-hopping over the mountains, the German Messerschmitts fell upon one airfield after another, and wiped out whole squadrons of British aircraft. They never ceased coming. British crews at some places never even had a chance to get to their bombers and load them; the bombers got no chance to take off. Messerschmitts would hang about drawing the ack-ack fire, and then cut down beneath it to machine-gun the helpless British Hurricanes on the ground.

Things were little better back in our rear bases. Larissa was overwhelmed. Down in Piraeus harbour, where the German blitz touched a climax on the first night of the war, a bombed ship, instead of being towed out of the harbour, was left blazing. The flames ignited another vessel full of T.N.T., and in a second the harbour was savaged and battered with a volcanic explosion. Ships, wharves and buildings burned. Later, a whole cargo of Hurricanes went to the bottom.

And now up at the front the empire troops came under an unrestricted bombing attack that never relaxed until they escaped to Crete and Egypt. Every road was blitzed with every type of bombing—high and low level, dive-bombing and ground-strafing. Broken vehicles littered the roadsides. Communications were disorganised. The Stuka was the new artillery—the mechanical device that carried the missile over the mountains to the target and dropped it there. The Stuka pilot saw what he wanted to hit, and went at it in a perpendicular dive at so sickening a rush that he sometimes fainted. To guard against this, the Germans had fitted the Stukas with a device which automatically released the bombs and pulled the plane out of its dive, keeping it airborne until the pilot had recovered.

Dive-bombers are a sitting target for fighters, but we had none now to bring against them. For the Luftwaffe it was just a matter of hopping over from Bulgaria, getting rid of the bombs, and then going back for more. In hundreds the bombers were plying to and fro on their unmolested way. Where the R.A.F. was able to get fighters into the air they made havoc, but some soldiers went through this campaign without seeing a British aircraft in the sky.

Shaken by this airborne attack, Wilson flew back from Florina and Edessa toward the coast. On Olympus the New Zealanders stood and fought. This was their battle and they made it great. They stood to let the other British forces get through to form a line farther back. But in the west the Greeks could do no more. Six Greek generals at the front met and informed the British they would seek a

separate armistice. After six months of continuous war that had even drawn women into the front line, the Greeks had been broken at last, and an armistice now was all that was left to them—all, in fact, they could expect. The Fascists alone they had disgraced for ever. Germany was too much. The Greeks had their glory. Wilson had a first-class problem in deciding how to get his men out of Greece and home again.

He retired now to a line running from Thermopylae to Delphi, where again a battalion or two of Dominion troops stood while their comrades pushed on south. By the end of April they were pouring through Athens to the embarkation ports. German parachutists disrupted the retreat; a whole body of them landed round the Corinth Canal. Some fell in the Canal. Many others, dropped from too low an altitude (three hundred feet) smashed their thighs on landing and were tended by British doctors. But others got to earth safely, and the German technique of parachuting was revealed very clearly.

A zone perhaps half a mile square was selected, and around this the bombers laid down a barrage almost too heavy for any unprotected living being to survive. While this was in progress troop-carrying planes flew through the bombers and dropped their parachutists in the protected area in the middle of the bombed zone. The parachutes carrying equipment were of different colours, so that the descending men could quickly sort out their weapons on the ground. The parachutes were opened instantly by a special device which left a puff of French chalk in the air. These tactics were a rehearsal and a warning of what was going to happen in Crete.

Upon the beaches the British set about destroying the last of their equipment, putting bullets into car tyres, ramming shells the wrong way down gun barrels and firing the charges, smashing engines with crowbars, draining oil sumps and leaving the motors running, plunging vehicles over cliffs, shooting horses, firing dumps of munitions, oil and food. The order to the men marching to the ships was: 'Don't take shelter, or if you do you will be left behind. Carry your wounded and leave your dead.'

Some were stranded and cut off in the vicinity of Volos; others got away from four embarkation ports to the east of Athens; many were taken off from Nauplion in Peloponnesos or from farther south. There were many remarkable escapes. Destroyers ran dangerously close inshore and men swam out to them. Many put to sea in small Greek fishing boats. Sunderland flying boats crossed from Crete and each packed ninety men aboard, including three standing in the lavatory.

Weeks later in Cyprus I came upon a group of two hundred Australians who in Greek caiques had sailed across to Turkey and thence passed right through the Dodecanese. And in the end some 45,000 of the original 60,000 who had landed in Greece got away. They had lost all their equipment, but the total of 15,000 men killed or taken prisoner was not in the circumstances very large. Great credit redounded to the navy.

By the end of April, then, the Germans were in Athens, and had crossed to Samothrace, Lemnos and other Greek islands where little resistance was offered. Our second Gallipoli had been lost. Our foothold in Europe was gone. It remained to be seen whether we could hold Crete and Tobruk; Mr Churchill announced on May 17th that these would be defended to the last man.

On the fall of Greece many of the evacuating ships made for Crete. In Suda Bay there was great congestion, and more than one warship was damaged or sunk by the successive waves of German raiders which continued to harass the British across the sea. We had now been in occupation of Crete for many months. One brigade, camped among the olives and vines between Canea and Suda Bay, had discharged the garrison duties. The air force had also maintained a base there, and although it was not thought necessary to dig underground hangars, two runways were cleared at Maleme, near Canea, and some attention had been given to the construction of landing fields at Retimo, midway to Heraklion (Candia) and at Heraklion itself. A few shore batteries and anti-aircraft guns had been established, and machine-gun nests commanded the approaches to the northern ports. A few Bren-gun carriers were on the island, but all of the scanty artillery was captured Italian stuff. There were six infantry tanks, but little general transport. Equipment, such as field telephones, wireless and so on, was lacking.

The island, one hundred and sixty miles of broken, barren mountains, offered little attraction to an invader. Water was short, flat stretches on which to land aircraft practically non-existent, and the serviceable ports were virtually confined to Heraklion and the deep, almost landlocked reaches of Suda Bay, six miles long. The villagers were sturdy, primitive people, who had worked a poor living in wine and cheese and olives from the rocky red soil. The local defence force amounted to nothing more than a few guerrilla fighters. But to these were added now some two Greek divisions from Greece. King George of the Hellenes and his Cabinet had also arrived on the island, and the national patriotic movement flourished strongly.

After the fall of Greece the British arrivals brought the imperial garrison in Crete up to 27,550 men, made up of 14,000 British, 6450 Australians, 7100 New Zealanders. Major-General Freyberg, the commander-in-chief of the New Zealanders, was placed in command.

At the beginning of May, Wavell and Wilson flew to Crete for a secret conference with Freyberg. They discussed then how the island should be held. Freyberg had barely three weeks in which to straighten out the tangle of evacuated troops: to send some away, to retain others; to share out the little equipment they had; to set up new strong-posts round the island—endeavouring all the time to keep the Nazi air raiders at bay. The navy especially were suffering under the incessant air attacks, and six warships were sunk around Crete. Others, capital ships among them, were damaged. Freyberg's headquarters were established upon the Akrotiri peninsula of Suda Bay, and upon that small area, reaching through from Suda Bay to Canea and Maleme, the German air attacks were insistent.

Our R.A.F. meanwhile were reporting that large numbers of enemy aircraft were massing on half a dozen landing fields in the south of Greece. On the island of Melos, which the R.A.F. had found unsuitable as a base, the Luftwaffe had established an aerodrome in the space of eight days. There was activity, too, in the Dodecanese, and the Germans were observed to be collecting numbers of caiques and small coastal vessels. The R.A.F. in its present depleted state could not hope to break up these formations; the navy and the fleet air arm were busy with raids upon Tripoli, where the Germans were still reinforcing Libya.

In Cairo it was well known that a German airborne division was gathering in Greece, but its destination was an open question. Crete was the obvious answer.

But it might, too, have been Cyprus or Syria or the Western Desert, even the Delta itself. Airborne divisions were still something new in the Middle East, and since we held too vast a territory to be closely garrisoned, the presence of this one was a menace everywhere. Its strength was placed at about nine thousand men, and, as it was believed to carry its own armaments up to a 75-millimetre gun, it was a formidable opponent.

Vichy and the rebel government in Iraq were playing Germany's game to the utmost now. Raschid Ali was in open revolt, and the Germans were sending aircraft through Syria to aid him. Once again the enemy was making a very extensive and ingenious attempt to hide his real intentions. The next move was up to him, and we had to expect attack in the Western Desert, in Crete, Syria, Cyprus, Iraq—or in all five places simultaneously.

I myself took ship to Cyprus to see what I could glean there, and arrived in time for the island's first air raid on the capital, Nicosia. It was a half-hearted affair, carried out by Italians, but it showed that the Axis was casting its net far and wide in the effort to split up the Middle East command. For the moment it really did seem that the German way lay through Cyprus: as if, by establishing a chain linking Greece, the Dodecanese, Cyprus, Syria and Iraq, she was going to isolate Turkey and absorb her into the Axis.

I travelled across to Cyprus overnight in a merchantman that was carrying new guns to aid the island's slender garrison. We landed at Famagusta, where the sandstone ruins of the crusading days rise from the edge of the sea, and the Moors worship in a Norman cathedral. For twelve shillings one could take a special train from there and travel across the flattish plains of the eastern end of the island to the old walled capital, Nicosia. For two or three days we idled there, buying silk in the markets, meeting the garrison officers, lunching with Sir Wilfred Battershill, the governor, whose residence is a more than modern affair, where the interior walls slide up and down into the second storey, and Roman arches rise over a tiled swimming bath. We drove on across the lovely island to Kyrenia in the north and the ruined castle of St Hilarion, where you can clearly see the Turkish coasts and flowers bloom richly among the vines. Beyond that, at Morphon, the gold–pyrite–copper mines, run by an American syndicate, lay idle for the want of shipping.

We went down along the southern coast, where we fell in with an R.A.F. pilot who a day or two before had taken the first American Tomahawk into action in the Middle East. He had raided Palmyra, in Syria, he said, and the Tomahawk had gone beautifully. He had surprised three or four German aircraft on the ground, and his big cannon had blown bits off their fuselage as he dived at 350 miles an hour. He had lingered so long over his target that his petrol had run out in the mountains on the way home, and only after a forced landing had he managed to get back. Now he was in Cyprus with his Tomahawk to intercept any more Germans going across from Greece.

The rest of the island was slowly and reluctantly shaking itself out of its ease in this dreaming corner of the Mediterranean. Now at last they were being drawn into the war, and clearly they might be in very great danger indeed. There were a number of Polish refugees here, and these, together with British wives and children, were being sent away. Yet one could hardly believe in wars here in this holiday place of pine forests and donkeys and wine and flowers. Something in the

sun and the solid earth bound the island to the more definite realities of farms and fields and crops and fishermen's homes by the sea. There was an essential 'villageness' about everything, that would not and could not absorb the possibility of war.

Crete had been like that, too. And Greece. Yet it was refreshing to meet the sense of peace again for a little, and I came back to Egypt determined to go on at once to Crete and continue on down the Mediterranean to Malta, so that I might write the story of the island front line, and trace the differences between the outright war in Malta, the preparation for war in Crete, and the peace in Cyprus. I had a theory that the waiting for war was a worse strain than actually being in war, so that Malta in the midst of its gunfire might be fundamentally a happier place than Cyprus, where the people merely dreaded and waited.

Chapter 17

> Early this morning German parachutists and airborne troops made an attempt to secure a footing on the island.
>
> —CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, MAY 20TH, 1941.

> After twelve days of what has undoubtedly been the fiercest fighting in this war it was decided to withdraw our forces from Crete.
>
> —CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, JUNE 1ST, 1941.

WHILE I was waiting to embark for Crete, air raids of exceptional ferocity and extent began to fall upon the northern coasts of the island, and continued with rising intensity for three days. The British warships especially came under the barrage. The cruiser YORK had been sunk in Suda Bay by enemy sailors who, courageously, came riding in astride torpedoes. But the ship rested on the bottom, and although her decks were awash she kept firing on raiders with A.A. guns. YORK was repaired by divers, and a salvage party was about to raise her to the surface when enemy aircraft scored a dead hit with another torpedo—and sank her for the last time.

But now from Suda Bay other warships and the shore batteries fired back, and all the garrison—the New Zealanders round Suda, the Australians at Retimo and Heraklion, and the British and Greeks interspersed among them—lay under cover from the shock and blast of thousand-pound bombs. By May 19th it was apparent that this was no normal raid. It was the preparation for something big. Perhaps invasion.

The night of May 19th–20th was still and clear and bright. But with the first light the sky was filled with the noise of machines: machines everywhere flying very low. The biggest diye-bombing attack yet had begun.

Then the sentries along the coast saw them—little white lazy dots that looked like flung bits of paper in the sky. Parachutists. Some down by the beach, some over the hill, then parachutists dropping everywhere in scores and hundreds,

falling straight down onto the villages and the vines, straight into the arms of the waiting men, onto the tents, the slit trenches, and the guns. The half-lighted morning sky was filled with twisting, turning aircraft, hundreds of them bearing down in long lines from the sea.

And now machine-guns and small-arms fire cracked through the din of bombs and exploding shells. At Heraklion and Suda and Canea and Maleme the Imperial troops were firing straight out of their trenches and rock shelters into the sky. The aircraft were spilling out the parachutists from only a few hundred feet, and as they came down, squirming and running with their legs to break the fall, the British picked them off with Bren guns and Lewis guns, with rifles and pistols, with hand grenades and bayonets. Sometimes a whole sector of the sky, crowded with parachutists, would fill the sights of a machine-gun, so that all were killed in the air and the parachutes would deposit only inert, clumsy bodies on the ground.

As the enemy soldiers came down they could be heard calling to one another to rally their spirits or warn one another of the dangers below, and those that landed safely and found a little shelter from the bullets that were flying everywhere started shouting for others to join them. It was essential for them to keep together, for alone they were helpless, and since one man might be carrying the barrel of a machine-gun, another the base, and a third the ammunition, they were not an effective unit unless they got together.

All the falling men were heavily booted and heavily harnessed with equipment. They wore camouflaged overalls with the parachutists' special badge, and a rimless helmet. They wore wrist and ankle bandages. In their packs were blankets, little stoves and utensils for boiling water, water bottles, clips of ammunition, sacks of hand grenades, knives, gloves, greatcoats, torches, underclothing and many other things the soldier carries. Most had tommy-guns and pistols. Many had as well the parts of heavier guns, bicycles, signalling and radio sets, and all manner of weapons that might be used in guerrilla warfare.

Some had a trick of turning a somersault as they were about to land in order to break their fall. They were only a few seconds in the air, and instinctively they clutched at a device to release them from their parachutes as soon as they were down. Then they would crouch behind bushes and wriggle forward among the rocks, calling to their fellows until enough were banded together to make a knot of resistance.

But their tommy-guns had a range only of two hundred yards, and the British standing back from a safe distance would pick them off at four or five hundred yards with rifles and machine-guns. Again and again in the thick of this day's fighting the British charged into close quarters with bayonet and hand grenade, for there was a moment when the parachutist had first landed when he was dazed and could be taken prisoner, or knifed.

Every enemy soldier was working upon rigid instructions set out for him on his maps. The coast had been carefully charted, and the men were dropped according to a set design. But in the descent and on the ground all became confusion, because so many were killed and wounded, and the heavy firing not only of guns and rifles but of bombs made an already unfamiliar territory doubly strange. At scattered points all down the coast from Heraklion to Maleme it went on, while

flames lifted over the burning village houses and the olive groves, and along every road and upon every village the incessant heavy dive-bombing went on and on.

Upon Suda came something that had never been seen in action in the world before—glider troops. Over the great knoll that forms the seaward side of the bay came big, troop-carrying aeroplanes, drawing gliders behind them. The gliders were attached to the mother craft by a cable, and each glider had the wingspread of a large passenger machine. They carried ten men. As they swept up to the bay the glider pilots slipped their cables and floated out over the rocky hills looking for a landing place, and the men who saw them come said they were more sinister than the parachutists, stranger and more menacing. Some flew straight upon Corps Headquarters, as though they would land there, and each soldier below felt the landing would be made upon his own head. But the wings tilted just over the treetops, and in a swift rush the gliders were carried over the hilltop. Clearly the pilots had expected a flat space there where they could land or pancake down, but their maps were at fault. The machines crashed heavily in a sharp rocky valley and the crews and passengers were killed outright. Others wrecked themselves among the scrub and rock around Maleme, where the parachutists were falling thickly, and the British gunners were upon them before the unwounded men could rise and make a stand.

Strewn along the northern coast then for a hundred miles men were fighting in isolated groups among the rocks and the olives and the vines; and over everything rose the insistent heavy bombing and the answering gunfire.

Gradually toward evening it became apparent that the Germans had made landings in three main sectors—Heraklion, Retimo and the Suda Bay–Canea–Maleme sector. These three areas were the sites of Crete's three landing fields, so it was obvious that the Germans were intent upon getting control of these before anything else. Some three thousand parachute troops had been dropped, and of these about eighteen hundred had been killed or made prisoner by the end of the day. Others, wounded among them, were still hiding among the foothills and along the beaches. Still the bombing continued into the night, still parachutists were landing, and still the wounded and dead were being brought in.

I was with Mr Peter Fraser, the New Zealand Premier, in Cairo, when General Freyberg's message came in: 'It has been a hard day.' It seemed like a message coming out of another world, for there was little the remainder of the forces in the Middle East could do but wait and watch.

Again, as in Greece, the Germans had control of the sky. The few fighter planes on Crete had not been able to deter the invasion, and now they were finished. Bombers might reach the island on the morrow, but the distance was too far for fighters to accompany them, and what could they bomb when they got there? And the morrow promised to be as bad or worse than the first day.

The news from Crete was painfully and pitifully scarce through the night. The Germans, unwilling to publicise an adventure before it was a success, were saying nothing either in their communiqués or on their radio. Freyberg had the use of a military wireless, but his own communications on the island were poor. Sometimes for many hours no news at all came from Crete. But it was becoming clear from our air reconnaissance reports that the Germans were operating from at least half a dozen landing fields in the Peloponnesos and southern Greece, as well

as the island of Melos and the Dodecanese. All these points were barely an hour's flight from Crete across the sea, and the German aircraft were kept ferrying back and forth, each plane making several journeys through the day. The enemy aircraft were packed wingtip to wingtip on their Greek bases. They were of all types—Messerschmitts, Heinkels, Stukas, Junkers, Focke-Wulfs—troop-carriers capable of lifting thirty fully equipped men into the air. It was the airborne division in action. Now we knew its destination. Undoubtedly it would be supported by seaborne troops sailing in those scores of Greek fishing boats which the Germans had been so busily collecting through the past few weeks. Crete was going to be subjected to the most violent and desperate storming that had ever yet fallen upon the island.

Our hope lay in Freyberg's men, and the Greeks already on the island, and their thin equipment. But there were some things that could be done to help. From the neighbourhood of Mersa Matruh the R.A.F. prepared to bomb the invasion ports from which the Germans were setting out—a flight of six hundred miles each way. Other bombers were got ready to make the 700-mile journey to Crete and back. Hurricanes were stripped of ammunition and equipped with extra fuel tanks in the hope that they would be able to get to the island and have half an hour's fighting there before they were forced to run for home. But already at this early moment it was seen that the R.A.F.'s chances were limited. The Crete sky swarmed with German fighters which flipped easily back and forth to Melos and the Dodecanese. In the daylight our bombers would have little chance against them. Maleme and the two other landing fields were already untenable under the German bombing barrage. No British aircraft could be stationed on Crete. None could even land there to refuel.

Again the high command turned to the navy and asked Cunningham to do what he could. Ships to take more men, guns, ammunition and food to Crete were wanted. Somehow they would have to be landed under the German barrage—and landed quickly, before it was too late. Any attempt at a sea invasion had to be frustrated.

Once again the admiral ordered his ships out. This was to be the old fleet's last battle in the unequal fight of ships against bombers, and possibly it was the greatest battle of all. It was to take a greater toll of lives than Matapan. It will be remembered that the sailors went out well knowing that the odds against them would be much greater than in the Greek evacuation, and their chances of survival much less.

That first nightfall found a compact group of parachutists still holding out on Maleme airport. It was essential for the British to expel them, reoccupy the central aerodrome, and wreck the two runways that ran down to the seashore in a 'V' formation, the arms of the 'V' uniting on the beach. Only then could we prevent the enemy from getting his troop-carriers down on the morrow. The gliders had been a failure, and it had been proven that parachutists by themselves could be dealt with. The whole battle now hinged on whether the Germans could get the main body of their airborne troops down by landing them from aircraft on Maleme. Freyberg attacked. His New Zealand infantry made headway, and in the morning they were in possession of a part of the airfield.

The second day—the day that was to decide the battle of Crete—broke clear and warm. Over most of the island the colours still glanced up from the pale blue peaceful sea along the high cliffs, and gulls wheeled unmolested through a quiet sky beyond Ida and the White Mountains. But on that strip of northern coast the battle was continuing in a fury that was not to reach its peak until the end of the day. From dawn the dive-bombers were over in hundreds; and the parachutists; and now something in addition—troop-carriers and supply planes. Three-inch mortars that had done deadly work in Greece were floated down in big cylinders. Light field artillery supported by three separate parachutes were released. Then came motorcycles, boxes of medical supplies, ammunition, signalling sets, tinned food, barrels of water—all suspended on parachutes, all dropped at a steady rhythm and on a set plan. Little by little the group of parachutists fighting at Maleme added to their numbers. They began to get machine-guns into action. Soon they had a mortar assembled, and were winning back the ground they had lost in the night. And still more and more German aircraft filled the sky with the noise of rushing express trains as they dropped more men, more supplies.

By evening Freyberg was ready with a new attack—tanks first, then the New Zealand infantry coming in, and at the end, as they wearied, an Australian brigade was to break through.

It came as near to success as any failure could. The tanks went in, but in the confusion after Greece some had been furnished with the wrong ammunition and were smashed up without their crews being able to fire an answering shot. The New Zealanders advanced, but when they looked for the support of the Australian brigade, it had not yet arrived. Poor communications had made it late in starting, and the heavy air blitz along the roads had delayed its progress. The New Zealanders had almost but not quite gained their objectives, but now they were not able to go on alone.

And now the Germans sent down their big troop-carriers onto the Maleme runways. The first dozen aircraft pilots, with the deliberation of men committing suicide, landed their machines straight into the line of British artillery fire, and were smashed to pieces with their passengers. And still others followed them into the arena of flaming wrecks and wounded and dying men. At last one troop-carrier got down. Then another. Then others were destroyed. Then another got down. In five minutes the Germans were out of each machine and taking cover, and the pilot was off again. Some of the aircraft were blown up as they steadied for a landing, others as they taxied to a standstill, others again as they rose from the take-off. At immense cost the Germans were getting a few men aground—just enough to hold back the British from the aerodrome.

It was useless now to regret that we had not laid obstacles across the runways before, or dug pits, or exploded the surface with dynamite. The field had to be won back first. And Freyberg at this stage could not draw off more men from the other sectors. At Retimo several hundred fresh parachutists had succeeded in holding a building by the sea and were engaging an Australian brigade. Farther east, at Heraklion, it was the same. The Germans had taken a hospital near the ruins of Cnossos, and the fighting was bitter. Many of the parachutists had been wiped out, and others had been ambushed and killed with knives by the Cretan irregulars who lay in wait round the waterholes. But more kept arriving.

Had Freyberg been able to summon the R.A.F. at this moment to bomb the Germans on Maleme, he might still have won the field back, but the means of communicating with the R.A.F. command in Cairo were archaic. An officer from Freyberg's headquarters had to find the R.A.F. group captain and bring him back to Freyberg. The R.A.F. officer had then to return to his office to put a message to Cairo into code. Cairo had to decode it and send instructions to the Western Desert bases—by which time it was too late.

So on this second evening while the sun shone warmly across a still sea, the battle of Crete swept up to its crisis. Freyberg knew that a sea landing was likely to be made at any moment. Indeed, the shore light signals which were to guide the convoy of enemy caiques into Suda had been captured from parachutists. The navy was warned that the British forces ashore would make an attempt that night to decoy the enemy convoy toward Suda at a convenient moment. But a British destroyer came upon that convoy first in the darkness. An Italian escorting destroyer failed to release its torpedoes in time to damage the British vessel, and soon the navy was on the spot in strength. This was about 11 p.m.

There began then one of the most fantastic actions ever fought in the Mediterranean. The British ships found themselves in the midst of a fleet of caiques, each carrying about a hundred Germans so closely packed they were standing shoulder to shoulder. The Italian destroyer was sunk outright, and the navy turned its pom-poms and four-inch guns upon the caiques—often at point-blank range. In a few minutes the sea was in chaos. In the gun-flashes the sailors could see thousands of Germans swimming about in the sea, calling hysterically for help. Caiques were rammed head on and smashed to pieces or raked by the pom-poms or sunk by the four-inch guns. For hours the British warships cruised back and forth, ramming, sinking, killing. In some vessels the Germans attempted to hide below and hoisted the Greek flag. In others they jumped overboard in terror as the big warships bore down upon them. A few who got near the shore were met with machine-gun fire or ran foul of booms and, overturning, drowned their crews among the rocks. Not a living man landed that night. Some nine thousand Germans were either drowned or killed. They were the staff of the Eleventh Fliegerkorps and part of the Fifth Mountain Division with their artillery.

Their destruction gave Freyberg sufficient respite to hold on for another ten days. But already that night he had seen the vital danger at Maleme. 'All depends on the next few hours,' he wirelessed to Cairo. But in the next few hours he could not retake Maleme. His hope was that sooner or later the Germans would have to stop coming. Sooner or later they would have no more aircraft. But the Germans still kept coming. They never ceased till they had won, and had landed some thirty-five thousand men on Crete.

We had successes within the structure of the whole invasion. The Germans were turned out of Retimo. They were reduced to impotency at Heraklion. These two sectors were of minor importance to Maleme, but they helped greatly in the process on which broadly we were now embarked—that of destroying as many Germans and German machines as possible. At Heraklion those parachutists who had escaped death in landing took shelter in a valley where they could be heard calling to one another all night long. It was expected that in the morning they would emerge and attempt to win a better position. Accordingly, British guns were

trained on the outlet of the valley. The enemy came out. They were entirely destroyed.

It was in this sector, where the casualties among the falling Germans had been very heavy, that the British found the bodies of the parachutists turned a vivid green a few hours after death. The colour suffused the dead men's cheeks and arms and chests. Clearly they had been drugged. Already something of the sort had been suspected in Greece, and now an Australian soldier reported he had come upon a packet of the drug and had taken some. His story was that through the next few hours he felt uplifted on a glorious wave of enthusiasm and energy and recklessness. His comrades said that he had shouted and cheered, and they had had to hold him down when he wanted to rush from cover alone upon a position strongly held by the enemy.

Upon the bodies of the parachutists also was found the parachutist's code. It made a strong appeal to the ideals of late adolescence—and most of these parachutists were boys of twenty or thereabouts. All were volunteers. Here are the most interesting points in the code:

> You are the *élite* of the German Army.
> Know everything yourself; don't leave it to your officers.
> Your guns are more important than you; look after them first.
> Support your comrades always.
> Treat an honest enemy honestly; be merciless with snipers or spies and saboteurs.
> You will win.

Drugged or undrugged, they came with a high purpose, these boys. And the letters upon their dead bodies revealed much romanticism and idealism. There was more family feeling than national patriotism; more concern for their families in Germany than enthusiasm for the cause of Greater Germany. And the theme of many of the letters was 'when the war is over…'

They did in fact reveal themselves at times as honest fighters. At Heraklion they protested to the British that a wireless set was being used in Cnossos Hospital. When the wireless set was broken up, the German commander agreed that the place should be used as a joint hospital for the wounded of both sides, although the building was now inside the German lines. German doctors who had parachuted down joined the British staff of the hospital. British ambulances were driven through the German lines with British wounded. A British orderly, before he was taken off the island, was permitted to go first to the hospital and say goodbye to his colonel, lying wounded there. These things were exceptional in a battle of such bitterness and speed as Crete, but they did happen. The report that the Germans landed in New Zealand battledress was not true. It arose from an unfortunate but honest error. The hospital near Canea was taken in the first downrush of parachutists, and the New Zealand walking wounded there were forced to advance down the road ahead of the Germans as a cover. From a distance it appeared to the defending troops that these men were disguised parachutists, and the mistake was not discovered till later.

There was nothing much to destroy in Crete; no power plants, no railways or tall buildings. The majority of the villagers drew their water from wells and used oil lamps. But after the third day had brought them no definite result, and still their aircraft were being destroyed in scores, the Germans embarked on a ruthless campaign to obliterate Canea, the capital of the island.

Canea was a town of 27,000 people, many of whom had by this time evacuated to the hills. Before the Nazis came I had wandered one whole day through its quiet back streets and along the ancient stone wharves where fishermen had been fishing since before recorded history. The town's two best restaurants were the London Bar (with a Chinese chef) and the Caprice. They swarmed with flies, and you could not always be sure of getting a tablecloth or a table napkin or a clean knife and fork. But you could get the tart, resinous wine of Crete, and the goats-milk cheese, and omelettes made with vegetables gathered that morning from the mountainside. The market was rich with oranges and grapes and vegetables and cheese packed inside a goat's skin (with the hair of the goat turned inwards). Last war the Royal Navy was here, and it left a legacy of naval photographs on the walls of the London Bar, and a smattering of English words among the townspeople. Venizelos and Byron were the heroes of the people here. But history had left this place untouched in the sunshine for the last twenty years, and even tourists passed it by.

Now that it was suddenly become the battlefield of the most modern war the world had seen, it was hopeless for Canea to try and bridge the gap between its timeless stolid peasantry and this fighting in the sky. A few slit trenches were the town's only answer. For the rest, it lay half empty, its life paralysed, its importance in the war nothing at all. But between dawn one morning and the evening, the Germans came and laid most of Canea in ruins. The plan for its destruction had been worked out to the meanest detail at the Nazi air headquarters in Greece, and it was translated perfectly and methodically into action. The bombers, heavily protected by fighters, came at intervals of one every three minutes. They worked back and forth, bombing one side of the town, then the other. The sticks of bombs came down in neat exact pattern, reducing street after street. Then when the outskirts were demolished, the last of the raiders set fire to the centre of the town, and left it there smoking, battered and ruined forever under its own red glow in the evening.

When Geoffrey Cox, with whom I had worked in Paris, came from Crete and wrote his story of the invasion in my flat in Cairo, he described how he had gone down in the morning to see how his *Crete News* was progressing. It was a single broadsheet he and a few soldiers and local people were continuing to produce for the troops, invasion or no invasion. And this, the day of the destruction of Canea, was publication day. From the morning throughout the day the staff of the paper worked in a printing shop in the centre of the town, setting type, writing copy, reading proofs, running the machines. When the bombs came too close they would lay off for a bit and lie with their faces to the ground against a wall. An Australian, filled with the goodwill of the heady Greek wine, and completely oblivious of the bombs, kept roaming in and out of the printing shop through the day, bringing them food and drinks and cigarettes from the broken shops and the burning houses outside. And in the evening the printers presented themselves in the

darkness at Corps Headquarters with the printed bundles of *Crete News* under their arms.

The destruction of Canea did nothing much to advance the German foothold upon Maleme, but it added to the horror and the unreality of the war which now, through this last week in May, resolved itself into a series of heavy, slogging engagements, with the British giving way foot by foot. Plane after plane crashed and blew up until the beach was piled with wreckage, and some three hundred machines were strewn about the airport and the foothills reaching up to the White Mountains beyond. The Nazis, it seemed, were prepared to accept an insanity of wastage, and the assault took no account of lives or wounding. Once on the ground, the Germans alone could not have hoped to stand against the defenders but for the endless bombing and machine-gunning from the air, which never relaxed. Not even a single man or a cyclist exposed on the roads was too small a target for the Nazi fighters. They shot at everything and anything. And as the wrecked machines mounted in number from three hundred to four hundred and higher yet, they still kept coming.

Through this last week aircraft had been dropping supplies everywhere for the Nazis who were now gradually increasing their positions round Maleme. The parachutists brought down with them canvas signs and numerals which told the Nazi pilots above what to drop. At places along the beaches the British captured some of these signs and laid them out. Down upon them floated guns, rifles, medical supplies, tobacco, bicycles, barrels of water. One gun-crew received a piece of light artillery mounted upon rubber wheels. Forgetting to remove the wheels and steady the gun upon the ground, they promptly unloosed it at the enemy. The gun recoiled at speed upon the gunners, then came charging back on them and finally bowled over a cliff to destruction.

The New Zealand Maoris in the first battle rose out of their rock shelters and, shouting their native war-cries, charged upon the German machine-gunners—a wonderful charge, against the rules of tactics, but brilliant in its success.

King George of Greece and his staff, and the British legation from Athens, were taken by New Zealanders through the parachutists, over winding tracks and through the mountains, and were brought to a place on the south coast where they were embarked and got to Egypt.

The R.A.F. came in the night and bombed the Germans on Maleme, but the bombing was too slight, and they could not come in the day without fighters. The Hurricanes, which had been fitted with extra tanks, could do nothing against the clouds of Messerschmitts. As one fighter after another failed to get back to Mersa Matruh, the British air offensive was at last abandoned. Bombers still crossed to the Greek bases which the Germans were using, but there, too, the British met overwhelming fighter defence. The royal navy, coasting round Crete, was under ceaseless dive-bombing—sometimes thirty and forty bombers upon a single ship. Inevitably casualties at sea began to mount. Reinforcements sent out from Egypt were unable to make a landing in the face of the blitz, and had to turn back.

So when this bitter last week in May was ending, Freyberg gave the order to the Suda Bay troops to retreat through the White Mountains to the southern port of Sphakia. The others at Heraklion were taken off directly by destroyers. Two whole battalions in the Retimo area had to be abandoned. Through the last day of May

and the first two days of June the retreat through the White Mountains went on. Once for two hours the general and his staff lay sheltering in a narrow valley, while the Messerschmitts raked it from end to end. In the groves the branches of the olive trees caught fire. Units became divided, and men lost in the hills had to fend for themselves. There was no hot food and water ran out. Villagers in the mountains led the weary, unshaven, dirty men to wells where they lowered their water bottles on ropes to the springs below. The walking wounded walked at first, were carried in the end. Outside Sphakia they funnelled down through a narrow village in a long, tightly packed queue, none knowing whether there would be room or not for him in the warships lying out in the bay.

Nor was there room for everyone. The navy was losing ships. The Luftwaffe was pressing hard on the evacuation. When the last warship and the last caique drew off, there were still hundreds of men—New Zealanders, Australians, British—strewn over the mountains and along the beaches and in the villages. Many were still fighting because there was nothing else to do. Even when the warships were at sea they were harassed from the air through all the daylight hours on their journey to Egypt. Once when a destroyer was hit it was lashed to a sister ship and the crew and passengers transferred. As the sound ship stood off again she put a torpedo into the other destroyer.

But at last the ships came home, and the men from Crete came down the gangplanks at Alexandria. They had fought for twelve days. They had destroyed nearly one thousand German aircraft, and so mauled the German airborne division and two other divisions that it was many months before they could fight again. They had killed or wounded between fifteen and twenty thousand Germans. They had blocked the march of the Germans through Syria to Iraq and the oil wells. For this, we had paid with the loss of half a dozen of our best warships at sea and many of their crews. Of the 27,550 men sent to Crete, 14,850 had come back. Much equipment had fallen to the Germans. And we had lost Crete.

It seemed at first through that depressing early summer that we had paid too highly for too little. There was anger at our failure in the air, and bitterness at the mistakes that were all too clear after the event. But little by little it was seen that some good was emerging from the conflict. First, we had met the parachutist and the airborne fighter—the men they were threatening to send to England—and we had proved him weak, vulnerable, an easy mark in the air and not much good on the ground. He would never get anywhere if he did not have overwhelming support in the sky. Then it gradually became more and more apparent that the Germans were too weak now to press their advantage. Cyprus at that time might have fallen like a ripe plum. Dentz in Syria would have welcomed the Nazis. But they did not come on. The forces the German high command had allotted to this theatre of the war had been exhausted.

As later intelligence came in we learned that the Germans had expected to find no more than five thousand men in Crete, but once embarked on the adventure they had to press on and take appalling losses. By midsummer it began to seem that we had not paid too dearly. Crete was the low point for the fortunes of the British in the Middle East. After that, the British position painfully and gradually but steadily improved.

Chapter 18

Early this morning Allied forces under the command of General Wilson crossed the frontier into Syria, with the object of eliminating German personnel.

—CAIRO COMMUNIQUÉ, JUNE 8TH, 1941.

FOR ONE year—June 1940 to June 1941—Syria lived on its nerves. In all the world it was the one neutral place whereof you could say with absolute certainty: 'Here will be war.' The only surprising thing was that it remained at peace for so long. Whenever news was slack (it seldom was) you could always turn with confidence to Syria for a story, since the place hummed with rumour and intrigue.

Before France fell, Weygand built a great army there, and it stood upon the right flank of the Middle East as solid as a rock. Even after the Franco–German armistice it was expected that Weygand would come back and lead this autonomous command to the side of the allies. And when that failed to happen, Syria was bombarded with propaganda from every direction and riven with factions. The Arabs wanted independence, the Turks wanted Aleppo, Vichy wanted to maintain its mandate, the British wanted an ally, the Germans wanted a springboard in the Middle East, and the polyglot, restless, mercurial people of Syria itself wanted fifty different things and set about intriguing for them with a vigour remarkable even for a country that has bred intrigue since Alexander the Great.

Vichy tried a succession of administrators and generals in command—Mittelhauser, Puaux, Fougère, Chiappe (who was shot down and drowned on the way out) and lastly General Dentz. Inevitably every one of them made a mess of it. And the worst mess of all was made by the Italian and German armistice delegations in Beyrout, who were the real masters of the place. The Italians had command at first, but failed to make much headway against the solid mass of contempt from nearly everybody. One Fascist general after another went trailing home to Rome, and the Germans took control with the eager assistance of General Dentz. When the battle of Crete was fought and German aircraft were passing through Syria to assist Raschid Ali against the British in Iraq, it became obvious to everyone that the country was going to be occupied by one side or the other. The only question was who would get there first.

After Crete I had gone up by train to Jerusalem, hoping to get a week's holiday in the cool air there. As I stepped down from the train on Sunday morning an American correspondent met me with the news that the empire forces and the Free French had crossed the border a few hours before. There was nothing for it but to get a car and chase after them.

We drove fast down to Haifa, and, having no military transport of our own, clambered aboard an ambulance called 'Bloody Mary' at the border. The French were fighting back, and there were casualties. We rode on into the Phoenician port

of Tyre which had been captured that day, but the coastal road farther on was blocked with heavy machine-gun and tank fire. It was going to be no walkover.

Back in the mountains in the central sector, the Australians, expecting a friendly reception, had walked up to the French frontier post with their slouch hats on. They were mown down by machine-gun fire and a battle was now raging round Merj Ayoun below the slopes of Hermon, still capped with snow. Farther east General Legentilhomme's Free French had gone through Deraa easily enough and were well up the road to Damascus. But they, too, were getting a hot reception. Away round to the far east two other British columns were making their way in from Iraq along the general direction of the Euphrates valley, but they had miles of desert to cross before they got anywhere.

We settled down to a protracted campaign. When the German and Italian agents in Syria fled the country and Berlin announced that the affair was no concern of the Axis, the result was a foregone conclusion. But General Wilson, again in command, had to find the solution of the extremely bristly problem of how to subdue thirty or forty thousand angry French subjects with the least possible number of people on either side getting hurt. He tried sending in officers to parley under a white flag, but they were shot down. There was nothing for it but to fight a way through to Damascus and Beyrout.

I chose at first the coastal sector and never was a war so convenient for the war correspondent. We lived in a Jewish hotel high up Mount Carmel at Haifa—a lovely place overgrown with pines and flower gardens. Looking down from here—the very place where Elijah saw the cloud no bigger than a man's hand and beheld below him on the site of Haifa the priests of the temple of Baal—one had a panorama of the whole sweep of coastline around to Syria. Across the plains of Armageddon came the French and Axis bombers to raid the fleet in the port of Haifa at our feet.

In the night we stood on our balconies and saw the heavens open with tracer shells, flaming onions and the flowering bursts of the navy's ack-ack fire. Sometimes in the moonlight you caught the silver outline of a bomb going down, and, knowing it was not headed in your direction, you watched fascinated for the explosion in the sea or along the shore directly beneath. Sometimes a raider, misjudging the sharpness of Carmel's slopes, would all but brush the pine trees above our heads and we would hear the pilot open his throttle for the next dive on the port. It was the nearest thing to being in one of the attacking machines oneself, and Mount Carmel must assuredly have been the world's best air-raid grandstand.

Over this chain of hills where the Carmelite Order had been founded and David and Jonathan had their last quarrel, the Jews had built big modern hotels and restaurants among the trees. Here every afternoon and evening the people came from the hot town below to listen nostalgically to lieder from Germany and hot rhythm from America, and to dance under the trees. It was possible, if you wanted, to attend a tea dance on the mountain and afterwards drive down to the front in Syria for an hour or two in the evening. Returning at dusk, you would be in time for dinner in a German beer hall in the town and a nightclub on the mountain. Each morning from my bedroom window I could see the fleet steaming

out along the Syrian coast, and soon the noise of shelling would come sweeping across Armageddon into my window as the breakfast coffee came in.

The road through Acre into Syria was almost perfect, and the coast itself dissolved into rolling hills and plantations of wheat and olives and bananas reaching down to a yellow beach and a soft and warm green-blue sea. Usually before going up to the forward positions we would strip on the beach and swim for half an hour and drink the bottles of Carmel Hock we had brought from Haifa. It was still not too hot, and always the snow sat pleasantly on the mountains inland.

It was not quite so idyllic as all that for the soldiers at the front. They were being opposed by tough Algerians and Foreign legionnaires, and more and more Dewoitine fighters and Glen Martin bombers were arriving from French North Africa by way of Italy and Rhodes to bomb and strafe the British positions. Talking to captured Frenchmen, we got to know how bitter was this fight which had started as a skirmish and was developing into a war. The better-informed Frenchman would argue like this: 'Why shouldn't we fight? We're professional soldiers obeying orders, and you came here on a deliberate aggression. You think it would have been easy for us just quietly to submit; but what about our friends and our relatives imprisoned by Germany? The Boches keep threatening us. They say they will take reprisals and they mean it. We've got to fight.'

And there was another subtler impulse. It was expressed perfectly by a French sergeant near Sidon. 'You thought we were yellow, didn't you? You thought we couldn't fight in France. You thought we were like the Italians. Well, we've shown you.' They were fighting for something that was almost as fundamental as self-preservation—for human dignity, for the right of walking among others as an equal. And since we brought against them forces much inferior in numbers to their own, the French could not out of sense of pride surrender at once.

I am speaking now of the early stages in June when it was touch and go as to whether they would go on or not. When we tackled them with too few men and guns and they beat us back, they naturally gained confidence and wanted to continue the fight. And that old deadly frontline bitterness sprang up—Jean's comrade Gaston is killed and he wants to avenge him. And so the war gathered impetus, snowball fashion, feeding on itself. Everyone on the British side hated it. No one enjoyed killing Frenchmen. And it was naturally painful to be destroying the men and the arms which once had been drilled and built to help us. Even the very propaganda posters the French had printed to bring in volunteers to help the Allies in 1939 were being used now to recruit men against the British.

The greatest animosity of the Vichy French officers (not the men) was reserved for the Free French. In the first day or two a captured Vichy captain turned his back upon Legentilhomme, and that genial, courageous little man's blue eyes hardened suddenly when he realised what he was up against. Frenchmen fighting Frenchmen. It was unthinkable. But, by God, now the Free Frenchmen decided, we're going through with it. And they went battering on at Damascus.

On the coast the Australians struck their first real snag beyond Tyre at the Litani River. The Litani came down freshly from the snows of the Lebanon, a green fast stream bearing rich banana groves on its banks. As the troops came up to the river, a British force, lads from Scotland mostly, was landed behind the French positions on the enemy bank. There was some confusion in the darkness. The men

were put into boats a mile or two out, and when they got near the shore they waded up to their necks in water straight onto a beach that was covered by a French seventy-five-millimetre battery. The French had been forewarned. 'You were twenty minutes late,' one of the Vichy officers said later to a captured British soldier. There was a murderous sweep of fire down the seashore. By the time I got up to the Litani River in the evening the force had been badly broken up and those that could were getting out. Their colonel, some of the survivors told me, had got ashore among the first, carrying his walking-stick and a revolver, and had made straight up to the French battery with a sergeant and some others. Both the colonel and the sergeant were mortally wounded, but they led a charge up to the Frenchmen and actually succeeded in grabbing a gun and turning it on the other enemy guns in the battery.

Another soldier at the colonel's order had gone off down the coast where he had swarmed up the mast of a French barracks and pulled the tricolour down. There were many skirmishes of fantastic daring through that bad day, while the bullets kept ripping through the broad green leaves of the bananas and scorching the olive trees. In the end the force did what they were sent to do. They distracted the enemy while the Australians won the river and threw a pontoon bridge across.

I rode back in a convoy of two trucks with what was left of the British force. The men were utterly exhausted—almost beyond smoking—but when we stopped to pick up stragglers on the road they leaned out shouting excitedly: 'There's Jock. He's out of it'; or 'Andy, where's the rest of your section?' They rode back to Haifa counting their dead on the way, and those who had gone ahead in ambulances and those who were simply missing. Barely half had come back. The war was taking a serious turn.

There was to be an attack again the next day, and I stayed on the hills all night watching the barrage. In the morning the war correspondents rode back into the village of Tyre which lay a little off the main road. We wanted breakfast. We saw something was wrong as we approached. The Union Jack was down from the Gendarmerie. There was no guard, no Australians in the town. The people who had thrown scent and rose petals at us as we came in a day or two before stood about sullenly in the village square. Some gave us the Nazi salute. The chief of the Gendarmerie bobbed up suddenly beside our cars and hissed at us doubtfully: '*Vous étes Anglais?*' He drew us into a café for an urgent consultation. 'You have been beaten,' he announced. 'The flag is down, the soldiers have gone. You are in retreat. The Boches are coming.' He was very agitated.

Little by little the story came out. It seemed that the Australian security company which had been posted in the town had been wanted elsewhere, and, all being quiet on the surface at Tyre, they had been withdrawn. Having only one Union Jack, and that one only an old yachting flag, they had pulled it down and marched off. The next thing the wondering people heard was heavy gunfire along the Litani River. Villagers sent to the main road came back with reports that British ambulances and staff cars were travelling fast down the road toward Haifa. At once the people jumped to the conclusion that the Empire forces were retiring. Out of their nooks and crannies in the village came the pro-Nazis, and there had been a wild night of arguments and Fascist demonstrations in the village square. When we arrived, the people had not been sure if we were Vichy French or

Germans or Italians. They had routed two Vichy destroyers that had come out of Beyrout. But now the chief of Gendarmerie stepped briskly forward into the square. Throwing up his hand for silence, he announced with superb simplicity: 'The British are not beaten.' There was a cheer from the ranks of the anti-Axis clique, and dark troubled looks among the pro-Nazis. From somewhere another Union Jack was produced, and as it went up we sent off for another platoon of Australians to occupy the town.

Of no importance all this, except it was probably symbolic of all Syria. These Lebanese had been so twisted and confused by rival propagandas that nothing seemed definite and true, and they were ready to swing any way so long as it would give them peace to go on with their farms and their fishing.

When Sidon fell and we drove in on the heels of the first Australian patrols, the town was half sullen and doubting. Two Senegalese soldiers lay jumbled in horrible death at the gateway to the town, where a naval shell had hit them, and the people had been badly scared. All the French had decamped. Dentz had been here only two days before to tell the troops straight out that unless they fought reprisals would be taken upon their kinsmen imprisoned by the Germans. They were to shoot all British who attempted to parley. More and more as we progressed with this campaign Dentz was emerging as a very sinister figure indeed. And as yet we had not begun to know how far he would go.

The town was painfully short of things like bread, sugar and petrol, and goods had apparently been cornered by a few merchants to put up prices.

The English fleet had been steaming steadily ahead of the advancing troops, shelling French positions on the coast from four or five thousand yards out. They had routed two Vichy destroyers that had come out of Beyrout. But now in the evening an unusually heavy force of German Junkers appeared suddenly over Sidon. The British ships were at once obliterated in fountains of bombed water, and as the bombers turned for their second run a great widening shaft of black smoke arose from one of the destroyers. It was badly damaged. This misfortune, coming after several other encounters in which British warships had been hit, made it imperative that the fleet should have air protection if it was to go on.

On land we were flourishing. We had taken Merj Ayoun, in the centre, and Jezzine. Kinetra on the road to Damascus had fallen, and we drove into it the following night and slept there in the Stade Pétain.

Two days later Merj Ayoun had been retaken, Jezzine was menaced, and a Vichy column fell suddenly upon Kinetra and captured or killed most of the British regiment holding it. The stone wall against which I had slept at Kinetra two nights previously was all but blown away. There was nothing for it but to bring up more aircraft, more guns and men, and recover the position. After a day in the central sector where the French were methodically shelling Palestine territory at Metulla with seventy-fives, I was glad enough to get back to Haifa for a quiet night.

These drives across northern Palestine and southern Syria went by like tourist outings. From Rosh Pinna you turned down upon the lower road past the Sea of Galilee and Tiberias and Nazareth. Or upon the higher road you came past Mount Canaan and a succession of villages almost too Biblical to be real. Military traffic was on the road everywhere, and the general awakening to the war was very like what I had seen in the Sudan.

When I had come to Palestine a year ago the place was drifting along on the edge of the war with a happy-go-lucky round of dinner dances at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, and swimming on the coast at Tel Aviv. Prices in the hotels and restaurants and for such things as taxis had been allowed to rise to unreasonable heights—a legacy from the tourist days—and now they had gone higher yet. A day and a half at the King David Hotel cost my wife and myself seven pounds. It was the old business of cashing in on the war, and from one end of the Middle East to the other now the British army was paying through the nose. For the hotel-keepers and the merchants it was a time of abundance. Only the mass of the people, the fellah in Egypt, the farmer in Palestine—who had had no direct means of tapping the flow of gold from England and the Dominions—had a hard time, for they got no increased income to meet the artificial prices. And immediately any part of Syria was occupied, the old bad profiteering business was begun, for we were determined to placate the people and the best way of doing that seemed to be to let them have a free hand at their business.

Two weeks of fighting had not got us anywhere much, but now, late in June, the reinforcements had come, British–American Tomahawks were fighting French–American Glen Martins. Damascus was overlooked by Indians and Australians who had got around to the left flank. We regained Kinetra and I set off fast for the Damascus front. We were almost there when the car broke a spring and we had to return all the way to Haifa. Damascus was falling. Once again I was going to be too late. Once again it wasn't going to matter.

We drove hard all the next day up out of Palestine and across that arid black lava country where the Arabs were threshing a brilliant yellow harvest on the ground, and on up the road where Legentilhomme had been wounded, and so into Damascus, which had been entered a few hours before. Nothing comparable to the excitement of Lawrence's entry twenty-four years before had taken place, though the last fighting had been bitter enough.

Here, then, was the garden town on the edge of the desert, which was so beautiful that Mahommed had refused to enter it lest he anticipate heaven. This was the burial-place of Saladin and John the Baptist who is also a saint of the Arabs; the largest city in Syria, the oldest inhabited city in the world, and probably the most ancient hotbed of intrigue in the Middle East. I see Damascus must be a delight to a man coming into its green gardens from the desert—rather as Derna was to me in Cyrenaica; but, with my head filled with the lively colours of the coast, I found the streets dusty and noisy and the buildings shabby. We drove to the Orient Hotel and booked rooms, much as you could in Marseilles or Bayonne in the years before the war. It was very French. But the crowd milling round in the square outside was largely Semitic. Again the French had left in a body down the Beyrout road.

There had been a three-way thrust into the city at the end. Colonel Collet with his troop of wild Circassian cavalry had come in from the east without opposition. Legentilhomme had come straight at the town up the main road from the south; and round in the west the Indian and Australians had had a stiff fight in an outlying suburb called Mezze. At Mezze, while the Australians won the heights, an English gunnery officer had used the most original tactics of charging with twenty-five-pounder guns. Starting near a British military cemetery of the last war, he

had unloosed a salvo, and then, harnessing his guns, he had rushed forward to a new post where he swung his artillery round into action again. And then once more they charged. Unorthodox, risky and highly successful.

There was still a proper mix-up in the hills above Mezze. An Australian brigade headquarters had been surprised and captured by the French, and the French and their prisoners had had to face the Allied counterattack together. But now the prisoners were retaken and General Catroux was coming into the town to take over in the morning. There was a curfew but no blackout that first night. I looked out of my window and saw for the first time in a year a city glowing with light. Like some Venetian carnival, electric lamps gleamed right through the oasis and threw their warm colour up on the bare heights beyond the city where the battle was still going on.

In the morning we drove through the city, looking, for some reason, for 'The Street Called Straight,' and found only endless bazaars and byways filled with hideous prostitutes of whom Lawrence used the disgusting and brilliant phrase, 'raddled meat'. We put on slippers and walked through the Ommayyad Mosque to the tomb of St John the Baptist, and later climbed a hill above the town.

Coming back we went into a Roman Catholic church where Collet's Circassians had come to hear Requiem Mass for one of their number killed. A plain deal coffin stood at the altar. In the pews were these wild, stable-smelling, leathery men with their knives and rich robes. They bore the coffin out into the sunlight and placed it in an army truck. As it went down to the cemetery, the Circassians walking behind, I ran ahead in my car with Christopher Lumby of the *Times*, and a little farther down the road an Australian soldier shouted at us: 'Get back, there. Get out of it.' We had run straight into the front.

Here, three minutes from the centre of the town, two minutes from that solemn pathetic little funeral, machine-gun bullets were coming down the road, and dead and wounded men were lying out on the hillside. Even round at Mezze, French guns were still lobbing shells onto British transport going along the road. And it was then I heard the news that Germany had gone to war against Russia.

My story of the fall of Damascus could not mean much against such news as that. So I left quickly and returned to Cairo, for my paper was endeavouring to get me to Moscow. When no visa arrived, I returned to Syria for the fall of Beyrout. There had been a hard fight at the village of Damour just outside the capital. And now at last, after a month's hostilities, Dentz had asked for terms to end 'the bloody and unequal battle.'

Acre, the place where Napoleon was beaten back from the Middle East by the British Commander Sidney Smith, was chosen as the place for the negotiations. It was well back from the front in Palestine, and the conference room in the barracks stood pleasantly beside the sea. Firing stopped around midnight Friday, July 7th, and in the morning General de Verdillac, whom the Germans had recently released from prison to fight in Syria, crossed the British lines with his staff. General Wilson and General Catroux were waiting to conduct the negotiations for the Allies. All day long the conference went on. Journalists, radio broadcasters and photographers waited outside to report the signing of the armistice. Occasionally, during breaks in the conference, the delegates strolled out on the lawn by the sea, and more than once I saw Catroux and de Verdillac chatting amicably enough.

There had been one minor incident when a certain M. Conti, one of the Frenchmen, had refused to be served luncheon by a Jew. But, on the whole, the negotiations went peacefully enough. Yet it was annoying to discover at the end that de Verdillac had come without full powers and could do no more than initial the drafts. The actual signing, they asked, should take place forty-eight hours later on the Monday. It looked then as if the French wished to gain time for some motive of their own.

However, at 11 p.m. all was ready for the initialling, and the journalists were ushered in. Edward Genock, the Paramount cameraman, had been concerned that the lights in the conference room would not be sufficient for his newsreel. He had obtained several reading-lamps in the barracks, and these he had joined together ready to plug into a power point in the conference room. As soon as the correspondents were admitted, Genock's assistant strode forward and took up a position with his makeshift candelabra at General Wilson's elbow. The general, a large and benign-looking man, allowed himself one astonished glance at this sudden visitation and dipped his pen for the initialling. The candelabra was plugged in, and all the lights in the room went out. Someone produced a fountain-pen torch and flashed it aimlessly among the blacked-out delegates. Others brought a staff car to the door, and turned its lights in a blinding stream upon the Frenchmen at the conference table.

It was proposed then that a motorcycle should be brought right into the room in order to shed its light upon General Wilson's papers. A dispatch rider accordingly bowled his machine up the steps and into the position lately occupied by the unfortunate holder of the candelabra. Then before the fascinated gaze of the company the soldier began to set his motorcycle in motion: a performance which would have utterly deafened everyone in that confined space. 'But I can't light the light unless I start the motor,' the soldier protested glumly. He was ordered to take his machine away and hurricane lamps were called for.

During the period of waiting it was seen that a number of unauthorised persons, hangers-on around the barracks, had crowded into the conference room to enjoy this entirely unusual spectacle. The order was given for their removal. The order, however, was not quite understood by a sergeant of police who had possibly had a training in raiding nightclubs before the war. He now flung his arms solidly across the door and announced: 'My orders are that no one who was in this room when the lights went out can leave.' At length the hurricane lamps were brought, and in an atmosphere that was beyond either laughter or tears the papers were initialled. The further meeting was called for the Monday.

All next day the two armies lay in the positions they had occupied when the ceasefire order was given. Wilson's five columns, that looked on the map like the five fingers of a man's hand, stood clutched about the heart of the country waiting for the order to go forward and occupy. On Monday de Verdillac came back, and another long day of negotiation brought the final signing of the armistice. There was nothing unexpected in the terms. The French were given all the honours of war. There would be an exchange of prisoners, and those French soldiers who wished to return to France could do so. The Allies were to have their choice of the French war material, and there was to be no sabotage of the essential services of the country by the vacating French command.

The terms were generous, and Syria itself had suffered very little by the campaign. The men who had suffered were the front-line troops. There had been no fraternising between the two sides during the negotiations. The two armies had kept a rigid no-man's-land between them.

On Tuesday, July 15th, when the Australians were ordered forward and it was clear to everyone that the war was over, the people came out in thousands to see the entry into Beyrout. We drove slowly forward along the coast into Damour's rich gardens which had been ravished by the fighting. I counted some fifty houses in the village, and every one had a shell-hole through it. The big bridge over the Damour River was down, and broken tanks and armoured cars lay about. An undertaker's shop in which the French had secreted a tank to fire down the road was blown up. As we drove on toward Beyrout, through the world's largest olive plantation, Lebanese villagers ran from their houses to wave and cheer. Since it was finally the Allies and not the Germans who had the honours of war, the population were content to welcome them. In the suburbs of the city itself girls ran along the streets waving hastily made Free French flags with the cross of Lorraine upon them. We came out at last into the big Place des Canons, where between ten and twelve thousand people had lined the pavements and the windows and the rooftops in a compact mass.

A brass band was hurried forward, and now in the bright sunshine they came marching into the square playing *Mademoiselle from Armentières*. A long column of infantry followed behind with their tanks and Bren-gun carriers.

I had arrived now at the scene of the third British victory in six months. Benghazi, Addis Ababa, Beyrout. In this tangled, fluid war it was impossible yet to assess them clearly or know how to set them against our reverses. We were simply profoundly grateful that this Syrian campaign, with all its unpleasant implication of civil war, was done. We were very ready to forgive and forget and make friends with the Vichy people that morning.

I went down to the St George's Hotel, a luxury place that rises like a Chinese pagoda out of the sea on the edge of the town. The bar was filled and luxurious Lebanese girls were swimming idly in the sea below the hotel. Over across the bay the Lebanon rose up mistily cool and remote. It was a little like Toulon. It was as though the war had never been. General Dentz and the Vichy army had gone off up the coast to Tripoli where they were to sort themselves out—some to stay, others to go off to France. The rest of Syria was ours to go wherever we liked; the forests, the vineyards and the mountains, the ancient ruins, the cities and the beaches. In the streets you could drink syrups cooled by the snow brought down from the mountains, or buy rich silks and silverware in the bazaars, or knives with long chased handles. The motor roads led off to places with romantic-sounding names—Baalbek and Palmyra, Homs, Rayak and Aleppo. In the winter there would be skiing in the Lebanon, and high above Beyrout at Aley one could stay in great tourist hotels and see the lighted city spilled out below. All this new country was rescued from the war and could expand now in peace.

In a relaxed and grateful frame of mind we arranged for a large and very French dinner at one of the town's best restaurants, and, coming home late that night, we plunged naked into the warm sea that broke away in shafts of phosphorescent light from our bodies as we swam. Russia was in the war now, and for the first

time in a long busy year the Middle East correspondents were not expected to fill the news pages and keep up a daily stream of messages. It was good to win like this.

I woke abruptly from my idyllic daydream next morning. Syria was not passing out of the war quite so easily as all this. You could not take a country to war and avoid leaving running sores behind. As I moved round the town, meeting people, I began to see Syria was pretty well raddled with running sores at that moment. Bit by bit I pieced together the story of the last month—the story from the French side. And the thing that emerged from it was that Syria was only the beginning of an eruption in the French Empire and an estrangement between England and Vichy that was to eclipse anything that had gone before. It became clear that cooperation between Vichy and Germany was much stronger than had been guessed. And the essential link in this theatre of war was General Dentz.

Dentz and his henchman Conti were no longer Frenchmen any more. They had sold out completely to Germany. Here briefly is what I discovered. After his reverses in the first days Dentz had approached the United States Consul-General in Beyrout, Mr Engert, and asked him to sound out the British for terms. But by the time a reply had come through Washington, the position had altered and Dentz decided not to parley. He had had some successes in the interim, plus a strong injunction from Berlin to hold on. Two divisions of French prisoners held by the Germans were being released and sent overland to Salonika. The Vichy undersecretary of state was on his way to Turkey to ask permission for these troops to be transferred through Turkey to Syria. New aircraft were being sent across from France and French North Africa, and several French naval vessels were *en route* to Beyrout. It began to seem that Vichy (i.e., the Axis) would hold out in Syria.

But things did not go according to plan. Turkey refused to give the French troops right of way, and the British navy was intercepting the vessels that endeavoured to bring them across by sea. Damascus fell, and then the strong position at Damour. Dentz, who had been in daily communication with Darlan (not Pétain) and Berlin, as well as surrounding himself with the Italian and German delegations, decided to ask Mr Engert to approach the Allies again.

You can judge the feeling that was running at Beyrout at this time by an incident that occurred over two American correspondents with the British forces—Robert Low of *Liberty* magazine and Kenneth Downs of the International News Service. They were captured in an ambush outside Damascus, and when they were brought to Beyrout they were confronted by M. Conti. Conti said: 'You are spies and I intend to have you shot.' The charge was absurd, and in the ensuing argument Conti revealed himself as entirely in German pay.

But now the armistice intervened, and Dentz set himself to protract the negotiations as long as possible. While the armistice was pending and his delegates were at the conference table, he flew off the British officers in his hands to Europe, where some of them were delivered to the Germans. He flew off all his remaining aircraft to other French possessions. He took the British tanker Pegasus, then a prize in French hands, to the mouth of Beyrout harbour, and, with two other British vessels, sank her there. He removed the last of his own serviceable warships to Turkish waters for internment. He tried to coerce the

French conscripts into returning to France instead of giving them a free vote. And he set in motion a most intricate organisation for the supply of information to the Axis and the political disruption of the country.

Every one of these actions was a violation of the understanding of the armistice. Yet some weeks intervened before Dentz and thirty-five of his immediate and most dangerous followers were interned by the British in surety for the British officers so treacherously handed over to the Germans.

Driving after the fall of Beyrout to the far north of the country, I saw many French airmen in Aleppo and soldiers along the route. They had a very understandable coolness, but would stop and give one directions upon the road with good grace. Everything was being done by the occupying troops to leave them at peace until they made up their minds whether to go back to France or join the Free French. But at Tripoli, where the main French army had retired, a most active campaign was begun by the Vichy officers to dissuade foreign legionaries and others from coming over to the British side. I drove on to the Turkish border and saw the first meeting of British and Turkish soldiers there. But as I drove back and out of Syria I could see no permanent settlement in the country—not at least until it was purged of Vichy French and the mounting Axis influences. That lovely troubled little country was still far from working out its destiny in peace.

Chapter 18

We have had some setbacks, some successes.
—GENERAL WAVELL.

AND NOW, in July 1941, the first phase of the war in the Middle East was done. It had actually ended on June 22nd when the Germans marched upon Russia. Just as the R.A.F. had saved England until the help of the United States arrived, so Wavell had stood in the Middle East until the imponderable Russian army rose to fight with us. It had been a big and tiring year. I alone had travelled, I suppose, some thirty thousand miles and seen something of three of the five campaigns. From next to nothing the army of the Nile had risen to half a million men, despite its reverses—English, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians, Poles, Czechs, French, Palestinians, Cypriots, Sudanese, Belgians, Ethiopians, East and West Africans. And at least they were being armed from the United States as well as from England and the Dominions.

As the Russian war rolled on into the late summer, and one peaceful week succeeded another in the Middle East, it began to become clear that something had been done here to earn this rest and prepare the way for bigger offensives. Something like a quarter of a million Italian soldiers were safe in concentration camps in Egypt, India and South Africa. Ethiopia had been won back, and two other Italian colonies were conquered. Berbera was recovered. The Western Desert and Tobruk held strongly. The Canal was open and secure. But by far the major achievement had been in the sphere of our reverses—the sphere that inevitably

will be the centre of argument. Whatever were the demerits of our tactics and planning in Greece and Crete (which were the cause of the Benghazi reverse), it could not be denied as the winter of 1941 set in that our campaigns there had delayed Hitler's plan for the Middle East and perhaps baulked them altogether. If, as it seems likely, Hitler had proposed to sweep quickly through Crete and Cyprus and Syria to the Iraqian and Persian oil wells, then we had impeded him by going out to meet him in Greece and Crete. Presumably he already had the Russian campaign in view, and could allow only a certain amount of time to his Middle Eastern adventures. By delaying him, it well might have been that we forced him to cut short his drive at Crete. That, anyhow, is the British case, and it appears fair and reasonable to those of us who have followed the war out there.

There are many criticisms, for there were many errors in these twelve tumultuous months. The Benghazi reverse was a bad blow, and would have been averted had we gone on to Tripoli in the first place. Greece and Crete showed that we underestimated the Germans, and had failed to accommodate ourselves to meet the new fast blitz of war of the air. Iraq and Syria showed we needed a deeper understanding of the peoples of the Middle East, and a firmer hand. Both those countries might with clever diplomatic handling have been won to us without revolt or war.

But it would have needed a brain of genius and more forces than we possessed to have averted all these mistakes.

There is much here I have not touched on, either because I had no personal knowledge or because I did not think the event contributed greatly to the theme of this book. Malta, for instance, is a book of itself. There were many Maltese who had no cause to love British administration before the war, and the story of their loyal fight for England is a thing of grandeur and deep pride.

The revolt in Iraq truly was nothing. When the British dead were counted they numbered scarcely a dozen. It was a political rising that had just this significance—it showed that the Germans will stoop to use any tool however small. And it indicated that skilful propaganda among the Arabs will achieve results as great or greater than actual wars. It was a warning, too, for us to keep watch and stem the intrusion of German agents into the Middle East or Asia.

Against this, there were many other more vital things not noted here. There were the garrisons in Palestine and along the Suez Canal; the merchantmen who bring the weapons and men from England; the men in the outposts like Aden; the A.R.P. in a hundred cities through the Middle East; the people who slogged at their desks in G.H.Q. in Cairo; the civil airways pilots, and many a civilian who was stuck in some Godforsaken place on the route between Cairo and England.

In all these people's minds there was one overriding thought—how are my family and my friends? Nearly everyone in the Middle East was cut off from his family. The mail means much to every soldier. And it was not easy for men to fight in the Middle East knowing that their families were being bombed in England or menaced in any of a dozen other places I can think of. I heard this a thousand times: 'Why aren't we home defending England?' It was difficult to make it clear to the soldier on the Nile that he was doing as much to defend England or Australasia or India as he would have been in his own village.

Wavell saw this clearly. He understood his troops. And I for one was deeply sorry when at the close of this hard year's fighting the papers came out with the announcement that he was going.

The war correspondents went down to G.H.Q. to say goodbye. The general was in his shirtsleeves again. And for once he was full of words.

'We have had some setbacks, some successes,' he said, and he went on to sum it all up. It wasn't a particularly good summing-up. The theme was 'More equipment.' But I saw suddenly how sincere he was, how hard he had tried—tried, fought, organised, argued and held on. There went out of Cairo and the Middle East that afternoon one of the great men of the war.