

Written by Walter Woodhams

... the place which seemed without rhyme or reason, into Wales south and mid Salop then to Liverpool during the bombing which was not a pleasant experience. We had fire-watch duties, one night I was on duty outside during a raid checking that no lights were showing, and showing a new intake to the air-raid shelter which was in the basement of a school. That was our billet. At the top of the outside steps, leading to the basement was a heap of sand for filling bags. I saw then men down the steps when a bomb exploded somewhere at the back of me, it was so near that it was not heard coming and fortunately the blast blew me into the sand. Had I gone down the steps I would have been hurt, that if course if the reason that people think I am mentally unbalanced! I then went to Woking and did a driving test for driving on sand, being ignorant I had no idea that this meant I would be going on a sea voyage to the Middle East.

We were given 48 hours leave to see parents and whoever before we went overseas. By this time we had moved to Haslemere. We were taken to the station, given our pass and ticket and sent on our way. By this time it was getting well into the afternoon, journey to Paddington then cross London to St Pancras. By the time I arrived there the last train to Wellingborough had gone. What to do now! There was an air force fellow who wanted that train to Bedford so we teamed up together and made enquiries to find that the next train would be at 4am, so that quite a lot of the 48 hours would have been used. It then transpired that there would be a train leaving shortly for Luton. The air force man said that his father had a car and he would pick us up and take us to Bedford, I said that I could perhaps get a lift. We arrived at Luton in the early hours and my companion phoned his father who said no way could he get us, he had no petrol and suggested that if we went to the main road we might hitch a lift on a passing lorry. So, off to the main road. No lights, so how do we attract someone to stop for us? I had a cigarette lighter but there was no movement of any vehicle. Then along came a policeman asking names etc, eventually he said 'come with me'. True, we weren't handcuffed and there was no one to see us being taken into custody, and I was thankful that it was not Wellingborough where this was happening. We were taken to a sub office, the policeman spoke to the main police station and said that he had two stray servicemen, found wandering but they were sober and had missed their train to Wellingborough, and could they spend the rest of the night in a 'cell' until the next train out. Permission was granted, we were given a cup of cocoa and a blanket, and put in separate cells. In the morning before it was light, given a cup of tea and sent on our way to the rail station. Hurrah for the English 'copper'.

That, of course, was not the end of the story. I arrived at Wellingborough station and lucky for me there was a post office van just loading mail which had arrived in the train with me. I asked where he was going, he said to Rushden but would take me as far as Little Irchester if that was any good. At that time in the morning anything was good. By the time he got loaded it was getting on for 7 o'clock and I knew that May Green, a neighbour of course, would shortly be getting to Little Irchester to open the cafe, so that at least I could get a cup of tea whilst waiting for the bus.

May arrived at the same time as I did and she had a bit of a shock, because no-one knew that I would be coming home. I got my cup of tea and whilst I was drinking it a driver of Whitworth Mills came in who, after his tea and toast, was going to Wollaston, then on to Bozeat. An eventful journey – police cell, mail train, mail van, then a flour lorry.

But at last I was home for a short time, and a very pleasant time it was too, but not for my parents because a cousin of mine had gone down in the bombing of a rescue ship at St Nazaire, none of us knew what the future held. For me it was somewhat of an adventure, I didn't know where I would be going but somewhere far away. The leave was soon finished and I had to leave and get back to Haslemere to be issued with a sea kit-bag for the sea journey, and all the heavy stuff to be put into the ordinary kit-bag which would be put in the hold, we still didn't know where we would be going. We went to Haslemere station to 'entrain' for Liverpool. We waited around on the dock for a long time and then eventually marched off to the ship, The Duchess of York, a Canadian Pacific ship originally called the Empress of Japan. We were a motley crew of Army Air Force, A.T.S and civilian crew because it was of course a passenger Liner and still had its own crew. So below where we were shown how to hang the hammocks, then on top to look at Liverpool. I had a surprise because I saw a soldier standing at the rail who I recognised as Les Miles from Wollaston, so at least we had something in common although there were a lot in 402 Coy. R.A.S.C., who came from Northamptonshire. Les was in Signals, there was of course no semaphore at this time, just telephone and wireless (or should I say radio.) We eventually set sail, the largest convoy of troop ships to leave the U.K. We sailed into the Atlantic after first sailing the Irish Sea as apparently the Atlantic side of Ireland was patrolled by German submarines. Mid Atlantic, the ship's lookout said that the coast of Canada could be seen, which meant that we were well away from land.

Just here about the Duchess of York (the ship not Fergie). She was what was known as an auxiliary cruiser and was fitted with a six inch gun in the stern as well as Bofors anti-aircraft guns and machine guns, once of the reasons we were the last ship in the convoy. The civilian crew said that they had been in the Far East and with the speed and manoeuvres of the Captain she had avoided anything the Japanese could do. We were all given jobs aboard, at least the army was. My job was fireman, manning the hoses in any trouble and cleaning the brass, and keeping everything in good order. So we journeyed on to Freetown in Sierra Leone. We stayed in the harbour for two days. I wouldn't have liked to have been posted there, as some were. There was a lack of humidity hanging over the land, the native boys came alongside and dived for any coins that were thrown overboard or anything else, the water in the harbour was quite clear. It was fascinating too, at night to see the fireflies like a myriad of moving twinkling stars. We left Freetown and sailed again into mid Atlantic before going to South Africa. It was there in mid Atlantic that we were joined by a convoy of Merchant ships from America to escort them to S.A. One night there was a loud banging on the side of the ship that sounded as though it was being hit by a giant sledgehammer. We found out later that we had dropped depth charges as a U boat (submarine) was in the area. We had been warned that to sleep on the rafts which were tied at an angle

was dangerous, and with the rolling of the ship we could easily roll overboard, and there was no stopping to pick you up. We did, I understand, lose one man that way and we were given a second warning. The convoy did in fact stop one day before we reached Cape Town, there was a burial at sea. Someone on another ship, I think it was the Arcadia, had died so the whole convoy stopped while the burial took place. There is in fact a man in Pembury who was on that ship. We eventually arrived at Cape Town, staying for three days and a very pleasant three days it was too.

The people of Cape Town were very hospitable, providing meals and friendship. Table Mountain was a rare sight, after the mountains of Scotland and Wales it was something to learn what a mountain really was and I was determined to get to the top. The first day two of us walked around Cape Town. We had been told that there was segregation between the whites and blacks but to us in England it was really not understood, but to be in S.A. and to see the black people having to walk on the road because the whites were on the pavement, and to be ignored was an education. So the second day ashore two of us made for the cable car and took a ride to the top of Table Mountain. It was fascinating to see the different fauna and flora, and the expanse of the top, although it was not quite as level as a billiard table, it was quite flat. We caught the cable car down, we were in the bright warm sunshine, whilst Cape Town was in darkness and all the street lights were on, there was no blackout and no war there. The third and last day we made our way to the railway station and asked if there was anything else we could see. We were told to take the train to Meuseberg, a seaside town on the Indian side of the Cape. There were quite a few people on the sand. We watched the rollers coming in from the ocean. I counted seven at the same time going back into the distance, a fascinating sight I had never seen before.

We left Cape Town and joined the rest of the convoy at Durban for our journey to Egypt. We sailed between S.A. and Madagascar on our way to the Red Sea. Being the fastest ship we were again last, we slowed at the beginning of the Red sea so that the others could get well away. We raced at full steam ahead arriving at Port Tewfik (probably not spelt right). We had to land by lighter because the ship was too big to get near the dock. It was not easy. I and another carried between us a Piat antitank gun, a box of ammunition, our big packs on our backs and sea kit bags on top. We then had to walk up a sloping ramp from the lighter to the shore. We then had to climb aboard a metal sided lorry and which had been standing in the sun for a long time and we all had burnt hands. I then decided that I was not cut out for that life. We travelled some distance to a tented camp where in the distance the pyramids could be seen. We were only there for a short time until our ordinary kit bags arrived. Perhaps I should explain – when we were on board ship we were given a sea kit bag which was much smaller than the ordinary kit bag and we had to take in the smaller bag only the things needed on board. The big bags were put into the hold of the ship. We then left for a much bigger camp, a place called Cassasein (I have no idea how it was spelt) but this was to get us acclimatised to weather. It was there that most of us suffered from diarrhoea. We did of course get over it and moved on to get the three ton Bedford lorries from a South African Coy., who were returning home.

It was interesting talking to the Africans. Most came from Cape Town. The one whose lorry I (or at least that I) would be travelling in was a master baker in Cape Town. He was not allowed to sell bread to white people but most whites had black servants so that whites did get his bread. He was of course trying to get us on his side and hope that we would try to get them equality. He also told me that his younger brother was an engineer, that he had obtained a scholarship to study in England, he qualified and went back to Cape Town where the firm he worked for before the qualification was situated, got a job there as a labourer, even though they knew of his qualification. The irony of it was that any new work that came in, he was allowed to read the details and plan the work. One of those things that we at home could never understand. It's a blessing that Desmond Tutu and Mandela were there and we can appreciate what they suffered.

So we had our lorries and made our way to Alamein where the big push was to start. Just before 10pm on that night (I forget the day but it is well recorded) we were all called on parade. The platoon Officer then read out a message from Gen. Montgomery, telling us what was going to happen. The Officer then said 'good luck' to all, assuming that we could all be dust on the morrow, definitely no place for me. The lorries were loaded with 25 pounder shells for the artillery and we were awaiting instructions as to where to deliver them. At 11pm we were told to take them one mile across the desert to a company with ten ton lorries (American Whites) and to unload three of our three ton lorries on to one of theirs. We arrived at 11pm, travelling just one mile. At one point we were doing figure eights around some sand dunes. The other Coy., were not very happy but had it been now I would have called it a perfect case of 'pomposity.'

That wasn't the only error of judgement. On another occasion we were again loaded with ammunition but there was one lorry that was in trouble and Arthur Patis and myself were working on it. The platoon Officer Lt. Nicholson came to see what was happening and told the driver of the first lorry to go between two sand dunes and follow those other two lorries which were not ours, so Solomon did what he was told, but the trouble was he was going the wrong way. We eventually caught up with them. The Officer and the Sergeant were talking and decided to take a short cut. We did, to find ourselves at a German minefield. There were some vehicle tracks and we were told to keep in those tracks which, with the sand blowing up from the lorries in front, was a little difficult. Fortunately we all got through safely, pomposity at its best.

So things were moving. The Germans left it to the Italians, who were taken prisoner by the hundred, a hasty prison camp was set up, mostly an area surrounded by barbed wire and attended by two military police armed. This was a sight worth seeing, one three ton lorry loaded with singing prisoners, looked after by a British soldier sitting on the cab with a rifle, followed by two Italian Fiat ten ton lorries with trailers filled with Italian prisoners and driven by an Italian. Then followed by another British lorry, as before. To crown it all when the prisoners were unloaded all the lorries turned round to pick up another lot of signing prisoners. Something out of Keystone Cops, the American comedy films. That wasn't the only amusing thing to happen.

(We) were again loaded with ammunition, too it to its destination, but again another lorry would not start. The track through the desert was marked by empty petrol flimsies (very thin tin gallon cans) so again Soloman was told to take the lead and follow the flimsies until he saw the cooks wagon. Unfortunately before the cook's lorry another track of flimsies went to the right. Soloman of course followed that track. By this time the Officer had caught up with the rest, we got the other lorry started and followed behind. It was (not?) too easy to turn round and get on the right track, so we kept going, not knowing where. There were wadis(?) of soft sand and we had to help some get going, you cannot change gear in soft sand anymore than in snow. We followed the track to firm ground. It went between two sand dunes and turned right to a camp of R.E.M.E.S who looked after tanks. We stopped and spoke to one of the soldiers who had come out of a tent and looked at our lorries, disappearing up an incline. He said 'they will soon be back, on the other side there will shortly be a tank battle.' Sure enough the Officer had then reached the front and when he saw what was on the other side he gave the signal to turn round. We being the last then became the first. Lt. Nicholson then took the lead but he didn't take the same track back to the cook's lorry, but took a track in front of us. After about 200 yards this came to a stop with a drop of about 6 feet. So we stopped again, he called the Sergeant and they walked 50 yards in front, took a compass point, came back and said 'follow me when I'm on the next sand due over there'. He had a 15 cwt truck, we had three ton-ners and it wasn't too good driving round the side of a sand dune. However we did win the war.

There were many more adventures on the way to Benghazi via Mersa Matruh and Torbruk, which was the end of the railway and where we had to visit to pick up ammunition and high octane petrol for tanks and planes. On one occasion five of us were detailed to load up with 40 gallon barrels of high octane petrol. Again, being driver mechanics, we had to deal with troubles, or if we could do nothing to get them going we had to tow them. Of course on wouldn't start. The Sergeant said 'Do what you can and carry on down the coast road, you will see the company' but now how far they could have moved whilst we were away. We got the other lorry started (and?) went on our way, for quite a long way. No sign of the others. It was getting late so after a discussion (Arthur Patis was a Lance Corporal) we decided to park up for the night, eat some of the 'hard tack', and pitch our tents and have a sleep, the tents held two. There was no undressing, just removal of boots, lie on your Gas Cape on the sand, hoping that there would be no scorpions or scarabs to disturb us. After about half an hour we heard loud bumps as though bombs were dropping. Panic. We all ran away from the lorries and got behind a sand dune. Silence, so we went back to the tents. After a little while the bumps started again, the other three scampered but I thought something was wrong and stayed. Sure enough there were more bumps but they were coming from the lorries. During the day in the heat barrels of petrol had expanded and during the night cooled so that the metal of the barrels were settling back to normal. Still, we had a laugh.

There were quite a few more trips to Torbruk but we eventually got to Benghazi, here we were in an old German camp built around an inland sea, at least – it went up and down like the tides. On the way to

Benghazi I had a few boils and a carbuncle on the back of my neck. I treated it with sugar and soap making a poultice and getting someone to put it on for me. I'm no doctor so at Benghazi I reported sick, had Sulphodamide crystals bandaged on and told to keep it on for seven days. Within a few hours I was going mad, it was erupting and pus was spreading all over my face and neck giving me dermatitis. So at the appointed time I went back to the M.O. and got told off by him because I hadn't gone sooner, but I had been told not to go back before seven days whatever happened. So I was to go to hospital. The trouble was the Army Hospital which was tents, was under water as there had been a lot of rain. So I was sent to the Air Force Hospital which was in a building until the Hospital ship arrived there. Incidentally this was Christmas 1943, there was no Christmas fare but each man was allowed one bottle of beer as an order from Monty, ships weren't allowed to carry anything else.

I got into the hospital, how I don't really know because by that time my hands and feet were swollen. I was out into bed and a mask of waterproof material was put over my head to cover the dermatitis, no treatment. After one night's sleep I had to pick up my kitbag etc and walk 300 yards to the entrance where an ambulance would pick me up and take me to the dock, ready to get on the hospital ship. I got to the dock to be shunned by everybody, as I was the man in the mask nobody wanted to know, I could have been contagious. Eventually a Padre came and said 'soldier, can you smoke?' Bearing in mind that I only had a slit for my mouth, two holes for my eyes and one for my nose, I said 'Yes sir.' With that he put a Woodbine in my mouth, lit and said good luck, and departed. Reading this I'm not really surprised that I was shunned. It did cross my mind to ask the padre if his name was Kennedy, after Studdart Kennedy, the Padre in the first war who was known as Woodbine Willy because he handed them out all those years previously, but I thought I might find myself on a charge for insubordination and I had enough worries without that.

To continue we had to board lighters to get to the ship. That in itself was a hardship as I was unable to see, and with swollen feet and hands it was very unpleasant. To board ship we had then to climb three wide ladders carrying all our belonging. As it was difficult for me to see I was last off the lighter, there was no-one to help so I started up the ladders. I got halfway and a nurse came and helped me, I was extremely grateful, had I been able I would have given her a kiss. As I was the last man aboard the only available bed was on a top bunk, I wondered what I had done wrong to deserve all this hardship. I was seen by a Corporal who removed my mask and said that the M.O. would see me as soon as possible. I went to sleep and was told later that I slept for three days, by which time we were near Alexandria, where I would be going to Number 6 field hospital. The hospital was tented not far from Alexandria. We were given a place in a tent to drop our kit and await a call to see a M.O. We had to go to him. I duly arrived to be asked what my trouble was. I said 'the Egyptian plague' – as explanation I told him 'boils and carbuncles'. He looked at the carbuncle and two boils then said 'anything else?' so being polite I said 'desert sores'. He looked at a big scab on my right knee and told the nurse to remove the scab. When she did dark blue blood flowed. I asked then 'when I would be going home because you couldn't have an

ordinary squaddy with blue blood in his veins'. I said it would either be promotion to Field Marshall or complete discharge. He looked at me and said 'It's a damn good job you can laugh'. He then looked at an abscess under my right maxilla and said 'go straight back and I will bring the surgeon to see you and get that lanced, get undressed and get back into bed'. When they came back I was asleep. I was woken; the surgeon put his hand on my back. I was sweating, he said 'Good God, are you always like this?' I said 'no' so first thing in the morning the stretcher arrived to take me to the theatre. There were two steps to get out of the tent (all the tents were sunk, I do not know why) so to save being carried I walked out and got myself on to the stretcher. I had the operation and boils dressed and was sent to Sidon in Syria to convalesce. I still had boils and was called out to show my maxilla boils to trainees.

There was a Padre attached to that hospital and as we were all walking wounded he asked if anyone would like to see the mountains mentioned in the Bible (Mount Hebron). Four or five of us went, to get there we had to climb a few hills. These were all cultivated in terraces. Wild cyclamen and anemones were growing, the anemones were blood red and very big, the cyclamen were right and the Padre said that they were the original lilies of the field as mentioned in the Bible – a sight that I will never forget. Convalescence over, we went to Palestine (Beirut) to catch a train back to Egypt, back to the same old camp before being sent to join a unit. We who were drivers were sent to R.A.O.C. (Ordinance Corp) to pick up new three ton lorries to drive to Tripoli, the lorry that I had was full of tyres, not very comfortable for sleeping. Not only did we carry goods but also had to carry soldiers of the 51st Highland Division who had been in hospital, to join their units to Tripolitania. We had to go to the rail head and drive on to flat railway carriages, two a carriage, and then tie them down. Eventually we were all loaded and started our journey to Torbruc. The second night we had a gale, we had to walk along the side of the lorries tying down the sheets, which wasn't too easy on a moving train, still we all survived, eventually reaching the rail head at Torbruc.

Unloading was easy so we were on our way to Tripoli. We were on the coast road which wasn't too wide, it was fortunate in a way that I was driving the second lorry, and the first and myself were inclined to consider safety. We met some army tanks which are a little bigger than a three ton lorry and also take up a little more room, so the first lorry and myself pulled over to the edge of the road and stopped to let them pass. Unfortunately the fourth lorry which was a little behind didn't stop, pulled over too hard and went over the edge, landing in the sand partly on its side so it was all hands to the rescue. We eventually got going again and made our way to a place with a sign post which said Pisida, what it was I know not, there was no building only a narrow track that led towards the Mediterranean, so we followed the track down to the sea. Nothing there – only a small light aircraft lying in the water, which was Italian. The sea was so clear and, not having had a bath for so long we all stripped off and swam, at least I couldn't swim but floated. We had our meal and slept there for the night, and managed to get in the water before we started on the rest of the journey.

We came to the border of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, a stretch of perhaps 1 mile of unmade road but there were telegraph lines, and perched on the line were some six beautifully coloured parakeets, something worth seeing. But all was not so good because travelling alongside us were some American ten tone trucks called whites. One had a mishap, the road was rough and one American lorry had its front axle break and the front sank to the ground. It was of course not our worry so we went on our way and left them to it, for all I know it may still be there. So on our way to solid road and to Marble Arch, which we were told was a point as far as an Italian ran to claim the land. It was March, the spring of the year when the desert blooms with Camel grass, a very hard and prickly plant which is green and dangerous if you are wearing shorts (it) cuts your legs to pieces. So just beyond the Marble Arch we would be between the sand dunes for the night. The first thing we had to do was fill up with petrol from the jerry-cans which held four gallons, I felt so weak after driving and still not really well after the boils etc that I found it difficult to pick up the jerry-can to fill up, but on this occasion that was the last thing on my mind because as I stepped down there was a smell of Night Scented Stock, so I followed my nose and in between the dunes was an amazing sight of scented stock and scabious, how it got there I'll never know. There was another lad with me who also saw it. We went back, filled up with petrol and water, had something to eat, hard tack of course, and tea, and then went back with a few more lads to see the flowers.

We went back there 3 weeks later and there was no sign of flowers, just sand. I wondered if it had been a figment of the imagination but I know it was real, at the same time the Camel grass had disappeared. So we carried on towards Tripoli. We stopped at midday for tiffin, whilst we were eating an Egyptian carrying a hen and a little boy with a basket of eggs was bargaining with Scotsmen in the first lorry to buy his eggs. They eventually showed him a seven pound tin of corned beef, their rations, and he agreed to take as payment for the eggs. The man had climbed on the back of the lorry to hand over the eggs and this was just the time we received the signal to start up and move. The driver of the first lorry did not know what was happening in the back and started to move. I stayed back, I could see what was going to happen. The cots hit the old man's knuckles so that he fell, I was still stationary so he managed to get out of the way before I moved. So we went on to our destination. We pulled off the coast road onto a wide piece of land which looked like grassland or had been, but it was really a cultivated plot where wheat had been grown. There was a donkey loaded with bundles of wheat, a very big load so that its legs looked as though they were bending. At that moment the Officer in charge said that only a short distance down the road was an old Roman town, at least the remains of one, known as Leptis Magna. He said he would be going to see it after a meal and would anyone like to go with him. I of course, being nosy, was one who went. It was well worth a visit, there were still marble columns, artefacts used in cooking, and other works. There was also an amphitheatre, most interesting to see the real thing after seeing pictures only at school. In the meantime the same Scots had cut the ropes from the donkey and scattered the wheat far and wide, so it was nearly impossible to get it all together again. Many years after I was not surprised when we were kicked out of Egypt and losing the Suez Canal, there is no excuse for the abuse of any other race.

We pulled into a camp some short while after, handed over the lorries and went to the office to find our posting. Two of us who had been together on the whole of the journey were posted to 50 Coy R.A.S.C. in which Coy I stayed to the end of the war. We were now getting near to the end so we thought, but not much chance of that, we were of course a transport company and the tasks were much the same. A new major arrived at the same time as myself, he arrived at the company office to find it unoccupied. He wasn't very happy but eventually the Sergeant Major arrived in a Jeep at great speed spun round and showered major Wilson with sand. Shortly after the Sergeant Major was transferred and the current Quartermaster was promoted to Sergeant Major. Sometime later when Geordie Thompson and I were on a cooking course we met the old Sergeant Major who was then training Senegalese soldiers. He said he was fed up with that job because he said it was difficult to find them in the mornings as they would be hanging from the ridge pole in the tent like a lot of monkeys. Sometime after when Major Wilson came into the cook house tent he was talking and Geordie was telling him we had seen the old Sergeant Major, and what a pity he wasn't still with us, whereupon Major Wilson recounted his arrival at the Coy. when he was showered in sand (although he didn't say sand – something else beginning with S), and he said in his stuttering voice after that 'He...had...to...go'.

I said previously that I was on a cooking course, so it's about time I became a cook. When we arrived at new Coy. we were spare drivers, all the lorries being driven by the original coy members. We were in the desert and one of the cooks went sick, there were two cooks to each platoon of about 44 men, including the Officer and N.C.O.S. so having nothing better to do, and having done a bit of cooking in the U.K. I volunteered. At least I would be doing something useful so that became my job to the end of the war. Two of us on the course were assigned to the hospital kitchen and to get there we had to pass a prisoner of war camp which held Italian prisoners. The guards were men from the Belgian Congo and were naturally black. We also had to pass this camp when going to the cinema such as it was. On the course was a guardsman and one night he had been to the cinema and had consumed quite a lot of alcohol. To get past the prisoner of war camp we had to pass by the guard house, the guardsman got to the guard house and passed by only to feel a touch on his soldier, and he saw nothing, then suddenly he saw two eyes and he said he nearly passed out. T was one of the black guards having a joke. The guardsman came into the tent in which we were sleeping and collapsed onto his bed, looking very white and ill, and after a while told us what had happened, he was still sure he had seen a ghost. The following day two of us were on night duty and the prison guards told us the story and thought it was great fun.

So, back to the daily grind. We were at Tripoli and my platoon had orders to back to Torbruk to pick up the Ox and Bucks regiment who had been in Syria, and who were needed for the advance to push the Germans into the sea with the help of the Americans. The idea was that from Enfedaville the American First Army would hold the land slide flank to form a funnel whilst the British Eighth Army would push up the funnel but things don't always go as planned. But that is another story.

We picked up the Ox and Bucks and set out for Enfedaville. On the first night we stopped and the Colonel in charge had all the lorries form a square like the Pioneers in Western films did when the attacked by Indians. He was told by our officer that if German plane came over and dropped a bomb or machine gunned we would all be finished, but to no avail. After the evening meal, a guard was set and paraded for inspection. I noticed at the back of the guard there was a Major wearing a big pack. On my cooks wagon we were carrying three men from the Ox. and Bucks. Coy. Office, I asked what the Major was doing at the back and was told that whilst in Syria waiting to entrain he gave a wrong command and gave himself seven days parading behind the guard with full pack (how did we win the war?), so we eventually arrived at our destination.

The terrain was of apricot orchards and the Germans had cut down quite a lot at the height of the trees, so that if there was a movement of troops during the night time then the lorries would be damaged as the tree stumps could not be seen, and also the German search lights could be used to see any traffic. As far as we were concerned, we were in the part which had not been felled, interesting and very tasty as the apricots were, as big as peaches and very nice indeed. The start was made to push the Germans into the sea with the help of the Ghurkhas. Apparently the idea was that the Americans would form a barrier on the left flank whilst between that and the sea the 8th Army would push the Germans through the corridor thus made. But we were told that as usual the Americans could not stay in the place they were told to stay and stop Gerry (from escaping into the desert) and moved off into the path of the Ghurkhas who like the Queen in Alice in Wonderland said 'off with their heads', and apparently they did, mistaking them for Germans because the steel helmets of both were similar, both having a practical neck covering, that of course was hearsay.

We were fortunate in so far that we were sleeping in the apricot grove, the cookhouse wagon was not the best place to sleep so it was outside on ration boxes, all very nice, cool and comfortable, if it had not been for the fact that the wagon awnings were green, a colour that locusts seem to like so we were bombarded by them which wasn't too pleasant. Still, we had some very nice apricots which made a change.

Our job was finished there so back to Egypt. On our way back after we had our 'tiffin' at midday we started off again and in the distance there was a cloud. I should perhaps say here that being in the cookhouse wagon we had to open the front of the canvas cover of the wagon and close the back. Seems strange, but the movement of the wagon sucked sand into the back which was not good for the food so we sat on the front rim. There were three of us and one of them said 'what's that cloud?' I said 'you will see in a few moments' and I climbed into the back and got three pieces of wood from one of the boxes. We had one each and I said 'it's every man for himself' if they didn't want to be eaten by locusts, and for the best part of an hour we were hitting horrible locusts, I hope I never have cause to see another locust. So back to the daily grind of transport but by this time the North African campaign was nearly over and we wondered which would come next.

After getting back to Alexandria we went to Jordan to take various Army units who had been in Palestine and some in Turkey to the port in Alex for shipping to Italy. After our tie in Jordan we ourselves had to hand over the lorries to ROAC, and ourselves taken to the docks to await a ship for Italy. We eventually got a small ship which took us to Taranto on the insole of Italy's foot. nwe were in tents and it was very cold and wet and a lot of the company were down with colds and very 'miserable'. Whilst there I was told that my father had died and was already buried. Being the only son I applied for compassionate leave but was told that it was too late as he was already buried. So a lot of letter writing went on to clear his estate as there was no will – not a good time. Of course the Lorries that we were to use, our old ones in fact, were sent to Naples so there was a train journey for the drivers to collect them. We left in camp were detailed to the dock in Taranto to sort food boxes which had been salvaged from the coast from one of our cargo ships which had been sunk in the harbour, at least it got us doing something.

I as cook had to take utensils to feed the men during the day. I was told by the Sgt. Major that I could use anything I fancied so we had a good meal on tinned meat and 'veg', and tinned fruit after. There was also a unit of Basutos and it was unfortunate that they found some gallon jars of rum and bottles. They of course had to drink and get drunk, they also had packets of cigarettes so the Military Police were called. We all had cigarettes in our battle dress tunics, some had bottles of rum wrapped in their gas capes. I must say the boys treated me well and got me 'cigs' and a bottle of rum. But in the six gallon container used for cooking I was carrying two gallon jars and two bottles. One of the en threw his bottle over a wall and I was told I'd better get rid of the container of I'd be in the 'glasshouse forever'. They said 'what will you do?' I said 'I will put it by the wall and join you on parade'. To cut a long story short, al the Basutos were charged but according to the police who searched us we had nothing. Was this a touch of Apartheid?

Eventually the men who had gone to Naples to get our vehicles arrived and after getting fruit and delivering to the B.S.D we left for Brindissi, a small amount of transport but mostly maintaining the vehicles. A platoon was the sent back to Taranto going into the country picking up fruit and turkeys as it was now Christmas 1943. The only issue of food was tinned chicken but the boys were good to we cooks and found some turkeys, so the next thing was to get an oven. We had easy access to the flat roof – at that time there were two cooks and we got a workshop to get a forty gallon oil drum cleaned, and two shelves put in. We then put in a system of oil and water for heating. Then one of the drivers brought in a huge flagon of wine whereupon there was drunkenness, one being the other cook. I was left to provide the Christmas dinner for fourty-four men. We had turkey and vegetables, some fresh that the boys had found and some tinned, stuffing made with soaked biscuits and herbs, and a Christmas pudding made with fruit (and) biscuit in a seven pound jam tin, boiled and served with custard made with milk powder, egg powder, sugar and boiled water. Then there was tea to think about, we did have some bread and turkey for sandwiches, tinned cheese and beetroot but no lettuce. All the food was left in trays to help themselves. There was, of course, no mince pies or cake. I had made one the day before with biscuits,

fruit, tinned apricots, oranges that the boys brought in, all mixed with margarine, egg powder, milk powder, sugar and cooked in the oven on the roof. I had some almonds which the boys had brought in and cheeky like, went upstairs to the lady in the flat and asked her if she would kindly grind them for me. This she did so I had the basics for almond paste. Egg powder was next mixed with sugar and a little milk and made a paste and spread onto the top. The icing was made with ground sugar and hot water, cooled and spread on top. It looked a little bare and the friend who was helping said we should have some writing on top so with icing that was left over I wrote 'Merry Christmas A Platoon' in red – I'd remembered that beetroot was in water not vinegar which coloured the icing nicely. But before the happened the Company Commander arrived and stayed for tea. He came into the kitchen afterwards and his actual words were 'Bloody good show – more than we've got at HQ'.

I did get a chance to look around Taranto and it was interesting to see the cemetery, the gravestones had pictures on them of the deceased and some of the bigger ones had shelves which held vessels for eaters and food, which to me coming from a country village in England and not being of Catholic faith, was .. strange but fascinating. Our stay in Taranto soon after came to an end and we went back to Brindisi. After a couple of weeks we were on the train to Naples. We were taken to a transit camp some miles from Naples and when we arrived we had to get all cooking utensils from the store before the men could be fed. There came the time for us to leave to come to Blighty, we cooks were on duty from 4am getting food for the day and finally an evening meal. We then had to clean all the utensils and return them to the store, we could then have a rest. There was no transport so it was 'march lads, put your best foot forwards and march.' It was unfortunate that it was no midnight and raining, so as well as carrying our big packs we had to wear gas capes to help keep us dry. It was hard going for we cooks who had been on the go since 4am but we did get help from the lads who carried our big packs at times. We arrived at Naples docks to await orders to board ship. Whilst we were waiting an American soldier came towards us. One of our 'wits' called to him 'Want some Spam Sam?' to which the reply was 'No you can keep your and stuff it up your all I want is a can of beans' much to our amusement. One of the cooks found a door to a building which was open so he told us all to come in and have a rest out of the rain. Someone told the major and our rest was soon over. We were told to get out so wet again but we were soon moving towards a small Dutch ship, our kit-bags had already arrived (must have been a mystery man who got them there) so we went aboard. But there is no peace for the wicked (or the righteous) and the cooks were ordered to the galley where we were given orders to carry up fore-quarters of beef and such like for the ships cooks. We then had to defrost the freezers which were lined with six inch pipes which had to have the ice chipped off. I must say though that we were better off for food than the troops. We had pork chops while the men had stew (?). We arrived back in the UK, arriving at Ayre in Scotland. We then had our python leave – a week for every year spent abroad. It was all arranged that those living the furthest away would leave first. We cooks of course still had to work and eventually there were only two cooks left. We were both very tired. I had to change train at Birmingham, from one station to another. I changed to New Street station on my way home, no seats so it was kit bag seat in the corridor. Some people got out at Rugby and I got a

seat and promptly went to sleep. The train stopped at Northampton where I should have changed. I knew nothing but woke up some way along to Bletchley where I got out. Fortunately I looked in the signal box to see someone I knew (he was married to the sister of a friend, in fact I knew her before marriage) so I went to speak to him and had a cup of tea. I caught the next train back to Northampton and home.

During the leave Trudy my future wife came down and stayed with us for a week and I spent some time in London, whilst at home Trudy and I borrowed a tandem bicycle from my cousin and had a couple of rides in the country. One day out we saw some American Airmen which, when they saw us walking up a steep said 'Oh! Look a two bike' whatever that might be.

Eventually the leave was over, so back to the daily grind for King and Country. The Wales Company arrived and we were off to Towyn in Mid-Wales for (?) training. Whilst there, we cooks were called on parade to be seen by a Colonel. We were called to attention to be told that we were now members of A.C.C (Army Catering Corp) and would be getting an extra shilling a day in our pay.