

Transcription of the war diaries of Edward Winchester Levings, no.1, done by Susan Brookes 2018

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A wartime log for British Prisoners. Gift from The War Prisoners' Aid of the Y.M.C.A., 37, Quai Wilson, Geneva – Switzerland.

Next page:

This book belongs to (*printed*)

NX70155 Capt. E.W. Levings A.A.M.C. (?)K gf No. 31588

Campo. C.C. Derna, Bengasi, Capua (66).

Montalbo (41). Gruppignero (57). Castel St Pietro (203).

Stalag 8B [Lamsdorf]: Oflag 9 A-Z [Rothenburg]: Stalag 18. A/Z [Spittal]

Y.M.C.A. (*in logo*)

Geprüft (*in German script*) Stalag XVIII A 27 (*stamp*)

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(*The diary continues in other notebooks.*)

Note

1. *That were I am uncertain of spelling or a word I have put (?). I probably still have some things spelt wrongly, as his writing is not always clear.*
2. *My comments & descriptions are in () and in italics)*

GOING UP, SIR?

Sunday 23-3-41 saw me packed off to Gaza after a night of terrific spasmodic pain (?). Quite certain, I am, that parturition could not be more painful!

Ned dashed down next day to see me & get orders re the R.A.P. Two batteries of guns were going west on Tuesday & the rest of the personnel on Thursday. He & Geo Beaver were detailed to go with the guns, Ferral (?) to come with me later (?) & Warren to stay behind.

Unit rang up for me on the Wednesday so I dressed, packed & caught the ambulance straight back. And to blazes with the forms & formulae of official discharge.

Found all packing completed but quickly reviewed my personal packing & very luckily as it eventuated.

Thursday the remaining men of 10th and 11th batteries & R.H.!. entrained at El Majdal. We left at 8pm & spent a dreary dull night continually shunted into sidings & reaching El Kantara (161 miles) at 7.30 am. Here, after breakfast of sausage & mash at N.A.A.F.I. we stayed 4 hours wandering aimlessly around, arguing with the pedlars & money changers, watching a gilli-gilli man, the passers-by, the rail & passenger ferries, the canal or any damn thing at all until twas time for our train to go off down the canal.

Ismalia with its lovely greenness, its towering trees interlaced with multi-coloured bourganvilla again charmed us.

Following the sweet water canal with its avenues & gums (?) one saw many delightful oases. Then came Benha & from there we wandered all day practically due west across the green, flat patchwork of fields & roads that is the Nile Delta; with towering sails of feluccas rising out of the ground apparently; the blue grey cattle; the age-old hand water wheels for irrigation; the noise & squalor dirt and colour that constitute Egyptian glamour.

At evening we were running along the east shore of Lake ... & at dusk entrained at Amurya (?). Once this place was one of the granaries of Rome, to-day it is hopeless dust-hole.

Next morning took delivery of a one-ton Ford van that is to be the R.A.P truck. Promptly christened it 'Margaret'. Collected our heavy stores at the railway & all was ready for the desert by lunch

After lunch dashed into Alexandria. A few spots, a last drive along their magnificent sea front, a few more spots, a quick look at the town itself, Mr Pompey's pillar, the Italian war memorial, some shopping at Mustafa & in the bazaar, still more spots & back to camp.

At this stage I couldn't afford an evening in Alex. Being still badly bent after the Cairo expedition in March.

Sunday, left at reasonable hour for Merca Metouh (?)
 Good road all the way undulating amongst the Sand hills with the sea always visible on our right.

Attempts to rehabilitate the once fertile stretch are being made. Somewhat pitiful orchards – mainly figs – exist for many miles. The wind erodes the sand leaving the roots exposed & the trees have few leaves & even less fruit. Saw a fair number of sheep, cattle & camels &, always unexpectedly, low black Arab tents nestling in shallow depressions & difficult to see until one was almost on them. Metouh (?) itself – Cleopatra's week-end paradise where she & Anthony tarried over long – was a deserted town. Very well built - there was quite a lot of bomb damage. Barracks were magnificently built but no one had thought to connect the water to the very elegant bath-rooms & latrines.

It was difficult to credit the amazing filth. Apparently any room that no one was, at the moment, living in served as a latrine. Later I found the same condition of affairs – or worse – at Derna & other places we had occupied. Our Australian sense of hygiene was completely outraged & later the army paid terrific toll in dysentery casualties for it at Metrouh as we did at Derna. The Italians were, of course, blamed.

There we saw the ancient fresh water cisterns & had a swim in the harbour. We picked up the gun crews here & Ned & George rejoined me. Everyone was mine conscious & some very hefty leg pulling had been successfully indulged in on our chaps.

Next day we started late & did only 80 miles. The road was good for the first 26 miles & after that one long dust bed with columns of dust rising hundreds of feet into the air when vehicles passed. It was not pleasant at the tail end of the convoy.

The country was dull, uninteresting stony desert carrying a few sheep & cattle & here & there the ubiquitous black Arab tent.

Sidi Borrani was passed & examined by the R.A.P. Now, just a name on the map, originally it had about 200 houses all of which are uninhabitable & most of them hopeless wrecks. A party of English were camped by the sea shore still burying and reburying the bodies from the /December battle. The stony ground & the depredations of the jackals make their job a ceaseless, grisly round.

Tuesday April 1st. The unlucky month. Waiting for the convoy to get started we spent a couple of hours watching the scarab beetles. A 'war' was being waged between them. One chap had acquitted a lump of dung which he industriously pushed around until it was quite rounded & almost as large as a gold ball. He was then attacked by a raider but beat off this & several other attacks but finally lost his 'prize' but the new owner also had a battle on his hands. The 'trophy' changed hands several times until possessed by an all-powerful one who proceeded to bury it under a small shelving bank of hard sand. Vigorously scooping with his powerful hind legs he dug a cave in the bank, then pushed the ball in, more scooping, more pushing, until, finally, it was deeply enough buried. Here the lady love would lay her eggs, the young hatch out & enjoy the 'feast' until fit to fend for themselves.

The day's stage took us along Musso's Via Victoria. Via Dolorosa would be a better name. It was MEANT to be a good road but building had ceased at the foundation stage & it consisted of large blocks of stone, fairly evenly laid but with no top dressing. It made painful travelling, though the tracks in the stony desert at the side were, if anything, worse.

Country much the same as the day before. Approaching Solluem (?) I speeded up & got towards the head of the column. We then pulled into the bay, had lunch & tea, a swim – badly needed to remove the dust of two days in the dirt, filled up with water & then climbed the winding road up the steep 400 foot escarpment to the Libian plateau.

Salluem, like Borroni, is now merely a name on the map, but a couple of houses were reasonably intact. It is quite a pretty spot nestling around its bay at the foot of the escarpment.

The plateau was flat & stony & very much desert. Why it is so situated with the sudden steep drop off to the Egyptian desert I do not know.

We next passed the border fence – a real, interlaced seven strand barb wire one built by Grziani at enormous cost in 1933-34 to stop smuggling of arms & materials to the Senussi via Salluem & the Egyptian desert. It runs from Badia 175 miles inland to Giarabub (?) – the Senussi headquarters & in peace-time was policed by patrols situated every 20 miles & had some electrical equipment to detect & instantly notify breaks in it.

Fort Caprizzo came next. Somewhat ruined. The Italians had been making a brave attempt to grow trees & green things.

Badia, a few miles on, was by-passed by the convoy but the R.A.P. dashed back to have a look at its one 500 yard long street, its white stucco houses, its pretty church & its lovely jewel of a heart shaped harbout, boom protected & sparkling 300 feet below with the deep genial Mediterranean blue. Built on a small peninsula the land approach is very narrow & the cliffs drop sheer away to the sea 300 feet below. It was rather badly damaged by shell fire.

Camped again in the fields that night & found the reason for the growth of herbage & camel grass in the very heavy night dew that completely soaked everything left exposed & uncovered.

April, 2nd saw us run along a good but pot holed road to Tobruk & after that we were deviated 20 miles south to El Adair (?) where we joined the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade as their anti-tank defence.

Later returned to Tobruk to collect water & see the town. Had my first air-raid. As I knew nothing of it until a bomb dropped a few hundred yards away & it was a small raid can't claim any credit for the nonchalance with which we continued. Tobruk is a longish town, in white stucco, well built, good public buildings, really magnificent hospital, large, well protected harbour with 9 ships sunk in it. Peace time population 5,000 but the water supply is poor & the Italians proposed to run a pipe-line to it from Derna.

Our destination uncertain. Germans were reported to be 120 miles west of us today.

I'm still nobody's baby & can't find out a thing about medical organisation.

Next day after spending an hour or so examining the purple sage & other desert flowers went to Tobruk for another look around & left instructions for the lads to pack up as we were moving that afternoon – allegedly to join 9th div at Barce.

Achieved nothing in town & got back at mid-day to find Ned, Ferrall & two others hopelessly & completely blotto. They had had a half gallon of cognac each! Beaver had stayed cold sober & we managed to get packed & loaded George & the 3 drunks in the back. As we couldn't see what happened told George to knock out any that got troublesome on the trip. Ned recovered first & finding George pushing Bert about demanded to know why. Told it was orders he sat up & owlshly watched for some time. When Bert moved he copped it good & proper from the vigilant, but still drunk, Ned. Ned spent every spell after that getting out & profusely apologising to me!

Camped on the Gulf of Bombe that night & had a swim.

Thursday morning produced 3 sick & sorry specimens. Ferral had a lovely eye & a broken rib from Ned's ministrations

During the night orders were again changed & we are to go on & await further ones. About 20 miles short of Derna we parked by the roadside for some hours & watched guns, men & vehicles haring back into Tobruk. We, poor mugs, were headed the wrong way!

Hours later our orders came & we branched off into a desert road & headed south. It was just a track amongst the sand & stones & after 60 miles we at last reached El Mechili.

This spot was once a famous cross roads & a great centre of desert commerce. Today it consists of an old Turkish, P.C.Wren type of fort & the wells that made it famous. These are 40 to 50 wells each 16 to 20 feet deep & giving plentiful, good water normally but the Italians had put lots of diesel oil into them before they retreated & this had not yet been removed.

One wee(?) patch of about ¼ acre is sunken 8 feet below the level of the country & is growing a prolific crop of green barley. Quite a surprise amongst the arid wastes. Elsewhere one comes on small areas of ploughed land – awaiting the annual rain to grow a crop of sorts. There are quite a few low hills about & on & amongst one group of them the camp is placed. We have a defended perimeter but no artillery, no tanks, and cannot expect any air support. Jerry is reported to be advancing through the desert but no one seems to know.

A terrific dust storm in the evening that did not subside until after 10pm.

Saturday morning brought our first casualties. Two trucks of Indians were shot up by a couple of hedge hopping planes. Eight killed, 14 wounded, both trucks burnt.

Our Derna party arrived during the day with stories of the hectic retreat going on along the coast road. Copeland was badly injured & Hitchfield (?) filled in a smash on Derna pass. Already we realised the situation for us was very poor indeed.

A flight of 14 of his aircraft went overhead at mid-day but left us alone.

The lads have languidly dug slit trenches all day.

We scrounged many tins of tinned pineapple from the dump at the Fort.

Catching the hare, the battle of Mechili (6.4.41 to 8.4.41)

Sunday 6-4-41

Bright & early we were roused with instructions to park urgently. At mid-day we were to move 60 miles further west & try & retard his advance through the desert whilst the units at Barce, Derna etc got back to Tobruk.

A good plan but ---

10am saw large columns of dust approaching us from the west. They travelled slowly to the south of us. No one seemed to be quite certain what they were until a couple of Blenheims came over & bombed them.

Movement ceased & around about 11am & a few minutes later shells poured at us from the south & machine gun bullets whistled through our trucks from the N.E. Suddenly, from peaceful contemplation we were plunged into war. The machine gunning did not last long & was efficiently dealt with by the Indians. The shell fire went on for nearly one hour but, fortunately for us, his guns were badly placed & the low-ridges defeated him.

Then from S & N came a rush of heavy 10 ton diesel trucks. Each of these was a little arsenal with a 2 pound gun, 2 machine guns & loads of ammunition & 16 men in each. On them our chaps opened fire with their little guns – the first time they had ever fired them! Firing a solid shell of about 1 ½ lb they created havoc. One went up when its ammunition exploded killing the whole crew. Six others were outed quickly & the rest got no nearer than 400 yards & then withdrew.

A lull occurred in the battle & our men went out & gathered in the moveable trucks, found 22 dead, brought in the odd prisoner – nearly all Italian. Our own casualties were nil.

More stuff continued to roll into his lines & we could see several tanks through glasses.

A light Henkel machine commenced to use the aerodrome & flew fairly low over our lines. No one bothered it. We had nothing to hurt it anyway.

About 4pm & again at 6pm he(?) carried out a couple more, but smaller raids on the camp. Each was beaten off & a few more prisoners gathered in.

He did not shell us again.

The battle died down at dusk but at night we could see the exhausts of planes overhead though they did not bomb or machine gun us.

The second day of the battle opened with a party of two of our guns going out at dawn looking for his vehicle parks. They found them but got bogged in the sand on a hill & we lost one truck & gun burnt out, Humphries killed & Staine wounded without doing any damage at all. In fact, without firing a shot. It was not a very well executed effort.

Early in the morning we received a request to surrender – naturally refused.

Several small attacks were thrown off but at 3pm a slightly bigger one yielded us two trucks in perfect condition. By now we were completely surrounded & the outlook was very poor indeed. The guns off the trucks were taken down to the perimeter by a motley crew & proceeded to fire his own stuff back at him. The hit one truck & then changed over to another target. This proved to be his new gun positions & they quickly went into action. For an hour & a quarter he pumped away at us so that ultimately not one patch of 20 yards square in the whole camp had failed to receive its shell. He was using only 3" stuff which needed direct hits to do any good. Again our casualties were nil & no vehicles were put out of commission.

Followed a big raid from two directions. It did not penetrate our lines byt they knocked out one of the R.H.A guns & wounded three of the crew.

In the midst of all this imagine our surprise at seeing a huge column of vehicles moving in with us. These turned out to be the 3rd Armoured Brigade & H.Q. 2nd Armoured div. They brought a few A.A. guns & one 25 pounder – but no ammunition! They created congestion in our lines & it is difficult to see what use they will be. With them came one cruiser tank. At dusk the cheeky Henkel came over flying, as usual, at about 100 feet. The A.A. guns started to crack at him & he disappeared pronto. He must have had a huge surprise.

The night followed quiet. The usual dust storm died down. Ned badly wanted to eat the pineapple but I reckoned we'd save it.

Before moon-set I was roused out to conference. The news had come through that as many as could be expected had got into Tobruk & we were to try & break out & join the others there.

Plans were made. The tank reconditioned rapidly, all vehicles packed & all ready for the move at first light. This came & went & dawn came befoe the tank could move. Escorted by the two 10 ton diesels & a troop of Indians it moved off to his gun positions & for over half an hour waged an heroic battle against impossible odds before being knocked out. The commander was later killed.

The column moved off in units & in good order. The first lots got through without a shot being fired & racing between the enemy tanks were soon on their way to Tobruk.

It was 7.10 before my turn came & by this the sun was well up & tracers & shells were ripping merrily across our proposed course.

Orders were to move at 12 m.p.h & this was done until we reached the fire belt. Bullets & shells were ripping everywhere, heavy clouds of dust were rising, vehicles around me. Commenced to race & in that hellish fire & impenetrable dust it seemed better to go too so off we went.

Suddenly a deep ditch loomed ahead. We checked, stopped in a skid & crawled across. Still safe. Away again & right in front of us a 3 tonner went up in a blaze of flame. Switched around it & saw away to the right a couple of Indian trucks cop it.

Leaning well out I picked up all the shallow depressions I could & we ran along in them. This saved us as later we found the van's hood was completely riddled. A terrific tug at my coat & looking down found a neat bullet hole. Close that one!

We had done a mile of this & could see the final ridge ahead when a 30 c.w.t.(?) on our left suddenly swerved to us. He was a trifle ahead but not far enough to get ? behind him. Looming closer in a steady even curve, collision was inevitable. Channell braked but he struck us just in front of the windscreen & promptly turned turtle, but 'Margaret', sweet child, kept her feet. Bert tried the engine & we crawled away in first gear. The other chap was beyond our help. He must have been hit.

At snail's pace we crawled over the last half mile, up the hill & to peace.

The Indians now swerved violently off to the west – in the directly opposite direction to that which we wished to go. Tanks to the left were the cause.

In our crippled bus we could do nought but follow & after half a mile more it gave up the ghost completely & we bailed out into various vehicles. Rescued some of my gear but not much. The engineers promptly set Margaret ablaze & her ashes & sundry photos of mine rest in the desert.

We then travelled west to my amazement. I found myself perched on top of a fully loaded 3 tonner above the level of the top of the cabin. Curious to know what was beneath asked & was told it was ALL mess gear! The lads were in two other similar trucks & they, too, were entirely surrounded by mess gear.

My truck was running along in front of the column accompanied by an armoured car. Asked about that & told it was Maj. Gen. Gambier (?), Parry's & all the gear was that of 2nd Armoured Div H.Q. mess.

After a run of a couple of miles west we stopped for a long period & a conference was held.

During this period we were machine gunned from the air & the A.A. guns did some pretty but ineffective shooting.

The conference closed. Our position now was that we still had Germans all around us & it was difficult to find a way out. Our turns & twists had resulted in our again coming back into the German circle. The decision was made to charge back through the old perimeter & out to the east. Such tactics, we were told, had "never been tried before" - & no wonder!

Wasn't keen on going through two more lots of that fire, particularly now that I had no responsibility but it had to be done.

The column wheeled & speeded up straight at his strongest positions. For a while, nothing happened. The Germans were apparently too amazed to do anything. Then the fun began. Shells started pooping, explosive bullets whined at us & burst overhead with a crack like that of an enormous stock-whip, the dust was lit up with flashing meteors that were tracers, noise & more noise everywhere. Twisting my head to one side I saw 3 vehicles & the water tank fo up – two in flames.

My admiration for our driver went up sky high. He just went on & on straight at it. An hour earlier it had been terrific going across 1 ½ miles of fire but this straight at 'em stuff was 10 times worse. No wonder folk still talk about the Light Brigade at Balaclava!! Each moment it seemed as though the next instant must bring a vehicle or personal hit.

The fire became more intense & more of our vehicles went up. When we were 100 yards from his artillery we suddenly stopped. A few seconds later so did the fire & noise. Taking a quick & cautious peek to my right I saw a white flag flying over the General's car.

The abysmal sense of humiliation & frustration that the next few seconds brought had to be experienced to be realised. It cannot be described.

And so I hare was juggled.

There was work to be done though. Attended a couple of badly wounded & then seeing others carrying gear & suitcases dashed across for mine but all that was left was the suitcase & in it a drill uniform & a couple of pairs of underpants.

A howling dust storm now came up & in it a few cars at the far end of the column got away but escape for those of us in front was impossible. We marched back beyond the fort & sat in the dust the rest of the day. Found that none of my team had been hurt but only Ferral had any gear.

Ned (who was bulging with cigarettes, whisky, gin & Cointreau as his share of the officer's mess) & I carried out a raid. Got a couple of blankets & a kit bag of gear for him, an enamel mug & a plate for myself. It all helped.

Water was precious but again my mob seized the golden chance & filled everything we had.

We then settled down to some steady drinkin & disposed of Ned's liquid loot. Ferral & Channel ended up in a brawl & I was quite, quite drunk & didn't give a damn for dust or anything else.

In the late afternoon another batch of prisoners taken elsewhere came in including 89 of the 3rd A/T Regt. Two – Copperk (?) & Howe – had been killed & five wounded.

We were unable to estimate our casualties but I do not think that more than 20 British were killed in the whole of this "hard & bloody battle" – the German's first major mistake in the desert. They could have taken us 2 days before & Tobruk the next day as well. The tarrying around us cost them dear.

Prisoners were about 2,200 but only a few fighting troops. They included Div & Brigade H.Q., Indian A.S.C, a field ambulance & other non-combatants.

That night [April 8. 1941] we slept on the hard stony ground. It was bitterly cold but by sleeping the whole 7 of our officers in one group we managed better than most. Food & water were both scarce.

Next day I contacted a German speaking English who took me out on the old battlefield where I gathered several pairs of socks, 12 hats, a towel & other

oddments. All things that yesterday were worthless but to-day were as priceless as rubies.

Later the same lad got permission to take Jim Phipps & a carrying party into the same area. They did not do as well as they could have.

Then, to our joy, we heard that we were amongst the first party to move off to Derna that afternoon.

We left at 3pm & after a rough drive in a howling dust storm reached El Ftaiuh (?).

Next morning we were roused early & the officers taken along to the aerodrome to be flown to Tripoli. Reaction was terrific by now & I was scared as hell of this proposed flight. After sitting in the open for 5 hours in a dust storm we were told it was no go & marched down the escarpment, through the town & into the barracks – a long weary 5 miles though what little luggage we had was transported for us.

DERNA DAYS [10.4.1941 TO 23.8.1941]

Tired, weary, filthy & dispirited we arrived at Derna barracks. Arkell (padre to 2/15) soon found us out, lent us shaving gear & a washing bucket & brewed tea. After cleaning the filth off (for 2 days we hadn't had enough water to even wash the dust from our eyes) we felt better.

We kept together & the 7 of us took a room.

That night lying comfortably (though damn coldly) under shelter we discussed our fight & our fate. Altogether the show was a success in that it achieved it's object in delaying the desert advance until Tobruk was garrisoned; our losses were light particularly in fighting troops; of the 24 guns the 3 A/T's had there 18 reached Tobruk – one was lost on a minefield on the way, one on the Monday morning & the whole of Cant's (?) troop fought a hopeless battle against the tanks. They were rear-guard. A moment before Coppock was blown to pieces, working his gun alone he scored a direct hit at 40 yards & didn't even stop the tank.

In the next two years the battle of Mechili was to be fought & refought, ad nauseum, in the prison camps of Italy until the 'Mechili Harriers' (?) became famous & were finally swamped by the arrival of the hosts of Tobruk late in 1942.

Next day I did a little work. There were many down with dysentery & soon all would be.

The Augean Stables were a sterile operating theatre to this place. Water had been off for weeks past & no one had bothered to dig slit trenches so that every nook & cranny became a latrine. Faeces were piled high – in places a foot – everywhere – in unused rooms, lanes, between buildings etc. Every basin was chock full. A disgusting, sordid state, and not entirely Italian in origin as we'd been occupying the place for two months past.

After lunch was told I was going down to a hospital so Ned & I packed & got away. Found Binns, Gibbert & 40 men of the 2/8 Fd Amb doing an heroic job of work.

There is no other medical unit forward so Binns, working alone, has been doing all wounded of all nationalities for the past 3 days. He can have had little sleep in that time. He has had no medical assistance but his men have done excellent work.

He commenced as soon as it was daylight on the 7th a few hours after capture & continued to do surgery on all wounded for 36 hours up in the Wadi after which the Germans brought him into Derna & installed him in the original civilian hospital. Most important, they told the Italians to leave him alone – which they continued to do throughout our stay. The benefit of this order & the amount of suffering to our men & the lives it saved could not be really appreciated until I, later, arrived at Castel St Pietro & saw the appalling results of Italian surgery (???surgery)

At my arrival there were 120 British wounded, 60 with dysentery, 75 German & 93 Italian wounded.

A German unit arrived the day after me & took over a large building on our eastern side & all their wounded.

Spedale del Camp No 783 – the Italians – came in the day following (13.4.41) & moved into the rest of our hospital. They took over their wounded, half of one of our blocks & the operating theatre.

The hospital itself was solidly built, had a good x-ray room (that we could only rarely use because of bombing) water sewage, water laid on everywhere & well planted gardens that were a joy to us in mid summer. Lots of West Australian flowering shrubs had been planted as well as wattles & gums. Curiously enough, the latter bloomed in August as in their native land.

There were two main blocks of wards built parallel to the sea & four smaller blocks at the southern end of the grounds. Between these there were gardens, an avenue of firs, a line of buildings composed of the offices, church, kitchen, store & nun's quarters.

In peace-time the place was entirely run by the nuns who belong to the Italian African Mission. The mission owns the place as well.

Altogether whilst there we used 3 rooms as theatres. The last one was probably the best but it was actually only a room about 14'x14' with one basin of running cold water & in this everything, ourselves included, has to be washed.

We were always perilously short of soap & never had any hot water for cleansing. Instruments & bowls were boiled on a couple of small petrol stoves that had belonged to the 2/8th. It was amusing, each time an ambulance convoy came in, to see Ken or Alf haring off with a 3 litre bottle under each arm & a piece of rubber tubing to cadge, borrow or steal petrol for the theatre. The hospital, officially, couldn't supply us!

Binns had a fair number of gloves with him but no gowns. When the gloves were used up we could get no more for a long while & for about 2 months I operated in bare hands & a pair of shorts & spectacles! About 6 weeks before we closed the Italians gave us gloves & gowns but the latter could not be sterilised anywhere in Derna so they just got washed occasionally.

Anaesthetic material – ether & ? – was always plentiful. The ? we had collected & hidden from the stores left behind by the 2/15 British C.C.C. From the same source came enough local to almost see us out though, at the end, I was making my own out of any cocaine or novocaine I could find.

Dressings were always short & strapping very hard to get. The Italians pack theirs in ready sterilised packets. At first we could get some large dressings, that, opened up, made good operating towels. Later we had gauze swabs only & we opened up enough of these to cover the area about the field of operation & hoped for luck.

Despite gloves, gowns, efficient washing, & sterile covers our cases all did well & we had no single case of post operative wound infections in all the time we were there. Which is an amazing claim.

Our technique was a careful & thorough one.

On admission the wounds were seen but not re-dressed. They were classified as follows

- A. Extremely urgent – those operated on in any way by the Italians
- B. Urgent: Those untouched by anyone
- C. For later consideration: Those operated on by the Germans

[In the latter respect one must record one's admiration of the German, Dr. Fisher, & his team who worked under appalling condition at Bardia for about 18 hours each day & every day. What they did they did very well indeed & their cases all did exceedingly well later]

The patients were then taken to the theatre, the wounds undressed & the limb etc thoroughly washed with soap & water, then ether & the iodine liberally used. After examination the patient was then anaesthetised & the operation done.

Binns & I both firmly believed in excision (?) of wounds with ruthless removal of all dead tissues, devitalised bone etc. The wounds were then dressed with sulphur..amide powder & vasiline gauze. Secondary suture was employed later if all went well. This had to be done between the 10th & 14th day. After the 18th day fibrosis around the wound was too great to achieve anything. Our results were far better, under far ?, than those I later saw at 203 & at Spittal.

We quickly discarded the guillotine amputation. In the desert, at any rate, it should be a capital offence to do one. The morbidity was always 100% & always grave. The mortality was between 40% & 50%. These, of course, were in cases sent to us already amputated & about whom we could do nothing. Operating on similar cases, usually 5 to 6 days after wounding, using a circular flap amputation lightly sewn up over a gauze pack we got perfect healing in all but one case & even he was up on crutches in 4 weeks.

Burns were our greatest bugbear. Bad beds, tough, unclean sheets & poor nursing made the going hard. We lost 2 of our 17 cases of burns. A mixture of flarine (?) & tanni? Was used.

All major joints, chests, abdomens & skulls were always closed & all healed very well – again with the exceptions of one knee in which we overlooked a bolt from his tank that had been blown into another part of the joint. Later he had quite good function.

Tetanus was no trouble amongst our own people but amongst the Arabs it was common. We continued to treat the wounded Arabs for 4 months & in this time had some 32 of them in – from bombs, hand grenades etc. Of these 3 developed tetanus & died whereas we treated about 120 of our wounded who had been shot in the Derna area & had no cases & none of them had any anti-tetanus until after the first case occurred.

In May the Italians reduced us to one pavilion - & then put 46 fresh wounded in on us in a night! Later they took half this pavilion & left us one 16 bed ward, one 3 bed ward, a small office, the room occupied by Binns & self & the theatre. Our task was a hopeless one from then on & I was very glad when, a month later, they closed us down.

The staff at first was far too large but was reduced to 40 at the end of April. Ned had stayed with me as batman. On May 19 we were reduced down to 10 men, Binns, Padre & self. This was not enough but we managed by always keeping 4 or 5 recovered patients on our sick lists for some weeks.

The men worked well & consistently but, towards the end, repeated attacks of dysentery, the terrific heat, no mail, very little food & the increasing Italian restrictions got them all fed up & like me, they were pleased to call it a day.

Ned left me in May & Gilbert went too.

Equipment: Comprised chiefly of stuff of Binns' & what the C.C.S. left. Italian issues were very meagre.

X-rays were always hard to get & I doubt if we had 20 all told whilst I was there. Film was short already & the R.A.F usually put the plant out of action twice weekly.

The C.C.S. stuff had been left in a welter of straw, dirt & packing cases. Gilbert got up at 5 am one morning & spent till mid-day sorting it. After cleaning the room he assembled it in bundles all around the walls, very neatly. That afternoon one of the German doctors walked in & saw it. He walked around the room, examined each collection of material closely & remarked "This I will take" or "This I will not take". Most of the stuff disappeared. They had lost their whole medical equipment between Sicily & Tunis & were, medically, destitute. Gilberts was speechless & the Italians furious but they could do nothing about it.

Personal Gear At capture comprised a motley collection fo stuff in my pockets – soap, tooth paste, 5 hanks, ties, a set of underclothing, boot polish & all sorts of odds & ends; what had been in the suitcase – a drill uniforms & some underclothing; what we picked up on the battlefield – an extra towel, pair of shorts, socks & a shirt & what we scrounged (the we, being mainly Ned) on arrival at hospital – pyjamas, razor, tooth brush, cutlery, - & a battle dress for Ned. We ended up not at all badly off.

Food Supplies Were always scarce & in late May & early June almost desperate. It was at this time that the Madre (?) roamed the countryside looking for supplies. The Arabs gave us presents of bully beef, jam, fruit & vegetables on occasions & we could always buy an odd tin of jam or condensed milk – at a price. It was mainly stuff they had taken from dumps & hidden in the wadis or the desert. But it helped us out many times. Later when they recommenced using the harbour with submarines the situation improved & after boats (300 ton

wooden diesel vessels) started coming in twice a week the position was satisfactory but not good.

The grapes growing in our section were allotted to us by Madre. They lasted about 3 weeks but never had a chance to get really ripe. The garden, originally started by the men, & kept going by us provided us with beans for 2 months & small quantities of onions, lettuce & tomatoes. Mint grew all over the place.

Liason with Italians The latter never quite got over the German order to leave us alone. Binns' rank also helped us a lot as they had nothing better than a lieut. With them.

They left the work with us & never tried to interfere. The marvel of this we did not appreciate until many months later in Italy. The amount of suffering it saved as well as lives I did not appreciate until later at Castel St Pietro & later still at Spittal. I saw appalling results of Italian (???) surgery.

Their pressure was applied more subtly & was brought to bear by reducing our bed space on each & every possible occasion until we were so short our task was hopeless.

We were inspected by various senior Italian officials – including a general & a bishop – at various times. They promised us the world – if we would stay & work. We would be the first medical men repatriated & so on. Well, Binns did go at the end of 2 years in the second party but although some 65 other medicos left I stayed till the end of the war.

We knew later it was all very typical of the untrustworthiness & general lack of justice of the European negroes – though, perhaps, one is being a little hard on negroes.

In all my stay with the Italians I met very few even reasonably decent ones. The physician of 793, Sambalino, was an exception. He was always most decent to us, spoke English fairly well & helped whenever he could. He did not smoke & invariably gave us half his weekly cigarette ration. Later he, himself, became a P.O.W. I hope he was well treated. He was one of the seven only Italians I met who could be badly treated as a P.O.W. otherwise, taking their treatment of us at 57 as a guide, it is impossible to treat an Italian badly. Whatever happens to them is good compared to what they hand out to the men they hold.

Madre was, of course, another exception. She was a grand old woman & toiled & fought in our interests all the way through.

The Italian staff once gave us a dinner – a six course meal with 2 wines which we much appreciated. It was on Anzac Day, 1941. But was never repeated – probably because of orders from above. It was the last time for many long weary years that I dined like a civilised human being.

In June 1941 the Italians, in face of our proposed attack prepared to evacuate Derna. All the A.A. guns etc were dismantled & taken back, tanks rolled westward for days & the hospital packed to move at an hour's notice. We were to be left to carry one &, if the attack succeeded, our captivity ended. But the Capuzzo sector (?) fizzled out hopelessly.

Arrival of Wounded April was consistently busy & we received almost daily admissions of small numbers. This continued till mid May when we got a huge batch from the May show – both Tobruk & Capuzzo. After that we received only an odd one till the June show brought us 70 odd.

We had odd batches from then on till August. Usually small & usually a ship's crew who had been put afloat & then captures in supplying Tobruk. Many of them were Greeks.

August brought us our last batch from the 2/28 & when we cleared them up we closed down.

The last batch did not do quite as well as our previous ones & I lost 2 of them due to deficiency of judgement. I blamed my weariness, the incessant air-raids, lack of space, heat, dysentery, etc.

Escapes We had only one from the hospital – Bill Kelly's effort – he & a cobbler pinched a boat & rowed to within a few miles of Tobruk. They had bad luck to strike two days of terrific head winds & each got dysentery on the trip so they just could not make it & exhaustion eat them almost on the spot.

Many more were staged from the camp but I heard of only one being successful. Two chaps at the aerodrome pinched a truck & made it easily in a few hours – one of them to be killed in action later. Buchanan & 10 others ducked from the German hospital in August, pinched a boat & made a clean getaway. The boat sank and they managed to reach Gjezila (?) before being picked up

Many card pages, all blank except for one with a cartoon pasted on it.

Air Raids were at first confined to the 'drome with an odd one dropped on the town. For the first month they were carried ? by Canadian flown Blenheims – only a couple of the. Both, later, were shot down. In June the town started to get it in earnest & we had our first raid on the hospital itself. Several 250 lb bombs dropped in the grounds but did little damage. One fell alongside the old Arab quarters but did not explode. It worried our hosts who promptly sand bagged it & set it off where it lay – and wrecked the quarters!

The tempo of the raids increased so that Wellingtons were over town & drome practically every moon-lit night. We had two attacks on the hospital itself in July – one of which wrecked the pumping station but they did little damage to the solidly built buildings.

August 3 saw our biggest raid. Arab, working the the wadi alongside, had been mistaken from the air for a party at work on an ammunition dump, so a methodical bombing was done to get it. We had the first night, in our 3 acres, 32 500lb bombs come down as well as lots of incendiaries. It was a nasty experience. One batch of 3 landed parallel to & just outside the wall – about 30 yards from us. We had no shelter, of course. The whole area was done over methodically in 3 hours, up one side, down the other, across us in 3 ways, then 2 diagonals. The church was completely wrecked, all the windows broken, all buildings badly pock-marked, many very old grape vines & one Italian killed. And that was the lot.

Next night the strip on our west caught it. Luftwaffe H.Q. was wrecked & we suffered more from blast this night than the previous one. The east side got the 3rd issue & the German hospital had two direct hits on it – one burst in a room our boys had only vacated as sleeping quarters that day!

Another went through a building containing 150 officers but did not explode. It's a hopeless feeling being shot up by your own folk.

Some of us had narrow escapes from flying splinters – myself included – but no one was damaged.

The Arabs were with us nearly the whole time. They loved (?) the Italians with an abiding hatred. Mainly Senussi we learnt something of their mode of life & outlook.

They were extremely generous & grateful people to us. They had little but always brought us gifts of food & cigarettes.

As patients they did fairly well, on the whole but resented restriction in plaster or splints & pulled these off when they could.

They suffered from worms of all kinds & focal sepsis so were not the best material to work on.

We found that wounds left open always did badly with them & toward the end closed all wounds amongst them.

the results were then fairly good but the dangers were great.

They have a civilisation of their own that can teach us a lot.

Education amongst them was of high standard & the rapidity with which they picked up foreign languages was amazing.

The Arab ward at night was always given over to story telling or singing. Each patient, down to little Dires(?) aged 7, would, in turns, recite a story of Arab history, folk lore or mythology or tell of an Arab hero of the past.

Their singing was a dull monotone chant in Eastern rhythm.

The senses of mischief & humour were well developed in them. Mishid (aged 14) who lost a forearm & the thumb & middle fingers of the other hand & an eye delighted in stories & practical jokes. His chief effort was always in town to find an Italian with Germans near by. He would then cheek the Italians until he got hit & then run howling to the Germans, pointing to his missing eye & hand.

Invariably the Germans would race over and paste hell out of the IT for hitting him. Which hugely delighted Mishid.

Once we were short of beds & an Arab was put in on us with a small graze on his knee. I was furious & roared & ramped & told him to get. He looked at me amazed for a minute & then went at express speed from hospital & everything. An hour later the Italians were enquiring for the Senussi P.O.W. whom they taken with some of our chaps! Never heard if they caught him but at the speed he was travelling & with an hour's start they would want to be very lucky. A Sudanese tom tom man once joined us & entertained us with a kerosene tin & bits of grass.

Once one Arab had a ruptured bladder which I drained. A couple of weeks later I saw George the Arab orderly washing a rubber drain under the tap. Curious I followed him & found him, quite cheerfully, pushing it back into the Arab's bladder – unboiled or anything else! Nothing happened!!

Derna itself is a very lovely town. Perched on a widening of the sea plain at sea level. The plain goes back from ½ to 1 miles & then the cliffs or the escarpment rise sheer for 800 feet. At the top of the plateau was the enormous aerodrome. The town is well & solidly built in white stucco with good tarred (?) streets. Avenues are common & green, luscious crops of sorghum, barley & esparto grow in plots all through the town & in the 2 wadis. Palm trees abound & it all

presents a very pretty picture.

A small harbour with a long mole running east exists. Sea-weed tends to block it in peace time & a small ship was now down right at the entrance that completely blocked it.

Peace population 11,000 & it is H.Q. of the eastern Libian district.

The Via Ottobre XVIII has bourganvilla trained on a lattice across the whole street & is a thing of great beauty.

Life for us generally was not so good. At the finish we had insufficient work for two which did not make for harmony. When not working we spent our time playing quoits, gardening or sitting under the trees.

Reading matter was very scarce. In fact, we were lucky to have the 40 or 50 volumes we did have. They meant a lot to our patients.

At first we used to perch on a platform & spend hours watching the town, the road & the harbour but the Its got suspicious & pulled it down so we had to give up looking over the wall.

Quoits was the only game available. We were too weary to walk round & round the grounds.

We had quite a lot – about 7 swims in the harbour & these we loved.

Our only other excursions were to funerals. These meant a drive through the town – where we carefully studied air damage & supplies generally. The cemetery was a lovely green place, on a small hill running right down to the sea, with green fields behind it. There amongst the green freshness & with the music of the waves we buried our dead.

At night the electricity was usually off so we played 3 handed auction by candlelight. The most famous effort was that of Binns who bidding 4 spades was doubled, redoubled, & ultimately made one trick.

Our complete list of distractions was hence a very small one – some 50 or so books, a few swims, a few funerals, ring quoits & some lovely trees to sit under. Yet we were not unhappy.

My health suffered badly during the stay. Within a week I was down with my first attack of dysentery & later I had six more doses of it; septic feet laid me out on two occasions; my back was never well, always aching, always stiff & sometimes exquisitely painful. Here commenced the spondylitis that later put paid to my active career.

We all lost weight. I dropped from 87 kilos (13st 9) to 73 kilos (11st 5lb).

Later, on arrival in Italy, we all had a mild degree of beri-beri.

The weather was consistently hot & very hot too.

Dust worried us little but storms often raged out of the desert & would sweep high over the town, to come down in the sea 3 or 4 miles off shore. One then sat in a clear atmosphere with a complete curtain of dust above & a dust wall out to sea that we couldn't see through.

Early in April & May we had heavy dews each morning but this ceased in mid summer.

Rain we never had & thunder only once.

Cigarettes were extremely scarce. The Its issued 35 per week but these often took the form of unsmokable black cigars or equally unsmokable tobacco. As our money ran out we could not buy & finally in June I sold my watch for 2000

cigarettes & 250 lire. Quite a good sale & by rigid economy I saw Derna out & left with 26 lire in my pocket.

As

Egyptian & English money became scarce its value soared. On capture they paid 100 lire at Derna & 60 at Bengasi for a pound. When we left it was easy to get 200 at Derna.

During this stay I learnt to roll cigarettes (a compulsory thing!) to save cigarette butts & re-roll them; to use a safety razor & to re-learn how to do my own washing & mending. None of which are bad things.

We were all tired, listless & fed up. All our hopes had been blasted. Poor food (camel isn't bad, but the way) loss of weight, the incessant heat, repeated dysentery & lack of sleep from air-raids (it is not pleasant to hear one of your own bombs come whistling down & wonder if it has your number on it) – these things all combined made us greet with joy the news we were to go to Italy.

COOK'S TOUR

[23-8-41 to 6-9-41]

On 23rd August we were up at 4.30 am. Madre gave us an ample breakfast of eggs, tomatoes, bread & coffee. The patients were loaded onto the ambulances & we ourselves then got into a 10 ton diesel truck. We were only 15 so had ample room to spread & get as comfortable as possible.

Cigarettes were very scarce & Sainkalino (?) on hearing this, made a collection amongst the Italians so that each of the staff collected 30 apiece & he gave me an extra 20 for myself.

Derna gave us a last beautiful dawn & we had a quick run around it & through the delicious greenery to the camp where we picked up another truck of 25 men. Our convoy climbed up the western escarpment – much like the eastern. A well built & graded road & from it one had some good views of sea & land. almost immediately we were in better country than we had seen in Libia previously. The country was fairly heavily wooded with dwarf cypress & sycamores & around the houses, gums had been planted. Stock was plentiful too – camels, donkeys, sheep, goats & cattle. The latter were all a small bodies, sleek type – quite good in this climate.

Crops were grown hereabouts in the better soil – a black, sandy loam.

At Giovanni Berta (?), where the Bishop's palace is the only building of importance, we first saw the Italian colonisation scheme in operation.

The settlers are given the land & the houses. For 25 years they pay no taxation. At the end of that period they may have half the land taken from them but retain the other half as a free gift. They pay no rent for the land during this period.

The houses are well built of brick or stone & some semi-detached to accommodate two families in each. A large central courtyard lies between the two sections. They have no verandahs & air circulation seemed difficult in them. They did not appear to me to be at all suitable for the climate.

Water is supplied by wells – dug at government expense. The Italians are very afraid that, with the small rainfall in the desert, the underground supply will peter out. They are making great efforts to discover an artesian basin under the shallow water level.

The only catch is that the settler must stay. He cannot sell out & cannot return to Italy for permanent residence until his 25 years are up.

Small grants of implements, seed etc are made & interest-free loans made for any further requirements they may have.

For the next 100 miles the country was of like type – patches of cultivation, colonial houses, trees, & plentiful herbage.

There was an enormous concentration of men & war material hereabouts. All was very well camouflaged with the motif, trees.

We sailed down Borce (?) escarpment into Borce plain – the granary of Cyrenica.

About 30 miles long & 15 wide it lies in a depression of the desert – really an extension of the sea plain – between two deep escarpments.

The soil is rich black loam interspersed with red patches & very fertile.

The underground water supply is copious & meets all needs easily. In addition, during the short, rainy season, the escarpment's run water down on to the plain. In early spring the whole area is a mass of high, green, waving crops and a delight to the eye.

Borce itself – the only town we saw – has a population of 26,000. It is well built, in typical Italian style with avenues of gums & palms & grape vines everywhere. The gums were either stringy bark or sugar gums.

We lunched outside the town & then ran quickly down to Tocra & the sea-plain – an arid waste – After an hours delay due to an air raid we entered Bengasi & completed a run of 180 miles for the day.

We were surprised at the small amount of bomb damage in Bengasi as it had been raided, nightly for months past. We saw an incredible number of bomb craters in the marshy sea flats to the south of the harbour where, obviously, they had done no one any harm.

Bengasi (population 65,000) is the second city of ? Libia. Another white stucco, Italian creation its sameness was broken by delightful little gardens at all cross-streets & by its good avenues in the streets.

Our camp was on the outskirts. We slept in huge, not-so-solidly built barracks. We 3 officers with our batmen occupied one to ourselves.

We appreciated the rest & quiet of our few days there, our idleness & the reasonable quantity of food. We breakfasted at 7a.m. on coffee, bread & jam (our last tin), at 11a, lunch – macaroni plus meat minced into it - & at 5 p.m. dinner. For the rest of the time we sat in the sun, talked, played a little bridge & above all, relaxed.

The peace was broken only by the nightly air raid & the terrific A.A. fire. The planes did not come near our sector so we could enjoy the fantastic beauty of the tracers of all colours in an A.A. barrage.

As we were able to buy cigarettes in the camp at the Italian A.S.C. rate – one lire for 20 – I invested the whole of my remaining cash in smokes 0 very wisely, as it turned out.

I can recollect no amusing or interesting human incidents during this period.

We left on the morning of the 28.8.41. there were now 63 prisoners all told but still only we three officers.

During the rest of our journey we drew daily our ration of one 6oz tin of meat, one 6oz loaf of black bread & one lemon. A lemon was always the answer to any of my problems or requests until I reached Germany!!

We passed by the harbour – very large, with plenty of space, protected by two huge, long moles & so mainly artificial - & then by the huge aerodrome running for miles & miles with gum avenues breaking up the pattern as seen from above. Soon we were back in the desert – still a stony one - & ran on to Ghemines (?) – a small Arab village where we saw the old Arab irrigation methods. A mud wall, about 3 feet high, completely surrounds a patchy of ground about ½ acre in extent. In the centre (usually) is the well & from this small channels run out & then criss-cross the ground to supply water. The final channels are about 1 inch deep & 3" apart. A splendid example of the meticulous patience of the Arab.

Palms usually grow near to the mud wall & around the well. They were all now bearing their fruit & each bunch of this was carefully protected by hessian or netting. Whether this is to stop the fruit dropping on the ground or to keep birds off, I do not know.

Magnificent crops of esparto grass about 6 feet high grew in most. In some it was already being harvested. It was cut by hand with a scythe & then very carefully stacked & gleaned by women – again by hand. The fibre goes to the making of very good artificial silk but I never found out what was done with the seed. It is one of Libia's chief products. We saw many hundred of acres of it, in the aggregate, before we left Tripoli & it was all grown & harvested in the same manner.

Mogrum was our next stop. Another village, more irrigating wells, more palms, more esparto. We could have (but didn't) buy big luscious black grapes at 10 lira the kilo.

Agedabia (10,000) was reached by lunch. The old stronghold of Omar Muktar, it was one of the last places to fall to the Italians & its architecture is a mixture of Arab, Turkish & Italian. The Arabs gathered round & produced eggs like magicians. For them we swapped our surplus bread. The eggs ate well that night.

At Agheila (173 miles) we stopped for the night. We were all crowded into one largish tent; guarded goodness knows how many times over – there seemed to be a guard for each square yard outside! Those going to the latrine – all of 25 yards

away! – were escorted by 3 armed men. As though anyone in his senses would want to escape from Agheila.

A spot of personality play cooked our eggs & made us some coffee. We couldn't light fires inside, of course.

The town is only a few mud huts, a couple of buildings & an old Turkish fort.

Next day's stage was of 175 miles to Sirte (16,000). It was a dull, dreary day, across ceaseless sandy desert with no towns or villages & the road running straight ahead for miles & miles. We saw some gazelles scampering across the desert, a lot of camels, a large convoy of ships in the bay, many artesian well plants in operation. The whole journey was broken by one stop at a small oasis in the sand dune by the sea where we got some excellent water.

The only interesting thing in the whole day was an attempt to keep sand off the road. Wire grass has been planted all along the sandy stretches to a depth of 40 years from the road. These patches were fenced off. Where the road cut through a sand dune the grass had been planted criss cross fashion down the face of the cut. The grass seemed to be growing alright & the method appeared quite effective.

At Sirte we met, with something of a shock, our first pro-Italian Arabs.

We camped out in the open on an old tennis court – now just a sand bed. As we could light fires & get coffee it was better than the previous night.

Quite a lot of trading was done with the Italians. Binns sold his stretcher for 30 lire & I got 10 for an old fountain pen.

On the 30th we were roused out early & told we had to be in Tripoli that night. We hauled our luggage through the town for half a mile to the road where we picked up our trucks.

More desert & no interest until we reached Baerut – a purely Turkish town. Still more desert & less interest to Misurata with the hard seats getting harder every mile & corns growing rapidly on our buttocks.

Misurata (145 miles) has a population of 52,000. It is a white stucco excrescence but well laid out with central parks, smaller gardens & avenues. Around it we saw the early stage of an Italian colonisation scheme.

The water is all pumped & is delivered to the farms in concrete channels. Even the small reticulation channels on the farms are in concrete as the stuff is so precious.

The scheme otherwise was just like that previously described & the houses the same. The countryside had been planted in orchards but the trees, as yet, were small. Green crops & grass abounded & the green was a relief after the desert. cheek by jowl with it ran an old Arab irrigation of mud walls, individual well & mud runnels. The contrasts was marked but I doubt if the Italian is the happier man.

A huge palm grove – miles of it - & more irrigation of both types brought to Zleiten (?) (30,000). Nothing of note here. Then along a road, undulating over low hills all of which had been recently planted with trees to Homs (42,000). This was a jewel of a town, done in brown stone with a delightful, small harbour, it was, next to Derna, the prettiest spot I saw in Libya.

After Homs we saw some weird sand hill formations & then more reforested hills. The road gave a good view of the sea below & the country around. The hills are now bare but when the trees grow it will be a magnificent scenic drive.

Several small towns were met between Homs & Tripoli.

We now ran into the oldest part of the colony where the trees & orchards were years older.

For 80 miles the countryside was one long, large orchard – olives, - miles & miles of olives – oranges, dates, vineyards. Each orchard was well protected from sand & wind by dense high hedges of privet or cypress. Huge sugar gums & stringy barks made avenues miles long. They do well in this part of the world & are the chief ornamental tree of the towns & cities. Originally they were introduced to combat malaria – it being thought that, as there was no malaria in Australia, the gum trees must prevent it.

Tripoli itself (120,000) was a well laid out city, well-built, with excellent street & avenues, good shops & public buildings & a glorious palm drive along the sea front.

The harbour is large & deep & partially artificial. It has a good entrance & good appointments. Quite a lot of ships (I counted 8) had been sunk by air bombing in it &, beached just outside the entrance was a large hospital ship.

After our long, weary ride of 280 miles we were ready to rest. Had just got bedded down in an old, badly bombed barracks when the alarm went & we were rushed out into the country about 11 miles & parked there till dawn. We were not allowed to get out of the trucks for more than a few minutes at a time & slept any old way.

It was most uncomfortable for me as I'd developed an acute urticarial & itched & scratched all night. In the morning I was a mass of scratches, wheals & redness generally. Gave myself some adrenalin & morphia later but it continued for 3 days & brought with it a foul, stinking attack of dysentery. It later recurred at Montalbo & enclussions pointed the finger at my trousers in which I'd slept at Sirte. When these were disposed of it went out of my life for ever – I hope.

Otherwise it was an interesting night. We saw a grand, 4 hour long fireworks display over Tripoli, heard the fall of many bombs & the boom of many guns; caused a little local interest which the lads capitalised (for cigarettes!) by giving a concert & singing the only 2 Italian songs they knew; examined the light, poor sandy soil & the struggling vines &, in the morning, bathed well under the tap of a wind-mill.

But the exodus from Tripoli was what amazed us. They came in hordes & of all nationalities. They came in ambulances, cars, trucks & sulkies; by foot; on camels, donkeys, horses & even bullocks; on bikes; &, I believe, two special trains to the south. It seems that only gun crews & a few prisoners were left in the city. The roads in all directions were as ours was. A German medical unit complete with nurses spent the night in the woods near us. Others slept under trees, in vineyards, by the roadside or, if very lucky, in the houses of farmer friends. For nearly two hours they passed us in an endless stream. Most of them carried some food & bedding & what they could of their lares & penates. For they knew not if the household gods would greet them on their return in the morning. And, after dawn, when we went back we passed them returning wearily to commence a day's work.

We returned to the old barracks, had a meal & made up the very last of my preciously hoarded tea & then a couple of hours sleep on the concrete floor.

After that we went down to the harbour & were taken on barges to the M.V. Neptuna, quartered & told we sailed at dusk.

During the whole of my stay in Libia I collected not one lira of pay yet the first two Aussies I met aboard had lots of cash from pay. They had been captured a bare 26 days! During the next 2 years I made frantic efforts to collect the pay for the Derna period but it was too complicated or something for the Italians & when war ended was still owing to me!

Libia has seen many occupations from the Phoenicians of old to the Italians. The latter spread slowly east & did not achieve much outside of Tripoli itself until 1926 when Misurate was quietened. Cyrenica, under the Senussi, was not finally subjugated until Graziani built his border fence in 1934.

The oases to the south of Tripoli & the sea plain are the only fertile areas. The latter varies from ½ mile wide to 30 miles – as at Barce. From border to border the distance is about 1000 miles. Population is about 1,000,000 of which 100,000 are European & 15,000 Jews. Administration is in 4 districts & the southern area. Arabs are now given a place in the administration & in the judiciary. Four fifths of the population lives on the sea plain. Products are barley, wheat, grain of all kinds, esparto grass, sponges, fruits of all kinds, tobacco & wine. Salt is the only mineral. Stock comprise sheep (1,000,000), cattle, goats & donkeys & a few horses. tunny fishing & canning is rapidly growing as an industry. Olive oil production is, of course, on a large scale. The chief town are all well built with good roads & good municipal services

So at dusk on 1.9.41 I left Libia.

We sailed N.E. to Torronto. There was not much zig-zagging. The convoy was 3 ships of 15,000 tons, 4 destroyers & an aeroplane look-out.

We were quartered on 'C' deck in the middle of the ship. We had meals on 'B' deck in the dining room & were allowed to walk for a short time on deck either before or after. We could take as much time as we wanted over meals.

Quarters were good & Arkell Binns & self had a cabin of our own. Quite up to the best cabin class accommodation. Food was excellent. We were not to see the like of it for many years.

There were no incidents on the trip. My urticaria gradually improved with treatment.

We entered the outer harbour at Toranto on the evening of 3.9.41 but, as we could not be unloaded that night, were taken out to sea again & brought back next day. It suited us.

Such a tame ending to the cruise – we came straight across, too – after the blood-curdling, near-miss, none-escape tales told us by our two submarine crews was very much an anti-climax.

We saw no sunken ships in the huge bay of the outer harbour.

Unloaded on to a long ferry we entered through the old, medieval gates onto the smaller harbour – at that time full of destroyers lying tied up side by side.

They gave us each a decent cut lunch as we left the Neptuna. Altogether we were very well treated by the ship's company.

Entraining at the wharf we were slowly & laboriously pulled up the mountainside & shunted into a siding until dusk.

Our route took us through mountainous country – all of which showed signs of attempted cultivation. Innumerable olive groves, other orchards, vineyards & small cultivated patches. It showed nothing exceptional of interest.

Morning brought us to the flat area around Capua where we detrained & spent the day [very luckily for in so far as mail was concerned as Enid had been addressing her letters to that camp for some reason or other]

Capua, in those days, was a transit camp only. The men were put off into compounds. They were under canvas but as the weather was not yet bad that wasn't important. As the officers were staying only a short while we were accommodated in the Infirmary & spent the day sleeping. We were fed by the Italian officers' wives who gave us two very good meals with red wine for 11 lire per head {Steve McHenry paid for me}. Liqueurs & other wines were extra but they were only too willing to help.

We all had a hot shower during the day.

I saw Ned for a couple of minutes in the morning. He had been on the ship & train with me but, of course, we had no contact. He looked very tired, drawn & weary after his many months of hard work at Tripoli.

What Hannibal saw in Capua to keep him occupied during 20 years is decidedly buried in the mysteries of the past.

It was flat, dull & uninteresting. We left again at midnight & ran quickly through the night seeing nothing at all. Early morning found us in Rome but I could recognise but little of that ancient city from the train.

We did, however, buy breakfast baskets at 10 lire each which contained chicken & a very good alround meal.

We headed north & passed lots of places. There was little particular to note except some lovely mountain & lake scenery at Carnucia (?).

For the rest it was intensely agricultural country producing the maximum possible. No land was wasted. All headlands were cropped. Along drainage ditches a row of fruit trees would be planted – one row on each side of the ditch. Fields were divided into long strips about 40 yards wide. Each of these strips was bordered by a row of trees planted 30 to 40 feet apart. Wires ran between the trees & vines are planted & trained up on these wires. Then each strip is planted with its own crop which is duly harvested. Ploughing was being done mainly by oxen, sometimes by horses, rarely by tractors & on a couple of occasions by milking cows.

Crops were mowed, then hand stoked, carefully gleaned & hand threshed.

No waste of anything is the Italian's law.

It is poor agricultural land – but probably too good at that for the people living in it.

Travelling hundreds of miles in Italian trains in later times I think that the short picture described fits the whole country – one large orchard with vines between the trees & crops between both.

At Florence we tarried awhile & then on through the long tunnels to the city of the twin towers – Bologna. Then Parma, Modena & Piacenza. We were now on the valley of the Po & the country was all flat & all the same.

At Piacenza we turned off the main line & detrained at Castel St Giovanni where two large motor coachs waited to transport us the remaining 16 miles to the old & decrepit castle of Montalbo.

Here after a long & tedious wait we were admitted one by one, minutely searched & packed off with our remaining gear in a hopeless muddle. I lost a few unimportant things but they impounded my scissors & syringes. It was a strip search so little was missed.

I was lucky as my turn came early & I was upstairs & in bed by 10pm. Some of the lads weren't finished till 1am.

MISERY AT MONTALBO

[7.9.41 to 28.11.41]

This was the most miserable, most painful & least productive period of my imprisonment. The camp (castle) is about 250 years old. It is built of stone & most of the rooms were of stone, too.

Perched on the top of a small mountain it is 1300 feet above sea level.

The building was roughly hexagonal in shape & had a central courtyard just slightly larger than a volley ball court – for which it was used. Entrance to the courtyard was by a massive door which was locked at dusk every night.

A small area outside the building was enclosed by wire & was our 'outdoor' exercise area. It ran around 3 sides of the castle & had a total length of 150 yards & a width varying from 10 to 40 yards.

There was one kitchen – in the basement & no other fire or heating arrangements in the whole building.

Water supply was poor & ran only for an hour a day [7.30 to 8.30 am] on one side of the building. This was the bath side so we all had to have our cold showers in that time - &, of course, no latrines could be used on that side.

Hot baths were unknown & were made with great difficulty. In the time I was there all officers had one hot bath each, about half managed to get a second one – i.e. they were half way down the roster a second time when I left. I was ordered a third on medical grounds when the urticarial recurred & so was exceptionally lucky in that regard.

When we came there were only 8 other British officers there. It had been a Greek officers camp & there were still 40 of them there. They moved on in October by when our own numbers had grown to 69 officers & 22 men.

For the first 10 days we messed with the Greeks. It was really appalling food but seemed quite good to us after Libia. We then got a contractor at 16 lire per head per day. Meals were excellent for the rest of September but in October rationing started, he had to drop his price to 13 lire & his quantity of food by half. During the whole of my stay he could produce cheese, fruit, chocolate etc for sale from his hidden stores. It was a great asset at the time as we were all light – myself down to 11st 5lb. The cost was terrific & I found on adding it up that I'd spent 10/- (A) a day on food during my stay.

The scenes from the upper floor [we had 3 – ground, 1st (Greek), 2nd (us- all the stone floors!)] were really good. One could look over the hills & valleys, the orchards & the farm houses for miles in any direction. On clear days we could see the Po 20 miles away with Milan behind it & to the north the snow clad Alps stood out in the sun in their glory.

One could look at a pretty picture from any window of Montalbo.

Beds were good & comfortable. We had ample blankets by later, in Nov., it was too cold to use sheets.

Each of us had a small wardrobe [5'6" x 1'3" x 1'3"], a stool, a bed, & bedside locker (1'6" x 1'6"). None of us had many clothes & winter soon found us out. In Nov we got a small supply from Red Cross which helped. I was not so badly off as some even though I wore my pyjamas all day with the other clothes above them.

Walks were held 3 times a week & were a strict & strenuous march – or gallop – up & down the hills close by. I went once & they nearly killed me.

Dentistry was done in Pianello – 4 ½ miles away – tow hich we walked. Again, I went once only but the dentist was out! He could stay out for mine after that walk through snow & ice.

A small 4 bed room was allotted as sick room & had another one as consulting room near by. The Italians did the medical work but Binns kept an eye on him. I did nothing - & liked it.

Boots were a big problem for all. My own were good but needed repair. A month's consistent racketeering by Roy Conway finally got them dome privately by the interpreter.

Red Cross food parcels were unknown on our arrival. Rezzonella very decently sent us one apiece in September from their own reserve & repeated the dose for October.

During late October we received a small shipment of them from Geneva & we had an issue of 3 apiece from that in November.

Mail was not so good. Our issue was one letter & one card per week – increased to double for medicos at the end of Nov. In Libia one could write only one letter a week.

Inward mail was scanty.

My first via Capua was from Enid. It left on 14.8.41 & got there on 24.9.41. She also ran second with one 16/9/41 to 20/10/41. This latter was the quickest I ever received from down below. Several from Phil then rolled in but I got none from home till Dec.

I was in bad health all the time. Spondylitis flared into its first terrific session until it was a slow painful process to get downstairs to meals & doing up boot laces was beyond me. Urticaria came on & off until I found the cause & sold the trousers to a Greek!

Septic feet worried me once or twice. Dysentery paid me a last farewell visit. Beri-beri raised its ugly head & though mild & not diagnosed till 18 months later left behind nodules on the peripheral nerves, numb fingers & complete exhaustion. It was finally conquered by the high meat & vitamin diet at 57 during the early weeks of December.

The weather quickly go cold & before October was out the whole country was snow covered, each morning saw thick black frosts, the cold north winds whistled through the broken windows, we did not see the sun for days but lived

in a continual cloud bank & life was only tolerable by going to bed all day & every day.

Pay commenced with our arrival & on 11.9.41 the Its paid me my first salary – a magnificent 30 lire. We had so many small things to buy – shaving soap, tooth brushes & paste etc etc that our money never lasted long. We were all in the same boat as the chaps who had been paid in Libia had spent it all on wine etc.

On one of the two occasions I was out of the castle I saw the local wine-press at work. It consisted of a squat oblong box on wheels. It was about 8 feet long 4 wide & 3 deep. It had a spigot at one end for running of the juice. The working party consisted of Ma & Pa. They both shovelled grapes in until it was over half full, off came Pa's boots & in he went doing the hula-hula on the squashy mess whilst Ma dashed about chucking in a few grapes here & there & running off the "wine" into earthen jars.

Learnt a little of Italian farming. Vineyards as we know them are rare. The usual method is as previously described with the crop between rows of fruit trees (or of mulberries) & the vines between them. They are very keen on agricultural colleges. Artificial manuring is widely used. Citrus is cropped only in the south, Sicily & Sardinia. Rice & silk are crops off the Po valley only. Lucerne is used for reclaiming marsh land. It is planted, grows & holds the soil together. After 3 to 4 years it is ploughed in & the ground taken over for other crops. By pump drainage & Lucerne the Pontino (?) marshes have been converted into fertile land. Untillable land, reclaimed anywhere, is given to the reclaimer free by the state.

Tomatoes & wine are very big crops.

Wheat is grown in just sufficient quantity to meet their own needs.

Cattle are bred with big – enormous – frames to serve a dual purpose – also a third, ploughing!

Sheep are rare & found only in mountains. In the intensity of their agriculture there is no place for the wandering sheep. Mutton, except in Rome, is not popular as meat.

Silk is a northern industry. The state supplies the "seeds" which are hatched out in special rooms kept at a constant temperature. The caterpillars are fed on mulberry leaves & when they pass to the pupa stage must be destroyed before the butterfly is mature as, otherwise, it will bite the cocoon & spoil the silken thread.

Grass is regarded as a crop & is mowed 3 or 4 times a year & put into silos – along with maize stalks, mulberry leaves or any damn thing the stock will eat in winter.

Notice to quit was served on Binns & I on 27.11.41. We were sent off to 57.

The lads gave me a farewell party. I was lucky with the 8 in my room. All good chaps.

We all got very merry & self half blotto & the early rising at 4.15am on a bitter winter morning was not appreciated after the party was over.

Life at Montalbo had its moments. We were all in the same, sorry mess. My own particular pals were great coves & later, when I had a job of organisation do, found that the whole bunch were cooperative.

We had little to entertain us but staged a few "race' meetings, a session of community singing, several debates & we had many interesting lectures about all parts of the globe.

ITALIAN INTERLUDE

[Gruppignano 28.11.41 to 13.7.43]

Binns & I had a taxi to Pianello where we caught a huge motor bus. Already, at that hour, this was crowded & so were the trains the whole day long. At St Giovanni we caught the train to Piacenza, changed there to the electric train to Bologna where we again changed & bought ourselves a breakfast bag each. It was very cold & snowing at Bologna but the trains were heated. We passed across the plains of Lombardy north from Bologna, crossed the Po, passed Ferrara & Padua & reached Mestre where we again changed. Bought chocolate at Ferrara & food at Padua. The whole afternoon was taken up in the run to Udine where we had a longish wait, some food in the railway café & then did the remaining 10 miles. We ended with a walk of 1 ½ miles. It was by then dark & a cold, bitter wind bowled down from the Alps & almost cut us to pieces.

We were examined but not searched – in fact, the goods impounded from us in Montalbo were returned to us.

Then escorted into the camp & our quarters, issued with a parcel apiece & had tea, bread & jam sent over from the cookhouse.

We could hardly believe our eyes when we saw our quarters. Each of us had a separate room – about 9'x7', well lined, with a wooden floor & equipped with a spring bed, plenty blankets, sheets, a good mattress & pillow, two towels, a washing stand with basin & jug, a writing table with a lockable drawer, a wardrobe, a stool, two chairs & above all, and old fashioned jerry! Each room had its own clay, 3-decker stove that burnt wood, bread or macaroni – all equally well & was a remarkable heat producer. Even the fires had been lit.

But with two months this placid & good treatment ceased & although Binns & I were not affected the men had a shocking time under the sadist, Calcaterra.

It had been a Jugo Slav camp at one time & the same day as us 14 White Russian officers serving in the Serbian Army arrived. On the whole we got on well with them but they had divided into 3 parties on the question of joining the Italian army & it was generally unpleasant for 7 months until the 10 who finally did, left.

A few days after our arrival Ryan & 14 other Serbs joined us. Ryan left in February & was repatriated in April but we never heard a word from him.

The Serbs had their own batmen & these were peasants & had not seen quite a lot of red cross foodstuffs. They ate cocoa & dried milk with a spoon & Vaseline once tried out Ned's mustard the same way. The effect was terrific & when he rushed to the tap to wash it out it got worse.

The 18 other Serbs became our good friends & we developed a polyglot language of English, French, German, Italian & a few Serbish or Russian words for general use.

A few of them were sent home at different times & in 1943 the rest were sent off to Aresa but three remained with us all the time. It took the Italians a long while to realise they could not shake the solid loyalty of Feor (?) & Co with propaganda.

Binns & I spent 9 months in the small officers' compound. We were allowed no access to the camp & for sick parades had to be escorted up to the infirmary by an officer, an interpreter, a Carabinieri & a soldier. As soon as sick parade was over we were brought back & not allowed out again till next morning. All protests to the protecting power were vain. Still it was amusing to see little Binns escorted alone on his mornings by his personal troupe of 4, for 300 yards down the centre of the camp & between two rows of armed sentries spaced out at 50 yard intervals. They must have thought us wild men!

The camp occupied an area of about ½ mile by ¼ mile & was divided into two by a central road. At the eastern end was the bath house, infirmary & isolation & later still new officers quarters were built in this area. These were on the same plan as our previous barracks & after we moved in on 1.9.42 we were allowed the freedom of the camp but were always spied on by the Carib when we left our own quarters.

At our arrival some 800 Aussies, 100 Cyprians, 100 Palestinians & about another 100 oddments occupied the southern half of the camp.

They had a fair amount of playing space but were never allowed out for walks even after the camp became crowded & congested. The only people to ever leave camp were small working parties to gather stone etc for roads inside the camp & those going to the hospital. Most of the men spent two years in that confined space & never once got outside the wire. It is not to be wondered at that, when I left on 13.7.43, there was hardly one sane man in the place & 90% had acute neurasthenia.

Their barracks were small & had to take 96 men. They slept in two decker beds, two such lying side by side with a small gap of 18 inches between every second bed longwise. These blocks of 8 were so close together that any infectious disease involving one man automatically spread to the other 7 unless they were immune.

A vacant space about 8 feet wide was left at end end of the hut & a passage down each side of 2'6". Each barrack contained a stove & a small room at each end which was occupied by 3 N.C.O.s.

In this small, confined area they had to eat, sleep, study & live generally.

Four large "recreation" huts were built late in 1942 but, after being in use for 6 weeks, were converted to dormitories accommodating 250 men each.

Four kitchens did the cooking. They were poorly equipped & hopelessly inadequate to the task. Extra food possessed by the men had to be cooked by themselves in the open on small fireplaces made by standing two bricks on their sides. Fuel was an impossibility &, because of this, their ingenuity produced an amazing number & variety of blowers – small forges worked by wheels, pulleys, bellows & all sorts of devices that would boil a pint of water in 6 minutes on a few chips or pieces of charcoal.

Our first big addition was 400 kiwis in January 1942. They were not in bad condition but ran into a period of 10 weeks when there were no red cross parcels.

In the middle of 1942 the whole of the northern half of the camp was covered with huts & we had a sudden influx that sent our numbers up to 5000. Most of these men were in bad condition & some shocking from starvation.

Discipline in the camp was always rigid & for the last 18 months sadistic. It was a continual terror raid on the men by spineless despicable creatures. I learnt exactly what a swine & coward the Italian is, what a brute he is. They have been described as the "European negroes" but that is a gross libel on the negroes. A worthless, useless race with no redeeming feature the world would be better for their extermination. Like all slobbering sentimentalists they are bitterly cruel & vindictive when they have anyone defenceless & in their power.

Goal regime was rigid. Ironed like felons for 10 days, kept on a diet of a little macaroni & water once a day for 6 days & for the rest of their term given two small meals a day & deprived of all reading matter, smoking & extra food & not allowed their parcels during the whole period – it was really a modern, typically Italian, torture chamber. And they got 30 days for this for such "offences" as not saluting the Italian flag, failing to see & salute an Italian officer 100 yards away & 15 days of it for having an unopened tin or being out of step on parade. One chap got 30 days on one occasion because he was asleep in shorts & not pyjamas.

The camp motto that greeted one on entering Calcaterra's office as "The English are despicable but how much more despicable are those Italians who treat them well". It stood all the time, in 3" letters, over his desk.

Our work was continually hampered by the appalling ignorance of the Italian M.O's. We had two shocking specimens. Bernardi – a major – for 9 months had been a village dentist for 20 years, knew no medicine at all except a few names but alone could make decisions affecting the lives & welfare of the men. Binns & I totally disregarded officially. Before him we had an old chap who officially practised medicine in Parma. God help Parma. His ignorance was abysmal.

The infirmary at first consisted of one barrack with a small store, a dressing room & a ward of 14 beds. Later more accommodation was built including two more wards, a kitchen & a dental room. We could then take 35 patients.

Italian medical supplies were almost nil & we were dependent on B.R.C.S.

Dentistry was badly done until Doug McLeod took over. Dentures were never done & the men had to buy them at a cost of 1200 lire a plate. Naturally only a rare one was possible. I, myself, later lost 2 teeth owing to their shocking treatment.

As washing facilities consisted of one row of concrete troughs with taps for each 1000 men, no laundries existed, hot baths averaged one in 14 days per man & latrine were open slit trenches, usually overflowing.

Our life was a continual chase (?) for scabies & treating of boils & other infectious things.

Acute nephritis was rampant & some of the men died of it, acute tonsillitis a daily happening, pneumonia always with us & dysentery & the diarrhoea a ceaseless march of men. We had but little for them.

In late 1942 we had our worst period when the starved hordes from Tobruk & Metrah (?) arrived. Men normally weighing 14 or 13 stone were down to 8 stone or less. Beri beri was universal amongst them; so was jaundice which was far severer than I'd ever seen it & always showed hepatic degeneration; pneumonia killed a few & dysentery a few more. At their arrival the R.C. issue was a parcel a fortnight but we had nearly 4000 milk & invalid parcels in excess in the store. We begged & beseeched permission to issue one each of these to these men, made out signed lists with each man's name & number, told of the imperative necessity for more food for them & the dire results that would follow their not having it. Calcaterra smiled & refused to allow us to do it - & the protecting power didn't help. And so six Aussies & Kiwis were subtly murdered by our sadistic host.

It was a polygot camp & contained mainly Aussies & Kiwis (1600 of each), a few Canadians & Sth Africans, Cyprians, Palestinians, two Arabs, one Chinese, 600 English, Serbians, White Russian, 400 Indians, some Ghurkas & a few Greeks. At different time 18 languages were in fairly common use in it.

It would have been a good camp with a little sanity & humanity at the command. The climate was ideal, the location food & playing space adequate.

The lads did well with entertainments & the shows of various kinds put on were always well rehearsed & well done.

Music was excellent. There were, at last (?), 3 first class orchestras. The instruments cost the men a terrific sum.

But the continual strain under which they lived of searches, goal for no offence at all, & reprisals wore down their spirit as the months of imprisonment added up.

Personally I did not do at all badly. Got only one sentence of 5 days. Was very gleeful about it but they realised there was no one to do the work & cancelled it to my great annoyance.

The time was passed in walking around, playing patience, a lot of bridge & reading – such a lot of books. I rarely went on officers' walks but did a visit to Premariacco (?), another to the Cividale Orphanage & Mother Maimaceo (?).

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