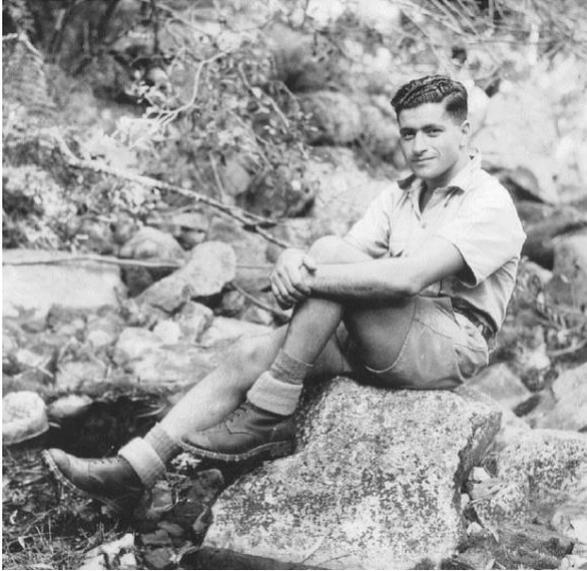


A SOLDIER
AND
HIS DIARY



HARRIS GREEN

A Soldier and His Diary

First Edition 2023

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book tells the story of a soldier who served as a Sapper in the Third Field Engineers of the South African Army during World War II. His service took him “up north” through Africa – from his home in Cape Town, South Africa to Gazala, Libya where he was injured. The journey of more than 11,000 kilometers was made by truck and rail.

This soldier kept a diary spanning from January 1, 1942 until May 30, 1942 – two days before he was seriously injured while detonating a minefield. It's possible he kept diaries for 1940 and 1941. If he did, I don't have them.

Although I always knew this diary existed, I had never, until relatively recently, read it from cover to cover. For me, it was an eye-opener.

What makes the entries so fascinating is that they were written in real time. This is not a memoir. The entries haven't been re-written to make punch lines more dramatic and there's no shortage of grammatical errors. They weren't edited by a

copywriter or directed by a publisher with an eye on the bottom line.

The entries are written as the soldier witnessed the events - in his own unique way of describing his experiences and using his personal brand of slang. This soldier wrote this diary for himself. He had no intention of turning it into a best-seller. That's what makes it so authentic.

This diary wasn't penned on a polished desk. The writer never sat on a comfortable executive chair pondering his experiences and thoughts before committing them to paper. What was on the lung, was also on the tongue.

The entries were written with low grade writing materials - most of them, I suspect, in candle light. Perhaps, on the writer's lap. He couldn't edit or correct anything. Once the words landed on the diary pages, they were there to stay. Here and there, some letters have been over-written. Occasionally, a word or two is crossed out. That's it.

The diary includes accounts of requests from higher-ranking officers seeking volunteers for "suicide missions", of having to say goodbye to friends who

volunteered for these missions and of the writer's "farewell letter" to his sister in Cape Town on the eve of a "suicide mission."

I wasn't there. I never experienced the oppressive heat, the freezing cold or the blinding sand storms. I wasn't subjected to food and water rations. I never had to contend with rats or swarms of flies and mosquitoes.

I never had to dig holes to lay thousands of land mines. I never had to dig them up to create escape routes for retreating forces. I never had to seek shelter from air strikes and artillery shelling. I wasn't subjected to the dangers, the despair and the drudgery these soldiers faced on a daily basis for months, even years, on end.

I've never been challenged by a situation without a ray of hope. Even the most vivid imagination cannot begin to conceive the routines and realities these soldiers were subjected to.

Reading the diary helped me understand just why volunteering for a "suicide mission" was always a viable option. What else did these soldiers have to live for? To me, dying a hero's death for something

you believe in, was a better proposition than near certain death in an enemy air strike or artillery attack.

Considering these soldiers were volunteers, makes the overall picture even more complex and intriguing. They were soldiers, not career officers. They risked their lives to make our world a better place. Their battlefield was thousands of miles from where they lived, in the heart of one the world's most arid and desolate regions.

These volunteers had no fringe benefits or home-court advantages. They had no idea what they were volunteering for. They never knew where they were going, or for how long. Would it be for a few months, a year or a few years?

What motivated them to volunteer? Was it out of fear of the German dictator and the threat he posed to the existing world order? Was it their sense of duty to defend their country in its hour of need? Were they seeking some illusionary adventure to satisfy a lust for action?

What thoughts passed through their minds when they hugged and said good-bye to their nearest and

dearest? Where did their minds roam in those moments of solitude, lying in their dug-outs or standing in the freezing cold, manning road blocks and observation posts?

So many died. Nobody ever called them Dad. They never experienced the joys of life. Their unshared dreams and ambitions simply vanished. They died without a wrinkle on their faces.

Thousands more suffered physical and mental injuries condemning them to lives of pain, anguish and unrealized dreams. For them, the war never ended. Life became one long, lonely, sleepless night after another.

Others were taken prisoner. Often humiliated and tortured, they were robbed of some of the best years of their lives and denied the opportunity to pursue their passions.

And there were those who did make it home after six long years of unforgettable experiences along with sad memories of dear friends who were less fortunate.

These heroes gave my generation a much better life than the ones they experienced. We are duty bound

to remember them, to recall their bravery and document their stories.

Wikipedia describes World War II as the deadliest military conflict in history. An estimated 70–85 million people perished in the war. That's around 3% of the world's population in 1940.

Deaths caused directly by the war - military and civilian - are estimated at somewhere between 50 and 56 million, with an additional estimated 19 to 28 million deaths caused by war-related diseases and famine.

For want of a better cliché, these numbers are mind-boggling.

As Laurence Binyon wrote in his poem for the Fallen:

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

I, for one, will always remember them – each and every one of them.

To fully appreciate the contents of this diary, understanding the historical, political, social and economic contexts is essential.

I'd like to share the contents of this diary with you. They are both illuminating and thought provoking.

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THE SOLDIER

The soldier is Solomon Charles Green. Personal number: 19807. Rank: Corporal.

Solomon's family and friends called him Solly. I called him Dad.

Solly was born in Cape Town, South Africa on January 19, 1911 to Harris and Leah Green, Polish born Jews who immigrated to South Africa in 1902. Solly was the fourth of their six children – three boys and three girls. His youngest brother died from a respiratory illness at a very young age. The family first lived in a small house in Bloem Street in the heart of South Africa's mother city before moving to a larger apartment in Orange Street.

Harris, Solly's father, was a tailor by profession. Leah kept home and saw to the family's needs. Their English was poor. Times were tough and the neighborhood was rough. Putting food on the table was their priority. Leah's health wasn't good and in 1927, at age 54, Leah succumbed to cancer. Both Solly and his youngest sister were forced to leave

school to provide additional income for the family. Like so many other young people of that day and age, their academic and economic destinies were forever sealed.



The Green family with a cousin in around 1920. Solly is standing in the front row to the left of his mother.

Solly began working as a delivery boy for a wholesale manufacturer of hair products. Deliveries were hand-carried. They were done on foot, occasionally with the aid of a cart or by public transport as it existed at the time. Unemployment was high and opportunities to climb corporate

ladders were rare. Nonetheless, Solly was able to transfer to sales and graduated to the position of a behind-the-counter salesman.

But life for the Greens wasn't all dismal. Members of their extended family followed them to Cape Town. Despite the difficulties, life in Cape Town was far better than the lives they left behind in Europe. Exploring the many trails on Cape Town's iconic Table Mountain became a family tradition. Solly loved sport and excelled in sea swimming, water polo, wrestling, weight lifting and mountaineering.

Life for the Greens in South Africa continued to improve. The light at the end of the tunnel was becoming brighter. But the winds of war were howling through Europe. Hitler's inflammatory rhetoric and actions were gaining momentum. On September 1, 1939 Germany marched into Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

Public opinion in South Africa regarding participation in the war was divided. The governing United Party split. Prime Minister Herzog was deposed by the party caucus and, on September 6, 1939, the South African government under General

Smuts voted to support the British war effort and declared war on Germany.

At this time, South Africa's armed forces numbered 5,353 regulars. This meager army was supported by an additional 14,631 members of the Active Citizen Force. South Africa's pre-war strategic military planning never anticipated their army would be required to fight outside southern Africa. Their small army was trained and equipped for bush warfare.

South Africa's declaration of war on Germany was far from popular. A significant and often very vocal minority actively opposed the war. Given the prevailing political climate, conscription was never an option. Building an army and deploying it outside of South Africa depended entirely on volunteers.

An additional problem South Africa had to contend with was the shortage of available manpower. Due to its race policies, the South African government would only consider arming men of European descent. This limited the available pool of men aged between 20 and 40 to around 320,000.

Around 135,000 white South Africans fought in the East and North African and Italian campaigns.

Another 70,000 non-whites served as laborers, transport drivers and stretcher bearers. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has records of 11,023 known South Africans who died during World War II. That's more than 5% of the total number of those who enlisted. Thousands more were injured.

None of the Green family or their friends was surprised when, in December 1939, Solly volunteered to serve in the South African Armed Forces. He underwent military training at Zonderwater and was sent "up North" in 1940. A few days prior to his scheduled departure, his father died of cardiac arrest on his beloved Table Mountain.

Solly was drafted to serve in the Third Field Company of the South African Engineer Corps. He saw action in East Africa, Abyssinia, Somaliland, Sudan, Egypt and Libya. He was promoted to the rank of Lance-Corporal on October 1, 1940. On December 14, 1940 he was appointed Acting Corporal. On March 14, 1942, he became a full Corporal.

On June 1, 1942 during the Battle of Gazala, Solly was charged with the task of detonating a minefield. My understanding is that, in error, he was given fast-burning rather than slow-burning fuse to fulfill his mission. Solly was blown up together with the minefield and suffered severe injuries, many of them irreversible. His colleagues assumed the worst.

Solly was evacuated to Tobruk for immediate surgery and then flown to Cairo by hospital aircraft for more surgery. On July 2, 1942, he was repatriated to South Africa on Hospital Ship Llandoverly Castle arriving in Durban on July 27, 1942.

He spent time at the Springfield Military Hospital in Durban. He was then transferred to the Military Section of the General Hospital in Pretoria and, later, to the Wynberg Military Hospital in Cape Town.

Solly underwent a series of 19 operations in 11 months and was discharged from the army with around half the number of fingers he had when he enlisted. His sight and hearing were severely damaged.

Solly was awarded the 1939 – 1945 Star, the Africa Star, the War 1939 – 1945 and the Africa Service Medals. He was mentioned in a war report in the

Sudan. He was discharged from service on June 2, 1943. His military file states that, upon discharge, he was granted a cash allowance of £5.

His place of work was, by law, required to re-employ him at the salary he earned prior to joining the army. Solly, however, considered himself fortunate to have a job and never took issue with his employer's opinion that "because of his injuries, he was no longer the man he was prior to joining the army" and would have to content himself with a lower salary.

A few years later, Solly was offered employment by an old friend from his pre-war mountaineering days. Before accepting the job, he reminded his old friend that he was no longer the man he was prior to sustaining his war injuries. The reply he received was that he was being hired for what he is, and not for what he was. This was such a morale-booster for him, especially after the thoughtless comments made by his former employer.

Rehabilitation became his challenge. He resumed his mountaineering. He married my mother in December 1944. I'm the older of their two children. My parents gave my brother and I all the things they

never had as children. They taught us the difference between right and wrong. The house we grew up in was a home in every sense of the word.

Solly never complained about his war injuries. He joked about his “stompies” as he referred to what was left of some of his fingers. He always insisted on closing the buttons of his shirt, tying the knot of his tie, inserting his cuff links and tying his shoe laces by himself. My brother and I were exposed to his injuries from the time we entered this world. We never considered our father as being handicapped or disabled.

Solly knew that in order to get on in this competitive world, he needed to give much more than what he got. He needed to be so much better than those who had all ten of their fingers, saw through both of their eyes and heard clearly through both of their ears. His work ethic and inter-personal skills were unmatched.

He was a true sportsman in every sense of the word. Win or lose, at the end of a game, he always had a broad smile on his face. He seemed to enjoy losing just as much as he enjoyed winning.

Solly remained an active member of a number of ex-servicemen organizations. He loved and cared for his old army friends. He was particularly sensitive to those who suffered from shell-shock, now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some of these lonely and broken people were frequent visitors to the home I grew up in.

Solly often spoke about his days “up North”. World War II was a landmark event in my parents’ lives. Whenever they had to put things into perspective, they categorized them as having occurred before, during or after the war.

As a youngster growing up in the home of a war veteran, I never felt any inhibition on his part to discussing his wartime experiences. He never tried to conceal his injuries. He never sought any dispensation for them. He was proud to have served his country to the best of his ability. He was equally proud that both his children served in the Israel Defense Forces.

Solly passed away on July 28, 1982 at age 71. He was survived by his wife, two sons and six grandchildren. His six grandchildren posthumously presented him with sixteen great-grandchildren. His

great-grandchildren have begun raising the next generation of Solly's dynasty.

I am so proud to have been born to a hero who risked his life to fight alongside so many others in order to provide their countrymen a better world in which to live.

Solly wasn't alone. Of course, he's always been my hero but I know he never won the war on his own. So many others, too many others, paid enormous personal prices defending their countries. Where would our world be without them?

THE DIARY

Solly kept a diary. There are diary entries for most of the days from Thursday, January 1, 1942 until Saturday, May 30, 1942 – two days before Solly was wounded.

The diary is a faded, red, hard-cover book. It measures 20 centimeters in height and is 13 centimeters wide.

The title page of the diary reads as follows:

Woolworths
Page-A-Day
Diary
For
1942

The diary includes a calendar, postal information and other “valuable business and household data.” There are some pages with advertisements for various household goods. Other than Croxley stationery products, Epic vegetable fat, Dettol and

Rowntrees chocolates, I don't recognize any of the other advertised brand names.

There's some interesting data included on the information pages of the diary. This information provides relevant context to the time the diary was written.

The Union of South Africa is described as "a British Dominion covering an area of 472,347 square miles with a population of 9,530,649 including all races".

There's also a listing of the largest cities around the world with their approximate populations. London, with a population of 8.2 million, is listed as the world's largest city. New York, with a population of 7.1 million, is in second place followed by Tokyo with 5.8 million people and Berlin with a population of 4.0 million.

Russia appears to have had the greatest military strength with 11 million soldiers including trained reserves. Italy was in second place followed by France, Japan, Germany, Poland and Spain. A number of other smaller European countries including Yugoslavia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary and Greece all had big armies relative to

their populations. Great Britain and the United States were way behind.

This is what the world looked like at the time. Fast forward 80 years. The demographics and distribution of military power have changed dramatically.

Considering the journey this diary made from the time it went to print in 1941 – from South Africa through North Africa, Italy, back to South Africa, and then to Israel - it remains in remarkably good condition.

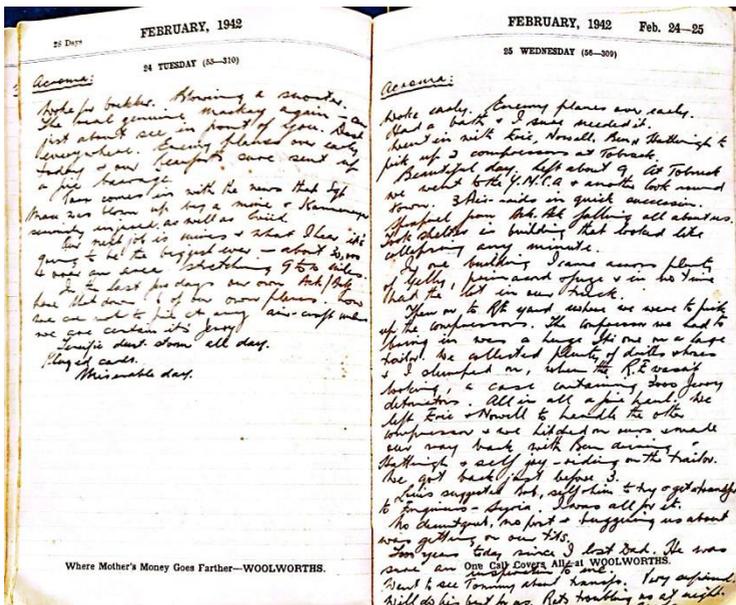
Solly's father was a tailor. One of his last creations was a windbreaker he made for his son. This windbreaker, Solly's camera and this diary constituted Solly's worldly possessions. Other than his good name, that was it.

When Solly was injured and evacuated to Tobruk for emergency surgery, these assets were collected by his fellow soldiers who saw it as their duty to guard and protect them for Solly's next of kin.

These same soldiers were subsequently taken prisoner and spent time in prisoner of war camps in Italy. In 1945, after the war, they were repatriated to

South Africa and passed on Solly's worldly possessions, including his diary, to his sister – three years after Solly was injured. Yet another of their sacred missions successfully accomplished.

Solly treasured these possessions. Following his death, my mother, and later my brother, took care of them. Only after my nephew encountered difficulty in reading the handwritten diary, did I read the diary from cover to cover. The contents literally blew me away.



I transcribed the diary as I read it. All in all, the handwriting is legible. I never encountered significant difficulties in the transcribing process. I deliberately refrained from correcting grammatical errors. Here and there, I found sentences that didn't make sense or were out of context but these were few and far between.

Google wasn't always able to help with the abbreviations used in the diary to describe military personnel and equipment. I thank my dear friend, Peter Bailey, for the help he provided in this respect.

I suspect some of the places mentioned in the diary are so insignificant that even Google hasn't heard of them. Current photographs of some of these places taken 80 years after the diary was written, indicate just how remote and desolate the battlefield area remains.

I may have erred and misspelled some of the names of Solly's army buddies. If so, I sincerely apologize to them and their families.

My aim is to share the contents of his diary with you in the most transparent way. Hopefully, it will

provide you with a picture of what life was like for those with their boots on the ground.

THE BATTLEFIELD

The events referred to in this diary took place in North Africa close to the Mediterranean coastline in the territory stretching from Mersa Matruh in Egypt to Gazala in Libya. This area was also known as the Western Desert.

Following is a brief description of some of the places mentioned in the diary.

BUG-BUG

Located east of the Egyptian-Libyan border, Bug-Bug is 163 kilometers east of Tobruk and 159 kilometers west of Mersa Matruh.

SALLUM

A coastal village in the upper northwestern corner of Egypt. Sallum is 8 kilometers east of the border with Libya and 128 kilometers from Tobruk.

HALFAYA PASS

This strategic pass enabling access to the 180-meter high, narrow escarpment is located in northwest Egypt, 11 kilometers east of the Libyan border. The

escarpment extends south and then eastwards for a total of 55 kilometers.

MERSA-MATRUH

This resort town on Egypt's Mediterranean coast is situated on a large bay. It is known for its lagoons and white-sand beaches.

SIDI-BARRANI

A town in Egypt near the Mediterranean Sea, about 95 kilometers east of the Egypt–Libya border and 240 kilometers from Tobruk.

FORT CAPPUZZO

A fort near the Libyan-Egyptian border, next to the Italian Frontier Wire.

ACROMA

A town in northeast Libya about 28 kilometers west of Tobruk.

DERNA

A port city in eastern Libya.

BARDIA

A Mediterranean seaport in eastern Libya, located near the border with Egypt.

EL ADEM

Located 22 kilometers south of Tobruk.

BOMBA

A village in eastern Libya on the Gulf of Bomba. It is located 61 kilometers south of Derna.

TOBRUK

A port city on Libya's eastern Mediterranean coast, near the border with Egypt.

BIR HAKEIM

Situated about 160 kilometers west of Sollum on the Libyan coast and 80 kilometers south-east of Gazala. Bir Hakeim is best known for the battle which took place there in World War II.

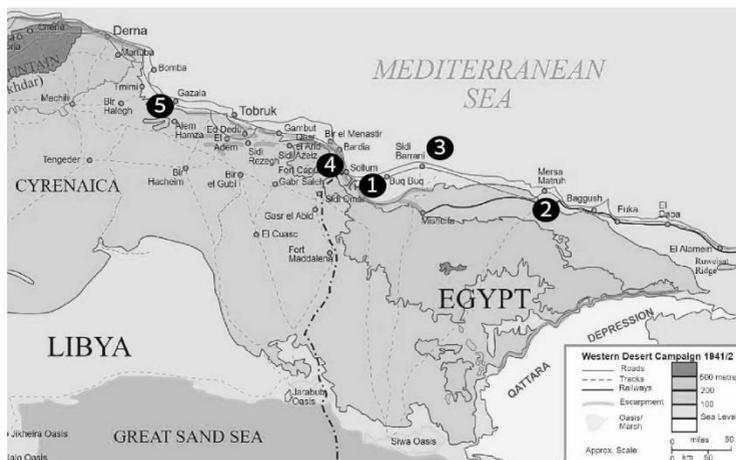
GAZALA

A small village near the coast in north-east Libya. It is located 60 kilometers west of Tobruk.

The area was, and remains, sparsely populated. The area is arid. Water is scarce. There's no infrastructure to speak of. The summers are hot, muggy and clear. The winters are cool, windy and mostly clear.

The diary contains many references to the inhospitable landscapes, the difficult terrain and the extreme weather conditions.

By no stretch of the imagination was this a land of milk and honey.



By Stephen Kirragetalk - contribs - Own work, CC BY-SA3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2917699>

THE CONTENTS OF THE DIARY



*From left to right: Ken, Solly (the writer of the diary),
Lou and Robbie.*

This photograph includes some of Solly's army friends who served with him in North Africa during World War II.

There were others – lots of others. They will always remain my heroes. I salute and remember them.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Quiet day at battle positions. Left camp for positions late in the afternoon with Robby.

That evening, Sgt. [Sergeant] Buret passed through with [his] truck to work on the minefields forward of [our troop] positions. He stopped and I wished him a happy new year. He continued and I slipped under my blankets. A number of seconds afterwards there was a terrific explosion that shook the stone trench Robby and I were sleeping in, followed by cries for help. I immediately realized what had happened and shouted to Robbie to follow.

I was on my way. I passed an NMR [Natal Mounted Rifles] Corporal on the way and arranged with him to get a "quack" [doctor]. I eventually spotted the Sgt's truck and made my way across the minefield. There were a few NEs [non-Europeans] and Cpl. Brown. Buret was in a bad way and looked as if both his arm and leg were broken. We did our best with field dressings and then carried him to the road. Eventually the ambulance turned up and he was taken to hospital.

We decided to get the damaged truck out and waited for a truck to do so. Robby and I, with blankets [wrapped] around us, waited in the cold. Eventually, Lt. Scott turned up with a couple of my boys and, [after] clearing a passage through the minefield, we hooked the truck out. It was late when we turned in and then Wally turned up to take the NEs back. As they had already left, we chatted until late.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Robby and I woke up before dawn and we opened the road. We prepared brekker [breakfast] in the mortar pit and then had to wire off a minefield. This took us a good time. We then went over the scene of Buret's "knock" and found he had passed right through the minefield and had the misfortune of hitting the last mine – tough. There was a good deal of blood around and he sure must have felt weak.

Going back to camp, I came across an Iti [Italian] hand grenade with pins withdrawn. Picking it up, I tried to dismantle it but to no avail and slung it aside. It went off with the usual bang much to Robby's and my surprise. Luckily, we stopped no shrapnel.

We spent a quiet afternoon.

Returned to camp at night where Martin had some sausages specially fried for us. Lodge and Lewis at road block tonight.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Quiet day. Very cold and dusty. Hall and Kennedy at road block tonight.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Easy day. Ash and Smart at road block.

MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Easy day.

At night – continuous rumble of bombing and artillery fire. Looks as if Bardia is on its last legs. Kept us awake.

Davy and Jock at road block.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Left late in afternoon with Robby for battle positions.

Flares over the escarpment.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Woke early in battle positions. Breakfast in mortar pit. Prepared road block and charged up 10 RE Mk II [small anti-tank] mines.

Rest of the day to ourselves.

A Free French plane coming over low gave us a scare.

Back to camp at dark – very cold. Lodge and Lewis at road block.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Woke late. Miserable day. Took it easy.

Had a kick about with the ball in the evening.

Hall and Kennedy at road block. Played cards.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Easy day.

Ash and Smart at road block. Robby at OP
[Observation Post].

Played cards.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Up after brekker. Blowing the usual.

Lt. Scott had me fence off a minefield as his patrol had almost marched into one. Davy and myself went down. It was a 2-mile hike and we came back in a howling sand storm.

Had to take it easy in the afternoon.

Left that evening [left] for Alum Baghut. Took a beat with the NMR. Our long-range Vickers [machine guns] were in action. Plenty of raids over Halfaya.

Not much sleep tonight. Damn cold. Dust almost covered me. Flares over the dunes. Lodge and Jock at road block.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Up at dawn. Had to patrol road with NMR to meet Colonel. He turned up with Tommy, Theunissen and others. Remained with them to show them the road block.

Later in the day saw Eric and Tommy training [in the] minefield. Went with two NMR chaps to meet them. Eric tells me Baard, Harris, Solomon [were] killed in lifting mines and Strybus, Watkins and Loudy [were] killed when walking over a booby trap. Many injured. Hellish blow. Many old pals of mine. Tough break that. Returned back to camp late that night. Ash at OP tonight. Lewis and Davy at road block.

MONDAY, JANUARY 12, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Easy day. Called out at 10 at night to attend urgent order group. Capt. Theunissen took the group and he was pleased to see me. At the group, we were told to hold ourselves in readiness to move down the line for re-equipment and then we were off for a further sector – unnamed. We were also told Sollum had fallen to the Second Transvaal Jocks with heavy casualties and that Gerry [Germany] still held Halfaya Pass.

The group was held in an officer's tent. There were about 15 of us stuffed in it. The quaintest order-group I'd ever attended.

Very cold tonight.

Smart at OP tonight and Hall and Kennedy at road block.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 13, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Small job of wiring for Lt. Rodgers.

The usual sand storms.

In the afternoon, Miles, Lewis, Robby, Lodge and I took our truck and went to Mill's camp. From there we hiked to the beach and then towards Bub-Bug. It was good to see the sea again. Pity it was so cold otherwise I'd have had a dip.

There were a few graves and a skeleton with almost all the flesh eaten away. Tons of flotsam and jetsam all over the beach. There's plenty of Gerry [German] containers with petrol, Iti equipment and a million of Iti grenades.

We travelled some 5 miles along the beach and then, after crossing huge sand dunes, we came back via the lake. Here again, we came across Iti equipment, ammunition and plenty of Iti tanks bogged in the slime.

We arrived back to Mill's camp where Creighton gave me some Iti cognac he picked up on the beach.

We got back to our camp to find Smithy back with us after 4 months absence.

Grub [food] and then a kick about with the football.

Jock and Lodge at road block and Smart at OP.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Received morning orders today. Leaving for Bug-Bug tomorrow (15th).

Busy preparing truck.

Fine day.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 15, 1942

BUG-BUG - SALLUM

Up early. Packed.

Left for Lt. Thompson's camp. Rejoined by Sub II and Sub III and then rejoined company HQ [headquarters] at Bug-Bug. Quite a reception as we hadn't seen our HQ boys since [the] end of November.

Settled down. Usual sand storm brewing.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 1942

BUG-BUG

Up early. Soon after brekker went out on job. Took Smart, Jock, Ash and Robby. Lt. Thompson and the S.M. [sergeant major] accompanied us. Our first job was to blow up a minefield beyond Alum Baghut. Passed plenty Free French on the road.

While blowing up the minefield the OP [Official Photographer] turned up and took photos of us in operation. RE Mk 4's sure kick up a din.

Then on to the road block which Jock, Smart and I blew. We collected some 43 RE II's and blew them up in a derelict truck. The explosion was terrific and the truck caught alight.

Then we blew an armored road block. The wind was hellish and the continual dust made work a hell on earth. At the road block, a RAF staff car had hit a mine and, in short notice, we stripped off all we could.

I came back with a parachute from a plane.

Our jobs were only 2 miles from Halfaya Pass.

We did a good day's work and the S. M. went to get our grub. Bully [bully beef] and biscuits. I travelled in front with the S. M. and Tommy going back. We had canned fruit – an unexpected treat.

Terrific Gelly [Gelignite] headache tonight.

Played cards with Wally, B. Hall and Lewis.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 1942

BUG-BUG

Had permission to go on rekkie [reconnaissance]. Took the gang. Beautiful day. Went out to forward road block and stripped a RAF staff car. Found baramils [water tanks] belonging to [Field Marshal Sir Archibald] Wavell's previous push.

On the way back, examined Messerschmitts brought down some time back. Two graves were alongside. The wind had blown the sand away from one of the skeletons exposing broken bones. A hellish wreck.

Arrived back in sand storm. Lovely night. Bad cold. Halfaya surrenders.



SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 1942

BUG-BUG

With Halfaya in our hands, I got permission to (as a bluff) strip the RAF car again but my idea was to go right into Sallum. We passed Tommy with some of our boys busy on a roadblock where a French armored truck was blown up.

We then hurried passed, passing the roadblocks we blew up a few days ago. Then on to Sallum. We passed through a Gerry roadblock cleared by the 2nd Division S. A. Engineers. Through the wrecked town of Sallum [and] through the Barracks Pass to the barracks. The cable way here and the water holders were all smashed. Down the pass and then on to Halfaya but we were not allowed on the pass. Iti prisoners here still being taken away. Gerry graves and Iti graves by the ton as well as our own.

Louis and I inspected dug-outs on the barracks road making a few finds. We all came away with maps, tin helmets, rifles, etc. We passed 2 Gerry's dead on the way. We were the first S. A. boys in from the Bug-Bug side.

Day well spent.

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 1942

BUG-BUG

Awoke early. Small party of NCOs and men to go to Halfaya Pass and I was lucky to be in the party. Our gang travelled in one truck and it was like old times. Ainslie realized it was my birthday and that started the ball rolling. They all pounced on me and wished me all the best.

After reaching Sallum, we carried on to our left and then over the escarpment via the Halfaya Pass. It was a grand sight from the top. At the top, we got off the truck and had a tour of inspection. Firstly, we had a look at the German and Iti graveyard - a neat piece of work. The Gerrys sure love their swastikas.

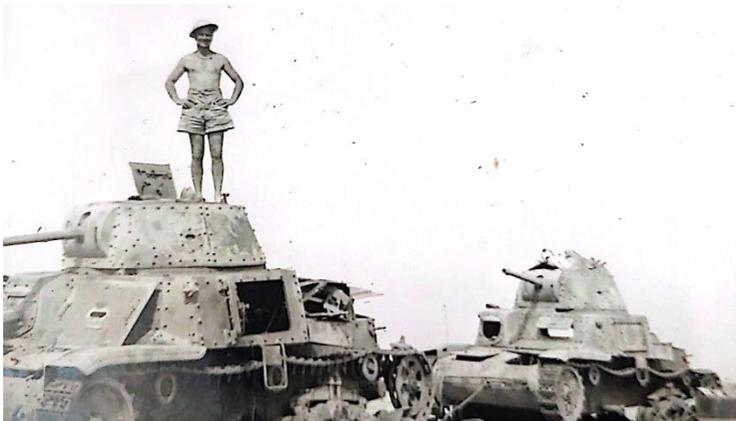
Then we broke up and I, with some others, travelled on by foot and went through some dug-outs. There was plenty of ammo [ammunition] and equipment lying about but all the guns and range-finders were destroyed. Hicky and I were almost arrested by an MP [Military Police] officer but he saw it was a tough proposition.

We worked our way down the pass and, after entering one of the many valleys, we came to a huge

camp. There was a hospital of sorts, boot repairer, tailor, etc.

It was a sad sight. Ash and I explored this valley. I came across the spot where the Gerrys tried to dig for water. They had struck it alright but it was salty. I also found charges ready to be lit. I came away with a certain amount of booty including Gerry helmets, a diary, etc. Ash and I found a huge rubber boat all complete with paddles. At the bottom of the wadi [valley], we came across a ton of Gerry and Iti trucks, tanks, etc., - all out of commission. There were quite a number of planes smashed up. Our aerial bombardment of Halfaya didn't do much damage. The Pass was intact.

We got back late. Another day of "holiday-making."



TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 1942

BUG-BUG – MERSA MATRUH

Left early for our way back to Matruh. The whole company was in convoy once again. My cold is hellish and on top of it all, it's blowing a gale – a genuine sand storm. The trip was a miserable business. We had one stop the other side of Sidi-Barrani for bully. Later in the afternoon we passed through Matruh and took the smuggler cove road for home – 10 miles. We made camp alongside a salt [water] lake. The dust was hellish. My crowd were lucky to find a deep dug-out and we soon had our canvas over it.

Very cold after the wind. Could do with a wash.

Mileage for the day – 130 miles.

Smithy, Robby, Davy, Smart and I in dug-out.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Easy day. In the afternoon, took over Iti rifles to the shore and had a fine break shooting off Iti ammunition.

Air raid today.

Blowing again.

Good to see the sea again and hear the good old breakers.

Two Libbies [Libyans] killed and a few Iti prisoners wounded in today's raid.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Easy day. Air raid.

Usual sand storm.

Played cards at night.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Easy day. Beautiful day.

Local leave arranged. And I'm lucky to be in with Louis, Ben and Ken. I have a feeling it won't come off.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and mine [land mine] lectures.

Max Goodman came to see me. What a pleasant surprise to see him after all these months. He came down to my dug-out and spent the night with Robby, Smithy, Davy, Smart and I. A few beers helped the evening along. It was good to speak of home and old times.

I walked back with Max to his camp and continued our talk in his bivvy [tent-like sleeping bag, tent].

Got back late. Fine night.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 25, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Instructed to leave tomorrow on maneuvers with my sub-section. We had to give a rail breaking dem [demonstration].

Left in the afternoon to collect a couple of rails. On our way back, raided our HQ and pinched 15 SAWAS [South African Women's Auxiliary Service] scarves – warm necks now.

Max Goodman. I visited in the morning and had grub with him. Decided to go to the bio [movie house] with us but Tommy had me remain in camp and arrange church parade.

MONDAY, JANUARY 26, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Had instructions to go with NMR on maneuvers. I had to take my sub-section. We joined up with NMR at 0900 and left at 0930. We travelled some 20 miles when we [were] caught up by an NMR officer who advised we had to hurtle back – “maneuvers off”. I wasn’t heart sore at all – it was mighty cold and [too] dusty for maneuvers.

On our way back, after leaving the NMR, I decided to make a break for the bio. The boys were with me, so that afternoon we spent at the YMCA. We arrived back in camp and no questions [were] asked. Thank God.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 27, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and lectures. I had to take one squad for drill.

Officer who took us for mines knew pretty well b. a. ["bugger all", nothing] about mines – we could teach him a thing or two.

Played cards at night.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and lectures.

Blowing a gale.

Went to dentist about a plate. No luck. Heard of
burial of Maggott.

THURSDAY 29, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and lectures.

Very cold.

Quiet night.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 30, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and lectures.

Blowing like the very devil.

Saw Joe Tresaden at Bob's tonight. Last saw him at Premier Mine.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 31, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Squad drill and lectures. Len and I took the boys for drill.

Worked at the range in the afternoon.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Quiet day.

Bob invited me round to the mess where I found plenty of CTH [Cape Town Highlanders] boys and ours. What a booze up. Got beautifully tight [drunk]. Nearly ran into Goody who was tight and firing an Iti rifle. It was good fun especially with the old bag-pipes going.

Slept like a log and almost under the mess table.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1942

MERSA-MATRUH

Received orders for moving tomorrow – up the line again. Looks as if it's Tobruk by-pass. Sand storm continuous.

In the afternoon, went in to Mersa to a show. Reminded me of the Wolfram [?] days. The YMCA was packed. Got back at about 1600.

Popeye, Butch and Goody are remaining behind. LOB [lucky old buggers]. Popeye may get a transfer to the railway construction corps. We will sure miss him.

We are leaving without Ainslie. He's still down the line. Tough break on him.

Bang goes my local leave.

Sgt. Maister is our new sergeant.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1942

MERSA-MATRU – SIDI-BARRANI RAIL HEAD

Awoke at dawn. Breakfast and then broke camp. We left on the Sidi-Barrani Road in a hellish sand storm. Our section accompanied the NMR convoy. We had grub (bully and biscuits) just before reaching Sidi-Barrani. Tons of planes (damaged) and tanks (damaged) taken down the line.

From Sidi-Barrani we travelled west through the desert. Plenty of damaged Iti equipment here. The going was bad here. Eventually, we passed the rail head transit camp (Bir El Thilala) then west for another 11 miles where we camped for the night. Bitterly cold. Our rum issue sure came in useful.

Our mileage for today – 143 miles.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1942

SIDI-BARRANI RAIL TRACK

Awoke at dawn. Travelled east. Passed rail head and camped some 5 miles beyond. Blowing the usual dust storm. Had difficulty in holding the convoy but our section is on its own now. Rigged up a tent and had it strung down with huge boulders.

Our mileage for today – 17 miles.

Gerry at Gazala vicinity.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1942

SIDI-BARRANI RAIL TRACK

Up at dawn. Joined up with NMR again.

Travelled west for 45 miles. Travelled late in the afternoon and night. We camped some 10 miles from Sidi-Omar and now just inside Libya. Going was bad. Bumpy and dusty. Kipps fell out in the convoy together with our ration truck.

Very cold. Slept like a log.

Mileage today: 45 miles.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1942

CONVOY SIDI-BARRANI RAIL TRACK

Up early and rejoined HQs and, while we having breakfast, No. 2 sections rolled up from having just evacuated from Derna. They were full of their tales.

We then joined the convoy and returned to [the] rail head. Plenty of damaged planes and tanks on the way. At the Rail Head we were rejoined by No. 3 Section, which now made our company complete.

We had to eat at the transit camp and had some carrots floating in hot water – hell.

Mileage today: 49 miles.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1942

SOFABI

We left [with] our convoy complete. We travelled north across the desert. It's mighty cold. We passed the Iti positions of stone work. It was fine workmanship and built all along the escarpment. We stopped at one set of positions and came across huge piles of Iti road-block mines.

We camped that night in a wadi at the foot of Sofafi (east) [inland] escarpment. The area is well mined. Louis, Smart and I did a hike up the escarpment via the wadi.

Beautiful night but nippy.

Plenty of enemy aircraft overheard tonight.

Mileage: 33 miles.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1942

BUG-BUG – BARDIA

Left early. My truck has two badly damaged springs and my technical truck has a badly leaking radiator. The roads improved as we approached Bug-Bug. Plenty of Iti graves alongside the roads. Eventually reached Victory Road. Inter-mingling with other convoys going up slowed us down a lot. We had lunch near our previous camp some 12 miles from Bug-Bug. Then on past battle positions – Alum Baghut and stopped opposite Halfuya Pass.

The going was slow and monotonous as we were going over the Barracks Pass and there were a ton of trucks awaiting their turn. The pass is steep. Eventually we battled up and then we were on our way to Fort Capuzzo. Plenty of damaged stuff lying about. Then on to Bardia and passing over two bridges spanning two wadis – one of which was littered with damaged Iti vehicles.

We camped for the night. We dug ourselves in. Plenty of enemy aircraft over tonight. My section did guard tonight. Cold and windy. Mileage: 75 miles. Libya proper now.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1942

BARDIA/ACROMA

On our way early. Took Axis Road to 20 miles from Tobruk and then on to Sidi-Rezegh where we had lunch. Then El Adem with its aerodrome of damaged planes. Tons of equipment (damaged) all along the line, especially at Sidi-Rezegh. Huge graveyards. Dog-fight overhead at El Adem. Reached Acroma and had light to visit a graveyard of 100 graves of Itis, neatly arranged with a huge cross in the center.

Slept in the technical truck. Very cold. Not far from Gerry. Rommel is some 20 miles from here. Mileage: 112 miles.

Plenty of air activity tonight. Hall found what appeared to be a booby trap. On tracing the wires, it turned out to be a communication tin. In one holder, found a snake to our surprise.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1942

ACROMA

Easy day, Dug ourselves in. Surprise afternoon attack by 3 Messerschmitts that destroyed 3 trucks in a convoy a few hundred yards from our camp killing 3 men. The trucks were loaded with petrol and burnt for hours. At the time, I was in the cab [cabin] of my truck with Robby and saw the planes shoot out of the sun. It was over in a couple of seconds.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 1942

ACROMA

Easy day. Good spot to camp in.

Plenty of Gerry planes over but no actions. Rigged up tents today.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1942

ACROMA

Nice and warm today.

Easy and full of beans. Planes overhead.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1942

ACROMA

Up just before breakfast and I was watching alongside my truck when suddenly 2 Heinkels [German bomber aircraft] shot out of the sun coming straight for our camp and, in a twinkle, one dropped a stick of heavy and AP [armor piercing] bombs across the camp followed by his mate who did likewise. The first bomb dropped some 100 yards from me and, for the moment, I didn't know whether to dive for the tent or the shell slit. A piece of shrapnel dropped alongside of me and a few pieces hit the truck. Davies and Ash were in their shell slits and Miles lay flat in the tent. Luckily, there were no casualties although craters ran right alongside some of our trucks.

We then decided to dig our tent down and we didn't waste any time about it either. Plenty of scorpions, lizards and rats here.

In the afternoon, some of us went on a compressor job. We did a bit of shovel and drilling. It was good to do a spot of heavy work again.

We had to duck a few times when Gerry planes came over.

Got back tired and hungry.

Had the pleasure of seeing 9 Stukas [German aircraft] do their stuff – luckily a long way away. Dog fight over our camp and an Iti plane [was] shot down.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1942

ACROMA

Left early with Kipps, Sklar, Shelmer and I. Did a record day's work of drilling and blasting infantry positions. My hands are blistering – a good sign. Worked until 1630. Then back to camp for a good “hot” wash and shave.

Feel good.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1942

ACROMA

Quiet day. Did some washing.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1942

ACROMA

Took it easy.

A bit frisky in the air. Otherwise, all quiet.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1942

ACROMA

Supposed to be on defenses today but due to blunt drills, we slept in.

Had to take inventory of my technical truck.

Went on job after lunch. Blasted artillery pit and Vickers team pit. Worked until 2100. Very cold – compensated by a beer from the NMR. Kipps, Smithy and Jock were with me. Decided to return to camp as it looked like rain. We had difficulty keeping to [the] tracks and, many a time, narrowly missed driving over defenses, dug-outs and tents.

Eventually got on the right track after arousing men including Lt. Hubbell, who was “half out”. We ran out of luck when only 20 yards from the Axis Road. Jock and I were leading the compressor when the truck hit a rock, damaging the radiator. It was hellish to listen to the dripping water. It then began to drizzle. I had no option, but to order the boys to sleep. Luckily, we had our blankets with us and we turned in.

Jock, Smithy and I sleeping in the tracks and Kipps in the cab. It was bitterly cold and wet.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1942

ACROMA

Awoke before dawn – stiff, cold and hungry. Jock, Smithy and I decided to walk to [the] camp some 5 miles away and left Kipps in charge of the compressor. The sun was well up when we got back and were in time to get grub. Porridge, biscuits and coffee. Never tasted so good. I arranged grub and mechanics to go to Kipps.

It's a miserable day and we are likely to get more rain.

Ben, Smart and I went to Tobruk by water truck. We travelled by the Axis Road and Derna Road. It was about 20 miles. A sand storm came up. Sand storms here are hellish. All along the way, there were a mint of Iti, Gerry and our tanks, trucks, armored vehicles [all] in a sad state.

The defenses of Tobruk are formidable with barbed wire and mine fields by the mile. The bay is littered with sunken boats including 2 Iti boats which seemed to ram the shore. Tobruk is quite large and boasts electric light but is not in working order – naturally. The Iti church is a lovely bit of art and is

severely damaged. The figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary still stand. The town is a “pigsty” in every sense of the word.

We stopped at the YMCA for a game of ping-pong and it seemed strange.

Collecting our water, we started back with some dare-devil driving by Hall in a strong drizzle of rain, careering in and out of convoys. We climbed the Axis Memorial (70 feet) at the junction of the Axis and Derna roads.

Spent night playing cards. Very cold.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1942

ACROMA

Davies and I left at 0700. Bitterly cold. Had bran and coffee at job. Started new job. To blast entrance into an old Roman cavern. Compressor conked in. Wally and I returned to camp with same. Eric had it fixed and we returned in time for grub. Hellish sand storm blowing. Lt. Thompson came on the job with us. We had trouble drilling and eventually blew our holes at 1400. Just covered in dust. Got back to camp. Feeling tired and dirty. I haven't shaved for days – no chance of it now. The wind is hellish.

Played cards with Davies, Horton and Louis.

Hellish Gelly [gelignite] headache – gave me a bad night.

Blowing like the devil.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1942

ACROMA

Awoke late. Bad headache.

Missed brekker and lunch.

Weather miserable. Raining continuously.

Had shave and wash. Too cold for a bath.

Played cards with Ash, Miles and Davies.

Turned in late.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Detailed to take party to Tobruk on rekkie [reconnaissance]. Collected 2 NMR trucks at BHQ and left there at 1000. Beautiful day.

Arriving at Tobruk, we had a look round and found that the church I visited 3 days ago was again hit – the alcove being caved in. We had tea at the YMCA. One of our trucks never turned up so I broke up the party in[to] two and we went to see what we could rekkie.

We tackled a roof and had some nasty moments over blasted walls. One of my men tried to take a bath – home comforts alright. We collected CG [corrugated] iron from a cinema minus a roof. We had 3 air raids and one particular [raid] gave us anxious moments. At one time, 9 Stukas and bombers were overhead and our Ack-Ack [anti-aircraft] were pretty hot. At the time I was with Sklar and an Imperial [British soldier] and we took shelter in a solid concrete shelter. The Navy slung up a new parachute bomb and [it] exploded with a weird bang. It was the most terrific Ack-Ack I'd ever heard.

We then went ransacking. We stripped doors and benches and pretty well had our own way. At one time, I had to do some pretty quick explaining. Then on to RE yard where I did a bit of talking and came away with 24 spades and 6 sledge hammers. Then back to camp late in the afternoon. Bob, Sklar, Lazarus, Jock, Davies, Ash, Kennedy and Horton were in my party.

Three planes brought down at Tobruk.

Played cards.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Beautiful day. Did some washing. Feeling good. Plenty of air activity. Stukas and bombers over and bombing and machine-gunning close at hand.

At night, plenty of enemy aircraft overheard. Gave us the jumps on a few occasions.

Beautiful moonlit night and ideal for planes.

A flight of Stukas went over today.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1942

ACROMA

Left after brekker for job.

Very windy. Many planes over. Worked from 1100 to 1300. Then grub. Then worked until 1730. Blasted two Beaufort pits and turned out fine "blows". Used up a box of Gelly [gelignite]. Ash landed up with a fine bruise on his bum.

Returned to camp kitchen for grub and I drove the boys back by compressor – they didn't seem to like it. Had grub and then back.

Plenty of air activity today especially tonight when we had to "make" darkness every few minutes.

Played cards. Nippy.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1942

ACROMA

Woke for brekker. Blowing a snorter.

The real Mackay again. Can just about see in front of you. Dust everywhere. Enemy planes over early today and our Beauforts sure sent up a fine barrage.

Tarr comes in with the news that Sgt. Max was blown up by a mine and Kannemayer seriously injured as well as Wiid.

Our next job is mines and what I hear it's going to be the biggest ever – about 30,000 over an area stretching 9 to 10 miles.

In the last few days our own Ack-Ack have shot down 6 of our own planes. Now we are not to fire at any aircraft unless we are certain it's Gerry.

Terrific dust storms all day.

Played cards.

Miserable day.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Enemy planes over early.

Had a bath and I sure needed it. Went in with Eric, Nowell, Ben and Hattingh to pick up 2 compressors in Tobruk.

Beautiful day. Left at about 0900. At Tobruk, we went to the YMCA and [had] another look around town. Three air raids in quick succession. Shrapnel from Ack-Ack falling all around us. Took shelter in building that looked like collapsing any minute.

In one building, I came across plenty of Gelly [gelignite], primer cord [used for detonating] and fuse and, in no time, had the lot in our truck.

Then on to RE yard where we picked up the compressors. The compressor we had to bring in was a huge Iti one on a large trailer. We collected plenty of drills and hoses and I stumped on, when the RE wasn't looking, a case containing 3,000 Gerry detonators. All in all, a fine haul.

We left Eric and Nowell to handle the other compressor and we hitched on ours and made our

way back with Ben driving. Hattingh and self joy-riding on the trailer. We got back just before 1500.

Louis suggested Bob, self and him to try to get transfer to Engineers – Syria. I was all for it.

No decent grub, no post and bugging us about was getting on our “tits”.

Two years today since I lost Dad. He was sure an inspiration to me.

Went to see Tommy about transfer. Very surprised. Will do his best for us.

Rats troubling us at night. Cards.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 1942

ACROMA

Wally called for me to go to Tobruk to pick up [a] compressor from HQ. Left at 0830 together with Reinecke. Very windy.

At Tobruk, we went to the YMCA [and] then to the RE yard. Actually, no air raid while we were in the town. As soon as we hitched on the compressor, we were on our way. By now, it was blowing a gale and could just about see the road.

At the Axis crossing, we were told by an MP to have a plane look-out so Reinecke stood on the mud-guard. On the way we passed plenty of damaged trucks on the road destroyed by enemy planes. We also passed a huge Gerry and Iti graveyard. We came across the Polish burnt-out truck that was hit and fired on by 2 Stukas where 6 Poles were killed and 16 injured.

About 80 miles this side of Derna we branched off the road towards the escarpment. The road was hellish and we bumped about like a boat in a rough sea. We soon reached Gazala and went to HQ camp [situated] in a wadi. No. 2 and No. 3 were with them.

We managed to get post. I received 21 letters and it was grand as I hadn't received post for some 5 weeks.

Cardinal gave us soup and [after] chatting a while with the boys, we were on our way. We climbed the escarpment and headed east towards Acroma. The pass was very steep and the road bad. We had an air raid on the way and he shot at the cab. Like darts hitting the earth. Nobody likes Stukas.

At 1630 we arrived at Derna but then on to our works camp where Solly [Sklar] and I dished out the post. I then drove to our camp. Dirty and tired.

Heard that a tank was hit on Tobruk road as soon as we had passed by. Plenty of enemy aircraft over today.

Grand to read mail once again – especially home mail.

Played cards.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1942

ACROMA

Up early. New minefield to be started today. I've been put in charge of the mine party. Biggest mine field we have ever undertaken – some 10 miles long and 30,000 mines to be laid. My party consists of Sklar, Lazarus, Waterhouse, Horton, Dorman, Lynham, Lodge, Nielson [and] Ash. We started at about 1000 together with Tommy. During the morning, we witnessed a dog-fight between enemy planes and one of our Kitty-Hawks.

Unfortunately, our plane was hit and the pilot bailed out and the plane came down in flames about a mile away. The pilot landed and broke his ankle – otherwise OK. Then 6 Stukas came over, but our forces [?] kept them high up – thank God. We did wiring only today and wired some 4 miles. Except for a short break for grub, we worked continuously until 1630. Then back to camp for wash and grub. Beautiful day. Lovely moonlit night. Played cards.

Feeling very tired. Told that 2 planes (enemy) [were] brought down at Tobruk and 2 elsewhere. Later news said 11 planes [were] downed at Tobruk.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1942

ACROMA

Awoke early to the sounds of enemy planes and Ack-Ack – bombing and machine-gun fire. No damage in our area.

Very cold and windy. Left for job and continued wiring. Struck tough rock that made the hammering of pickets a tough and tiresome job. My hands are hardening fast since all the blisters have burst. Dust was bad. Had an hour in camp for lunch and then on the job. It began to rain heavily and we worked through it all. We were drenched but the hammering of pickets kept us warm. By 1630, my arms were aching. Then back to camp.

Very cold and miserable tonight.

In today's work, we covered about 3 miles.

Wrote home.

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Windy and cold. Left for job and carried on with fencing. Worked till 1200 then back to camp. Compassionate leave on the go again. Worked till 1500. Blowing a dinkum sand storm. Managed a hot bath in the wind.

Ten Mary [artillery] lands over this evening on Gazala way. Played cards. Davy and Mills went in tonight re leave. Were back at 0100 with post.

Naturally, [a] late night.

MONDAY, MARCH 2, 1942

ACROMA

Awoke early with enemy planes overhead. Machine-gunning and bombing.

Left after brekker for job. Lovely morning. Saw dog-fight overhead and one of our hurricanes was shot down. One Messerschmitt had to make a forced landing and another Messerschmitt [was] shot down. Our pilot landed in our camp and was badly stunned when he landed by parachute. His plane flattened out next to the Axis Road.

Gerry plane machine-gunned a Libyan camp nearby killing sheep and camels and killing a Libyan woman and wounding another Libyan. We collared a sheep (dead) for our own consumption. We smashed in over 100 pickets in hellish ground and went back to camp for lunch.

In the afternoon, the wind came up with its normal quota of dust. We completed the fencing. Sklar hitting in the last picket. I had to report to BHQ and then went back to camp a bit later for grub. Camels played havoc with our fences. Wind had died down. Beautiful moonlit night and nippy.

Had late spread out of our parcels with Sklar,
Horton, Lynch, Davy, Miles and Ash.

Ten of our bombers over tonight on way to Tripoli.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 1942

ACROMA

Left after brekker with Davies and Lynch added to my party. Started on trip wire fence. Did some 300 yards when Major Blamey came up to me re new positions, which meant the tedious job of taking [down] and re-erecting fences. Went back for lunch and reported to Tommy. Found out new parties to work on minefields and I and NEs to work on the fencing.

I was bloody annoyed and told Tommy so. He seems to have his knife into me – he sure has played me dirt after promising me the mine job. My gang are annoyed and went on strike but it's no use in the army. In the afternoon, we continued with the alterations and went back early to get a summary on the Iti block mine – the type we are to lay.

Tomorrow, I and Miles with a party of NEs are to continue fencing.

Fed up with the whole issue. The interest I had in the minefield is now gone.

Very few planes over today. Played cards.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 1942

ACROMA

Left after brekker with Miles and 5 NEs. Continued alterations of outside fencing and trip wires. Mining parties started mine-laying. I had plenty of fencing to do and Major Blamey confirmed my alterations as being OK. It came on to rain as we went back for lunch. It rained heavily and we continued with our job in gas-capes. We attached a mint of triangles to the fencing when Tommy came over to inform me to finish at 1500 as it was hellish working in the rain. He also told me that as from tomorrow, I'd be in charge of the mining and Cpl. Brown with the NEs [would continue with the fencing] – which, was it should be and as he originally planned.

He has certainly come down a peg or two and realizes he can't mess me about. To me, an arrangement is an arrangement, and, if one changes his mind like he did, well I just lost interest. He realized it quick enough.

We were helplessly stuck in mud and it took us an hour to get out. We had to maneuver the truck around the juncture to get back on the road. We arrived back at camp at 1630. I changed into dry

togs. I never dreamt of weather like this in the desert
– a real CT [Cape Town] winter's day.

In the evening the wind came in real earnest and it
is now blowing a gale.

Early night. Very cold.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early in the morning with the rain coming down in torrents. It never let up until after 0800. We got up for brekker and found our camp in a miniature lake. Our trucks couldn't get out even if we tried. Davy and I waded to the kitchen for porridge and coffee. What a miserable morning. Only a few chaps turned up for brekker. Rubbish all over again.

No work this morning. The wind has come up again. The camel camp outside need fear no shortage of water.

Rumors to the effect that we may be going down the line before the completion of our job.

Wind blew like blazes in afternoon. Work cancelled.

Played cards at night.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Camp still in a swampy condition. Had an early morning plane over and dropped a stack of bombs falling around Acroma defenses.

Left for mine-laying. Started immediately and made good progress. Finished first leg by lunch time. Tommy exploded an unexploded bomb near our minefield.

Wind came up in the afternoon. Continued with mine-laying in a sand storm. We made snappy progress and almost finished the second leg. Smart and I were on one leg and laid 30 Iti mines in just over an hour. The delivery of mines held us up.

Very cold and windy when we got back but I had to have a bath. I was grimy. A good day all round.

Played cards.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 1942

ACROMA

Ton of enemy aircraft over during the night and plenty of artillery fire. Something like the Bardia barrage.

Woke early with enemy aircraft high overhead and bombing Adem way.

Beautiful day and hot. Continued laying mines and went well. Mine deliveries very slow. Enemy aircraft overhead all day. Huge barrage over Tobruk – looks like oil-tanker hit. Big columns of black smoke there for hours on end. Worked till 1645 – a good afternoon's work. Very hot and flies.

Beautiful night. Feel fit.

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 1942

ACROMA

Awoke early. Plenty of Gerry planes over. Started mine laying and went well. 205 mines laid this morning. 705 to date.

Turned out nice and hot.

Half day off. Did some washing.

Played cards at night with Tom, Miles and Davey.

Mills held church service today.

MONDAY, MARCH 9, 1942

ACROMA

Minefield. Went ahead with a vengeance. Brig. Poole came round on tour of inspection and watched us laying mines. Beautiful day. Forged ahead in the afternoon and broke our record of laying 370 mines today. Not bad for a laying squad of 10 men.

No. 2 Section joined us in camp today. They're going to give us a hand on the minefield.

Plenty of enemy air activity today. Came back from minefield at record speed hurtling along Axis Road with Sklar on one headlamp and me on the other and Reinecke's foot flat on the gas.

Louis and Tom came round and played cards. Had a late supper of bully.

Our rations are spare and not sufficient.

TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 1942

ACROMA

Beautiful day. Started on minefield early. Very hot. Feeling languid. Struck stony ground which slowed us up a lot.

In the afternoon went ahead.

Our infantry mine carriers today were lousy. Did 305 mines today.

Plenty of enemy planes over and were bombing Gazala and Tobruk. Spent evening with Wally and the boys. Had a good chat about the old times and bridge.

Hear that our next job is at Gazala – an underground hospital.

Paid today.

Beautiful night.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 1942

ACROMA

Started early on minefield. Laid about 200 mines this morning. Called back at 1200 for an address by Capt. Smuts calling for volunteers for suicide job and gave us till this afternoon – wanting 8 fellows. Hell! Sometimes I wish my folks hated me. I gave it every consideration but I deemed it a foolish move when I thought of home.

Went ahead in the afternoon on the minefield and were approaching the 400 mark when we found our minefield running through the defenses of the NMR. This meant a stop to work and probably lifting mines tomorrow.

Many Kitty-Hawks over today.

Raining heavily tonight.

380 mines today.

THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 1942

ACROMA

Woke early. Dull morning. Robby came to say good-bye to me. Hell, it was tough and I felt mean. Blane and Tommy were going too.

Went ahead. Many planes over. Rained heavily at lunch time and [we] were drenched.

In the afternoon, had a surprise attack by 2 Gerry bombers who dropped a stack of bombs right through the Acroma defenses. Only a few hundred yards from us. No casualties. Tom cut his head and I, my hand, in ducking for cover.

Did 309 mines today.

Spent morning with Marty and the boys and had 2 bottles of whiskey to celebrate his birthday. It was a good night. Lewis was "out". Louis, his usual mad self. Ben with a tummy-ache.

Slept like a log.

FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 1942

ACROMA

Early on the job. No mines today and the whole day spent on digging holes. Very hot and tiring. Never saw so many planes over. Two Gerrys shot down. They bombarded all around us including Tobruk, El Adem and Gazala.

Kippy came to see us tonight.

Expect to relieve Poles [Polish soldiers] within the next few days.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 1942

ACROMA

No. 2 left us this morning.

Very dull and cold today. Went ahead like wildfire on [the] mines. Lunch time had to take cover from truck [?] when Gerry came over. Finished day with a record of 499 mines. Looks like our best day on mines. Probably moving up on Monday at dawn.

Heavy pounding of Tobruk this evening. No word of Tommy, Robby or Blane. Laid some 5 to 6 thousand mines to date.

Played cards.

SUNDAY, MARCH 15, 1942

ACROMA

Had a surprise when I was awakened by Sgt. Meister. I was under the impression we had the day off. Turned up on the job late. Nobody felt like work.

CRE [Commander Royal Engineers] turned up to comment on our work. Many bombs over. Laid some 100 mines. Afternoon off.

Expect to leave at 1700. Cancelled after pulling down our tents. Put up our tent again and intend to leave at dawn. Very cold. Blew up SH [suspected hazard] and Iti jackhammer nearly killing Sklar and Co.

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 1942

ACROMA – GAZALA

Movement cancelled again. Quiet day. Blowing a gale. Left at 0530 in a dinkum sand storm. Waited at Fort Acroma for NMR convoy. 2nd Division moved up today to take up our positions.

Left Acroma at dusk and travelled across the escarpment in the dark. Hellish road – miserable trip - took us to 1245 to do our 30 miles. Fell asleep in the cab. Eventually rolled out my blankets and slept like a log.

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke early and left at dawn. Moved into the Polish lines. Found we had to go back a few miles to our company positions. Started to dig in. Robby, Blane and Tommy rejoined us. Their job off.

Many planes over. Put up our tent. Louis, Davy, Ash, Miles and self.

Called by Tommy for sabotage job. Looks good. 14 all told. Slept like a log. A few miles from Gerry here.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke late and missed brekker.

Tommy called to change party. Expect to leave any moment. Spent afternoon getting stores ready. Tommy again changes party to 10. Louis, Bob, Ken, Robby, Robertson, Blane, Smart, Davies, Tommy and self. Expect to leave tomorrow afternoon. Taking 7 days rations. Tommy called us together to explain the job – and a suicide job as well.

Many Gerrys over today. A nasty piece of shrapnel just missed me and Louis. Sudden machine-gun fire from swooping Messerschmitt killed an artillery fellow a hundred yards from our tent. Poor bugger.

Nippy tonight.

Wrote “farewell” letter to Mil [Solly’s eldest sister].

THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT/"TIMROD" PATROL

Spent morning preparing for patrol. Many meetings with Tommy.

Plenty enemy activity overhead.

Left for patrol at 0645 and joined up with column. Left at sunset through gap in [the] minefield. Eventually passed our outer position and then on through the night into No Man's Land.

The road was bumpy and dusty. Stopped many times. Louis and I in front of Tech truck with Tommy in front. Stopped on ridge some 13 miles from camp. Had to take my party (Robertson and Smart) to road to wait for my platoon of infantry by compass.

Waited at derelict Iti tank. It was bitterly cold. They eventually turned up after a couple of hours wait. We then moved forward with them and immediately started on positions. We dug our positions through solid rock. It was well after midnight when I turned in with my back breaking.

FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT – PATROL

Woke at 0530. Rolled my blankets and carried them to a wadi some 300 yards away where our truck was hidden.

Beautiful day. Expecting heavy shelling and Stuka raids. Plenty of enemy planes over. A couple of Messerschmitts attacked one of our flights of 12 bombers and over 20 Kittys [single pilot aircraft]. There was machine-gun fire but nothing damaged. Plenty of Bofors [anti-tank] firing today but our positions were not attacked.

Artillery fire in the distance. Our other patrols advancing on El Gasa. Heard it was captured and they were pushing on to Selina. 250 prisoners taken.

Attended order group. Instructed to arrange dummy minefield around my platoon's positions.

Tommy came to see us. Played cards today. Did OP guard.

Plenty of artillery fire tonight. My night guard was 0130 until 0240. Very cold.

Mosquitoes bad.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT – PATROL

Woke at dawn. Brekker. Did two dummy minefields.

Went to see Lou. In the afternoon, carried on with dummy minefield on the flats and then prepared our demolitions for expected Gerry tank attack.

Came on to rain heavily on two occasions and took cover in derelict cab. Plenty of enemy planes over.

Armored truck blown up yesterday due to stray Teller [anti-tank] mine. One wounded. Many of our own planes over.

Nippy tonight. Night beat: 0221 – 0324. Slept on beat and woke at 0415. Mosquitoes.

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT – PATROL

We prepared brekker. Cards with Ronny, Paddy and Smart. Louis was round with news that Gerry was approaching.

Packed up early to move. Had our charges handy. Could see huge column of Gerry tanks in distance. We waited and waited. They seemed to stop. A huge Gerry bomber came over and gave us a scare. Hurried back to camp late in the afternoon. Boys gave us a welcome. Good to sleep in my own bed again. Mosquitoes.

MONDAY, MARCH 23, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke late. Ronny round to see me. Good to shave off 4 days growth and to wash off the grime. Took it easy.

Had orders to accompany Tommy to Acroma tomorrow. Unexpected. Gerry visitor today and dropped 3 bombs just outside our camp. Local leave on the go again. Sklar and Reinecke leaving in 2 days' time. Good to get mail again.

Had late meal with Sklar, Davy, Louis, Ash and Tom. Ate to a standstill.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Blowing a dinkum sand storm. Trip to Acroma cancelled. Supposed to attend NCO lecture on bombs. Also cancelled.

In the afternoon, played cards with Creaser, Lewis and Smart. Davy, Sklar and Reinecke leave tomorrow morning for Tobruk on their way to Cairo for "change of air" leave. Summer starting alright.

Played cards with Tom, Lou and Davy.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early and left at 1100 with Tommy and his batmen for Acroma. Beautiful morning. Headed for [the] main pass of [the] Gazala escarpment and from the top had a magnificent view of Gazala bay. The pass down was tortuous. Found 1st Field repairing pass. Stopped at HQ camp in wadi. Then up escarpment and across to Acroma with Ragman as look-out.

Sand storm came up and with the bumpy road, made the trip hellish. We turned off at the fort and then to our old positions at the Iti graveyard. While Tommy was busy with the 4th Field section officer, their cook heated up our sausages and made some tea. Grub, a chat and then on our way back.

We took the tarmac road and collected some water at a water point. The dust was hellish. We made good time going back and I acted as look-out. We passed Gazala drome with its mint of damaged planes. Up the pass again and what a climb. The sheerest pass I've ever been up. We arrived back in camp after supper. Feeling dirty and tired. Early night. Plenty of planes over tonight.

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up late. Plenty of enemy planes over and had to take cover often.

Beautiful day. Water very scarce. One bottle for drinking and washing.

Played cards with Lewis, Smart and Louis tonight and Kippy made us a slap-up meal.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Gerry bombers and 2 fighters over. Our Ack-Ack put up a smart bit of barrage.

Left after brekker with Prowse, Creighton and Blane on blasting jobs in NMR lines. Beautiful day. Started off on 2 Ack-Ack pits and had lunch with Ack-Ack with some beer. Carried on in the afternoon on tent pit and a spot of blasting for Lt. Hubbell. It was good to see him and Lt. Scott and some of the other NMR chaps.

Finished up the day with a beer each from the Ack-Ack officers. Narrow escape for Blane and Sgt. of the Ack-Ack from falling rock.

Gerry planes over again this evening and one crashed. Huge fire other side of [the] escarpment. Looks as if a petrol dump has been hit. Latest report is that Gerry is only 10 miles away with heavy tanks.

Played cards with Hicky, Smart and Prowse. Turned in late. Hundreds of planes over. Bombing and flares nearby.

SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Easy day. Beautiful and hot. Continuous Gerry planes overhead. Plenty of Ack-Ack. No bombs dropped in our lines.

Called out in the afternoon to prepare our battle positions on a ridge above our lines. My sub-section holding rim. It was tough digging and lifting rocks. We started stand-to [look outs for attacking aircraft] tonight from 1815 to 1900. Full battle order. Preparations against parachutists.

Plenty of aircraft over tonight. Played cards with Tom, Smart and Louis.

SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Breezy but warm. Took up positions at 0600 till 0630.

Parade. Rifle inspection.

Windy and the usual sand storm.

Ainslie turned up after 2 months absence.

Bad kidney attack. Had to lay up early.

Enemy air-activity tonight.

MONDAY, MARCH 30, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up at 0500. Stand-to from 0515 to 0615. Miserable but not cold.

Left mid-morning to examine loads of EP Mk 2 [anti-tank] mines. Took 13 men. Worked till lunch, then till 1600. Examined and tested some 900 mines today.

Bit dusty but warm. Drove the gang. Getting on fine with my driving.

Few enemy planes over today. Rumors that we are moving down soon.

Stand-to 1815 to 1900.

Paid tonight. Very miserable.

TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up at stand-to [from] 0515 to 0615. Bitterly cold. Came back to sleep. Took small party to finish mines.

Easy day. Usual sand storm.

Stand-to [from] 1815 to 1900.

Played cards with Tom, Sheldon and Ash.

Turned in late.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Stand-to 0515 to 0615 (in bed??).

Very tired and sleepy.

Compressor job. Took Lynham, Ainslie and Hicky.
Late when we started. Did 4 pits.

Clock moves an hour today.

Did some fine blasts.

Joe Fourie and gang provided us with some fine
guitar music. Turned in late.

THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Easy day. Plenty of enemy aircraft over.

At night played cards with Hicky, Prowse and Smart. Had 0100 to 0600 guard shift. Turned in at 0600. Tired.

Continuous aircraft over tonight.

Pesach [the Jewish festival of Passover].

FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up late. Took it easy. Plenty of planes and Ack-Ack today.

Received Matzoth [unleavened bread eaten by Jews on the Passover festival] and wine from Brigade.

Played cards with Phil, Tom and Miles.

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

On mine laying today with my section. Spent morning preparing marking cables.

Inoculated this morning. First injections (Tetanus) since Premier Mine.

Left after lunch for minefield and laid the first leg. Minefield is in no-man's-land. Very hot and a mint of flies. Most of us worked without shirts.

My arm is a bit lame tonight from the inoculation.

Hear that we're moving south to Bir Hakeim shortly. Most likely on Monday.

SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. My sub [section] on minefield again. Continued marking and digging legs. Had lunch and "job". Then completed four legs.

Messerschmitt and Iti pilot shot down today. Plenty of enemy planes over. Very hot and tiring today.

In the evening, played soccer against the British tanks who beat us 1 – 0. I played in the goals.

Played cards.

MONDAY, MAY 6, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Out early on minefield. Met Max Goodman. Working only to mid-day as we may move shortly.

Sudden artillery fire and then report of Gerry patrol of some 60 tanks. Had to send 4 parties with expertise in mines to NMR road blocks and prepare RE mines. Continued work with plenty of Gerry planes overhead. Back at camp at lunch time. Very hot and flies by the million.

Prepared to break camp. Expecting to leave between 1800 and 1900. Spent the night listening to wireless. Lodge, Miles and I made some tea in a dug-out. Moon rose at 0200. Left at 0345.

Whole company was in convoy. Millions of mosquitoes.

TUESDAY, APRIL 7, 1942

CONVOY

Very tiring travelling in the early hours of the morning. Robbie came off his bike as he hit a dug-out. I loaded it on my tech [technical truck]. Miles, and I in tech truck with Lodge as spotter and a few NEs.

Hit Acroma as the day was getting light. A dirty, tired and dusty trip. Dozed often. Near El Adem we passed one of our bombers that had made a forced landing on the Axis Road.

Had brekker a few miles beyond El Adem. Then on some 10 miles towards Bir Hakeim where we camped for the rest of the day and night. Davies, Sklar and Reinecke joined us today and related their experiences of their leave train being bombed between Tobruk and Fort Capuzzo. 31 killed and many injured. The only one who suffered in our company was Vogit with a shrapnel wound in the head.

Turned in early after digging our shell-slits. Very tired and even Gerry bombers overhead never kept me awake.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 1942

CONVOY

Up at 0800. Beautiful day. Hang about. Played cards.

Received orders to move back to Gazala. Left late in the afternoon. Reached Acroma at dusk [and] then on across the escarpment – the lousy trip all over again. Lost the compressor.

Palmer and Smuts led us astray and eventually arrived back at our former camp at 3 in the morning.

Just hosed down and dozed off.

Plenty of planes over.

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up at 0900. Erected tent (me, Davy and Lazarus). Very hot. Had to go on with minefield. Boys fed up. Started 2 hours late and Tommy had us back to camp and he was sure in a murderous mood.

Left after lunch and worked the whole afternoon laying mines. Plenty of bombing and artillery fire near at hand. Two NC [night combat] patrols captured over 100 Gerrys today.

Gerry push with tanks tonight. Had to send 3 parties to NMR road blocks. Slept in our togs tonight and "ready".

Plenty of shelling tonight.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up at stand-to and left before dawn to finish [the] minefield. Very misty and cold. Completed job at about 1000 and then back to camp for brekker.

Plenty of shelling all day long. 1st Brigade seem to be getting it all.

Gerry came up to a mile from our outside perimeter. Many planes over. A real hectic day.

Nice and warm. Soon be getting our summer uniforms.

Kippy and Waterhouse still unlocated. Second day we have sent out a search party.

Turned in early. Shelling again tonight.

SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up for brekker. Very hot. Continuous shelling.

Left to cement a beacon to ear-mark the minefield we had just completed. Took Smithy, Jock, Chicken, Louis and Tarr. On our way back met Max Goodman again.

Soon before supper, 10 Stukas came over out of the sun together with fighter support. They swamped down on us, dropped their bombs and were off with guns and Ack-Ack filling the air with a continuous roar. Our Section 3 compressor went up in smoke.

Cpl. Ross was taken to hospital with a shattered arm. Filby and Neuman received slight shrapnel wounds.

Just then, Robertson came in with the news that Sklar received a shrapnel wound from a faulty Ack-Ack shell while out at the road block and was rushed to hospital with a chest wound. We had only passed him a couple of hours back and given him and Robby their tea.

An ammo-dump [ammunition dump] was hit as well and shells are going off at intervals. Plenty of shelling today. Bad toothache. Kept me up tonight.

SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Left after brekker for the 12th field dentist to have my tooth extracted. Very windy and dusty. Same time went to see Sklar, Ross, Filby, Neuman and Fourie. Two Ack-Ack shells burst nearby my tent this morning. Back early in the afternoon. Also met McPherson on PE [Prisoner Escort] traveler.

Shelling all day long and plenty of enemy aircraft over. They bombed our right flank today. Tanks moving up tonight.

MONDAY, APRIL 13, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Left with 2 parties to examine minefield and check on shrapnel mines on outer defenses. Many planes over. Dog fight overhead.

Back for lunch and out again. Had to check up our 3 legs of minefields. Many shrapnel mines to be replaced.

Shelling all day long. 16 Gerry tanks destroyed and 10 of ours.

Tanks major buried tonight.

Louis, Sgt. and I had to report to Tommy for tomorrow's jobs and finished up by finishing his whiskey.

Lt. Johnson (late Sgt. Roll call) looked us up today. 16 months since we saw him last.

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Took 2 parties to minefield. Did b.a. [bugger all; nothing] as Brig. couldn't make up his mind re new minefield.

Usual sand storm.

Took Ken, Waterhouse, Lazarus, Tarr and Lodge to make gap [for] infantry through the minefield. Tommy felt fagged so he gave me the map. Ran out of white tape so came back.

Many planes over today.

Corporal of the guard from 0100 to 0600 hours. Chicken and Smithy with me.

Spent evening with Lou and Rob. Good chat about old Cape Town. Many planes over Bomba tonight.

Plenty of planes and artillery fire.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up late. Woke Sgt. and Mills at 0545 then back to bed. Took the day easy fixing up my kit.

Beautiful day.

Plenty of artillery fire tonight.

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up late. Easy day. Very sultry. Feel thoroughly browned off. Ate very little.

Davies and Louis get their second stripes today. Played cards tonight with Alec and Louis who wacked Davies and I.

Very warm tonight. Slept with one blanket.

FRIDAY, APRIL 17, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up for brekker. Very hot.

After lunch went with Ben to Bir Es Seam well with [a] water cart. Took over after escarpment. Hit it up. Vogit and Collins were with us with No. 2 water cart.

Road with many craters. Took shower and was it "good".

Stifling heat when we came back. Motor almost boiling when we reached the top of the escarpment.

Very hot tonight. Louis, Davy and I had to report to Tommy re minefield tomorrow.

Slept with one blanket. Restless with the heat.

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Two Stukas over and gave us a scary time. Up early and left for minefield. Tricky lay-out. Stifling heat and bad going. Finished 2 legs before lunch. Heat almost unbearable. No shade whatsoever.

Continued after lunch and finished another 2 legs. My party was Chicken and Shelver with 3 NEs. Finished at 1600 and we were out. I had to stop behind with Creighton and Hicky to lay gap mines. Back at 1700. Very cool tonight. Thank God.

Played cards with Alec, Tom and Davy.

Cool tonight.

SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Left for minefield. Went ahead and laid and completed 6 legs laying some 600 mines this morning.

Back late for lunch. Slept this afternoon. Brig. very surprised at our quick completion of the minefield.

Nippy and dusty today.

MONDAY, APRIL 20, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

New idea of roll call after stand-to in the morning.

Easy day. Nippy.

Few enemy planes over today.

Played cards with Smart, Hicky and Prowse.

Turned in at 0100.

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early. Roll call.

Left for new minefield with Peter, Jock, Smithy and Chicken. Laid 350 mines (MK II) this morning. Very hot. Enemy Junker [German four-engine transport aircraft] and fighters over today. Hot Ack-Ack barrage.

In the afternoon laid 375 mines in just over an hour. Worked like hell.

On guard 2000 to 0100. Turned in. Out to the world.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke up early for roll call.

Swim parade and took Ken Lynham, Waterhouse, Tom, Shelver, Tarr, Collins, Sangster, Smart and Lodge. Very dusty when we left. We traveled via pass down [the] escarpment [and] then on to Bir-El-Gazala. We eventually struck the beach (rocky). It was good to swim again. Very hot and all spent the day "kaal" [nude] playing polo, throwing the hammer and putting the shot. Gerry plane over. Everyone in the best of spirits. Shelver did the grub.

On the way back passed another Gazala aerodrome and saw the largest amount of damaged Iti and Gerry planes ever. A huge Gerry troop carrier was - good to see - damaged.

Back to camp in time for grub.

Played cards with Bob, Louis and Dave. Turned in late. Slept like a log.

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call at dawn.

Left early to lay anti-personnel minefield. 3 parties. My party consisted of Jock, Ash, Robby and I. I laid and completed our 3 legs with Iti Oto grenades. 96 all told. Gerry planes over and had to take cover. An Ack-Ack shell burst 100 yards away. Lucky again.

Back for lunch. Took it easy in the afternoon. Hellishly hot. Fell asleep in Bob's bivvy.

While we were having grub, we noticed a huge wall of dust coming towards us. In a few moments, we scattered to our dug-outs. I hauled out my camera and took a snap just before it swept through [the] camp and descended on us in cyclonic fashion. In no time, we were suffocating with dust. It lasted a couple of hours and then subsided. Our bivvy is just a mass of dust.

Turned in early.

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call at dawn.

Latest news is that Gerry has dug in and laid minefields 9 miles from us.

Took it easy today. Issued with our summer kit today.

Played cards with Davy, Smart and Hicky.

Turned in late.

SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Whole kia [?] overslept and missed roll call.

Left after brekker to finish anti-personnel minefield. Broke up into 3 parties – Bob taking one, the sergeant another, and I took Alec, Ken Lynham and Creighton. We had only one leg to complete and we finished at 1030.

On our way back we witnessed a dog-fight and saw one plane down in flames. Later we learned that 6 of our planes and 2 Gerrys were shot down.

Took it easy this afternoon.

Gerrys have dug in only 4 miles from our perimeter now. Won't be long before we have a scrap [fight].

Jerry planes over tonight and dropped 2 bombs nearby. Otherwise, quiet.

Turned in early.

SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Up early for roll call.

Left on another swim party with Bob, Ken Lynham, Tarr, Kennedy, Prowse, Lynchie, Phil, Lodge and Robby. Via escarpment pass to El Agheila's water point. There we met some Ack-Ack pals. Then a five-minute walk to the beach. What a champion day. Then a grave and a pitiful sight of women's and kids' togs.

Water warm and crystal clear. Good to see sea-sand again.

Played cards with Tom, Davy and Lazarus.

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT41

Missed roll call.

Detailed to repair Gyppo [Egyptian] mines. Hall, Alec and Kennedy in my party.

Intermittent enemy shelling all day long. Worked on mines the whole day and fixed 103.

Took sick tonight and spewed.

Played cards with Phil, Tom and Davy. During night, enemy air machine-gunning.

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call.

Continued with mines. Shore, Shelver and Hugo in my party. Completed 155 today. Intermittent enemy shelling today.

Beautiful day.

Guard tonight. Last shift from 0100 to 0600.

Played cards with Louis, Alec and Davy.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke sergeant at 0545. Roll call.

Easy day.

Plenty of enemy shelling.

Played cards with Hicky, Smart and Davy. Bridge.

Turning into real tournaments.

Beautiful moon tonight.

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call. New minefield today.

Very hot. NEs on holes. Laid some 200 odd mines today. Within shelling range from Germans.

No water on job and just about made camp with a useful drink on our way back at an artillery camp, where we got water for both the boys and the truck. Saw Gerry patrol.

Played cards with Lou, Bob, and Davy. Turned in at 0200.

Tired out.

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call. Out to minefield again. Finished laying all the EP MK II's we had.

In the afternoon, laid close to 100 Tellers [German anti-tank mines]. Had to make the holes bigger. Beautiful day. Enemy shelling dropping nearby.

Early night.

SATURDAY, MAY 2, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call. Left early with truck loaded with close on 300 Tellers. Started work right away. Staff with us today.

Completed minefield at about 1330 laying in all some 700-odd mines.

Had a pleasant surprise after grub with a visit from Len Wiid, who drives the Jewish Chaplain. I got a parcel from him from the SA Jewish Board of Deputies.

If all goes well, I'll be leaving with Bob, Louis, Ben and Tom on local leave on the 7th. I'm holding thumbs.

Played cards with Davy, Tom and Phil.

SUNDAY, MAY 3, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Overslept.

Davy left for Tobruk on bridging course. Took it easy. Miserable day. Plenty of shelling.

Played cards with Prowse, Smart and Tom.

MONDAY, MAY 4, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Roll call.

Left early to supervise flash-aprons of anti-tank guns. Returned early. Watched mortar practice.

Terrific sand storm in afternoon. Spent afternoon with Bob.

Guard tonight from 0100 to 0600.

Sand storm still on. Everything covered in dust. Miserable night. Can't see a foot in front of you.

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke at 0600 and woke Sergeant.

Sand storm still raging. Worst ever. Tried to fix up my kit for leave but it's hopeless. Spent day with Lou and Bob.

Had a pleasant and happy night and a whopping feast with Lewis, Alec, Bob, Louis, Tom, Lodge and Miles. Played a few rounds of bridge.

Turned in late. A very morale lifting evening.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6, 1942

GAZALA DISTRICT

Woke for roll call.

Spent morning getting my kit ready for leave tomorrow. Sure looking forward to it. Wind has abated a bit. What a life. Soon to have the comforts of civilization. Hoping to get to Palestine.

THURSDAY, MAY 7 and FRIDAY, MAY 8, 1942

There are no diary recordings for these days.

I suspect they were spent traveling to Cairo.

SATURDAY, MAY 9, 1942

CAIRO

SUNDAY, MAY 10, 1942

SUEZ CANAL

Rail to Palestine.

MONDAY, MAY 11, 1942

GAZA, REHOVOT

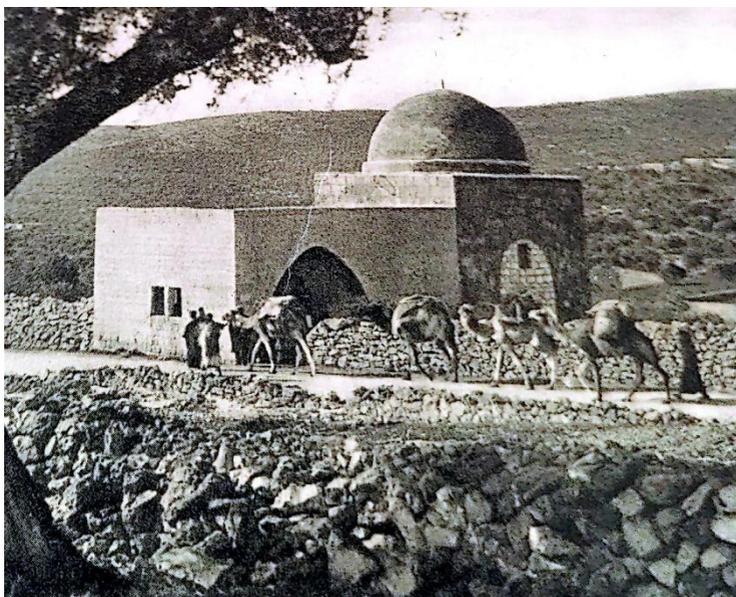
Bus to Tel Aviv.

TUESDAY, MAY 12 – THURSDAY, MAY 28, 1942

There are no diary recordings for these days.

I believe Solly spent most of this time traveling through his ancestral homeland. The photographs below show Solly at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and at Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem.





Given the rapid escalation of fighting in the area where Solly's unit was stationed, getting back to his unit in North Africa was a challenge in itself. The diary postings for Friday, May 29 and Saturday, May 30 certainly validate this.

FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1942

FORT COPUZZA – TOBRUK

Up early but didn't fancy the muck they dish one up here. Trying to scale a lift to Tobruk. Only 2 trucks for South Africans. Managed to climb on [aboard] an Imperial [British] truck. Very hot.

Made tea and left at 1200. Hit the Bardia road. Very uncomfortable traveling 25 up [aboard] with kit. Passed Bardia and then Tobruk transit camp at 1730. We dressed down in a tent after checking in.

Was told Gazala was surrounded and no hope of going up the line. Had grub and a much-needed bath.

Consistent Ack-Ack and 2 47s [powerful rifles] right next to us kept us awake practically the whole night. No Ack-Ack like Tobruk Ack-Ack. Gerry is only 25 miles south west of Tobruk and in the vicinity of Acroma. An Imperial "Jock" gave us a few turns after he had polished off a bottle of VAT 69. He spewed himself to sleep.

Too many flies here. Full moon. What a helluva [hell of a] night of din and bangs.

SATURDAY, MAY 30, 1942

TOBRUK/GAZALA

Up early. Had brekker. Fished around to try and scale lift for Gazala. Attended Munster [?] parade but no luck. Gerry's were too close to the Gazala road. Met Capt. Paul and he could help me but little. Eventually, scaled a lift with Lt. Hare – 6 trucks in all.

There were infantry, medicals and artillery chaps with us. The trip was uneventful. It was very hot and we left at 1115. Over the escarpment we had dust all the way. We clocked in at 1st Brigade and then on to our lines through the minefields. We hit our camp after 1600. Tommy was glad to see us and the boys gave us all the dope of the last few days.

Continued artillery and aerial action. Gerry's dropping heavy stuff near at hand. Sounds like 200 lb. bombs. Plenty of enemy planes over and Ack-Ack. Our lines are being continuously bombed and machine-gunned this afternoon. Tonight, Gerry's dropping the heavy stuff again.

Looks like little sleep. Tanks on the move.

SUNDAY, MAY 31, 1942

There is no diary recording for this day.

MONDAY, JUNE 1, 1942

This is the day Solly was severely wounded while detonating a minefield.

THE BATTLE OF GAZALA

What motivated the warring parties to fight such a long and bloody war in this desolate and arid part of the world?

Water supplies were minimal. Only one major road connected the few sparsely inhabited villages on the 390-kilometer route between Mersa Matruh in the east and Gazala in the west. A few strategic and steep passes provided vehicle access up the escarpment into Libya. The diary includes descriptions of the poor quality of these passes.

The battle for North Africa was a struggle for control of the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal was essentially the only supply route for shipments of oil and raw materials to Europe from the Middle East, East Africa and Asia. Its strategic value was vital.

The Western Desert Campaign began in June 1940 when Italy declared war on Britain and France. Italy's entry into the war made military conflict in North Africa and the Mediterranean inevitable.

The Western Desert Campaign included a number of battles fought at different locations in the area. The diary refers to graveyards, makeshift graves, abandoned equipment, arms and ammunition from earlier military altercations.

The advantage shifted from one side to the other. Italian forces crossed from Libya into Egypt. The Allies pushed them back, and, in 1940, captured the port of Tobruk. Long supply lines made this territorial acquisition difficult to sustain. During the period December 1940 – January 1943, the front between Allies and Axis forces changed hands five times.

The Battle of Gazala was one of the major military altercations between the Allies and the Axis forces in the Western Desert campaign. The Battle of Gazala began on May 26 and continued until June, 21, 1942 when the Allies were forced to surrender control of Tobruk to the advancing Afrika Korps under the leadership of General Erwin Rommel.

The Battle of Gazala is considered the greatest victory of Rommel's career. He was rewarded with the field marshal's baton following his stunning

victory. This made him even more determined to reach and seize control of the Suez Canal.

Some 50,000 of the 110,000 Allies soldiers who fought in the Battle of Gazala were either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The writer of this diary was amongst the seriously wounded. In addition, 2,000 vehicles, 2,000 tons of fuel and 5,000 tons of rations were captured by the Axis forces.

Axis forces penetrated the Libyan border into Egypt. The British forces retreated eastwards to El Alamein, where the Eighth Army fought two defensive battles, before defeating the Axis forces in October 1942.

The Western Desert Campaign ended in February, 1943. The over-extended German army was forced to regroup in Tunisia, where they were ultimately defeated.

The Axis forces may have won the Battle of Gazala but they lost the North African and Western Desert Campaigns.

REFLECTIONS

Reading and transcribing my father's handwritten diary raised so many questions regarding World War II.

I

The diary made me seriously consider my attitude towards war as a means for resolving conflicts or countering security and even existential threats. Its contents opened my eyes to the personal price those with boots on the ground are expected to pay.

I say this as a Jew. One-third of my people were indiscriminately murdered by the Nazi regime and their partners simply because they were Jewish. There's no doubt in my mind that Hitler had to be stopped at all costs. Imagine our world today if Hitler and his allies had been victorious.

I also speak as an Israeli living under the constant threat of missile attacks.

The Iranian dictatorship is dedicated to the destruction of my country. Despite the sanctions, Iran continues to pursue its dream of achieving

nuclear capability. I perceive this to be an existential threat. My children are reservists in the Israel Defence Forces. My grandchildren serve in combat units.

What should I expect my government to do about this? Should it conduct a series of pre-emptive strikes against Iran using weapons of mass destruction? I don't know whether this is even a viable military option. If it is, the number of casualties would be enormous. And if it were to do so, my country would almost certainly be targeted by a super-power. How many casualties would Israel suffer? Also, my people would be ostracized and condemned for generations.

But there are two sides to every coin. What happens if nothing is done and Iran continues to develop a nuclear weapon? Israel could find itself in an untenable situation. What would happen if Iran were to unleash its arsenal of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction? How many casualties would be incurred? What would happen to the economy we struggled so hard to build? Our neighbouring countries would pounce on our remains like vultures.

I find the thought of war utterly repulsive. But, in extreme circumstances, what is the alternative? Indeed, is there an alternative?

II

I have read countless books and seen even more documentary movies about the war. They moulded my understanding of what happened during World War II. Popular movies – the fiction based on fact – reinforced my opinions. As with so many other things in life, I thought I knew it all. After reading this diary, I realized I didn't. And I still don't.

There are major differences between the history books I've read and the diary written by this soldier.

History books and documentaries are written by historians. Their research is based on the memoirs of statesmen and career officers and millions of documents filed in thousands of folders stored in hundreds of official state archives around the world.

Their interpretations of the facts were made after due and thoughtful consideration. I'm not questioning the facts or even the bigger picture. What I am questioning, is the complete picture.

The diary was written in real time by a boots-on-the-ground soldier. The facts are the same but the picture portrayed by politicians and career officers is very different from the experiences of the soldiers in the field.

The politicians and career officers saw everything from the top down. The soldiers saw it from the bottom up.

III

The United States completed the first successful explosion of an atomic bomb on July 16, 1945. Three weeks later, the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Japan elected not to surrender. Three days later, the US dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Japan surrendered. World War II was finally over.

The combined populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki totalled 450,000. 115,000 (25%) of them were killed in the bombings. Another 94,000 (21%) were injured. These numbers are difficult to digest. The percentages even more so. The only benefit from these bombings, was that they ended the war.

The proportions of this devastation raise some interesting questions.

How many more people would have been killed or injured if the war wouldn't have ended when it did?

We don't know.

What would have happened if the US had an atomic bomb available and used it at the beginning of the conflict with Japan in December 1941?

US casualties in the war against Japan totalled 112,000. It's safe to say many of these lives would have been saved. Strange as it may seem, I also believe less Japanese lives would have been lost.

Clearly, the most significant benefit of having a nuclear weapon is its deterrent value.

Unfortunately, the Allies didn't have a nuclear weapon available at the beginning of World War II. Whatever they did have, certainly wasn't enough to deter Nazi Germany.

IV

This diary raised so many doubts in my mind about the manner in which the political and military

leaders of the time managed the war. Were there better ways to engage more effectively with enemies so far from home?

From a military perspective, it seems both sides were too far from home. The supply lines were very long and difficult, if not impossible, to defend. Both armies seemed under-resourced in terms of weaponry and grossly over-extended in terms of the territory they were expected to control. Neither side was able to sustain or capitalize on territorial gains. Control of strategic passes swung from one side to the other like a pendulum.

The infrastructures required to ensure the optimum deployment of weaponry and forces were woefully inadequate. When armies don't have the weaponry and infrastructure to deploy their resources effectively, they pay for it with the lives and welfare of their soldiers.

In this case, neither side possessed the military might to score a first-round knock-out victory. This war had the potential to go on and on and on.

I was surprised to learn of reconnaissance missions to collect enemy weaponry and ammunition abandoned on the battlefields for later use against

that enemy. It raises questions as to whether the forces were sent to battle with adequate supplies or whether, at times, they were used as cannon fodder to slow the enemy down.

V

I was staggered by the huge armies maintained by most European countries relative to their population sizes. Was this part of the legacy of World War I? Was it because of the relatively large number of dictatorships in Europe between the two world wars? Dictatorships require large armies to protect their leaders. Or, was this out of fear of being attacked by Germany or, perhaps, by mighty Russia?

I suspect there's more than an element of logic in each of these suppositions. Whatever it was, building a powerful military capability was very much a priority in many European countries between the two world wars.

Perhaps, in retrospect, World War II justified the size of the European armies during the 1930s. Building and equipping armies is an expensive business. Education, public health, social services, civilian

infrastructures, research and development all paid the price.

VI

While researching background material for my book, I was reminded that the South African government would only arm men of European descent.

Despite this, 70,000 non-whites volunteered to serve their country. They did so as laborers, transport drivers, stretcher-bearers and medical aids. The air strikes and artillery shelling never discriminated between them and those South Africans of European descent. They, too, risked their lives to make our world a better place.

They were good enough to fight and die for their country. Yet they were denied so many of the rights granted to their fellow South Africans who could have, but elected not to, serve their country in its hour of need.

Seeing the abbreviation NE and the accepted discrimination against those of non-European descent, hurt me.

VII

While transcribing the diary, I felt a sense of elation whenever I came to action-filled days. I found the days described as “easy” to be somewhat boring. And when this boring routine continued for a few days, it became monotonous.

On reflection, I realize that, for my father and his fellow soldiers, the “easy days” were the better days.

VIII

I was 36 years old when my father died. We were very close. I knew him like the back of my hand. I never saw him flustered. He never complained. He was always so patient and tolerant.

In the diary, there are a few entries in which his frustrations got the better of him. This can even be seen in a change in his hand-writing on those days. These entries are so out of character with the father I knew.

Those days must have been especially tough.

IX

For me, writing a book around my father's handwritten war diary has been an inspirational and emotional experience. I finally got to reading it from cover to cover. It opened my eyes. It also filled them with tears on more than one occasion.

The diary made me aware of the realities of war and the dangers these heroes voluntarily exposed themselves to – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, 365 days a year. We owe them so much.

It made me ask myself so many questions. The what-ifs are too numerous to list. I've enjoyed the search for answers and speculating the potential outcomes.

Thanks, Dad, for the wonderful legacy you left us. You are really a difficult act to follow.



SOLOMON CHARLES GREEN

*In awe and admiration.
Your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and
great-great grandchildren.*