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RASC, Allied Liaison Unit, with 3rd Algerian Division and 4th Moroccan Mountain Division

Letters Home

After getting past Rome, we were relieved and I sent back to a very large villa on the outskirts of Rome where I was placed in a pool of drivers. At this Villa there were many Officers of different nationalities and it was a nice life. After being in the forward area for so long, we had some days off and could go sightseeing. After about a week, an American officer approached me and asked me my name. When I told him, he said, "You're my driver and tomorrow we are going to join the 3rd Algerian Division in the forward area up near Sienna."

So the next morning we set off and I wondered what lay ahead. We soon came to a large lake where people were fishing or picnicking—the war had passed by this area and life was getting back to normal for the locals. But, not for us---we were on another mission. After some miles, we came within the shelling range and we soon located the Algerians where we stopped and picked up a guide to take us on. Further on, we had to leave our transport and proceed on foot until we reached a spot in the woods where I was told to wait while the Major went ahead. So there I was among about eight Algerians---we were chatting in French, English and Arabic.

It was pleasant chatting and we were showing each other family pictures until the guide came back and said to me, "Be ready to leave quickly as you are going back to North Africa." As soon as the chaps heard this they all wanted to know if I was going to Oran or Algiers and I ended up with four letters---one was for Algiers and three for different addresses in Oran. Soon after the Major arrived, we headed back towards Rome. Before Rome, we reached the lakes again and the Major told me to drive over to where the fishermen were and he started bargaining for fish. He got a stove out of the Jeep and proceeded to clean and cook the fish. (I might add that driving an American Officer is vastly different from driving a British Officer---you are treated more as an equal. But I digress.) We reached Rome airport and boarded a US Dakota bearing the name, King Luke 1. We called in at Naples and then went on to Algiers.

We were busy for awhile getting ready to join a new French Division, the 1st Armoured Division. Here I managed to get some free time and the day came to deliver the letters. I set off into Algiers and, after making some inquiries, found the first address which was a flat or an apartment in a big block. I mounted the staircase with mixed feelings about what I was to find. I knocked on the door and waited. The door opened a couple of inches and an Arab lady peered at me. I began speaking in my best French, telling her not to be frightened. "Madam, I was in Italy last week with your son and some of his friends.." and after those words, she turned and called out. Her position at the door was taken by the father and then, after a few more words, the door was opened. I was invited in and when I gave the man the letter from his son he was over the moon. We sat cross legged on the floor, drinking and eating. Mum could not thank me enough. She let me give her a hug and they were both overjoyed. I had really made their day, which made me enormously pleased to have had the opportunity to carry out this little wartime errand.

I delivered all the other letters and the same welcome awaited me. I met three more sets of parents and no money in the world could buy the pleasure on their faces. Looking back, one can see that Mums and Dads the world over are all the same. My only regret is that I didn't think to tell one set of parents about the other ones who all lived in the same area. I should have kept those addresses—it would have been nice to have made contact with them after the war.

Stranded in the Libyan Desert

I was in The 20th British Military Mission, attached to BIMP (Battalion d'infanterie De Marine du Pacifique.) The two Battalions had been separate groups but during the 8th Armies retreat, they suffered heavy losses and the survivors were blended together to form BIMP. At the time, we were in a rest area on a lovely beach and just along the road, a beautiful oasis with heavily loaded palm trees went right down to the beach.

It was a lovely setting for a holiday but for us, it was just a stopping off point, as we had other things to think about. The men in this unit were very mixed. Some came from Tahiti and some from Nouvelle Calédonie. We were a well mixed bunch but they were lovely people and, after all, we were all united together for one cause. On one occasion later on in the campaign, I was with a group of Tahitians and we were talking about our homes and wives when one chap produced a photograph. It was a group of young women from Tahiti who were teachers at his daughter's school. He asked me to pick a lady out and write to her, telling her about myself and where I lived. I did so and later on, much to my surprise, I received a parcel from her containing dried sliced bananas which were wrapped and tied in what seemed like dried palm leaves. There was also a diary, which I still have today, a nice leather wallet and other goodies. I have digressed.

We weren't long in this idyllic spot—I was told we were going on a patrol the next day. I made sure that I had extra water, food and ammo as well as a spade and sand channels. As there were only the two of us going on this patrol and I was the driver, the buck stopped with me, so to speak, when it came to making sure that we had enough supplies. Since we were in the desert, we were well aware of just how badly things could go wrong. The next morning we were off very early, not knowing what lay ahead for us. Before the day had come to a close, we did, indeed, meet some nasty moments. We set off and headed southwest. After traveling for an hour or so, we halted to get our bearings then made a sharp right turn so that we were now heading west towards the opposing forces. The terrain had changed dramatically. We had left the barren wasteland and were in a more sandy area. After a few more miles, we started seeing some sand dunes, which at first looked attractive, but, after a while, forced us to slow down. We were trying to skirt around some of them but traveling was getting very dodgy, to say the least. We could not go over the dunes and the narrow passage in front of us and between the two dunes didn't look too good. We stopped and both got out of the Jeep to weigh the situation that now faced us.

The officer I was driving had been in the desert already for over two years and had been in the 3rd City of London Yeomanry as a navigator so he had a lot of respect for, and knowledge of, the desert. He told me to wait whilst he walked forward to check the sand in front of us and as I watched I could see he was having a job walking as he was sinking into the sand well over his ankles. He returned and told me that it was going to be a job getting through, but it was important that we got on to our destination. At this stage, he still had not told me where we were heading. We got back into the Jeep, which was always in 4-wheel drive. As instructed, I drove forward at a slow pace into boggy looking sand. No sooner had we moved forward, down went the Jeep and came to a sudden halt. The Jeep was sinking and stopped when the floor was flat on the sand. To get out, we had to struggle to our feet. As we stepped out we were sinking. Believe me, it was a most unpleasant feeling. We had to keep moving from one leg to another to stop the sand rising over our knees but it was the time for action. We couldn't stay there. I was told to get the food out which he divided into two: a tin of bully beef for me, a tin of sardines for him and biscuits for each. Then I raised the bonnet of the Jeep, still trying hard to keep my feet. He loosened two pins from the hand grenades, placed them on the engine block and told me to blow the Jeep up if I was about to be captured. Needless to say, this came as a surprise. He told

me that we were miles from anywhere and the best thing was for us to split up. He said that he would walk forward and see if he could get help. I was to stay with the Jeep and resist capture.

Looking back now, I remember the feeling of being left on my own in the vast area of sand. I was not very happy with the situation, but there I was. After wishing me good luck and shaking my hand, he walked off. It was mid day and the sun was scorching hot. There was no cover from the heat, nothing I could remove from the Jeep to give me any shelter from the glowing sun. My emotions were at this time very mixed--I wondered if I would be captured and if I would have time to destroy the Jeep or even if I was going to stay there. Of course, I was thinking of home, wondering what was my wife doing at this particular moment, but I know that I remained fairly calm. My army training came to mind so I set about making myself comfortable and safe. This meant moving away from the Jeep and digging a trench to take cover in. I could see the stranded vehicle from my dugout and the sand was of a different condition. I settled down and hopefully awaited a rescue party of some sort.

The hours passed very slowly indeed. I had been here now for over six hours and, believe me, they seemed the longest hours of my life. Just after six pm, two unwanted visitors arrived. They were vultures. I suppose they were about forty yards away and were making most unpleasant noises, so I thought to myself, "I got plenty of ammo. I'll pick them off easily if the time arises." and I left it like that for awhile. Then it dawned on me that if I shot them, others would smell their blood and want to join the party so shooting was out of the question. I decided that I just had to keep my eye on them and, at the same time, hope that no Germans were coming my way. The evening seemed endless.

Of course the weather was beautiful, a lovely sunny warm evening, but I couldn't enjoy it. Just before the light faded, my two unwanted guests departed and this made me feel a little more at ease but the curtain of day came down and now it was dark and rather lonely.

Needless to say, I didn't sleep as I was far too alert. The night was long and filled with all sorts of noises in my imagination. Did I hear a noise? Or was that a bang? This went on in my mind until the dawn started to lighten up the sky. This was about six am. I had been there now for over 18 hours and it seemed like a lifetime. I was glad, however, that the night had passed without any incidents---the sand looked the same, the Jeep was still there and I began to wonder just how long I could carry on before help came.

It did come about 9 am. I thought I heard the noise of a tracked vehicle somewhere in the distance. Now I wondered, "Is this help?" or "Are the Germans going to take me prisoner?" I most certainly, wasn't going to offer any resistance. The noise grew louder and from the direction that I had arrived a Bren Carrier appeared and standing up in the front looking for me was a Legionnaire. I ran over and embraced him and the other two soldiers. It was a moment of great emotion, as I had been stranded so long. Although I hadn't given up hope, I had started to doubt whether or not I was going to make it, but here I was with my rescuers enjoying it to the fullest.

After having a nice drink and some food with them, they started to recover my Jeep. This entailed a lot of digging and cursing. With the help of the carrier, they dragged it clear. One of them drove the Jeep while I rode back to safety with my French friends to the French Battalion that I was currently with. It was over a week before the officer was located, but it seems that he walked forward from where we broke down and came across a Legionnaire old type fort and they had looked after him. I notified our unit where he was, so we were both saved by French

troops. Looking back, I was very lucky to have survived so long on my own and the hostile atmosphere made it slightly worse. On getting back to my unit, things being war time, it was business as usual. The Battalion got ready for whatever came next. My adventure, so to speak, took place in Tunisia in 1943.

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