

Portrait of a Wartime Marriage

CLAIRE WATHES

Portrait of a Wartime Marriage

A narrative based on the correspondence
between John and Maida Bulman
during World War II

C L A I R E W A T H E S

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John and Maida's wedding day, 27th July 1938

Preface

THE OUTBREAK OF THE Second World War kept my parents John and Maida apart for most of the early years of their marriage. For the six years from November 1939 until October 1945 they kept in touch by writing to each other almost every day, interspersed with occasional telegrams for special occasions. Remarkably, much of this correspondence has survived. After John died Maida painstakingly went through these letters and typed out an edited version that she wanted to pass on to her grandchildren.

I have now revisited this text, checking back to the original letters, shortening it in places and adding more of the historical context. It is a story well worth telling. A small amount of this material is also covered in a family history compiled by my brother, Andrew Bulman¹. In doing this work I have learnt much that I did not know both about the realities of living through a World War and about my parents. In common with many people who have experienced war, John never talked about it. His passion for becoming the best surgeon possible comes out strongly in his letters but life in the army was not all work. His lifelong love of ornithology kept going regardless of the war, providing much needed relaxation.

For Maida, her letters described living with her widowed mother (Mamma) and her own childhood nurse (Adda) in a small house in Cambridge. She was pregnant when John left for Egypt, so my sister Harriet was born in 1940. Relationships in this all-female household often became strained, not helped by frequent bombing raids and food shortages. Maida had to try and hold all this together and keep her letters to John as cheerful as possible in difficult circumstances.

This book is a testament to their enduring love for each other which enabled them to overcome all the challenges of the war years. Their experiences fully lived up to the motto of the Royal Army Medical Corps '*In Arduis Fidelis*' (meaning 'Faithful in Adversity'). They subsequently went on to provide us, the Bulman family (Harriet, Charles, Andrew and Claire) with a secure and happy childhood, which we remember with love and gratitude. It is dedicated to their nine grandchildren. Maida wrote: "In offering you these memories, I hope that you, our dear grandchildren, will remember us with love."

Claire Wathes (née Bulman)
1 May 2024

Acknowledgements

A NUMBER OF PEOPLE have contributed to the production of this book.

Firstly, I am extremely grateful to Ian Paterson the historian for the Desert Rats who compiled the wealth of information concerning the 4th Royal Horse Artillery available on the website at <http://desertrats.org.uk/WarDiaries/index.htm>. He also kindly supplied some original images taken from their War Diaries. I additionally accessed other relevant War Diaries available at the National Archives, Kew. The images used in this text are licensed under the Open Government Licence 3.0 as follows:

Image title	Page
War Diary 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery WO 169/246.	19, 81, 87, 101
War Diary No. 64 General Hospital), WO 177/1319.	105
Quarterly Report ending 31 December 1941 of the Military Hospital, Safaga. WO 222/914.	133
War Diary, No.10. Clinical Clearing Station, September 1939 to December 1943. WO 177/637.	179
War Diary, No.96. General Hospital. September 1942 to September 1945. WO 177/1370.	233
War Diary, No. 34 Field Dressing Station. June 1943 to April 1946. WO 177/920.	261

My thanks also go to Rob McIntosh curator of the Museum of Military Medicine for supplying information regarding the roles of different medical staff and hospitals as given in Appendix 2. Roger Lilley of the Museum of Cambridge has kindly allowed use of the image of the Brunswick Nursing Home on page 35. The photograph Sandstorm in the Western Desert on page 33 is from the Focal Press Collection, National Science and Media Museum/Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's.

I was fortunate to discover Heidi Martin (heidimartin.co.uk) who has been instrumental in turning my original text into a book through her expertise in artwork and graphic design, including the cover design. She has made the whole task a real pleasure and I am very grateful for her help.

My brother Andrew has kept the Bulman family archive together and he passed on to me the original letters and photographs on which this book is based. The biggest thanks must, however, go to my mother Maida who had the original vision of turning the letters into a book. She sorted them all out and painstakingly typed out the sections she considered important on her old-fashioned typewriter, so making my own job much easier.



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Glossary

A.A.	Anti-aircraft	M.M.	Military Medal
A.D.H.	Assistant Director of Hygiene	M.O.	Medical Officer
A.D.M.S.	Assistant Director of Medical Services	M.R.S.	Medical Reception Station
A.P.O.	Army Postal Office	O.A.S.	On Active Service
A.R.P.	Air raid precautions	O.C.	Officer Commanding
A.T.S.	Auxiliary Territorial Service	O.M.O.	Orderly Medical Officer
A.D.S.	Advanced dressing station	O.P.	Observation post
B.A.O.R.	British Army of the Rhine	O.T.C.	Officer's Training Camp
B.E.F.	British Expeditionary Force	Q.E.W.	Queen Edith's Way
B.L.A.	British Liberation Army	R.A.F.	Royal Air Force
C.C.S.	Casualty Clearing Station	R.A.M.C.	Royal Army Medical Corps
C. in C.	Commander in chief	R.A.O.C.	Royal Army Ordinance Corps
D.D.M.S.	Deputy Director Medical Services	R.A.S.C.	Royal Army Service Corps
D.S.O.	Distinguished Service Order	R.C.	Roman Catholic
E.M.S.	Emergency Medical Services	R.E.M.E.	Royal Mechanical and Electrical Engineers
E.N.S.A.	Entertainments National Service Association	R.H.A.	Royal Horse Artillery
E.P.I.P.	European Privates Indian Pattern (military tent)	R.H.Q.	Regional Headquarters
F.A.N.Y.	First Aid Nursing Yeomanry	R.M.O.	Regimental Medical Officer
F.D.S.	Field Dressing Station	R.T.R.	Royal Tank Regiment
F.R.C.S.	Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons	S.A.S.	Special Air Service
G.H.	General Hospital	S.M.O.	Senior Medical Officer
H.E.	High explosive	V.C.	Victoria Cross
M.C.	Military Cross	V-E Day	Victory in Europe Day
M.E.F.	Middle East Force	W.D.	War Department
M.I.	Medical Inspection	W.D.F.	Western Desert Force
		W.W.2	World War 2

Introduction



John with his grandfather Canon Jones and uncle Dennis Jones.

John Forster Harrison Bulman 1911-1985

John's father, Harrison Bulman, was a mining engineer. His much younger mother Norah was the daughter of Arthur Jones, an Anglican clergyman who became Canon of Durham Cathedral. John was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1911 and when he was eight years old the family moved to Morwick Hall near Warkworth in Northumberland. This was a beautiful house with extensive garden and woods running down to the river Coquet, which was rented from the Duke of Northumberland. There were six children, Helen, John, Philip, Margaret (Peggy), Denis and Heather.

John was educated at Packwood Haugh Preparatory School and then Rugby (1924-1929), spending most of his holidays roaming the Northumberland countryside and developing his profound love of nature. He then went on to Trinity College, Cambridge (1929-1934), where he had a distinguished record taking a double First in the Natural Sciences Tripos Parts I and II. He was subsequently awarded a scholarship, becoming the Senior Scholar at Trinity; this provided funds to undertake two years of research in Physiology. He then decided to pursue a career in clinical medicine rather than academia, so he moved to St. Thomas' Hospital, London for a further three years, qualifying as a doctor in 1937.

While he was at Cambridge John rowed for Trinity College and was a member of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club. He also joined the Cambridge University Air Squadron and qualified as a pilot. He was a keen member of the Bird Club; his interest in ornithology began in childhood and continued all his life. The family's link to North Norfolk also started at this time with the Trinity Millers Club, a group of friends who shared a love of the countryside and a fairly light-hearted commitment to the Church of England. The group had been started by the Chaplain of Trinity College and they used to spend occasional weekends at the Tower Mill, Burnham Overy Staithe. This then belonged to Hugh Hughes, a Cambridge architect, and his wife Mary, who became close friends.

Unfortunately, John's father had invested his money unwisely and when he died in 1933 it was discovered that he had left the family with almost nothing. This occurred during the Great Depression, which followed the Wall Street Crash of October 1929, sparking off a chain of events with a disastrous worldwide economic impact. Their dramatic change of fortune was hard for the family to bear. Norah re-

married Jim Fenwick (known as Uncle Jim) and they continued to live at Morwick Hall for many years. The young Bulman family were always very welcome there and continued to treat it as their home. The only financial help they received was, however from their bachelor uncle, Colonel Philip Bulman, who generously helped them all until the boys became self-supporting in their various walks of life and the girls married. John was still at Trinity when his father died, so this support from Uncle Philip was crucial in enabling him to finish his studies, although he was always short of money. Once he had qualified as a doctor, he had to rely on his own earnings augmented by a tiny income of about £25 per annum from a family trust.

Maida Beatrice Mary Hunter 1910 – 1994

Maida was born in North Wales in 1910 to Charles Hunter and Mary Adelaide, also known as Maida, who was the daughter of Robert Roberts of Bronceris, Caernarfon. Charles had qualified as a doctor at the University of Glasgow then soon after, in about 1890, he obtained a post as Medical Officer to the Indian Railway. There he met and married Mary Pendlebury and they had a daughter Wilhelmina Ethel, known as Ena. Following Ena's birth in 1895 her mother transferred her affections to William Nicolson, an army officer whom she eventually married in 1901. Mary persuaded Charles not to divorce her for adultery, as this would automatically have led to Nicholson being cashiered out of the army. Instead, he generously agreed to leave India so that she could divorce him for desertion. He next joined the Colonial Medical Service as a Medical Officer and went to South Africa, serving briefly in the Second Boer War before being stationed on the African Gold Coast. His final posting was to Sherbro Island in what is now Sierra Leone.

Maida senior (referred to in future as Mamma) came from a large family of four brothers and three sisters: Elizabeth (Mrs. Richard Williams, known as Aunt Ah and mother of Robin and Roderic); Kate (known as Nonin) and Mrs. Llewellyn Phillips (mother of Molly and Margie, and herself known as Trixie or Tricka). Mamma was an intelligent woman with a strong interest in Natural History, especially Botany. She enrolled as one of the early students at Bangor College (which later became Bangor University) in the late 1890s and studied the unique flora growing behind their house on the steep slopes and gullies of Snowdon. She met Charles on a ship as she was



The two Maidas.

returning from a holiday abroad with her widowed father and they became engaged and married in 1907. Although they set up a home in Wales, Charles spent most of his time back in Africa where Mamma was able to join him on a couple of trips. Following her return home, Maida junior was born in Wales in 1910.

Charles unfortunately became ill and had to return to England in early 1914, where he died suddenly soon after his arrival back. They had been happily married for just seven years and his death at the age of only 54 occurred six months before he would have become entitled to receive a pension from the Colonial Office. Mamma was therefore left widowed with a three-year-old daughter. Charles Hunter's entire estate was only £3,986, and this was split three ways between Mamma, Maida and Ena. As Maida's share was kept in trust, she did not receive it until 1934 when she was 24 years old.

This left Mamma with very little income to survive on. She lived initially with her father until his death in 1916 and then experienced a series of moves: to Bangor, North Wales (near her sister Nonin), briefly to Bereford (near old friends), and then to Llanidloes, Montgomeryshire (near her sister Trixie). She eventually settled in Oswestry, Shropshire, close to Oswestry Girls High School, to provide a good education for Maida junior. There she was able to

afford a very small house thanks to the generous help of May Bradford, who was Maida junior's godmother.

Maida subsequently gained a scholarship that enabled her to continue her education boarding at Cheltenham Ladies College, and from there she was awarded a second scholarship to attend Newnham College, Cambridge to read French and Italian. Her great love of France dated from her later school days. Mamma also moved to Cambridge to join her and bought 7 Queen Edith's Way*, a small but pretty house with a garden and large orchard, close to the current site of Addenbrooke's Hospital. This was where they would spend the war years, together with their housekeeper, Miss Agnes Buggie, always known as Adda. Adda originally joined the Hunter household as nanny in 1911 when Maida junior was just five months old, and she stayed with them and later the Bulman family almost continuously until she finally retired a year before her death at the age of 80.

Maida commented in her notes that she was brought up in the company of distinguished doctors. Apart from the famous 18th century doctors John

and William Hunter (who were distant ancestors), her godmother May (née Roberts) had been brought up by her uncle, Sir William Roberts, an eminent physician. May then married John (later Sir John) Rose Bradford, Bart, who was President of the College of Physicians from 1926 – 1931. The two Maidas stayed with them almost every summer in the 1920s at Bryn Hall, Llanymawddwy, their country home on Anglesey. Maida was greatly influenced by the Bradford's, both brilliant people who gave her glimpses of the intellectual and scientific life of London at that time. Although she was not at all scientific herself, she always regarded medicine as a very great profession with the pursuit of money being of secondary importance.

Early days together

John and Maida first met in March 1932 when they were both undergraduates at Cambridge University. Robert Bayne-Powell, a mutual friend, brought John to a tea party at Newnham College. John and Robert knew each other from rowing in the same boat, and Robert remained a lifelong family friend. This initial introduction led to a return invitation to tea at Trinity College, and Maida and John then started seeing each other regularly and

* Often abbreviated to Q.E.W.



Wedding Day 27th July 1938. Mamma, cousin Molly, Maida, Roger Tredgold (their best man), John and his mother Norah Fenwick.

gradually fell in love “in the restrained way that was then normal for young people with our upbringing.” They were, however, both chronically short of money, for the reasons described above, and in those days that made marriage out of the question.

When John left Cambridge in 1934 to study medicine in London, they therefore went their separate ways and never communicated during the following three years. Maida obtained a job teaching French and Italian at Wycombe Abbey School, Buckinghamshire and did not expect to ever see him again. John had, however, not forgotten her and finally wrote in 1937, when he had newly qualified as a doctor, inviting her to meet him at his digs in Lambeth. She described feeling nervous climbing the stairs to his rented room after such a long time apart, but: “his voice said ‘*come in*’ in the tone I remembered and it went straight to my heart like an arrow.” The ice was quickly broken and their relationship resumed.

They married quietly at St. Benet’s Church in Cambridge on the 27th July 1938. In a later letter John commented that he was lucky to have such a perfect mother-in-law who supported him in all his adventures once he had persuaded her to consent to what at the time must have seemed to be rather a premature and hasty marriage. By then John was working as a junior house officer first at the Kent and Canterbury Hospital and later at the Royal Cancer Hospital, Fulham Road, London (now the Royal Marsden Hospital), both of which positions required him to live in. Maida was allowed to keep her job at Wycombe Abbey in spite of being married, which was unusual at that time. For the first year of their married life they therefore had no settled home together, just a rented furnished flat in High Wycombe.

Before marriage Maida had managed to save enough money from her earnings (about £250) to buy a new grey Austin 7 car named Griselda, which she relied on for driving many miles to meet up with John at weekends and for holidays. She later described these early days together in a letter to John dated 9th May 1940, relating to the time when he was working in Kent. “Do you remember the nights and bits of nights in the Beresford-Jones’s spare room, especially the very hot night when we talked for such ages – I can’t remember what about. And the funny little dark, stuffy room at the George and Dragon? I remember returning there one night in Griselda after taking you back to the Hospital, driving very fast in an awful storm and torrents of rain, in floods of tears because I had said goodbye to you and was frightened of the

thunder and lightning. I am sure few people can have had such an unconventional first year of marriage as we did, darling. What fun it is to look back on, and how specially lucky it does seem now that we did get married then instead of waiting... I can hardly imagine now what life was like before I belonged all to you, my darling, but I know it was all very dreary and empty and not worthy of being called life at all compared with the present.”



Griselda the car on honeymoon in the Lake District, July 1938.

This split living arrangement lasted for a year until July 1939, when Maida resigned her teaching job. They planned to have a summer holiday together, including a trip to Morwick Hall to visit John’s mother, and then to find a flat together in London. John wished to qualify as a surgeon as quickly as possible, so he had arranged to do a short medical course at the Royal Cancer Hospital before having a first try at the examination needed to obtain his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (F.R.C.S.) in November. Maida intended to look for a new teaching post nearby.

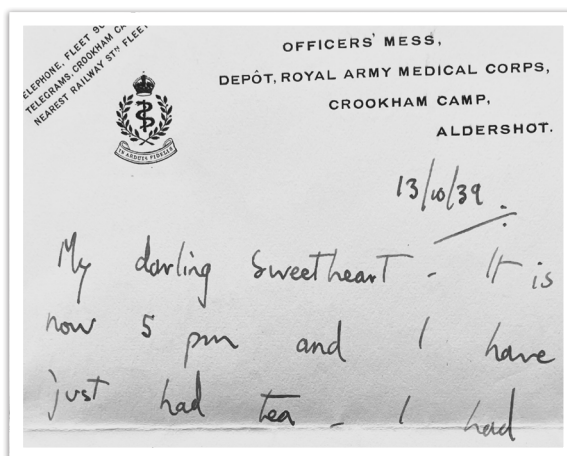
They had a lovely holiday with magnificent weather. While they were in Northumberland it became evident, however, that war was becoming inevitable. Up until then most people had hoped that this had been averted by the Munich agreement. This was a settlement reached between Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy in September 1938 that permitted German annexation of the Sudetenland, a German speaking region of western Czechoslovakia. Through this the Czechs lost almost one third of their territory and the Nazi Germans gained huge industrial capacity without needing to fight. This arrangement was meant to bring peace but instead established a pattern of appeasement towards Hitler, who then

violated the agreement in March 1939 by occupying the rest of Czechoslovakia. The Nazis next invaded Poland on 1st September 1939 and Britain finally declared war on 3rd September 1939, recognising that Germany had upset the balance of power in Europe and represented a direct threat to British security².

John immediately decided to volunteer to serve in the Armed Forces. He sometimes said he only did it for the money, but Maida believed it was really patriotism as most of their generation believed that it was the right thing to do. His three uncles had served throughout the first World War and many of their friends were joining up. He was advised by several people to wait until he had first obtained the crucial F.R.C.S. qualification, but nothing would persuade him to change his mind. This later proved to have been a big mistake. If he had had the Fellowship, he would have been given a higher rank in the army and would also have been able to obtain far more valuable experience by working for them as a surgeon rather than as a junior doctor.

He first applied to the R.A.F. as he was a qualified pilot and an Officer in the Reserve, but they already had enough doctors, so he turned instead to the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.). Maida said that he never regretted this and was always proud of his war service, especially of having taken part in Wavell's great campaign in the Middle East in 1940-1941. She remembered driving down to Cambridge and then travelling round with John to interview various army units, including a Field Ambulance at Ipswich, until he found one which was not full up and finally enlisted. The continuing glorious sunshine in the summer of 1939 seemed to make a mockery of their dashed hopes of setting up home together. Maida felt very anxious about the future and could not share John's optimism. He was quite sure that the war would only last for a short time and, even if he was sent abroad, that she would be able to join him.

At the same time that this was going on they decided that army pay would make it possible to support a family and Maida was fortunate to conceive soon after this decision was taken. They took a short walk from Queen Edith's Way along Long Road in Cambridge and agreed that if it was a boy then he would be called Charles Hunter and, if a girl, she would be Harriet Nichol. Before leaving Cambridge John put Maida in the charge of Dr. Walter Hedgcock as Dr Budd, her own doctor, had already joined a Field Ambulance. John also arranged for her to go to the Brunswick Nursing Home, just off Maid's Causeway in Cambridge, for the birth. Maida later wrote that



Opening of John's first war letter sent from Crookham Camp in October 1939.

being pregnant and then having the baby made all the difference to her during their long separation.

John left for London on 8th October 1939 and began the all-important F.R.C.S. course at the Royal Cancer Hospital the following day, hoping to complete it and take the examination before being sent abroad. He was, however, called up for overseas service only five days later on 13th October and was sent to the Officers' Mess at the Depot of the Royal Army Medical Corps, Crookham Camp, Aldershot. From there he wrote what turned out to be the first of a long series of war-time letters. This one was written on thick crested writing paper, in marked contrast to the flimsy cheap paper and reused envelopes to which they were later reduced. Regarding the F.R.C.S. he wrote: "I did not try to go on with the course — that can wait." He was cheerful and affectionate, ending with "All my love, precious one. You are mine forever. Your own adoring John." In a later letter from Egypt on 19th December he wrote "Bless you, precious one, who have taught me the meaning of real love." Their devoted correspondence was able to keep them closely in touch throughout the war.

At the outbreak of the war there were only 1,453 regular officers enlisted in the R.A.M.C. together with 5,920 classified as other ranks. The latter took on a wide variety of roles such as nurses, stretcher-bearers, theatre assistants, radiographers and laboratory technicians³. There was therefore an urgent need for the army to recruit more men into the medical service. While some of those entering the other ranks had some previous medical experience, many did not. All the new recruits including the doctors were initially assessed for their physical fitness

and they required training in both basic military drill and relevant medical practices, such as dealing with different types of wounds and burns. They were also given inoculations including T.A.B.*, often causing unpleasant side effects.

Many of the new recruits found this initial training, along with the introduction to strict army discipline, was very irksome and John was no exception. Although he had difficulty adjusting to life in the Officers' Mess, he tried to make the best of it and wrote on 23rd October: "I am sure this time here will do me good as it is important to be able to get on with men in order to be successful at medicine." Before he left England, after just one month of training, he was able to come back to Cambridge on two occasions for 24 hours leave. After the first visit Maida wrote to him with a quote from Mamma which she thought he would appreciate: "*I thought John looked changed yesterday. He looked much more firm and resolute.*" On 1st November they went together to King's College Chapel for the All Saints Day service, at which Maida commented that she felt so proud of him in his uniform, as shown in a photograph taken at Queen Edith's Way during his final visit home the following week.

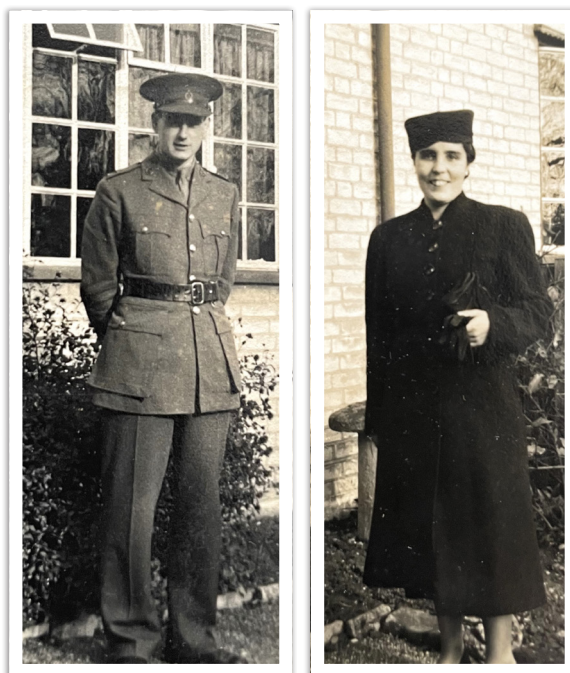
Maida went to stay near the Depot at Crookham for John's last few days in England. As he was very busy attending lectures and having his vaccinations, she was alone in the hotel for much of the time feeling very miserable and out of place amongst the wives of the regular army doctors. On the other hand, John was full of optimism. He was looking on the expedition as an adventure and did not expect the separation from Maida to last for long.

After a final hug and kiss outside the Officers' Mess Maida drove back to Cambridge in floods of tears while John embarked on his army career, leaving by boat on 15th November. He was not allowed to mention his destination and his first postcard and letter home dated 17th November were sent from "Somewhere in France". This turned out to be near Marseilles, where the new recruits spent a few quite comfortable days with good food provided. He set off again on 25th November to cross the Mediterranean, landing in Egypt on 27th November 1939.

Wartime Correspondence

Maida said that it was sometimes difficult to discern the truth in their letters, as they were both so keen to save each other from worrying. Nevertheless,

* Against typhoid and paratyphoid A and B infection.



John and Maida outside the house at 7 Queen Edith's Way Cambridge on 10th November 1939 just before John's departure for Egypt.

she thought that they did mainly provide an honest picture of their respective experiences. All army letters were censored. The officers censored the letters of the 'other ranks', and their own letters were censored by each other, though John said in one letter "we trusted each other". Mentioning place names was forbidden throughout the war and John was always very discreet. He did, however, continue with his favourite hobby of ornithology and kept a diary in which he recorded all the birds he had seen. He was later able to publish some of these records and this helped Maida to identify the places from where the letters had been sent.

Additional evidence of John's whereabouts has since become available via the internet, which contains a considerable amount of information about W.W.2 including detailed army diaries of regimental activities. During his service John was posted to a large number of different hospitals which were all identified by their type (e.g. General Hospital; Field Ambulance) preceded by a number. In army terms the hospital was more often a group of staff and facilities rather than a fixed location, as they often had to move around depending on the circumstances of the war. Each of these units kept its own diary, which are now accessible in the National Archives at Kew. The functions of the different types of army medical unit

are outlined in Appendix 2.

It is now hard to imagine just how important letters were during the war. All the events described happened long before the advent of mobile phones, computers and emails. Telephone calls to the army in the field were simply not available. Telegrams could be used in emergencies and on special occasions but were brief and expensive. It seems remarkable looking back that the British Government managed to maintain a functional postal service throughout the war. It recognized just how important this was to maintain the morale of the troops, so the post needed to get through wherever they happened to be stationed. This aspect comes across very strongly in the correspondence between John and Maida.

Letter delivery was the responsibility of the Army Postal Service (A.P.S.). As the soldiers were dispatched, they were given an address consisting of their Number, Rank, Name, and Unit. The actual destination of the unit was top secret information supplied by the War Office to a high security section within the postal service. The troops themselves usually did not know where they were going until they arrived, but their mail was nevertheless sent to the appropriate location at the same time.

The collection, sorting and despatch of the military post was co-ordinated by the Home Postal Depot, which relocated to Nottingham from London in 1941^{4,5}. From there the post started its onward journey by dedicated trains to either the ports of Liverpool, Bristol or Glasgow for surface mail or to various airfields. Regarding the Middle Eastern Force (M.E.F.), a peacetime garrison stationed in North Africa and the Middle East in the 1930s was using civilian postal services before the war. In July 1940 the army reached an agreement with the Egyptian government to set up a Base Army Postal Office (A.P.O.) in Cairo which was run by the Royal Engineers (Postal Section). Once in Egypt the mail was then distributed to the troops by sea, rail and vehicles. Postal Service men went with it, putting themselves at risk in the immediate war zone, so that the post could still be delivered to the front-line troops.

At the start of the war commercial airlines had only been in existence for about 20 years, and they were very short of suitable aeroplanes with an adequate range that could carry a sufficient cargo⁶. The post initially went to Egypt mainly by boat but when Italy entered the war in June 1940 the surface mail routes through the Mediterranean became

extremely vulnerable. The Germans then conquered the Balkan regions and in mid-1941 the direct air service to Cairo was also cut. More circuitous routes therefore had to be developed, meaning that the post was now taking around 4 to 8 weeks to arrive. Surface mail was sent all the way round Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, although the convoys were targeted by enemy U-boats.

An air route went to West Africa initially by flying boats and then by planes across the southern edge of the Sahara Desert to Khartoum in Sudan. From there the post continued north by rail. At this time there was significant fighting in the Middle East and extensive German bombing raids were targeting British cities and infrastructure such as railways. The inevitable delays in communication between the troops and their families at home therefore had a very bad influence on morale at both ends.

To allow more mail to be sent by air, it needed to be made significantly lighter. This led to the introduction of the airgraph, which had been invented in the 1930s by the Eastman Kodak Company working with BOAC (formed in 1939 as a merger between Imperial Airways and British Airways) and Pan-American Airways. The letters were initially written on airgraph forms which were photographed and then sent as negatives on rolls of microfilm. On arrival the negatives were printed onto photographic paper and delivered as airgraph letters.

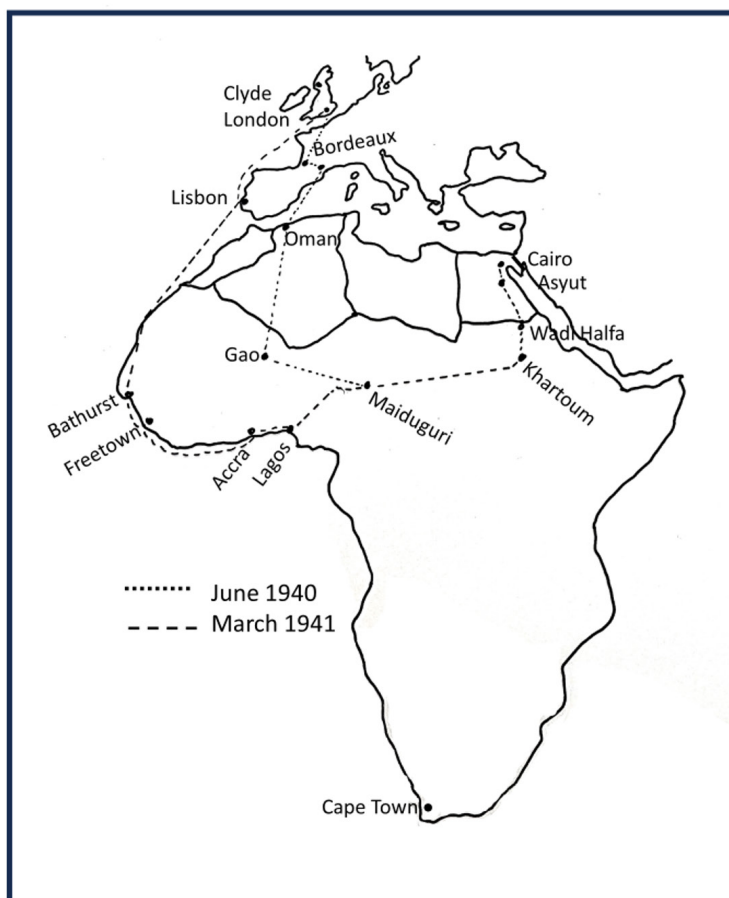
This system was adopted by the A.P.S. in 1941 for communication between the M.E.F. and England, so Kodak processing plants were co-located with the Base A.P.O.s. These airgraphs took less time to arrive (about three weeks) but were small in size (about 2 in × 3 in) and lacked privacy. When sufficient aircraft capacity later became available their use therefore declined in favour of air letters. These were newly developed lightweight self-sealing letter cards. The postage on each air letter was kept at only three pence but their use had to be rationed due to limited air capacity.

With respect to this narrative, at good times the letters to and from Egypt took only a few days to arrive. At the worst, particularly when John was on active service with the troops deep in the Libyan desert, they might take three months. In editing the letters, it was not therefore possible to present them alternately between Maida and John as they often arrived out of phase and several could come at once after long delays. They have therefore been blocked together, providing a better idea of how life for each

of them was progressing over a particular time period.

More of John's letters to Maida have survived than hers to him. Although they were clearly very precious, it must sometimes have been difficult for him to keep hold of them safely while he was on active service.

There are also missing details during John's rare periods of home leave, when no letters were needed. In some places Maida has filled these gaps in with reference to a diary she kept but which she chose not to preserve for posterity.



Map 1. BOAC air mail routes from the U.K. to Egypt in 1940 and the extended route used from March 1941. When the Mediterranean became too dangerous to navigate both the troops and the surface mail travelled from the Clyde via Freetown, Cape Town and up the Red Sea to reach Cairo, a journey which took around ten weeks.

C H A P T E R 1

The Phoney War

1939-1940



JOHN ARRIVED IN EGYPT on 27th November and immediately sent off a telegram and postcard confirming his safe arrival and letting Maida know that his new address would be 2/5 General Hospital, Egypt. This was near Alexandria, where he was initially billeted in a comfortable hotel. The newly joined officers were treated very much as new boys by the regular army staff. His early letters home provided long and interesting accounts of his surroundings. In 1939 very few households had their own television sets, so the main source of news was from the radio and newspapers together with occasional visits to the cinema to see news broadcasts. Neither John nor Maida would have been at all familiar with Egyptian life, so his vivid descriptions helped her to visualize his new environment and experiences.

John had started to wonder whether Maida could join him in Egypt even before he arrived, writing on 28th November: "I have been making enquiries all along about you coming to me, precious, but at the moment the authorities seem to frown on it, so I think we must wait a bit before making any arrangements... It is a terribly long way to come and there is a possibility I may be moved again soon, but the only reason I would not like you to start today is that I don't think the Mediterranean crossing is very safe by boat." This was followed up on 3rd December. "I must wait a little longer before I can tell whether we shall be here for keeps, or whether we are likely to be moved elsewhere. Every day we find out new things and so you must be patient just a little longer as I know you will be. Also, I am longing to know what Dr Hedgcock said when he saw you although that will not necessarily affect our decision. I am also finding out about the Obstetric doctors here."

Two days later he had become more insistent: "Darling, I have made up my mind that it would be best for both of us for you to come and join me here sometime in January – that is, of course, if the war continues as at present." This was because (9.12.40) "I miss you darling every day and I want your life and mine to be as much one as we can make them... However I must not be too optimistic as rumours are going around that no visas will be issued in future to officers' wives."

John was initially based in what was a large and established hospital. The hospital diary⁷ recorded that a contingent from the UK consisting of 24 nursing sisters, 53 other ranks and 14 officers were due to report for duty around that time and noted that some of the officers were destined to become attached to units operating in the Western Desert. Letters from this time described his medical work, which was similar to a house surgeon's job. When he first arrived he had charge of fifty patients (later increased to seventy five) in a septic surgical ward, working under a naval surgeon-lieutenant and with many forms to fill in. The paperwork continued to be a major part of life in the R.A.M.C. At that time no antibiotics were yet available, so sepsis of any wounds remained a very real threat.

On 10th December he was sent off to an army camp on the edge of the desert, for what was supposed to be one week. Both the sleeping accommodation and the medical treatment area were in bell tents, and John described his initial impressions as of walking onto a film set. On 13th December he had to return to 2/5 General Hospital to stock up on some medicines: "I was being driven in an army lorry through the town when two Egyptian fire tenders coming towards us at speed collided with each other and then crashed into us. Fortunately, our Transport had no windscreen but I was thrown forward and cut my right knee. The Transport was put out of action and I had to get a lift

to hospital... Mr Martin the surgical specialist looked at my cut and decided to clean it out and stitch it up in the theatre with a local anaesthetic. He then ordered I should stay in bed for 4 days so that the risk of it going septic should be as small as we could make it." Next day they dressed the wound with methylated spirits which "stings terribly." The accident received a write-up in the local paper.

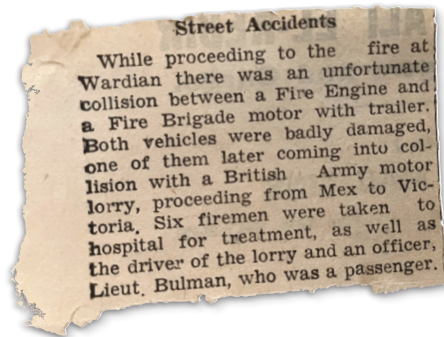
John was kept as a patient in the hospital for 8 days during which time he became both bored and homesick, even though several of his fellow officers visited him. Just after he was finally discharged he wrote home on 22nd December to tell Maida that one of these new friends, Lt. Geddes: "...has been sent out into the desert on a more or less permanent job... It was rather a shock for him as it knocks on the head all his hopes of his wife coming out." This news probably helped John to become more resigned to accepting that Maida would not be able to join him. However: "I thank God, darling, for the precious burden which will keep you happy and occupied until I return." By Christmas his knee had recovered sufficiently to allow him to enjoy the festivities, consisting of a good dinner and dancing. He was also given two days leave over the New Year to visit Cairo with another officer where they visited the Sphinx, the Great Pyramid, the Citadel and a bazaar.

His letter of 6th January reported that all was soon to change: "This morning I had rather a shock as I

was summoned by the adjutant and told that I was to be posted next Wednesday as R.M.O.* to a regiment in the town where I spent my New Year's holiday. I was at first very disappointed as I am just beginning to be happy here and make some good friends — however we take things as they come and I think this job may lend to my getting nearer home in the spring, possibly, so there may be a good side to it." On 9th January he wrote again, giving his new address as c/o 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (R.H.A.), Egypt.

The 4th R.H.A. were stationed at Helmieh, a large camp on the outskirts of Cairo. Here John found several doctors at the hospital who had travelled out

* Regimental Medical Officer.



Cutting from the local paper in Alexandria with information on John's traffic accident, December 1939

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

I am quite well.

I have been admitted into hospital
{ sick } and am going on well.
{ wounded } and hope to be discharged soon.
I am being sent down to the base.

I have received your { letter dated _____
telegram " { parcel " _____

Letter follows at first opportunity.
I have received no letter from you
{ lately,
{ for a long time.

Signature only *J.F.H. Bulman*

Date *17/11/39*

(1324) W1, W1566/R119, 4,000,000, 1/78, H. C. & L., Ltd.

Charges to pay _____

RECEIVED *AM 21 215*

POST OFFICE TELEGRAM

No. _____

Office Stamp: *CAMBRIDGE 28 NOV 39*

From *89 C 1930 27 RAMLEHBACOS 25*

To _____

Prefix _____

Time handed in _____

Office of Origin and Service Instructions _____

Words _____

NLT MAIDA BULMAN 7 QUEEN EDITH WAY CAMBRIDGE

= ARRIVED EGYPT SAFELY ADDRESS 2/5 GENERAL HOSPITAL

EGYPT BY AIR MAIL ALL MY LOVE DARLING = JOHN BULMAN +

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone _____ with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be acc _____ the envelope.

7 2/5

John's first messages sent home in November 1939 after his arrival in Egypt

to Egypt with him and who were now in the same Mess. His duties included taking a pre-breakfast sick parade. He wrote (11.1.1940): "Everyone has been most kind and there seems to be a much more friendly feeling in the Mess here than at the 2/5. This was the Mess that I called on with McLardy when I was on my New Year's leave, so I feel I know the place already and shall be quite at home here. I am sleeping in a large tent by myself. Fortunately, I have had a bed provided for me and slept well. I was very glad to have brought so many blankets and an eiderdown as last night I needed them all. I get paid 2/6 a day extra for living in the tent which is very well worth it as I have electric light and am within 100 yards of a wash basin with hot water etc. where I can shave. The only disadvantage is that there is no furniture or cupboards to park one's belongings, so everything has to stay in the trunk."

The 4th Regiment R.H.A. had been formed the previous year in May 1939. It initially contained two Batteries, C and F, with a third battery DD being added in October 1941. They were first equipped with 18 pounder field guns, which were upgraded to the Ordnance QF 25 pounder in 1940, the major British field gun used during W.W.2. These were highly mobile and combined both high-angle and direct-fire abilities, a relatively high rate of fire, and a reasonably lethal shell. The regiment were not equipped with tanks until 1942. In February 1940 they became part of the 7th Armoured Division which had a red jerboa (a nocturnal rodent indigenous to North Africa) as its emblem, and became known as 'The Desert Rats'.

John's letter of 11th January also described a three-hour train journey into the Egyptian countryside. "The country was monotonously the same the whole way, absolutely flat except for the dykes containing water. The ground is completely cultivated and looks as black as the fen soil very nearly, although almost all of it is covered with green vegetation, most of which looks like clover. On each plot are a few animals, tethered so that they can only eat the herbage immediately around them. The animals one sees are big grey oxen which look like buffaloes and appear moth eaten, as if they had spent the last twenty years in some provincial museum. Then there are smaller buff-coloured cattle, which look much cleaner and more sprightly. Everywhere there are white and grey donkeys, mostly being ridden and looking very diminutive under a full-grown Arab. Every now and then there are flocks of brown sheep with very small heads and a lanky appearance. The

most attractive animals are the goats, which are black and white mostly and have ears rather like a spaniel. They are very wide awake and have a mischievous look. I never saw a horse the whole way and only one or two camels."

With reference to the local people: "They all wear a sort of skull cap which is usually dirty white. On their bodies they wear either a striped nightshirt down to their ankles, or a shirt above with a sort of loose pair of very baggy plus-fours below. Their feet are invariably bare in the fields, though in the streets they wear loose slippers without any heels. One sees a good many women in the fields, mostly watching the men. They wear thin black material which is draped about them loosely and covers them from head to foot so that only their faces and their bare feet are left showing." Every now and then they passed a native village consisting of one-storey mud buildings roofed with piles of straw or reeds. These were small and crowded together in a disorderly manner. He commented that, although this painted rather a sordid picture: "The countryside looks well-tended and the people look happy. There are rows of trees in places, which are a kind of willow and still have their dirty green leaves on them." The last paragraph described all the birds he saw on the journey, most of which were then new to him.

As always John took a little time to settle down in a new place, and was at first homesick, although he preferred the atmosphere of the R.H.A. to that of 2/5 General Hospital. He was, however, comforted by Maida's frequent letters, saying (15.1.1940): "I am so much luckier than some of my friends who have only heard from home once or twice since they arrived. Events are moving very slowly at present but I am sure there will be a big bust-up in the spring and then perhaps we shall be in sight of home again." He imagined having a second honeymoon with the new baby when they could go for very long walks, talk, read and enjoy the scenery. He was also planning to get his F.R.C.S. as soon as the war had finished and settling down "in a house of our own." He envisioned first getting a surgical job at a London hospital to acquire sufficient experience and then moving on to a good surgical practice outside London after two or three years. Throughout his time in the army he was always trying to obtain as much of this elusive surgical experience as possible, saying: "I am greatly hoping to get a hernia operation to do next Tuesday, as Griffiths tells me he has several to do and thinks I could do one of them. It is very kind of him."



WAR DIARY OF INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY. (From heading not required.)				Army Form C. 24
Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	Remarks and references to Agreements
Helalish	1940			
	6/1		R.A. Demonstration for the Middle East Tactical School in area SOUTH of rd CAIRO - SUEZ. Regiment fired one troop concentration, one Battery concentration, one regimental concentration and two single screens. Targets and gun positions previously surveyed.	
	7/1 to 10/1		Regiment took part in 4th Indian Division Skeleton Exercise. Regimental Headquarters, Command Posts and two C.P.s. per Battery only took part. Area of Exercise FAITOM.	
	10/1		Lieut. J.F.H. Bulman, R.A.M.C., attached as Regimental Medical Officer.	
	15/1 to 26/1		Battery Training, Drill Orders, etc.	
	26/1		Lieut. W.A.P. Warden posted to 4th Regiment, R.H.A.	
	25/1 to 27/1		7th Armoured Division Skeleton Exercise. Regimental Headquarters, Command Posts and two C.P.s. per Battery took part. Area of exercise WADI MATHUN.	

Lieut. J.F.H. Bulman R.A.M.C.
Just arrived at 2/5 General Hospital, Alexandria, Egypt 1939 and in February 1940 at camp with the 4th R.H.A.

Extract from the War Diary 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery WO 169/246, showing John's attachment as their Regimental Medical Officer in January 1940⁸. Men from 4th R.H.A. digging a gun pit, while the 25 pounder gun, limber and quad tractor wait in the background. The limber is a two-wheeled cart that supports the trail of an artillery piece, allowing it to be towed⁹.

The insignia of the 7th Armoured Division showing a red Jerboa on a white background and giving rise to the nickname of the 'Desert Rats'.



On 17th January 1940 John experienced his first sandstorm, the notorious Khamsin*. “It was quite a fine morning at first but at about 11.00 a.m. I looked out of the window of the operating theatre where I was watching Griffiths do a hernia and saw what appeared to be a fog outside. I left the theatre and found a gale of wind outside with sand and dust being carried up into the air. One could see about 200 yards on the ground although the sky immediately above looked blue still. The wind continued all day and covered everything with a layer of sand dust. Four tents were blown down but mine survived all right, although it billowed about in such an alarming way that it made me almost seasick to watch the roof from inside.”

No running tap water was available at their campsite, so one of his duties as R.M.O. required taking the regimental water cart out in order to check that the water was properly filtered and sterilised with chlorine. This he described in his letter of 18th January: “Taylor and I travelled in an 8 cwt. lorry behind the water cart, which had a driver and the man who looks after the cart. I told him to go to the nearest canal as I did not know the way myself and was surprised when he took us about 15 miles but could not do anything as we were following behind and having difficulty in keeping up. When our little squad arrived, we were immediately surrounded by a crowd of Arabs, who stood and watched for quite half an hour before deciding they had seen us long enough. It was a lovely sunny morning and we all enjoyed it including the men I think. I saw a lot more of the small white herons.”

In the same letter he wrote regarding Maida’s ongoing pregnancy: “Darling, I do hope the backache isn’t bad any longer. I do wish I was at home to look after you. You are teaching me so much about pregnancy that I never knew before. I love to hear about everything just as you feel it. I think ‘quickening’ is such an exciting word, and I remember wondering what it meant in the Bible when I was quite a little boy. It is lovely to feel that our baby is really alive now and is 19 weeks old today.”

Work was picking up, and on 19th January he was Acting Orderly Medical Officer (O.M.O.) to the local hospital, which was 2/10 General Hospital, Egypt. This involved doing all the odd jobs and

sleeping there overnight: “However I enjoyed it and I saw some interesting cases.” By contrast, on 23rd January he was preparing to go out for several days on manoeuvres with the regiment: “This morning I attended a lecture on the tactics of the regiment which was very interesting. Warfare in the desert must be very interesting with all these new motorised units but thank God I don’t think they will be put to the test here.”

This comment showed a total lack of foresight as to what was to happen but he nevertheless found the trip entertaining and exciting: “My own little darling, I got back this afternoon after an adventurous three days which I thoroughly enjoyed. I can tell you about the desert though not what we did or where we went. Darling, I am so well and happy, though rather sleepy as I have been out at night a good deal. I am happy because I feel am beginning to get the confidence of the men and officers of the regiment, which is difficult to do when you are not living in contact with them.” Following another expedition on 3rd February: “I had several real casualties to deal with.”

After another trip out on 16th February he wrote: “There was much more vegetation in the part of the desert which I have just visited, lots of small bushes about 2 feet high with grey prickles and small mauve flowers with four petals. In the valleys or wadis they grow a few feet apart and make motor transport very uncomfortable with just one jog after another, and everything in the back flies up in the air and overboard unless you tie it down. I got so fed up with having to hang on with both hands that I took the wheel and drove myself so that I could at any rate steady myself with the steering wheel. There were also big clumps of a kind of rush which had a small white and red flower. Within five minutes walk of my tent I collected half a dozen different sorts of vegetation. I also saw three ravens, one of what I call a desert plover and one small bird something like a wheatear. I had no bad casualties to attend to but had to dress about 20 sores a day, mostly on the hands.”

This was his first mention of the sores, which remained a major medical problem for troops stationed in the desert. John was therefore keen to find the best way of dealing with them and wrote (16.2.1940): “If you do not cover a sore place with lint and ointment the surface dries up and it goes septic underneath. Some people blame the sand, but I am now certain that it is simply due to the dryness of the atmosphere which prevents the new skin from growing by drying it up and killing it. I had a small sore on my finger

* *Egyptian place names and other vocabulary often had a variety of spellings when transcribed into English and some modern spellings are different to those used at the time. For example, the desert wind can be spelt khamsin, camsin, chamsin, or kamsin. The spellings used by John in his letters have been retained here.*

about a fortnight ago which showed no sign of healing under my ordinary treatment of keeping it clean and leaving it uncovered; however, as soon as I covered it up with a dressing it healed completely in two days, which shows the fallacy of the sand theory, as sand could easily get under my Elastoplast. Other people try to blame their blood; they say their wounds won't heal because their blood is not pure. Absolute balderdash. I am now using an ointment which gives excellent results and I think the men are beginning to realise I can help them and are coming to me more readily for treatment." As the Army doctors already had rules of treatment laid down for all eventualities, John's unconventional and enquiring approach was sometimes to get him into trouble with the authorities. His first concern was, however, for the patient rather than for the approval of his superior officers.

John's trips into the desert alternated with periods at the Base, where he tried to increase his medical work. On 8th February he wrote: "Yesterday morning I gave the first general anaesthetic since I have been out here. It was for a case of appendicectomy for Griffiths. I was rather out of practice, but it turned out successfully. Afterwards I did one or two minor jobs myself. If I stick about the theatre, I will get quite a few odd things to do."

On 22nd February he was again the Orderly Medical Officer at the hospital when a case was admitted in which he took a great interest. Gunner Piper had two broken legs and severe concussion, victim of a hit-and-run driver: "The operation of setting his legs was completed before I started my duty, but I had the task of keeping him alive and gave him a blood transfusion and intravenous glucose for food. This morning he was better though still unconscious — unfortunately I have no more say in his treatment now, and I am afraid he is being neglected — at least so I consider. I am very annoyed after having taken so much trouble with him. However he is not dead yet, and I have just been down to try and persuade the Orderly Officer to continue with an intravenous drip."

"At 10.00 p.m. yesterday I admitted a military policeman with a perforated duodenal ulcer. I gave the anaesthetic for the surgeon on duty and we finished about midnight. I then had to attend to a drunk New Zealander who was so violent that we had to give him an injection. This afternoon I slept soundly for two hours to make up for rather a short night and am now feeling fine." He continued to visit Gunner Piper and mentioned him again three months later in his

letter of 8th May when he reported: "Gnr. Piper is getting on well and his mental state is now practically normal, though it will be some time longer before his legs are healed."

In another description of the desert scenery John wrote (16.2.1940): "The desert we were in was undulating with small hills not more than 600 feet high. The sand is mostly hard with pebbles on the surface but in places it is just like soft sand on the beach and equally difficult to get along in. The first two days were cloudy and the last two brilliant sunshine, but there was quite a strong wind blowing all the time, though not strong enough to cause a sandstorm. The most surprising thing was the temperature. It was bitterly cold compared with being here in Cairo. Yesterday I was wearing a shirt, my blue pullover and my white sweater under my battledress and my overcoat on top and was still none too warm even in the sun. The sun feels hot enough but the wind from the south goes through you like a knife and made me think of that Christmas when we left Terry Road[†] in the snow, though really it was not nearly so cold as that and our water showed no sign of freezing."

"The second surprise was to find so many fossilised trees lying on the surface of the sand. Some of them were several feet in diameter though mostly about 1 foot and broken up in pieces. They look very real, and sometimes until you pick them up you could not be certain whether their substance was of wood or stone. However they are heavy to lift and make a hard metallic noise when you knock two together. Every little detail is reproduced, the bark, the rings of growth (some 1/4 inch thick showing that they grew very rapidly), and even insect burrows, knots and branches etc. though the latter are always broken off close to the stump."

"The sunsets and sunrises are not particularly impressive, though in the evening the distance has a violet tinge unlike anywhere else I have seen. We saw no animals or birds, but I found tracks of gazelles, which must have been about, and one officer saw a jackal. I only came across one fly (a pleasant change) but I have been told that they manage to become pretty numerous in summer time. The flora consists of minute tufts of grass, which looks brown and completely dead at this time of year. The tufts are spaced about a yard apart and only grow on the parts without gravel; also a few plants with grey leaves and deep tubular root which I think was a kind of plantain. The loneliness is

[†] The house they had rented in High Wycombe.



John in uniform showing his R.A.M.C. lapel badge and his new moustache.

intense and makes me understand the biblical phrase '*forty days in the wilderness*'. We saw no palm trees, oases or wells, much to my disappointment."

He had earlier written of the night sky (20.1.1940): "Darling, one of the most beautiful parts of Egypt is the night sky. The sky seems so much nearer than it does in England and it is easy to understand why Astrology was such an important study in these parts. I have never noticed the moon so regularly before, and it is just as good as a calendar, as it is easy to see the difference each night. The pole star is very much nearer the horizon than at home and would be much easier to follow if you were lost. In England it is so high up that it is difficult to say from it which direction is exactly north. The Great Bear is so low down at the bottom of its circle that part of it dips below the horizon, and Orion's Belt gets right up almost directly overhead."

On 23rd February there were more details of his medical work: "I saw the adjutant this morning, Captain Lewis. He asked me to lecture the troops on First Aid next week. I am to give three lectures... It is quite exciting and I shall enjoy preparing and giving them. I shall also have some inoculations to give soon... This morning I visited all the members of

the regiment in hospital which totalled 8 (i.e. only 1% of the regiment, which is very good I think. Half the cases in hospital are due to venereal disease, so I shall have to say something on this subject."

He followed up on this a few days later (29.2.1940). "I have been so busy the last two days and am getting to feel more at home in my job every day. This morning I gave my first lecture to the troops on First Aid. It was the biggest audience I had ever addressed, being half the regiment. They behaved very well and listened attentively for over half an hour, so now I feel I am getting their confidence and respect. Next week I have to run a course for the regimental stretcher bearers, which will keep me fairly busy I expect as I shall have to look up a good deal of it in advance. I am to train them in First Aid. This will also be quite fun, as at present they know nothing at all. I am getting to know the gunners better now. They are more my age than the R.A.M.C. who are fairly elderly here. One of them, Captain Goschen, is a grand-nephew of the English ambassador in Berlin at the outbreak of the 1914 war."

The work did not, however, fill the days and John also had plenty of time for various sports, bathing in the sea and a lively social life with occasional cocktail parties, dances and bridge. He played hockey for the R.A.M.C. side and tennis with fellow officers, so commented that he was getting plenty of exercise. In Cairo there were also concerts to attend and he joined the Cairo Sailing Club. He was slightly apologetic about all this entertainment in his letters but he liked to keep busy and wrote (29.2.1940): "However I rather like it as it makes the time go flying by and that is the main thing, as I am living for the day when we shall be together again and your love will make me completely happy. I feel now more strongly than ever before that time spent in talking and getting to know people is not wasted even though one does not seem to be learning anything at the time."

He went shopping in the Muski, a busy Cairo street, and sent home gifts of a Persian rug, a string of blue beads and other jewellery and a bottle of exotic scent, which all eventually arrived in Cambridge intact after a journey of three weeks. Although John was clearly missing Maida, he also felt that he was doing the right thing and still believed that the war would not last long: "We must fight to live honourably, and I am proud to be helping in the preservation of our country which has given us such a wonderful inheritance to preserve... a few months separation is a small price to pay."

He reported the arrival of letters for his birthday on 5th March, including one from his sister Heather, then aged 12, and the Bulman family Nannie. Greetings from his mother and elder sister Helen arrived later. He also received an invitation from Roger Low to visit him and his wife Vera later that month. Roger was the brother of Diana Tuely, a friend from home, and was living in Egypt where Roger worked for a bank. They had a little girl, then about eight years old, who later grew up to become the writer Penelope Lively.



AFTER JOHN'S DEPARTURE IN November, Maida had found his outward journey a difficult time, as she had no idea where he was going until his first telegram from Egypt finally arrived. She then settled down to a quiet life in Queen Edith's Way, living with her mother, Adda and Benskin the Pekinese dog (often referred to as Ben). Ben had been a gift from John to Mamma in 1938, jokingly in exchange for Maida when they got married. Maida was now thrilled about the expected baby, which she referred to as: "my little bit of you inside me." Early pregnancy sickness soon passed. She knitted some khaki socks for John and also for his two brothers. Philip was in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.), serving with his regiment the 5th Royal Northumberland Fusiliers while Denis was in the Royal Navy on the destroyer H.M.S. Volunteer. She was also doing a little part-time work helping in a canteen feeding the Cambridge undergraduates, as their normal College facilities had been taken over by the Government.

The early correspondence with John in 1939 following his arrival in Egypt was mainly concerned with the possibility of her joining him in Alexandria, as the wives of the regular army officers were already there. Maida was hopeful that they would then be able to live together (implying that John would not have to be resident in the hospital). The army authorities were not, however, enthusiastic at allowing the wives of the new recruits to travel. John might also be moved elsewhere at short notice and crossing the Mediterranean by boat was unsafe, although Imperial Airways were still managing to run a commercial air service to Cairo. She wrote on 3rd December 1939: "I am longing for you very much, my pet, so you can imagine how thrilled I was to hear that you really think I may come out, though I quite understand the

importance of waiting to see what is going to happen to you."

There was also the question of the pregnancy. Dr Hedgcock's initial advice was that the sooner Maida went the better and that she should definitely not travel in the last two months of her pregnancy. He later became concerned that the course of the war might make it essential for her to relocate at short notice, even if she were able to go out in January 1940, so having to travel again nearer to term and risking a premature delivery. She reported this news back in a letter written on 14th December: "He very much advises us to give up the idea of my joining you now, and arrange that I come out with the baby in about September if the situation permits... It is an awful disappointment as you know how much I long to be with you, but I do feel after thinking and thinking that it wouldn't be fair to our baby to take the risk."

Money worries were also never far away, and relocating to Egypt would use up much of their small savings, which would be needed to set up home together after the war had ended. Maida wrote (14.12.1939): "Mamma would help us if she could but as it is she can hardly make ends meet with Income Tax going up. Darling, it goes to my heart to write all this, and in any case you must decide. I am feeling a tiny bit tired and depressed today, I think because of all the thinking I have been doing. If we have to wait then I will bring you such a lovely baby... and be able to do everything with you then and not have to be careful about anything." In the meantime the army had in any case decided not to issue any more travel visas for officer's wives unless the need for an immediate journey was clearly established.

At the end of December she had heard back from John saying: "I think you are quite right, it would be too risky for our baby for you to come out and we must put it before everything else at present. I missed you so much when I first arrived that I could not bear the idea of being parted for long, but now that I am getting your letters you are as close to me in the spirit as if I was working in London." Maida was relieved to hear this and replied (28.12.1939): "I had somehow abandoned hope of coming some time ago, so the disappointment has spent itself, and I am so glad, my darling, that you feel it is the best thing to do. While the uncertainty continued I worried all the time and sometimes could hardly bear to resign myself to not seeing you for so long, but now that we have decided I won't worry any more and will begin to make things for our baby, and later on get its little nursery ready, and I expect the

Envelope from letter sent from Maida to John at Christmas 1939. It shows the 1s 3d cost of an airmail letter, which allowed a maximum weight of ½ oz, the red censor's marks and the 'Dig for Victory' slogan.



time will go quite quickly.” Maida later commented that the dates of these letters showed how difficult it was to discuss such important matters at long range, as the post was very irregular, and the letters came sometimes singly, sometimes in a bunch of four or five, and often out of sequence.

There was also a good deal in the early letters about Griselda, the car. They decided to lay it up in the garage after Christmas 1939, partly to save money but also because petrol was now rationed. Otherwise Maida said that they were not short of food at that stage of the war as there was still plenty available in the shops. She sent and received a lot of Christmas cards and the family were invited to Christmas dinner by their friends Mr. and Mrs. Clay and their daughter Alison.

The letters between John and Maida also reported books read and birds seen and there was family news to relay. Maida’s cousin Molly had married Reggie Cooke in September and was also expecting their first child. Reggie was in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and they were able to be together in Ireland, where Margie had joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service of the Women’s Army. On John’s side of the family, his sister Peggy became engaged to Raymond Mildé. John’s elderly Uncle Philip wrote to her from London, where he was having rather a miserable time as he became increasingly isolated by failing health and deafness. Maida reported in her letter of 22nd December that

he found London ‘intensely dull’ and said in his letter: “These long blackouts are tedious, and I do not see when the war is likely to cease.”

This was the period of the so-called ‘phoney war.’ Very little seemed to be happening except at sea, where the German Navy did a great deal of damage to the British shipping. One good piece of news which cheered everyone at the end of 1939 was the loss of the German battleship the Graf von Spee². This had been preying on Atlantic convoys bringing food and other essential supplies to the UK but was finally caught by the Navy and chased into the estuary of the River Plate in Argentina, where it ran aground and was scuttled.

Maida reported having a lazy time during her pregnancy, being spoilt by both Mamma and the devoted Adda. She started to experience some backache and Dr. Hedgcock persuaded her to give up the light work she had been doing helping at the University canteen. She instead spent most of her time making clothes for herself and the baby, preparing the nursery and continuing to knit. The designated nursery was a small bedroom over the kitchen, which was the warmest room. The walls were painted primrose yellow but the window curtains had to be black to comply with the wartime blackout. She also helped in the garden. As a keen botanist Mamma strongly supported the ‘Dig for Victory’ slogan and before he left John had dug a valuable vegetable patch



Dig for Victory poster encouraging home grown vegetable production.

at the bottom of the orchard. Social life for the family continued with various lunch and tea parties and visits from old friends who happened to be passing through Cambridge.

The winter of 1940 proved to be the coldest for 46 years. On 27th January Maida wrote: "We woke up today to find about 6 inches of soft snow, and it is just as bad this evening." The next letter (29.1.1940) described how Adda had brought in a huge icicle measuring 15 inches in length and 3 inches in circumference. The snow was causing delays to trains and mail deliveries, with one train from Scotland arriving 24 hours late. An acquaintance reported that her daughter's R.A.F. boyfriend had arrived on leave unexpectedly as the snow on his aerodrome was 16 inches deep, so no planes could take off and their training had to be halted.

Denis sent her a letter from his ship 'somewhere in the North Sea' to thank for the knitted socks. He ended: "I am writing this at sea, mines beneath us, aeroplanes over us, battleships to the left of us,

destroyers to the right of us. I must go and sink a submarine now, yours cheerfully, Denis." Shortly after this news came of the Altmark incident, which happened on 16-17th February 1940 and cheered the nation. The German tanker Altmark was carrying about 300 Allied prisoners whose ships had been sunk in the Southern Atlantic Ocean. British naval forces cornered the tanker and were able to board her and liberate all the prisoners. The German government claimed that this was a violation of international law, as it occurred in Norwegian territorial waters and Norway was officially neutral at the time².

The correspondence of February and March included discussion about possible godparents for the baby. Several names were suggested but rejected as being too old or not interested in children and Denis (suggested by Maida) was turned down by John who did not want a relative. There was also an ongoing difficulty in paying for John's uniform, bought when he enlisted, as the bills and the cheques had been chasing each other around various addresses. Maida noted that John preferred to deal with his business affairs himself, but that it was difficult at such long range. He was, however, very pleased with his bank balance: due to army pay this had now reached nearly £100 for the first time in his life.

There was already a coal shortage over the whole country, and households were rationed to two hundredweight a week*. At Queen Edith's Way coal was the main fuel used for both cooking and heating, so this supply was not very generous, but fortunately the small size of the house made it somewhat easier to keep warm. Meat rationing began in March 1940, but the butter ration, which had been ¼ lb per head per week, was doubled. Maida went on reporting news of the birds in their garden, also suffering from the ongoing cold weather (12.2.1940): "I keep being interrupted by the birds on the windowsill asking for something to eat. A few minutes ago there were three accusing faces in a row — the robin and two sparrows. Now the blackbird has forced me to go in search of more cheese... Now here is the thrush! Really there is no peace! It's a good thing cheese isn't rationed."

In the middle of February both she and Mamma went down with flu and were cared for by Adda and Ben the Peke: "Benskin came to call on me early this morning. He jumped on my bed and sat for a long time looking at me with such gravity and gloom that he might have been the embodiment of the spirit of

* 2 cwt, equivalent to about 100 Kg.

Harley Street. He then went to sleep beside me for about an hour, after which he moved to Mamma's room, saying he had to look after his other patient." One disappointing consequence of her illness was that Dr. Hedgcock made her cancel a little job she had been offered, to invigilate an exam at Newnham College. This would have been a nice change, as she felt that she was turning into a vegetable.

By early March (8.3.1940) Maida had recovered and was able to make a trip to London to buy various items for herself and the baby, ordering: "a sweet little everyday frock of white muslin", plus nappies, tablets of baby soap and talcum powder to match at a shop called the Treasure Cot. She also visited Uncle Philip and reported him to be: "...very well and in cracking form. He gave me some amusing family history and talked about politics and the war. This is a list of the people he would like to see shot or hanged: (i) all those who commit robbery in the blackout; (ii) whoever was in command of the British outpost in France that got beaten up this week, as he thinks they must have been asleep; (iii) Mr. Hore-Belisha and (iv) all war profiteers." Mr Hore-Belisha was then in government as Secretary of State for War but he feuded with the commanding generals and was indeed removed from post later that year.

Uncle Philip had been a professional soldier from 1876 to 1906, serving mainly in India and South Africa (2nd Boer War). He also spent two years as a Vice Consul in what is now Turkey from 1895-1897, helping to stop the Kurdish massacre of thousands of Armenians¹¹. For this work he had been personally thanked by Lord Salisbury, the British Foreign Secretary at the time. He was created a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) in 1901 and had retired with the rank of Colonel. Although now elderly and in poor health, he remained well informed concerning military matters.

In Maida's letter of 19th March she thanked John for a photo: "The one of you in the boat is just like the way you sit, but your face isn't very like you; it looks as if you had a moustache." He had confessed to this in a letter written on 25th March which had not yet arrived, saying that it was the fashion and made him look older. Although Maida disliked moustaches, she commented that it did make him look more like a gunnery officer in his uniform and she gradually got used to the idea.

Later in the same letter Maida described a walk along the Trinity Backs: "Everything looked heavenly... the willows are coming out now, and



John sailing on the Nile.

bending so gracefully over the river which was full and running very fast. Then I went into Trinity and walked down on to the bridge and round the lawn and back along the avenue between the lovely crocuses, which were looking beautiful. The birds were singing, and I kept on saying '*Darling, I love you*' and hoping it would reach right into your heart far away in Egypt, my beloved. I came back to Trinity under the windows of your old rooms in Bishop's Hostel, where I first began to fall in love with you and then I had to return to everyday Cambridge."

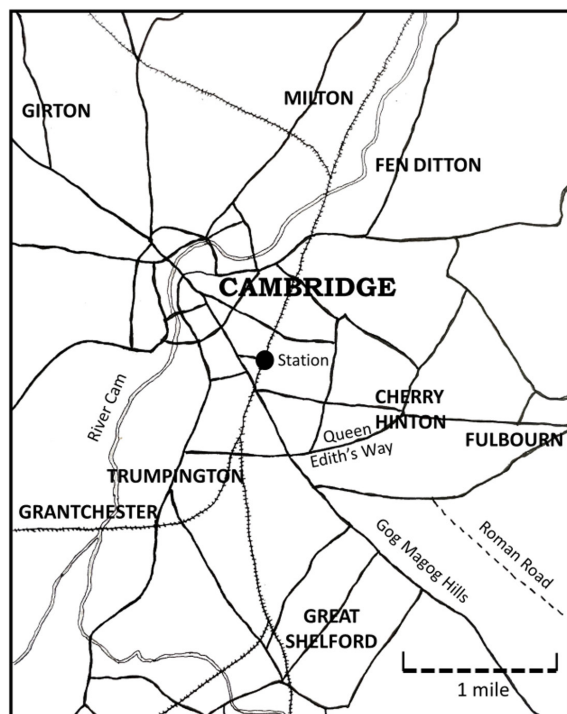
A few days later she had to rest in bed after having a slight haemorrhage, which fortunately turned out to be nothing serious. Mamma wrote to John about it (24.3.1940): "My dear John, I am just writing you a short note to give you the latest details of your darling Maida, who you most kindly left in my charge. I think Agnes and I and Benskin are in no way responsible for the fright she gave us yesterday, for I really think it is one of those mercies that has come disguised. It has been a very long trying winter, and owing to that I don't think she has had enough exercise. When all that frost and snow was about I was so afraid of her having a fall, so that perhaps she sat in sewing more than she ought to have done. Then on Saturday came a letter from Trixie saying that she had heard from Mollie that she and Reggie had gone for a very long tramp and come home drenched; and I believe Maida thought she would take a good brisk walk yesterday while I was out, with this result. However, she looks infinitely better this afternoon, so rested and jolly, which is most cheering. Much as I long to see Baby, it would have got no welcome from me yesterday. Your



The walk along Trinity Backs.



The orchard at Queen Edith's Way showing daffodils which John had planted before he left now coming up.



Map 2. Cambridge in the 1940s.

letters coming so regularly are what she lives for."

"It's a real spring day, and the little orchard is beginning to show life. I picked for Maida some pink *Daphne misereum*, one purple *Iris reticulata*, one pink Dog's Tooth Violet, some white and pink Christmas roses and the little yellow *Cornus mas* and sent it up with her tea in the little glass vase she brought me from Sweden. No sign so far of the broad beans, peas, carrots and parsley that Gates* planted. I expect the ground was pretty cold when the seed went in. Ben's coat is really beautiful, but he is a young Turk in the way of always wanting his own way, and I regret to say, getting it. Maida is very fond of saying '*You spoil him*', but I find she is worse than I am for giving in to him. We need you here, my dear John, with that useful little cane to hurry him up; he still hates turning in at this gate, and when you think he has followed you in you find he has extended his walk. I then see red and have to run after him and do what I can with my hand, which hurts me more than him... with best love to you, Yours affectionately, Mamma."

Maida's first April letter (1.4.1940) answered a rather melancholy one from John in which he was again dreaming of her coming out to join him: "Darling, I only wish I could come too but we must go on trying to be patient... It made me so happy to hear you went to Early Service on Easter Sunday: I was so disappointed at being in bed and not able to go, but now I know you went it is almost as if I had been myself." The old cot from his family home at Morwick had arrived and her cousin Rob and wife

* The gardener.

Dorothy Williams donated a pram, so preparations for the baby were now almost complete. Maida's social life also became busier, which cheered her up.

On 7th April she described going to church at St. Benet's: "The church looked lovely — the Lenten hangings put away — and the green carpet and gold frontal we had for our wedding were on, and there was a lovely jar of forsythia and one of arum lilies. The new vicar, Mr. Cobham, took the service; he looks very nice and has a most pleasant voice, especially compared with Mr. Ramsay*. As it was his first Sunday, he had to read the 39 Articles, but luckily he only read half and kept the rest for Evensong; even so, it took over half an hour, instead of a sermon. Our baby thought it frightfully dull, and wriggled disgracefully for the first part, after which it appeared to go to sleep. I should have liked to do the same."

The news of the German invasion of Norway and Denmark by Nazi Germany reached them on the radio (9.4.1940): "For the first time for months I have been listening to every wireless bulletin instead of just the 9.00 o'clock one." Norway had previously tried to remain neutral in the war and in 1939 Norway, Sweden and Finland had all turned down the offer of a non-aggression pact with Germany. However, Norway's long western coastline faced key access routes into the North Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean and several incidents in Norwegian maritime waters, including the capture of the *Altmark*, had already put great strains on Norway's ability to assert its neutrality. Although Norway had made trade treaties with both the United Kingdom and Germany, both these countries had a strategic interest in denying the other access to Norwegian waters. There were also important iron ore mines in nearby Sweden. The British had in fact planned to land troops in Norway in early April, but the Germans got there first^{2,12,13}.

Maida commented later that the war had been very slow in coming to the boil and she thought that the general public had not yet grasped that the real action was only now about to begin. Rather than talking about the international news, her letter of 13th April instead contained a detailed account of an argument through the fence between Ben the Peke and another dog called Bodger, who lived next door. The same letter also gave suggested wording for the announcement of the future baby's birth to go in the *Times* newspaper. She promised to send John a cable straight away: "I will compose it myself as soon as I

possibly can, as I shouldn't want you to hear the great news in anybody's words but mine. I do hope you won't be out in the desert or anywhere when it arrives, darling." This wish turned out to be prophetic in the light of later events.

On 15th April Maida went to tea with Professor and Mrs. Clapham. He was a distinguished economist and Fellow of King's College, and they were friends of Mamma. Although Maida commented that he was "not a little alarming" she enjoyed the opportunity to have some interesting conversation. "It fell to my lot to talk to him, chiefly about books and a certain amount about the state of Europe. I was able to keep my end up quite well talking about Germany thanks to the bits you read out to me from 'The House that Hitler Built', so I was very grateful to you, darling; I can nearly always remember the bits you tell me out of your reading because you are so good at making things clear. How I long for the happy days when we can enjoy books together again." The same letter gave an account of the nephew of their neighbour Miss Waring, who had just had a thrilling escape from Norway, where he was working as an official for the Foreign Office. He and his wife had just managed to cross the frontier into Sweden ahead of the Nazis. They had abandoned their flat and escaped on bicycles with a rucksack each, and scarcely any money.

On 17th April Uncle Philip wrote: "This Norway expedition gives great interest to the war, and it looks as if Italy is inclined to join in, and I do not see any prospect of the war ending but rather of its extending over the whole world." In this he was more farsighted than Maida or John, who both continued to be optimistic of a quick ending. She reported that John's brother Philip had returned to France after leave saying to those at home that he would be 'tremendously busy'. Her letter said: "I can't think why", again indicating that she still had no idea of what was ahead.

Adda went away for a week's holiday to visit her relatives at the end of April. Maida wrote (27.4.1940): "Mamma and I have been getting on very nicely without Adda: we don't do much in the way of housework, I am afraid, just the minimum of superficial dusting. I am enjoying cooking again very much, and Mamma and I have great fun over it." Mamma had carried 80 eggs back from Cambridge on the bus for preserving in big pottery jars, a standard procedure in those pre-refrigerator days. She was also cheered up by a long letter from Tricka, describing how: "...poor Molly had slipped down two stairs

* He later became Archbishop of Canterbury.

and landed on her behind, which as you can imagine entertained Mamma immensely: she laughed so much her false teeth nearly fell out. Luckily Molly was none the worse.” She also reported the first appearance of Mrs. Luard, a new neighbour. She and her husband Colonel Luard later became great friends.

At the start of May Maida was thinking of John and looking forward to the birth of the baby. On 3rd May she heard that a state of emergency had been declared in Egypt, but: “I am not worrying unduly because I still feel that Italy will back out of fighting us. I think one reason why I am usually so good-tempered nowadays is that to be without you is such a sacrifice that any other grievances of the kind that would have annoyed me once seem too utterly trivial in comparison to be worth bothering about.” Her letter of 9th May made little reference to the war except to say: “The papers at present are full of the parliamentary crisis. I should think Mr. Chamberlain will have to resign.” The rest of her letter involved reminiscing about their early married life and looking forward to the birth: “Baby has been very busy inside Tum yesterday and today; I wonder what it does. It is exciting to think that it may be born five weeks today if it keeps to the rules; I somehow don’t think it will.”

Maida’s next letter (11.5.1940) started with a long account of Dr. Hedgcock’s latest visit and very thorough examination, and his instructions for her to go into the Nursing Home at the first signs of labour. Only towards the end did she refer to the dramatic news of the German invasion of the Netherlands the previous day^{2,14}. Like Norway, Dutch foreign policy had been neutrality, a strategy which they followed successfully during the First World War, and the Dutch government had been careful this time not to take an official stance against Nazi Germany. The Nazis, however, intended to conquer France and wanted to bypass the French defence line at its eastern border by going through the Netherlands and Belgium. This would also help to prevent England from setting up an operational base on the European mainland. Although there was some minor resistance, the under-prepared Dutch were in a hopeless situation, and the Netherlands surrendered to the Germans on 15th May after just five days of fighting.

It was this invasion that led directly to the resignation of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain on 10th May¹⁵. He was the leader of the Conservative Party and was forced to accept that a national government supported by all the main parties was now essential. The Labour and Liberal parties

refused to serve under him and his support among the Conservatives had already fallen following the British failures in Norway in April. He was also ill at the time, ultimately dying of cancer just 6 months later. Maida listened to his retiring speech on the radio, which she found: “very dignified and rather pathetic”. He was replaced as Prime Minister by Winston Churchill.

On Whit Sunday (12th May) Maida’s cousin Rob Williams, his wife Dorothy with their daughter Janet and her Nanny came over from Leicester for the day. Rob was continuing his pre-war job working with Wolsey Ltd., a textile and clothing company, and had recently had to go to Dumfries on business: “He found the main roads blocked by army transports, gun carriages etc. These were all streaming north for the Norwegian campaign when the first instalment began coming back again, so the result had been a fine block. Rob said it reminded him of the line in Macaulay’s poem: ‘*Those behind cried ‘Forward’ and those before cried ‘Back’.*’ The whole Norwegian business has cast a special gloom in Leicester as the Territorial battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment was sent there, and Rob says has been cut to pieces.” This news Maida found rather alarming and she commented later that the reality of the war was finally beginning to come home to her.

CHAPTER 2

Parenthood

1940



BACK IN EGYPT, JOHN'S letter of 11th March described how his work with the 4th R.H.A. was going after two months in post: "It takes time to get things done in the army, and it is impossible to hurry things. If you try to hurry people, they seem to put the brake on automatically. At the moment, however, I have the satisfaction of having got all the vaccinations and TAB inoculations* of the regiment neatly recorded in two big registers, and by the end of this week I hope to have all the regiment completed. I still have the tetanus toxoid to do but this will not take long once going. I am giving stretcher-bearing lectures every morning and have completed half the course. On Wednesday and Thursday I am lecturing the regiment on the prevention of disease, which will finish my duty in that respect. I have ordered the fly-destroying apparatus that we are allowed, which consists of fly swats, fly sprays and wires covered with 'tangle-foot' which act as flypapers. I am also getting the ammunition lorries fitted with brackets for carrying stretchers so that they can act as ambulances when they go back empty. By Easter I think I shall have everything pretty well up to date and will then be able to devote any energy I have to learning French and studying surgery."

He had been invited to cocktails by Lieut. Colonel Latham, their Commanding Officer, which he described as "quite an honour" and commented that he: "got on quite well with Lady Gwendoline Latham... There were very few women there, but a plentiful supply of good champagne to make up for it." On Easter Sunday 25th March he went to the Early Service in the little wooden church, and then made

his first visit to tea with Roger and Vera Low, which cheered him up after a bout of acute homesickness.

The Lows lived in a pretty English-looking house and garden on the outskirts of Cairo. Roger's sister Diana had told them that John's hobby was birds and: "I was delighted to find out that their next-door neighbour, a Mr Duncan Macintosh, is an expert on Egyptian birds and they promised to introduce me to him later. While we were having tea bee-eaters obligingly appeared, which I had never seen before... I also discovered that the thrush-like bird with a song rather like a mistle-thrush which I have told you I sometimes hear in the camp is a bulbul — rather a fascinating name for such a dingy looking bird. Very refreshed by it all and returned feeling that I had been in the country for the first time since I left England. Egypt for me so far has been nothing but town or desert." Through the Lows he later got to know both Mr. Macintosh and Mr. Greaves, two expert ornithologists who gave him much hospitality during his time in Egypt and provided significant help with his own later studies on Egyptian birds.

April 9th brought news of the German attack on Norway and Denmark. On the same day Denmark surrendered and was occupied. John surprisingly put a positive spin on this: "I was delighted to hear the news because I feel sure it means that the Germans are getting desperate and want to get on with the war at any cost. On the other hand, I think it will mean that there will be no fighting in the Balkans for another six months, if at all, so I shall have to be prepared to settle down for the summer." The rest of the letter described the wedding presents which he had recently bought and sent off to his sister Peggy and Raymond. These were a miscellaneous collection of Egyptian items which he thought they would find useful comprising a camel-hair rug, a brass gong "with the most beautiful note" and four brass ash trays.

* A combined vaccine against typhoid and paratyphoid A and B.



John on manoeuvres April 1940.

His letter of 19th April was written in bed with influenza, caught whilst out on manoeuvres with the regiment. He soon recovered and afterwards kept very fit for a long time. A few days later on 23rd April he and four other doctors visited the Egyptian Government Fever Hospital, where he was particularly interested in the typhus ward. Typhus was a common bacterial infection amongst the native Egyptians that was spread to humans by insects such as fleas and lice. His other medical work was piling up: "I have hardly had time to eat." He was asked to give anaesthetics at the hospital on several occasions, which he enjoyed, and he had to write up a monthly sanitary report on the R.H.A. campsite where: "many of the tents are now infested with bed bugs."

In addition: "A new order has come out which commands that each regimental officer will examine every man in his unit and place him in a medical category. This will mean about two hours work a day for a month for me, so I shall have plenty to do even though the inoculations are nearly finished." On the positive side: "The regiment have now given me a man to act as regimental medical orderly; he is really a private servant to me as he has nothing to do except what I tell him." On 25th April he reported: "I

have been examining soldiers for four hours today... in order to put them into their various medical categories. They are mostly very fit and it is a boring job, but occasionally I discover someone with very bad eyesight or a bad heart."

At their recruitment interviews potential soldiers had already been placed into medical categories by Civilian Medical Boards as follows: (A) Fit for general service at home and abroad; (B) Unfit for general service abroad but fit for base or garrison service at home and abroad; (C) Fit for home service only and (D) Unfit for any form of military service. These four grades did not, however, take full account of the physical and medical condition of the recruit, where they would be stationed nor the employment they would be given on arrival. This led to some recruits being physically incapable of performing their required duties.

The Army now needed a more detailed assessment of the manpower it received¹⁶. In 1940 these categories were therefore expanded to include A1 and A2, with B subdivided into B1-5. These took account of eyesight, physical endurance, and any disease that would affect military duty. Consideration was also given to both the task required and the worldwide location to which they would be posted. Category C remained as being suitable for home service only and the final category was subdivided into (D) Temporarily unfit and (E) Permanently unfit. It was this new classification which John was now required to perform. A few days later (1.5.1940) he reported that he had had to examine a Rhodesian contingent of 80 men who had just joined the regiment: "They told me this was the fifth medical examination they had had since Christmas, but in spite of this I spotted one of them who had a glass eye."

The war situation was rapidly becoming more serious. Although Italy had previously declared itself to be neutral, the rapid German successes in early 1940 were making their intervention on the German side seem inevitable. 2/5 General Hospital received orders on 1st May that all troops were now on 24 hours' notice to deploy. The hospital diary noted that: *'During the past three weeks the possibility of attack on Alexandria by parachute troops has begun to appear less remote'*¹⁷. Some additional hutted wards had recently been finished and mostly equipped and: *'Should the necessity arise, the hospital could now function as a fully equipped 1,200 bedded hospital within 24 hours'*.

John's next letter reporting the 'flap' and his possible move from Cairo to the coast reached Maida very quickly, saying that he would enjoy being by the

sea again. He sounded very cheerful. The 4th R.H.A. did indeed move on 12th May and John wrote again saying: "I can tell you no more at present as to where we are going or how long I shall be away, but I shall be quite glad of the change, and it is nice to feel that I have got the regiment medically prepared for whatever may happen." He had packed up most of his possessions and books into his big trunk and suitcase and left these behind in store. They were constantly being woken up by air-raid warnings at night although: "Italy is still sitting on the fence."

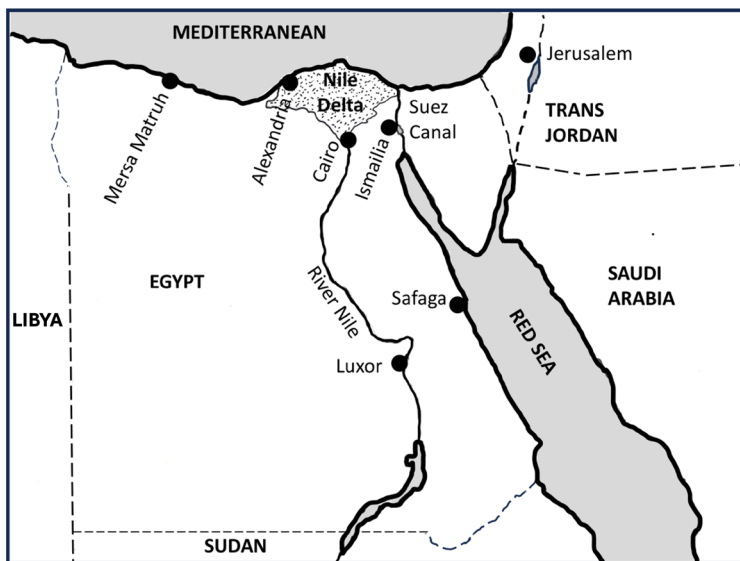
He was Orderly Medical Officer in the hospital the night before they left and had been kept very busy, saying he had sole responsibility for 600 beds and was glad it only happened once a week. He had left Gunner Piper behind doing well and also a New Zealand soldier with pneumococcal meningitis who had caused anxiety a few days before: "It used to be fatal in every case, but since the advent of M & B 693 some lives have been saved. I was able to diagnose the case and give him large doses of 693 early this morning, and I have heard he is a little better tonight although I don't fancy his chances very highly." M & B 693 was a sulphonamide antibiotic, first produced in 1938 by the pharmaceutical company May and Baker. It was hailed as a wonder drug, representing the first chemical cure for pneumonia and it could also prevent the growth of blood-poisoning bacteria in wounds and protect against gangrene¹⁷. It did not, however, work against all classes of bacteria and could cause severe allergic reactions, so it was later superseded by

penicillin and other more advanced sulphonamides.

From then on John became part of the Western Desert Force of approximately 50,000 British forces facing nearly 300,000 Italians in Cyrenaica under the command of Marshal Graziani¹⁸. A further worry for the Allied commanders was that the Western frontier of Libya was adjacent to Algeria, which was under French colonial rule. If France collapsed then the Italians would only have to defend their Eastern frontier adjacent to Egypt, so freeing up even more troops. The British army initially waited at Mersa Matruh, the road and rail head on the coast, about 180 miles to the west of Alexandria. John was still able to write letters home, but limited in the information he was allowed to provide.

Two days later on 14th May he wrote: "My own darling — here I am sitting in the sun on my lie-low* with my back against one wheel of my vehicle at 5.00 p.m. My vehicle and the ground within about 50 yards is now my abode and temporary demesne. I am wearing only an open-necked short-sleeved khaki shirt and long slacks made of dark brown drill... The weather is just perfect and the bathing is splendid and within easy walking distance. We came all the way by road, which was quite pleasant and interesting. I shall be quite happy here for a bit, it is really just like a camping holiday. The only snag, or perhaps advantage, is that there is no wireless and the papers are a day late."

* An inflatable mattress.



Map 3. Egypt. In May 1940 4th R.H.A. moved from Cairo to Mersa Matruh.

"I sleep on my valise and lie-low, which fits inside the valise, and am very comfortable lying under the stars alongside my truck. I have an opened stretcher on one side to keep the wind off, and the only trouble is the dew, which soaks the top blanket. However, this does not matter as it dries in about five minutes once the sun is up... I am already very sunburnt, and my appetite has improved 100% since I left my quarters. There are larks singing round about and lots of lizards which dart about. I have not yet seen any big birds here but I saw two Harriers on the way which looked like Montagu's Harriers, also a good many bee-eaters. Their long, pointed tails and short wings give them a peculiar look, rather like flying fish."

John continued: "So far I have had no sick apart from grazes and a few sores. Today I have been busy supervising latrines. Rather surprisingly, there are practically no flies here, so we must take special precautions to prevent their numbers increasing. I am not expecting your next letter for a few days as I expect they will take several days to come on here. However I am quite able to wait now as I am feeling so content and happy and I know they will come on in time. I am afraid you will also have a big gap in my letters, as they will take some days longer from here. I love you sweetheart with all my heart. I expect the next month will decide how long the war will last, and for that reason it will be an interesting time for both of us, as it will affect the time when we shall meet again. I only hope it will not develop into trench warfare like the last war. Still, if it does I shall maybe get leave after this first battle. Take care of yourself sweetheart — there is less than a month more to wait now until the great day arrives when you will have our baby to comfort you. Your own adoring husband, John."

On 17th May he reported: "I am still in the same place and enjoying life. I certainly feel much fitter out here and am very well and happy. Today the Assistant Director of Medical Services has been round inspecting the place and I have a lot to do supervising the sanitation etc. which we have to manage entirely with regimental labour. Yesterday we were visited with the 'Khamisin' wind again, hot and so full of sand that you could only see about 20 yards. However, it only lasted a few hours and by bedtime had almost died down. This morning I spent about an hour taking everything out of my vehicle and removing the sand. The most difficult place to get it out of is one's hair, and many of the troops including my orderly have cut their hair completely



Sandstorm in the Western Desert. Focal Press Collection, National Science and Media Museum/Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's.

off, or at least as short as possible with scissors."

"Saturday morning. My ink gave out last night and I had to leave off for the time being as I was writing in the mess bivouac, a sort of canvas erection against the side of a lorry. I woke up in the middle of the night to find another sandstorm in progress. It was pitch dark, and almost impossible to know whether anything was blowing away. I got well under the blankets and dozed until it was getting light; I then got up and turned the vehicle nose into wind and got into my shorts, shirt and old white sweater. I believe it is about 7.00 a.m. but unfortunately my watch has stopped, due I expect to the sand getting in it."

"I am now sitting in the back of my vehicle under cover of the tarpaulin I rigged up under the stretchers. From this point of vantage I can survey the scene philosophically in comfort. I can just see the next vehicles and the effect, as I said before, is very similar to being in a cloud on the moors with the pleasant difference that here it is both warm and dry. Every now and then an empty 4 gallon petrol tin goes hurtling by. You can hear them coming all right and they are too light to be dangerous... My driver and medical orderly are still completely out of sight, just a heap of blankets on the ground — really the best place to be, as it is impossible to eat anything but a biscuit with so much sand blowing about."

John was becoming known amongst the troops for his keen interest in wildlife, as illustrated in his letter of 17th May: "Two nights ago I was brought an 'insect' rolled up in a towel by some men who had been bathing in the evening. Johnston, my driver, swore it was a spider '*as big as a camel*'. I shook it out into an empty petrol tin and found it to be a long-legged crab. This explained to me what had been a puzzle for several

days. When bathing I had seen on the sand numerous tracks which consisted of four lines of marks parallel to each other. Some people said they were birds and some lizards but it was obvious they were neither, but crabs moving along sideways.”

By 19th May life in camp was settling down into a routine. Colonel Latham, his commanding officer, was attending his sick parade twice a day for treatment of sores on his leg: “He is a very nice man, and now of course I am getting to know him very much better. Our Headquarters Officers Mess where I live consists of the Colonel, the second-in-command Major Campbell, the Adjutant Captain Lewis, the quartermaster Lieutenant Studley, the assistant adjutant 2/Lt. Wolfson and myself; so we are quite a small party to meals. Incidentally, I am enjoying my food out here a hundred times more than at the hospital mess.”



MAIDA HAD HEARD ON the wireless on 15th May that troops in Egypt had taken up defensive positions, so she guessed that John would have moved. She also knew that he would have heard about the increasing air-raids over Britain. Aunt Tricka had written offering her the use of a cottage in her garden in Wales if they were driven away from Cambridge by the German bombing. She wrote to reassure John: “I am trying not to think of the slaughter in Belgium and have refused to go to a tea-party to avoid hearing more gloomy speculations about the war. I am not worried by the threat of air raids to this country and I do hope you aren’t worrying either, darling, though I suppose they are a very likely possibility now: in fact I was woken by what I thought was gun-fire last night but soon realised it was a slight thunder storm. Mamma fusses a little if not kept under control and talks of sending me to Wales, but of course I wouldn’t dream of going now, especially when so far there is nothing to run away from...”

“You needn’t worry about me a bit or think that I can feel any emotion other than joy at the thought of Baby’s birth coming so close now... It makes me happy to think that now when so many people are having to destroy lives, you are saving them.” On 17th May she was still busy preparing for her new arrival and had ordered a gas mask for the baby: “I only hope the poor

little thing will never have to go into it as I believe they are very uncomfortable.” She also suggested that after the birth they each ought to make a Will but, despite being stationed in a war zone, John later replied saying he did not think this was necessary.

Meanwhile in Europe the German armoured units, which had begun their invasion of Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands on 10th May, had pushed rapidly on into France through the Ardennes and along the Somme valley². They therefore managed to cut off and surround the Allied units that had moved into Belgium hoping to halt the German army there. Maida wrote on 23rd May commenting on the worsening war news: “We have just heard that there is fighting going on at Boulogne; however it can only be a small detachment of Germans who have arrived there, and the good old Channel is as satisfactory a barrier against tanks and infantry as it ever was. It’s a good thing we never built a channel tunnel, as I have no doubt if there had been one some enterprising Fifth Columnist would have handed it over to the Germans by now. It’s extraordinary how many sympathisers they seem to have outside their own country.”

The unexpected speed of the German advance led to Operation Dynamo, which took place between 26th May and 4th June 1940^{2,19}. This involved the evacuation of most of the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) together with some French and Belgian troops from the French port of Dunkirk and its surrounding beaches. Many volunteers from along the English coastline responded to an urgent call to assist the British and French navies to carry troops and refugees across the channel in a wide variety of small boats. More than 338,000 soldiers were rescued in this way, although they came under heavy enemy fire. Maida heard that some hospital ships had been bombed as they were trying to get away from the evacuation of Boulogne and that this included the Cambridge unit of R.A.M.C. doctors, so she was thankful that John was not with them.

Having completed all preparations for her own baby, she made a few dresses and other clothing for the incoming refugee babies that began arriving in England. In the midst of all this turmoil, Maida then began getting false labour pains. Dr. Hedgcock considered that the baby was now overdue, though John had always predicted that the birth would not be until about 13th June. She was becoming anxious that the news of the birth would not reach him before the real fighting began in Egypt: “As soon as Baby is born

I shall be so happy that all the discomfort of these days will be forgotten...”

“I am very lucky in being able to sit in the garden and enjoy such lovely weather. Dear Mamma keeps me company and is just the best possible companion as you can’t be here, darling. She is so calm and cheerful and yet sympathetic. The garden birds continue to entertain us; after telling you that the hedge sparrow’s nest was a robin’s, it has now been definitely proved by me to be a hedge sparrow’s after all. The babies are now well covered with feathers and very vocal — if they were only wise enough to be quieter they would do better, as their twittering has drawn Benjie’s attention to them, and he longs to inspect them at close quarters.”

Shortly after this, the baby started to give signs of arriving and on 7th June Maida wrote from the Brunswick Nursing Home: “My own perfect love — I thought you would like a little note written while I am waiting for Baby to arrive. I came down here this morning, but not at the scheduled time of 11.00 a.m. as things turned out rather differently. My pains got worse when I went to bed, and I was wandering about rather miserably from 12.00 to 1.00 until Mamma heard me and awoke. Just as I was writhing on the bed and saying I thought I would have to ring up for a taxi and come down here at once, believe it or not the air raid siren sounded. Of course, I knew it was impossible to get a taxi till it was over, and it lasted about three hours, though the raiders evidently didn’t come over Cambridge as we heard no firing xxxxxxxxxx (This represents a tummy-pain!). I came down to the hall with Mamma, Adda and Benskin, and after about an hour I could bear it no more as it was so uncomfortable sitting up in a chair, so I went back to bed and dozed a little between my pains which came about every twenty minutes. When the all-clear sounded we rang up the Brunswick and arranged for me to come in, and then I dressed and finished packing, and Mamma finally accompanied me down here at about 4.30 a.m. It was a heavenly morning. I felt better when I really got started.”

After various nasty preliminaries in the operating theatre: “I came into my room where I now am... I have a very nice day nurse, Nurse Chalmers, and Miss Jones has been to see me, and they are all very kind, and the meals so far are very good and nicely served. Hedgehog* appeared after breakfast and was very cheerful and competent... He ordered me a smart blue

* Maida’s name for Dr. Hedgecock.



The Brunswick Nursing Home, 9-10 Brunswick Walk, Cambridge where Harriet was born in June 1940²⁰. ©Museum of Cambridge

sleeping pill called sodium amytal, and I had another one later on so I slept all morning, with an occasional pain, and all afternoon. Now I feel better and they have asked Mamma to come and see me, so she will be here any minute now and will post this. No-one seems to know when Baby will arrive, probably not till tomorrow, but evidently I am not to have an induction after all. Hedgehog poked his head round the door later in the morning when I was asleep. I have a faint recollection that he asked me how I was feeling and I said ‘Bloody’, but it may have been all a dream, though I’m afraid not. Since then he has telephoned twice so I am being well looked after. I have your two new photographs in my room and all your letters under my pillow, and I think of you all the time.”

Harriet was eventually born two days later at 11.00 a.m. on the 9th June, a ‘Sunday’s child’ following a very difficult labour, later described in Maida’s letter of 10th June: “I had, as you will have guessed, a very long labour with a lot of false pains at first which, combined with air raid alarms etc. were rather exhausting, but when the proper pains started they developed fast and Dr Hedgecock and Dr Richards, who gave me the anaesthetic, were soon here and all went off well except that Harriet had a big head placed the wrong way round so Dr Hedgecock had to make an incision which now has several stitches in it...”

“Unfortunately, later in the afternoon, due Dr Hedgecock thinks to a mixture of fatigue, loss of blood and extreme heat, I had a bit of a collapse and he had to come back again. However I soon resuscitated



New arrival of Harriet at the Brunswick Nursing Home, with photo of John in the background.



Mamma with Harriet outside the Brunswick Nursing Home. The photo was taken by Dr Hedgcock on 12th June 1940, when she was 3 days old.

with oxygen and a saline drip. By the evening, I was much better and by today I am in grand form with temperature and pulse practically normal.” Maida managed to get a cable written soon after the birth: “Darling, we have lovely dark daughter about 8 lbs. Both well. Send all our love” but much to her annoyance she discovered later that the telegram had not been sent off until later in the evening “to see how I got on” following her earlier collapse.

This letter also described the new arrival in detail: “I am so, so happy, darlingest. Your love could give me no more perfect present than this exquisite little daughter. I do wish you could see her; she really is a beautiful baby, and Miss Jones and the Nurse say she is the nicest one in the Home at present. She weighed $7\frac{3}{4}$ lbs and is very strong-looking. She has a lovely brown skin and rosy cheeks and the sweetest little face, very dark eyes with quite long lashes and thick eyebrows, and a rosy little mouth and chin which remind me of Peggy’s; she has lots of very dark hair and beautifully

shaped ears and a funny little nose which hasn’t much shape so far. I think she will have your features and my colouring, darling. She has already got quite a lot of character and is very wide awake.”

“Yesterday I peeped at her for a moment before she was bathed but I was really too doped to take her in; and in the evening I was allowed to have her to cuddle for about five minutes, such a tiny little object compared with her big Daddy, but she had her head on my breast just like you do, darling. She was too new to open her eyes then, and I could do nothing but gaze at her in silent adoration, so our first meeting as separate individuals didn’t get very far, but today I have seen her twice and we have made great progress. I was allowed to have her to cuddle for a short time this morning, and she opened her eyes for a bit and gazed at me with all the questions in the world in her look, and then put out a tiny hand to feel the strap of my nightie.”

“At 1.30 she came up again to have her first lesson

in sucking. Unfortunately, my nipples aren't very well developed so far, so there isn't much for her to get hold of, and she was very puzzled and didn't quite understand what she was meant to do; finally, she got very cross. She didn't cry, I haven't heard her cry yet — but scowled fiercely and clenched her fists and shook her head angrily, and then suddenly gave about half a dozen ferocious and quite painful sucks, and then evidently thought she had obliged sufficiently, as she refused to try again and she just shut her eyes and pretended to go to sleep."

"5.15 p.m. I was interrupted to be washed and sat up on an air ring — very comforting to my poor behind — and am expecting Harriet to have a go at the other breast in a few minutes; then Mamma will be coming again. She came for about an hour this morning and for a short time last night. She is so sweet and happy." Maida also described the lovely flowers and telegrams she had received. Kind Uncle Philip had already sent £50 for Harriet to invest in Savings Certificates, a very generous gift at that time. She wished John was there with her, concluding: "I could write on and on, but I shall be scolded if I do. I long for you to see her, my darling, and I know you must be longing for us, but we will keep each other company till you come home ... I tell Harriet she has the most prettier Daddy in the world."

Two days later Maida reported that she had indeed: "...got into trouble with Nurse for writing such a long letter on Monday, so yesterday I thought I'd better not write, especially as Mamma brought the devastating news that the Air mail service has stopped... I wish I could just know that you had heard that Harriet had arrived safely." She was finding it difficult to get her breastfeeding established but: "They tell me that she laps up glucose and water from a spoon with great vigour." All the babies in the Nursing Home were kept downstairs in a Nursery except at feeding time, offering greater safety during possible air raids. Dr. Hedgcock took some snapshots of Harriet to send to John. One showed her being held by Mamma, who: "...is so happy and she brings me lovely roses from the garden every day." Maida was still being treated as an invalid and Matron had given instructions that she was not to hear any of the war news, to save her from worry. She commented: "Of course I worried more about not knowing what was going on."

The war news was indeed bad as the German armies were flooding into Northern France and the Italians had declared war on the German side on 10th June. In France, the sixty remaining French divisions

together with two British divisions made a determined stand but were defeated by the German combination of air superiority and greater armoured mobility. The Germans entered Paris, which had been left undefended, on 14th June. The French government fled and the German commanders met with remaining French officials on 18th June to negotiate an end to hostilities. On 22nd June the French surrendered and signed an Armistice agreement imposed by Germany^{2,21}. German military occupation of France had begun, with troops stationed along the North Sea and Atlantic coasts and their inland regions.

A neutral Vichy government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain replaced the original French government. They were allowed to retain some control over an area known as the free zone in the south of France although some Italian forces crossed the Alps to occupy a small area in south-east France. Meanwhile General Charles de Gaulle managed to reach London, where he established an alternative French government-in-exile. Most of the French army became prisoners of war, but those who did manage to escape gravitated towards England where they established a Free French army led by General de Gaulle.

Back in Cambridge, Maida had to remain in the nursing home for another two weeks to recuperate while all this was going on in France. Harriet had started breast feeding better but the war news remained terrible. Despite Matron's instructions Maida discovered accidentally from the housemaid that the Germans had entered Paris and was naturally upset about the fate of her French friends, particularly the Jordans. She had often visited France while studying for her degree in French and Italian at Newnham College. She first visited the Jordans at their family home, the Chateau d'Alivet, in the South of France in 1932 and had become friendly with both Augustin Jordan, one of the sons, and his parents. It later transpired that Augustin had managed to escape from North Africa and had joined General de Gaulle in London. Meanwhile the British troops evacuated from Dunkirk were being moved inland. Many of those who arrived in Cambridge made their way to Midsummer Common and went to sleep on the grass. Maida had a good view of this through her bedroom window and reported that the nurses from the Brunswick Nursing Home naturally fussed over them and helped the hungry and wounded.

On the night of 18th June Cambridge suffered its worst air raid of the war. A few weeks before a German plane had dropped eleven bombs on



In the garden at Queen Edith's Way showing Harriet with Maida and Adda.

Cambridge. These were aimed at the railway station but fortunately they all missed and landed harmlessly in fields. That night, however, another German bomber mistook the nearby St Matthew's Church for a control tower, and dropped its bombs on what they thought was Marshall's airport. These landed instead on Vicarage Terrace, only about half a mile from the Nursing Home, destroying most of the houses in the street and killing nine people, including four children. Maida reported that the patient in the next room screamed nearly all night, but the babies slept peacefully in their downstairs nursery.

She gave a fuller account of this episode in a letter to John dated 20th July. "I didn't tell you before thinking it would worry you in retrospect, but if the news has reached Egypt already no harm is done now. It made a fairly impressive 'Boum und Krach' and the Nursing Home swayed from side to side, but I was comfortably in bed and not particularly frightened as far as I can remember, my chief impression was '*There's one that's not hit me*'. The night nurse was sitting with me and we waited for another, but none came, and then we heard a burst of cheering which we discovered came from the R.A.F. men stationed at Jesus College, who could see the machine coming down in flames, and it crashed near Bottisham in a field. Mrs. Clapham, who is an air-raid warden, was out on duty and said it was most exciting to see it caught in the searchlights and firing tracer bullets down the beams before it was attacked by a fighter."

To make matters worse Maida had developed mastitis with a painful blocked duct and a temperature and was feeling ill and depressed. She knew that John would want her to take Harriet to Wales to live in the tiny cottage that Aunt Trixie and Uncle Louis had offered them. Their own daughter Molly had also just had her first child, Christopher, born on 19th June and they would be there too. Maida was, however, not well enough to travel and the journey to Wales would have been very difficult with many people from the South and East of England trying to move west, further out of reach of the German bombing. Together with Mamma and Dr. Hedgcock she decided to wait another week. In the end they stayed in Cambridge throughout the war, but the anxiety of trying to decide what to do for the best was affecting them badly and Maida said that Mamma began to look very tired.

On 22nd June she was able to write much more calmly, having definitely decided not to go to Wales but to stay in the Brunswick until her mastitis cleared up. A postscript the following day said: "I am so much better altogether that I can go home tomorrow... I have had a real treat this morning — seeing little Harriet bathed. Nurse brought everything up to my room to show me how to do it. Adda will take on the job until I am up. By this time next week I hope I may be beginning to bath her myself."

"I have been much amused, darling, to compare my own impressions of hospital life and the relationships of the eternal triangle, Doctor, Nurse and Patient, with what you have told me. I greatly look forward to giving you useful information on many subjects from 'The Psychology of the Patient' to 'Childbirth

and its Treatment', since I feel as if I have sampled every kind of pill, medicine and apparatus known in this branch of medicine. Dr. Hedgcock assures me that my disgraceful behaviour in requiring so much attention is typical of doctor's wives who, he says, are always more trouble than anyone else. But I am now evolving the theory that Providence has arranged it so that the wives can pass on to their husbands the knowledge gained from being an 'interesting case' and thus benefit indirectly other members of their sex."

She was finally allowed home on 25th June: "Here we are, Harriet and I, home again and it's very nice to be here. As I have not been up yet we came home in the Police Ambulance in great style, and I was carried downstairs at the Nursing Home and upstairs here most efficiently by two enormous policemen, and deposited in bed in our room. Harriet has settled down wonderfully well; she cried off and on for about two hours yesterday evening, but she was very good all night in spite of being transported downstairs for a three-hour air raid alarm with Mamma, Adda and Benskin. I, of course, had to stay in bed and very glad I was as I slept practically undisturbed; there was no gunfire and very few planes went over." She also reported letters from Denis (announcing his unofficial engagement to Kitty) and from John's sister Peggy. The subsequent bill from the Nursing Home for almost three weeks of excellent care in a private room was just £21.19.6*.

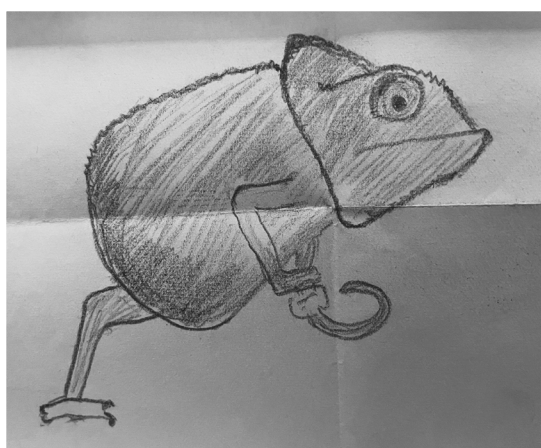
During the last few days of June Maida was able to start getting up again although she was still feeling weak and rather depressed and was missing John terribly. Harriet began going out in the garden in her pram. At the start of July her breast was again giving trouble, and Mamma was now ill with a bad cold. As Dr. Hedgcock was away she was visited by Dr. Richards, who changed the treatment (1.7.1940): "Dr. Richards is a friendly creature but I find his conversational style extremely trying. He referred to his wife — horror of horrors — as *'the Missus'* and Harriet (our beautiful and distinguished Harriet) as *'the Nipper'*. Can you imagine anything worse? However, if his Bismuth Subgallate does the trick, I will forgive him."



WHILE ALL THIS DOMESTIC drama was unfolding in Cambridge, John was writing cheerfully from his camp in the Egyptian desert. On 23rd May: "This morning I went with a few vehicles on a 50-mile desert reconnaissance. I saw several birds I had not seen before, four wild gazelle and two huge herds of camels with more than 100 beasts in each. I enjoyed it very much though I am still without field glasses. We got back for lunch and heard a rumour that the Germans are within 20 miles of Paris. It seems impossible. I am sure we shall pull the fat out of the fire even if from Churchill's speech it seems that we must expect an attack on England. I do hope that Baby will arrive first so that you can go to Wales if necessary, my sweetheart."

"One by one all my treasured possessions are getting lost or out of order — first my pen, then my watch and now my cut-throat razor; the edge has become so blunt that it is useless, owing I think to the amount of sand which gets on to the strop. Fortunately I have been able to use a Gillette razor which was included in my regimental pannier. My rate of sickness here has so far been very low, and the various sores I am treating are healing up well, including the Colonel's leg."

In his next letter of 25th May John included a sketch of a chameleon holding its tail that the men had brought him. He commented that: "He seemed quite happy as long as he had hold of something, though every now and then he would spit at me like a cat." John also enjoyed swimming in the Mediterranean: "This morning I watched the sun rise out of the sea



Sketch by John of a chameleon holding its tail.

* Before 1971 the British currency consisted of pounds, shillings and pence. There were 20 shillings in a pound (£) with one shilling (s) containing twelve pence (12d). The nursing home charge was therefore £21 19s and 6d.

at 5.15, and was bathing before 6.00 a.m., since when I have been doing all sorts of odd jobs... The Colonel has left us for the day to see his wife Lady Gwendoline off. She is returning to England. I think I should be more worried if you were in this country by yourself than at Q.E.W. with Mamma and Dr. Hedgcock to look after you."

John continued to keep busy and optimistic, despite the news from Europe. On 31st May he wrote: "The news tonight that the British Expeditionary Force is evacuating Northern France is pretty bad and shows that it will not now be long before the bombers reach England. I pray that our baby will be born first my precious and that you will be able to go to Wales to Tricka's... Although the news is depressing, I am quite convinced we shall pull through. I am naturally rather worried about Philip* but think he must be lucky as he has had several narrow escapes before. Also, every time a destroyer is sunk, which seems to be now increasingly frequent, I feel the next may be the Volunteer†. I am sure as a nation we are just beginning to realise what war means. I shall be worried, darling, when they do start bombing England, but it is comforting to think that there are so many aerodromes near Cambridge to protect you, and I like to think we have kept our biggest force at home against such a contingency."

On 3rd June John described a sort of gymkhana that had been arranged to keep the troops' spirits up: "There were races of sorts for every type of vehicle from motor bikes to 3-tonner lorries and tanks, mostly driving over a short course in and out of tin petrol-cans. One of the units arranged a tote for betting and altogether it was a good deal more amusing than the average horse race meeting. I finished up 8 piastres to the good chiefly through winning the last race, which was a motor bike Grand National. The course was two miles long over very bumpy desert, and about 300 yards from the start was a trench which the runners had to get over. This proved a most difficult obstacle and no one got over without dismounting and pulling their bikes out by hand. Our regiment got one first out of five races and would have won the motorcycle relay if it had not been for Wolfson, who insisted on being in the team and then fell off."

"I had a most amusing experience during and after the meeting. While watching one of the races I felt something moving in my trousers which felt like

a mouse. I grabbed hold of something which felt like a mouse's tail, but after a minute or two the rest of it seemed to have disappeared, and I thought I must have imagined it, and that it was only an insect. We had just started our soup at dinner, however, when I felt it again and pulled my shirt tails out behind to investigate... imagine the amusement when out hopped a full-grown lizard minus the end of its tail which had been shed in the afternoon's engagement!"

On 4th June John heard that the Italians and Germans were bombing Marseilles, a key French port on the Mediterranean which was currently still under Allied control. This was likely to mean that the airmail service to Egypt would cease to operate, as this was a key stopping place on the direct air route. The post would instead have to go by sea round the Cape of Good Hope, clearly taking very much longer to arrive.

On the medical front John had to cope with a near fatal bathing accident on 6th June. "The sea has got up and rollers are coming in, though nothing like so large as the Atlantic breakers. One fellow bathing this morning was very nearly drowned. I had to run about half a mile to him but found when I arrived that he had just started breathing again. He is now in my tent and has recovered apart from a severe headache." He also reported doing some minor surgery, such as cutting out warts. "The two I sent into hospital were not done to my liking at all. It is really against the rules as things are meant to go septic in the desert very easily, but this has not been my experience so far if proper care is taken." His birdwatching was also continuing: "I had a lot of amusement climbing two small rocks where some swifts were nesting in rock tunnels near the top."

The next day John reported having no news, although this proved to be the calm before the storm: "This morning for the first time since I arrived I had nothing pressing to do and spent the time looking up odd paragraphs in my army books that I had been meaning to consult for some time. This afternoon I lay on the beach sunbathing and bathing, and reading the letters you have sent me since we came here. I left all the others locked up in the trunk. It is exciting to think that your next letter will be written in June, and that even by my calculations there are now only six days until the baby is due, instead of six weeks or six months. The wind has gone down now and today is beautiful... I must stop now, sweetheart, to see my sick parade which I hold at 6.00 in the evening; by the time that is finished the papers will have arrived and I shall have a job to finish off in the general discussion of the day's events which follows in the mess."

* His brother who was serving with the army in France.

† The ship on which his other brother Denis was serving.

As already described, Harriet was born two days later on 9th June, although John did not yet know this. On that day he wrote: "I am just a little worried today as I have heard that Cambridgeshire has been bombed twice by the Germans. We have not heard whether Cambridge itself was bombed and whether there were any casualties. I gather they were trying to bomb our aerodromes. I am not worrying about baby not arriving yet as you know I did not make it due until Thursday. The sooner it arrives the better though as I should be less worried if you could go to Wales. There was a bit of a flap here two days ago about Italy, but it has calmed down again and I don't think Italy will fight unless the French line gives way... I went to the Church Parade this morning, darling, and thought of you — the sermon was very appropriate dealing with

the difficulties of watching and waiting. I am putting on weight with the food we get here... I am sorry to say I still get through my packet of cigarettes a day but have not had a sore throat since I arrived."

In his next letter written on the morning of 10th June John still had no news from home, but that evening he received the all-important telegram saying: "Darling we have lovely dark daughter about 8 lbs. both well send all our love. Maida Bulman." That same day Italy declared war on Great Britain and France and only an hour or two after the telegram had reached him John's regiment was moved. He just had time to send a reply cable. "Received good news 10th stop. Love to you and Harriet. Stop. Letters will be delayed. Stop. All well. John Bulman."

Exchange of telegrams between Maida and John announcing Harriet's birth.

C H A P T E R 3

Into the Desert

1940



IN 1940 THE ITALIAN forces in Libya of around 300,000 men greatly outnumbered the British army in Egypt. General Wavell, the Commander in Chief of the Middle East, had military responsibility for a vast area of 1,700 miles by 2,000 miles in size, which included Egypt, Iraq, the Sudan, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Cyprus, Aden and British Somaliland. In 1939 he was initially given the unformed equivalent of two divisions, two brigade groups, an armoured division well below strength, sixty-four field guns, and a camel corps of five hundred men, overseen by a headquarters staff of just five officers^{2,18}. During the winter of 1939 to 1940 General Wilson, who had overall command of the British Troops in Egypt, tried to build up an army with what was available and to prepare plans for the invasion of Libya. By the late spring of 1940 he had put together the Western Desert Force, commanded by General O'Connor, and composed of the 7th Armoured Division, two regiments of the Royal Horse Artillery and a screen of motorised patrols. These were based at Mersa Matruh on the Mediterranean coast about 180 miles to the west of Alexandria.

On 10th June, the same day that news of Harriet's birth arrived, Italy declared war on Great Britain and France and John's regiment was moved. Although General O'Connor had far fewer troops under his command than the Italian 10th Army, he nevertheless decided to attack. The Western Desert Force cut the frontier wire separating Egypt from Libya and took seventy prisoners on what was Italian imperial soil. This was the start of an active campaign in which the R.H.A. were continuously involved. John was, nevertheless, able to send home a letter written on

14th June, although it took over four weeks to reach Cambridge: "It was wonderful to get your telegram on Monday evening just before we moved. Thank God it arrived then so that I have nothing to worry about now. If it had come a few hours later then I might not have received it yet and with no prospect of getting letters for a month or more that would have been ghastly."

"I have not written before today because there was no means of getting letters back. I don't know how long this will take to reach you as I should not be surprised if it takes six weeks via the Cape. Darling, it is marvellous to know at last that we have a daughter and that you are both well. This knowledge makes me so much more able to bear this long exile. I shall miss your letters frightfully but now that we are moving about there are so many things to see to that I don't get much time to mope. In fact, this is now much more interesting country with more life. Darling, I am so glad Harriet has your dark hair which I love so much. I long so much to know all about her... We must live on hope for the present, but you may be sure I am the proudest papa in the world."

The delays in the post were fortunate in one respect, as John did not receive a more detailed account of Harriet's difficult birth and the problems this had caused for Maida until six weeks later on 27th July. As it was, he next wrote on 16th June saying that he was: "...very well and happy and not at all afraid of the Ities (as we call them)*. Send me Harriet's birth certificate sometime, darling, as I will get 1/6 a day extra†. All my love to both of you, sweetheart, and my love to dear Mamma."

John could not mention any of his locations in his letters to Maida, but he was always observing the birds and he continued to keep notes of his sightings in a

* Hereafter referred to in full as *Italians* in this text.

† 1 shilling and 6 pence

bird diary. He was later able to turn his records for the period spent in the desert into an article entitled 'Notes on Birds of the Libyan Desert' which was published in 1942 in the Zoological Society of Egypt. By this time the locations of the army in 1940/41 were no longer sensitive, so he included a map supplemented by details of dates and locations for some bird species. In addition, the war diaries of the 4th R.H.A. provide reliable information as to where they were located during this period. The regiment was initially stationed near the western boundary of Egypt with Libya, near Buq Buq and Sollum. Their role was to keep a forward troop of guns constantly shelling the Italians at Fort Capuzzo and to harry any Italian transport entering or leaving the fort. The 4th

R.H.A. were therefore directly engaged with enemy action from 11th June onwards.

Photography was then impossible, so in many cases John confirmed identification of the bird species seen by shooting and skinning. He later took doubtful skins to the Zoological Museum in Cairo where comparisons were made with those in their collection. The article states that: "These notes are by no means comprehensive. Eagles, Falcons and Ravens were occasionally seen in the interior and Gulls, Terns, Waders and Swifts on the shore. I have not mentioned these because I was unable to establish their identity for certain. Also, during migration, I saw flocks of ducks and cranes flying high overhead, and numerous small birds which I had no time to follow up."

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE LIBYAN DESERT.

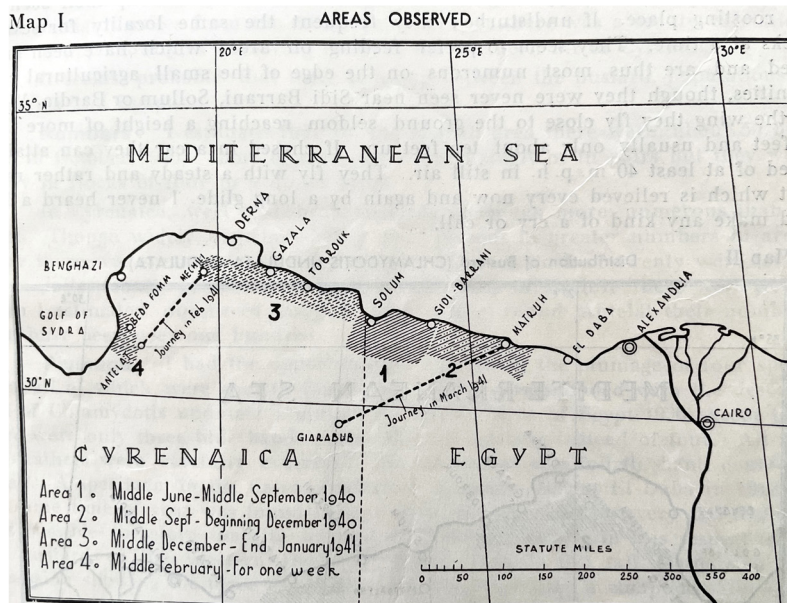
by

Captain J. F. H. Bulman R. A. M. C.

Between May 1940 and March 1941 I travelled over large areas of the Western Desert of Egypt and Northern Cyrenaica in the course of my military duties. During this period I was camping out in the desert travelling on an average thirty miles a day by car between different units. I was thus afforded an opportunity of observing the bird life and have marked the areas covered and the time of the year spent in each area in Map I.

Excerpt from Zoological Society of Egypt, Bulletin 4, published in 1942²².

Map 4. Taken from John's article in Zoological Society of Egypt, Bulletin 4 showing where he was stationed between June 1940 and February 1941²².



While the Italian command was deciding what to do in response to General O'Connor, the armoured cars of the 11th Hussars, together with some tanks, appeared out of the desert before the Forts at Capuzzo and Maddalena. After R.A.F. bombers had missed, the Hussars took the forts using delayed action high explosive shells from their 25-pounder field guns. On the 16th June the British followed up with a sudden attack on an Italian column that was moving along the coast road. This included General Lastucci, commander of the Italian 10th Army, who was taken prisoner together with eighty-eight others, leaving forty wrecked tanks.

As outlined in the Regimental Diaries of the 4th Regiment R.H.A.⁸ they were involved in this activity right from the start, so John as their Medical Officer was there too. On 14th June he wrote: "I am now responsible for obtaining water for the troops locally and sterilizing it." This was a vitally important job as water was always in short supply in the desert. More information followed on 17th June: "My adorable sweetheart — We are still in the same place since last Thursday and the weather is beginning to get really warm now. Yesterday and today have been the first two days which I would say were definitely hotter than anything England can produce. It now seems certain that Egypt will not declare war on Italy, so I am hoping I shall get a few more of your letters across the Mediterranean by Egyptian boats. Last night we heard that France was suing for peace which I could hardly believe, but if it is I am afraid all mail now will go round by the Cape."

His letter continued: "Darling, I feel sure Hitler's next move will be to invade England, or rather attempt to invade us, so I do hope Harriet and you will fly to Wales if he does start bombing. If you decide to stay, I advise you to have a big trench dug in the orchard as it is much safer to be out of the house where the roof can't fall on you. We are all rather worried about events today especially in the absence of reliable news. I have not seen a paper for ten days and the broadcasts are difficult to pick up here on the sets available. However, we have still got our fleet and while that is still afloat I don't think we need be downhearted. Some more beer arrived in tins looking like metal polish which was rather a treat. Alas, my new watch is misbehaving now and has suddenly started going one hour fast in every four, so is not much good. The only one of my treasured possessions that remains in action is my Woolworth penknife with the bottle opener on it, and even that has lost one of its sides. I managed to get my

cut-throat razor reground and into commission again but I am afraid the strop is impossible to keep free of sand. I have taken to doing my own washing now, as I have only two shirts and I dare not risk sending one away which may never reach me again. I wish I had brought some lux and a flat iron with me as I have a Primus to supply heat. The weather is certainly ideal for drying."

This letter also mentioned the capture of the Italian General on the previous day. "I have just heard a curious story. The division here captured an Italian General and his staff and were surprised to find two ladies in the party. One of them apparently was about eight months pregnant and the other was a midwife accompanying her. They have passed us and are on their way to Alex... Visitors to our Mess say it is the best round about and we certainly have a much harder worked and efficient Sergeant as cook... Captain Van den Bergh, the new signal officer, is a Lewis Carroll fan and we recite 'The Aged Man' and 'Father William' to each other... I have your copy of 'Alice in the Looking Glass' safely with me."

On 21st June John reported that they had been moving about again and that he was being kept busy. He had asked someone to send off a short wire to Maida to let her know that he was well and happy but: "...the nearest telegraph office is a very long way off, and it is only when someone is going back that it is possible... The biggest piece of news I have is that Colonel Latham is in hospital with pneumonia. I am very sorry he has had to go, as he was a splendid fellow. He told me at first he had lumbago but when he explained the pain was in his chest I naturally suspected something, and after examining him sent him to hospital straight away. Fortunately, I had some M. & B. 693 with me so he had every possible assistance I could give. However, I doubt if he will be back in less than a month and may possibly be sent to another unit as he is due for promotion. Before he went he told me I could use the canopy he used to sleep under. I haven't actually taken it as I prefer to be under the sky, but I appreciated his offer."

"Yesterday I had my first freshwater bath for six weeks. The quartermaster (Q) Mr. Studley has a canvas bath and we took it to the nearest well and filled it to the brim with beautiful cold clean water. I soaped myself all over and felt marvellous afterwards. Q gave me some coconut oil shampoo for my hair and I felt that temporarily I had got rid of the salty stickiness that sea bathing causes. At last the weather is really hot between 10 in the morning and 4 in the

Excerpts from 4th Royal Horse Artillery War diaries covering the period from 22nd May to 13th June 1940⁸

Date	Activity
22.5.40 to 10.6.40	During this period the Battery underwent training of all classes, and numerous divisional schemes of varying lengths and purposes.
10.6.40	ITALY DECLARES WAR.
10.6.40	“C” Battery left Madwar at 2000 hrs. and advanced to Sidi Barrani, arriving 0500 on June 11th.
11.6.40	“A” Troop come into action in a forward position with “B” & “C” Troops linked in rear. During the afternoon gun positions were surveyed and defensive tasks on the front of the 60th Rifles decided upon.
12.6.40	At 1400 hours “A” troop advanced to a new position at Buq Buq in support of the 60th Rifles. At 1700hrs. “B” troop moved to join 4th Armoured Brigade at Bir Digmaish. (Buq Buq lies due West of Sidi Barrani about 25 miles from Sollum). The situation for the next two weeks was that “C” Battery less “B” troop remained in support of 60th Rifles at Buq Buq.
13.6.40	“B” Troop under orders from 4th Armd. Brigade took part in an attack on Sidi Azeiz with 1 squadron 7th Hussars, 1 troop Bofors, 1 Squadron 11th Hussars. The troop in this engagement had three guns, only, one being left at Dar el Hamra en route... the troop withdrew at dusk to a leaguer area in the road the Egyptian side of the boundary. Italian Fighter aircraft attacked the column on its return to leaguer, but no casualties were suffered.

afternoon, and a siesta in the afternoon becomes almost a necessity... Darling I can't help thinking that whatever happens at the moment the Germans and Italians will not last the winter if only we can keep going till then. It is already mid-summer and we are only just getting going.”

“I hear they dropped 100 tons of bombs on England yesterday and only killed 14 people. Still that is 14 too many and I shall be worried to think you are so near the East coast, my precious. The R.A.F. here seem to have the Italians taped, and they have done practically no damage with their bombing. We have no news of France at present as the wireless sets available will not get the B.B.C. and we are dependent on hearsay for all European news. I suppose we live as they did a hundred years ago when news was verbal. One good thing about it is that one looks forward very much more to seeing a visitor from another unit who may know something.”

“The nights are still pleasantly cool and the full moon is very beautiful at present... We now have a mess hen which I bought from a Bedouin for 10 piastres. She spends most of the day sitting on the axle of the mess lorry, and today so far forgot herself as to

lay an egg while in this position causing the egg to be a total write-off. Darling, I long so much to hug you all night long again but first we must show Mussolini where he gets off. I still have no news of Philip and Denis. Your own adoring John for always.”

From 1930 to 1940 the French, as allies, had been defending Syria and their other colonies in North Africa. When the French surrendered on 22nd June, the Italian forces that had been facing them on the western frontier of Libya were instead able to reinforce those on the eastern Egyptian frontier, so the situation for the Allied troops was now certain to become worse. The following day (23.6.40) John had moved again and was gradually getting further away from Cairo: “However the scenery remains extraordinarily constant near the coast, and it has made no difference to us apart from some extra work involved in digging ourselves in, in case of bombing. The Quartermaster, Mr. Studley, is going back tomorrow to do some odd jobs, and I have asked him to bring me back some stockings as the Army & Navy ones have not yet arrived though I expect I shall get them some day...”

“It is nice to think that midsummer has passed and it will not now get much hotter. The early mornings

and the evenings are delicious and I am trying to arrange my day so that I can sleep during the midday sun; our breakfast time is now 6.30 a.m. though it usually turns out to be later. I get very exhausted by 1.00 o'clock, which is still our lunch time unless I can get a snack in the middle of the morning. A new supply of beer has just arrived, so I am feeling in the pink at the moment, which is 7.45 p.m... It is quite dark by 9.0 p.m. and we go to bed between 9.0 and 10.0 and get up at 6.00."

"I am pretty busy what with being in charge of sanitation and water supplies, and the men seem to produce an endless variety of sores which take about three weeks to heal. Under my control I now have my medical orderly, a driver and a sanitary orderly. I usually drive my bus myself as it is less uncomfortable. Riding in the back is perfectly bloody as you get covered with dust and come home looking like a film star made up with brown grease paint. Needless to say, there is no tarmac here and 15 m.p.h. is a good speed to go. Our new commander is a Major Shepherd, who is exactly like a fox terrier though rather too easy going. I do not like him so much as Colonel Latham but perhaps I shall get to know him better later..."

"The French defeat has had a deadening effect on everyone here. The peace terms seem to drag on indefinitely and the fate of the French Navy and colonies are still undetermined. I hope they are simply fighting for time and may yet pull through. Darling I sometimes can't bear to look at your photos as it makes me so lonely to think how far away you are and no prospects at present of getting any nearer. Still it is no use being disheartened, and the best thing is to get on with my job and live in the knowledge that no matter how long I shall be away you are mine for ever and I am yours. We must fight for our liberties or they will be taken away from us and defeat is unthinkable."

On 26th June John reported being very busy: "As now we are spread out so much I have to do a lot of travelling over very rough country to do my daily round. It is very exhausting in this hot weather, though I quite enjoy it all and see what is going on. It is increasingly difficult to write letters as now we are only allowed a very dim light after dark... There is still no news from anyone in England since June 10th, but perhaps there may be some this next week if they have got across the Mediterranean by boat. If they don't come this week, I am afraid we shall have to wait another 3 weeks while they come round the Cape. Yesterday was the hottest day of the year so far, and I certainly drank well over a gallon of water; a

pint of beer simply goes nowhere and seems a waste of money. However, it is amazing how good even a drink of chlorinated water out of a water bottle tastes. I managed to have a bathe yesterday afternoon; the sea was crystal clear and glassy, just like a swimming bath only better. It was an effort to get out of the water as I knew that in five minutes I should be pouring with sweat again."

"Today it has gone cold again which has made everyone perk up a bit. I made a new box to hold my bottles and dressings on the strength of it. We have an abundance of four-gallon petrol tins which are not used again once they are emptied. They are made of very much thinner tin than the petrol cans in England. They are supplied in pairs in a wooden box, and anything and everything one constructs here is made out of this buckshee* tin and wood. Coming home over rough country yesterday a tin of sulphur ointment was upset in the box in which I kept my medicines etc. The ointment at that temperature was about the consistency of cream and made the most indescribable mess, so I thought I would start again and make a new box."

"My new box for dressings is being lined by myself with tin in an effort to keep out the sand, though this is rather a forlorn hope. All my ointments have to be kept in 50 cigarette tins and all medicines in whiskey bottles as these are the only available containers. It is really rather surprising that more damage is not done during my journeying. A great part of the country consists of large broken stones and driving over these even at 5 m.p.h. feels as though someone had hold of you by the scruff of the neck and was bent on shaking the life out of you."

Being in the middle of a desert war did not, however, prevent his birdwatching activities: "I have seen several new types of bird here, some rather like wagtails with sandy backs and black chins. Others rather like winchats, but sandy coloured all over except for a white rump and black tail... I did see a hawk a few days ago which looked very like a peregrine, but I have been rather disappointed not to see any eagles or vultures. This is the fourth day we have been in one place, so I am beginning to feel settled in again. The business part of my lie-low is doing magnificently and is very comfortable, but the pillow part has punctured and is leaking in spite of the efforts of motor cyclists with puncture repair outfits. Tomorrow I am expecting the Quartermaster back with my stockings,

* *Meaning free.*

and the Major and Adjutant are going off for the day for reconnaissance.”

“I came across Lieut. Green the other day in the middle of the desert in charge of an advanced dressing station (A.D.S.) He was stripped naked to the waist and running with perspiration, though he has not lost any weight. He told me that his wife had evacuated from London to Worcestershire on June 9th. When I told him about Harriet’s birth he said ‘*Lucky man*’. So far his A.D.S. has been acting chiefly as a rest house as he is at about the middle of a stretch of 40 miles of track and 20 miles from anywhere else. However, he had just invited me to lunch when two ambulances arrived with some casualties, so I left him to deal with them and pushed on... All my love precious darling is for you — meanwhile I must do my job as best I can.”

He wrote again three days later (29.6.1940): “Still no news from you, so I expect I shall have to wait until the end of July. I am worried now that the Germans will attempt to invade England any day now, but I am hoping that by now you will be safely in Wales. I am wondering whether Molly will have had her baby yet, it will be ages before I shall know. The weather is very pleasant today and I have enjoyed myself motoring round seeing my various detachments and doing a few minor operations. This evening I bought a pretty cockerel from a Bedouin for 5 piastres. He is so pretty with his black feathers shot with yellow and such a cheerful bird that I have decided to keep him as a pet for the present, though he will be quite good to eat if he wakes me too early with his crowing in the morning. Next morning, I had to stop last night as Major Sheppard would not allow any lights. My fears about my cockerel have proved well founded. He started up at about 3.15 and has only just knocked off at 6.30. We are running out of stamps and they tell us that one will be as quick as four now so I am only putting one on this letter.” Maida noted later that the one stamp was insufficient as the letter took three months to arrive.

On 27th June Maida sent him a second wire after giving birth, reaching him on 2nd July. He wrote back: “It was so lovely to hear from you after three weeks and to know that all is well. I shall send one off as soon as ever I get the chance as I am sure my letters will not be reaching you yet. Darling, I leave it entirely to you whether you leave Cambridge or not. I know you will hate to leave the nursery and home you have prepared so carefully, but I want you to be as safe as ever you can be darling, and I can’t help thinking that, once they start bombing England, Cambridge will be

more exposed than Newtown. I know you will take care of yourself and Harriet as you are all the world to me sweetheart, and I shall not worry if I know you are both safe.”

“We do not seem to have reached quite the bottom of our misfortunes in this war yet, but I can’t help thinking the turning point in Hitler’s career must be near now and his downfall will be as rapid as his rise to European power. He has proved himself to be a second Napoleon but I still feel confident that he is not invincible. Things go on as usual here and the weather is quite bearable except occasionally about once a week when the wind blows from the south. We have been here for 10 days now and I feel as though we had been here for months. However, with so much travelling the time goes quickly and the days slip by.”

“Wednesday. At this point in my letter yesterday I was called away to see an officer in “C” Battery named Duncan Simmonds, a son of the brewer of that name. I think he has sandfly fever and I have sent him into hospital. We had quite an exciting drive home. No lights are allowed and it was very dark. However we got back safely. I walked in front of the cart to make sure we did not run down any sleeping soldiers. It is pitch dark here by 9.00 p.m. Today I have had a pleasant day... after dispensing medical attention we bathed and had our lunch. I took the lie-low with me to try to find out where it was leaking. However I was unable to see any bubbles; it makes a most amusing raft; when you get right on it you can lie on the water almost dry and sunbathe. Coming home the 27 odd miles we passed a very large bird which I think must have been a kind of eagle. Its wings were almost black on top and white underneath, and it was accompanied by a small falcon, some sort of peregrine I should think.”



AT THE BEGINNING OF July Maida had finally decided not to move to Wales so she was still in Cambridge where she had her friends Mrs. Clay and her daughter Alison to tea and Harriet was put into a dress for the first time, home-made of white muslin and lace. Maida commented that Adda was devoted to Harriet and was doing most of the looking after while she was still recuperating. She wrote on 1st July: “I wrote to Uncle Philip last week and had such a nice letter back... He thinks we are wise to stay here at



Harriet with Maida, Mamma and Dorothy Williams and Maida with the pram, both in the garden at Queen Edith's Way.

present instead of going to Wales. He says he always thought the French would let us down, and never approved of our sending the British Expeditionary Force to France at all. It has been a great shock to me, as I never thought of their giving in so easily, as you know. Of course, their political life has been rotten for years, and the politicians have the last word there as here. I am afraid that the bulk of English people, who have never liked the French, will never forgive them for this." She commented that, conversely, the French thought that the British had let them down, especially when the R.A.F. was withdrawn from France to protect Britain against the expected invasion.

Maida's letter of 3rd July described Benskin's affection for Harriet: "Benjie loves her and follows her everywhere. He sits by the pram when she is out, then comes in when she does. He is now allowed to give her a kiss on her toes at bedtime. We are so pleased that he is so sweet with her." They had a visit from John's aunt, Merle Dennis-Jones, who had also decided to stay living in Cambridge whatever happened, even though many people with young children had by then relocated elsewhere in the country or sent their children abroad. She wrote: "I think it is much better to stay really. The raids seem so widespread that we might move just to the place they happened next, and they don't seem to be doing very much damage. I have great faith in our defences."

She had also heard from Arthur Beresford-Jones, a surgeon at the Kent and Canterbury Hospital who had worked with John before the war. He and his wife had taken a cottage in Somerset to escape to if necessary but were currently still in Canterbury where Arthur was being kept very busy caring for French wounded. Also in this letter: "I see in the papers today that there is a certain amount of patrol fighting going on in the Western Desert, which I suppose is where you are, darling, and it says it is very hot. Sweetheart, I do hope you are well and happy... I wonder if you ever got your socks. I do hope so."

On 7th July Maida wrote thanking John for the cable he had managed to send saying she should decide for herself whether to evacuate to Wales, which was a relief to hear. However no more letters from him had arrived. She was able to give Harriet a bath for the first time, with Adda on hand to advise: "I was ready for tears, but to my great delight she didn't seem to mind and put up with my clumsiness quite happily... At last I have answered the last letter of congratulation on her birth. I added them up and found I had had over forty letters and seven golden telegrams... How I long and

long for the war to be over so that you can come home again; it doesn't seem like nearly eight months since I saw you, darling, because I think of you so much that I can't feel you are very far away in time or space, but my heart sinks rather when I think how many more months may have to pass before I am in your darling arms again."

By 9th July the airmail service had partially started again, although the mail still had to go to the Cape by boat, before continuing from there by air. Maida and Mamma had been visited by Rob and Dorothy Williams together with Rob's mother Aunt Ah, who was staying with them in Leicester. Maida was now well enough to look after Harriet on her own. On 14th July she wrote from the garden, sitting beside the pram with Ben. "It is a lovely sunny day, and the blue sky is full of fluffy white clouds and the gay yellow aeroplanes from Marshall's with an occasional big grey bomber looking more business-like; and just at this moment a flight of twelve in beautiful formation."

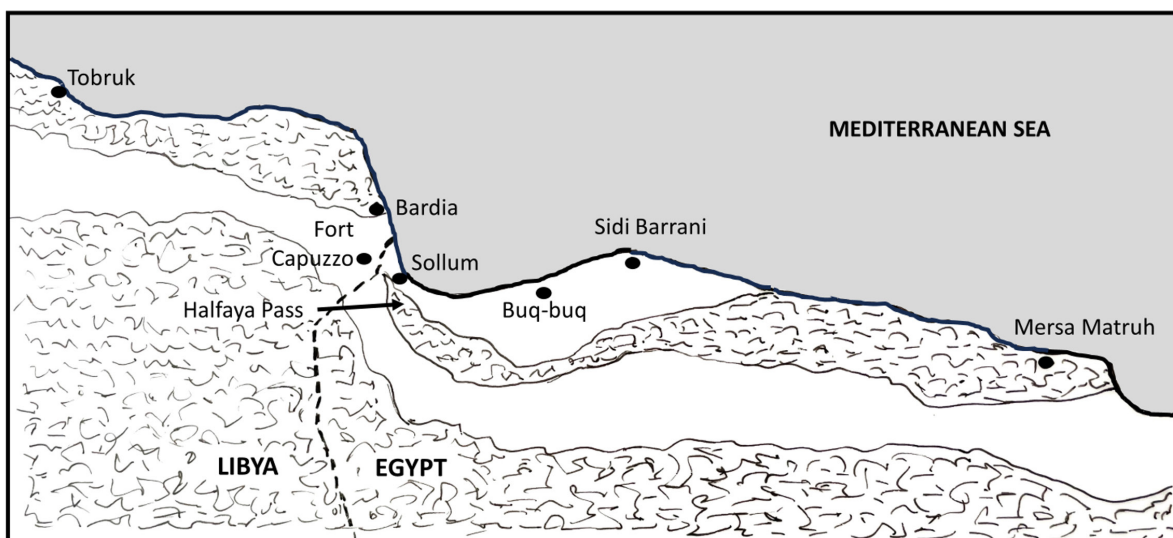
She provided a vivid description of which flowers were out and the blackbird's nest. "If it were not for the aeroplanes it would be a most peaceful scene, and even they make a droning like giant bumble bees which is not unpleasant now that we are so very much accustomed to it... How lovely it will be when we can drive off together again on a summer day with my hand on your knee, darling, and a kiss every few miles, and little Harriet with us." She also described going into Cambridge to register Harriet's birth, and get her

a birth certificate, identity card and ration book. On 17th July the first letter from John for five weeks finally arrived, written on 14th June and enclosing a cheque for £20 to pay the Nursing Home.



JOHN'S ACTIVITIES IN JULY can best be inferred from the 4th R.H.A Regimental Diary. "C" Battery commanded by Major Thomas were operating near Fort Capuzzo, just inside the Libyan frontier. The British had captured this fort on 14th June 1940, just four days after the Italian declaration of war, but were unable to occupy it for long due to insufficient availability of troops and equipment. The Italians had therefore reoccupied it by the end of June and the 4th R.H.A. arrived there on 5th July to try and prevent further Italian reinforcements from reaching it⁸.

According to his letters, John was initially based at the regional headquarters (R.H.Q) located behind the front line, although he still had to visit the troops who were at scattered locations around the desert to deal with any sickness. On 6th July he reported: "Here we are still in the same place with very little going on immediately around, though as you will have seen in the papers there is some activity on the Libyan frontier. Yesterday I captured a huge lizard about



Map 5. Egypt and Libya illustrating the main area of fighting involving the 4th Royal Horse Artillery between June and November 1940. During this period the Allies first advanced into Libya around Fort Capuzzo and then retreated back to Mersa Matruh as the Italian 10th Army advanced into Egypt.

three feet long... My orderly and I intended to make a pet out of it and tied it up by a rope to the vehicle. However, it slipped its lead when we were not looking and after a long hunt was recaptured in a disused well. The men rather liked it as it was something novel... Unfortunately, it did not seem to like us so much and continued to resist all advances on our part. This morning she has escaped again and so far has not been found."

"The number of sick has increased slightly and we now have about twice as many in hospital as we had at the base. Still there have been no epidemics and no dysentery as yet. A great many people get boils through lack of washing and some have succumbed to sandfly fever, the symptoms of which are rather like flu. My lie-low is mended again which is a great relief as without it, it is difficult to sleep really soundly. Last night there was a pleasant nip in the air, and I woke up thinking that autumn would soon be here. By midday however it was hotter than yesterday... People tell me that it does not get appreciably cooler until the end of September. It is nice to think that it will not get any hotter."

"We are pretty well catered for here now that things are becoming more static. We have plenty of beer, whiskey and lime juice but can get no soda water. I drink about two bottles of beer a day and cannot acquire any taste for whiskey which perhaps is just as well! Contrary to what one hears at home, very little is drunk out here, and I have not seen anyone at all under the weather since we left civilisation. We are now getting a free issue of cigarettes so I must be living just about as cheaply as it is possible to live in the army... Lieut. Green now has his A.D.S. only about a mile from us and evacuates my sick cases. I saw him this morning and he is coming to have a drink."

"I have made a little hospital of my own here — a pit dug about 3 ft deep which will take three stretchers and has the car cover fixed up over it as an awning. I keep it full all the time so as to save sending only moderately ill cases all the way back. At present I have one patient with a relapse of malaria, one with a duodenal ulcer and one with boils. Yesterday I discharged two cured patients to duty. The wireless is not yet working properly but we get Cairo news at 1.15. ... Every day that Hitler puts off invading England is a good day as England must be getting stronger now day by day. All my love darlingest — every day is bringing us nearer."

Three days later on 9th July he was missing Maida: "There is one piece of good news, which is that

a mail will arrive from England within a week. It will be the longest time I have ever been without a letter from you, sweetheart. I wonder if you and Harriet have been photographed yet, and whether the photo is on its way... It will be especially exciting to get your next letter as it will be the first one after Harriet's birth. Tomorrow I shall have been with the regiment six months, and then I shall be doing the longest appointment I have ever done. I think I am lucky in the movements we have had — the first four months in barracks doing the peacetime R.M.O.'s job and since then the very different job of looking after men miles from hospital in a country where one is unable to wash in fresh water (except very occasionally)."

"The number of sores and sick is increasing all the time and so I am becoming increasingly busy. However, I have not done any one part of the job long enough to get bored with it. I hope to get promoted in another three months, though of course I am also hoping that perhaps the war will be over before then and that then I shall never be a Captain. I am keeping very fit myself and have no sores at all. Yesterday I found two scorpions near my bed but they don't seem to be very dangerous beasts as several men have been stung and no harm has come of it... I keep on thinking of all the things we shall do when I get home. I am of course still determined to become a surgeon, and one thing about the war lasting so long is that I am saving money all the time and shall be able to afford to do a course for the F.R.C.S. and have a flat in London for perhaps three months. It will be lovely to drive again with you in Griselda with one hand on your knee, precious one, and listen to the British bird songs again... All my thoughts are with you."

On the 11th July he wrote: "It is difficult to write you long letters at present as it is only possible to write in the mess tent with other people talking and chipping in which makes thinking difficult. It is curious to think that I have had less privacy in the last two months than ever before — in fact I have never been alone at all. When I am in camp, I am either in the mess tent which measures about 10 ft. square or else at my vehicle which is parked about 150 yards away, where I do my sick parade and where my driver and orderly live; and when I leave camp I am always accompanied by my driver or orderly or both. This afternoon as a matter of fact all is quiet in the mess. Bobby Wolfson is sleeping on the floor, Studley is sleeping in a chair; Capt. Van den Bergh is reading a book and I am sitting up by the small table to write."

"Yesterday I had a good busy day and managed to

visit every unit in the regiment in one day for the first time since we came on here. I should like to describe my travels as I have been through some remarkable country, but I am afraid that would be giving things away. It is extraordinary what can be found on the roadside when the army is about. I have already collected a chair and a collapsible table, which must have fallen off some passing vehicle... We had a letter from Colonel Latham this morning telling us that he is still in bed, poor man, and there is a rumour that Major Campbell is coming back as Colonel to command the regiment. I have no news about getting any leave as yet. I hope perhaps I shall get some in August when it will be a bit cooler in the town. Things seem to be at a standstill at the moment, but I don't suppose Hitler will allow that to go on for long. All my love darling sweetheart, your own adoring John."

His next letter written on 14th July reported that he was just about to move on a few miles: "I am temporarily leaving R.H.Q. and joining one of the Batteries. I shall quite enjoy the change, but it will mean that it will take longer for letters to get back... I am expecting a mail from you any day now, sweetheart, it is five weeks tomorrow since I had the last one... You can't think what a difference it will make to me when your letters start arriving again — once they have begun coming I hope I shall get them at least once a week which will be marvellous. I am still very fit and busy and getting to know everyone better every day. I shall soon be one of the ancient members of the regiment, as everyone else gets shifted about so quickly and I don't see any reason for me being moved from the unit."

The Regimental Diaries for 14th July state that the battery was busy that day firing at enemy columns trying to get into Fort Capuzzo during which 40 lorries were destroyed⁸. As they were themselves also being shelled: *'The Battery retaliated on the enemy's position... Every gun opened up including the 60pdrs. and during the general concentration an oil dump was hit, starting an enormous fire, which burnt for four hours. Two other lesser fires were started, one of which like ammunition going off. Dense columns of black smoke and flames 100 ft. high leapt over Capuzzo while concentrations were fired into the Fort area periodically. Harassing fire was again continued throughout the night... Capt. G. W. Goschen was shelled continuously for over one hour in the O.P.* but despite this maintained fire on the enemy. For this he was awarded the Military Cross.'* Similar activity continued for the next four days, on one of which: *'there was considerable air activity by the enemy. Five*

bombers spent an hour overhead during the morning about 1100 hours, at a height of about 20,000 feet.'

On 16th July John wrote: "Here I am in my new unit, which is as far as I am likely to go at present. I have rather enjoyed my change as it gives me a new piece of country to explore and a new daily round to perform of about 30 miles. I am in a new mess with four officers besides myself, three of whom have been commissioned from the ranks but I like them no worse for that. The Battery Commander, Major Thomas, is the fourth. He is a nice man and has helped me to get settled down here. The only real snags are: one, that the flies are terrible, a thousand times worse than anywhere I have yet struck and, second, that we are some way from the sea so that bathing is difficult. However, I am luckier than the rest of the officers here as I have to visit a troop near the sea every other day so I can combine that with a bathe."

"No mail has arrived yet, but it must be two days nearer than when last I wrote. The days are hotter here at midday and colder and more dew at night-time. We wake up covered with droplets of water but in an hour's time everything has dried up again. The sun seems to scorch more, and I have made a pair of mittens out of handkerchiefs for the back of my hands which seem to suffer most ... I am still worried by the fact that the wireless never tells us which towns have been bombed in England. I should of course be more worried still if I heard that Cambridge had had a dose of it — however Wales seems to be bombed just as often as anywhere else so perhaps you will be just as safe at Q.E.W."

On 18th July he reported having had a great day: "I had a long expedition this morning and got back at tea time after covering 120 miles to find your telegram dated 12th July and a letter from Mamma dated 10th June... I am glad your wire reached me and was opened before Mamma's letter as she told me what a difficult labour you had, darling. I should have been terribly worried if I had known before, but now I know you are both well a whole month afterwards I shall not worry anymore."

"A new battery is coming up tonight and I am staying on another ten days so I shall be living in yet another mess tomorrow. I hope the new commander will consent to stricter sanitation as the flies are getting a terrible pest here... The weather has got very hot again, but I am used to it now and it does not worry me especially as I am sure it will be cold again in a few days' time. I wonder whether my letters will be reaching you yet. I do hope they are, darling, though I

* Observation post.

am afraid they will be rather dull ones I have written during the last month as I am not allowed to tell you any of the war news hereabouts. Though I don't think there is any objection in telling you I have been in Libya today. I am keeping marvellously fit, my pet, and am feeling fine."

"We have lost Colonel Latham from the regiment and Major Campbell has come back as our Colonel. He arrived with a load of fresh fruit, apples and grapes, which were a great treat. I have not met him as Colonel yet as I was out when he called this morning, but he was our acting second-in-command until about a month ago when we first came out into the desert, so I know him quite well... It is very difficult to write well, as my pen hand has to be used for brushing flies off my face while my left hand prevents the wind from blowing everything away. All my love, sweetest darling. Your wire has made me so happy, though it has taken as long as a letter used to take. Your own adoring husband, John. P. S. Give my love to Mamma. I will write tomorrow. It was grand of her to write the same evening as Harriet was born."

On 21st July the Regimental Diary recorded that: *"The role of "B" troop was with the support group and the section included the area north of the escarpment and the coast road through to Buq Buq and Sidi Barrani... The troop was disposed so that 2 guns were forward in the vineyard and 4 guns about a mile back in the Wadi al Shaabua. The grapes in the vineyard were just ripe, as were the figs, and the M.O. who was always short of medical stores said he would refuse to issue any laxatives to the gun detachments there... This was a quiet time much appreciated by the troops although a certain amount of strain was felt by the detachments in the forward sector. An Italian offensive was believed imminent and various plans for withdrawal were adopted."*⁸

John was the Medical Officer mentioned as supported by reference to both the figs and his lack of medical supplies in his following two letters, written as he was settling into the new mess: "I am out all morning on my round and also every other afternoon. I do a sick parade in four different places every morning, so I am really busier now than I have ever been... I found another well fairly close to us yesterday which I can wash in and wash my clothes. Most of the wells are getting a bit low now, but I believe in another two months we shall get terrific rainstorms if we are still here. The figs are ripening on the few trees that grow round about. I am very fond of the fresh figs and eat about two a day which so far has had no disastrous results... This mess has far and away the best wireless I have had yet. It is a 'Phillips' make, and we can get

every station without difficulty."

His medical work continued to occupy him (25.7.1940) "...the days are going quite quickly as I am so busy treating the hundreds of sores the men get on the backs of their hands. These start as sunburn blisters which get knocked and then go septic. If they are kept moist with ointment or damp lint they heal up quite well. The number of sick is decreasing and the average now is about one into hospital every other day. I sent one in yesterday with a gastric ulcer, the third to go in from this cause in about the last three weeks. There is no bad dysentery though quite a lot of diarrhoea which I don't have to send into hospital... I am running short of medical supplies but have asked officers going on leave to bring some back. There is still no news of my leave, but that does not surprise me as I expect I shall be about the last in the division to go... Darling, I long for you with all my heart, but can stick it out as long as I must. I feel sure Hitler will be feeling the pinch soon and am very glad his invasion of England has not come off yet. I must stop to do my morning sick parade now. All my love sweetheart, is waiting for you."

The 27th July was an important date, being John and Maida's second wedding anniversary. They were able to exchange cables and John also wrote on the same day: "My own darlingest — Yesterday and today are great days. Yesterday I got your first letter after Harriet's birth written on the 10th June. Darling, I think it was the most marvellous letter you have ever written to me. I am so thankful in some ways that I did not know what a bad time you had had until it was all over... The work here is getting harder as there are more sores appearing every day... The last two days have been exceptionally hot and the flies exceptionally bad so I am feeling just a little tired, though quite fit and happy. In any case I shall be going back to regimental headquarters in about two days' time, where I shall have much less running about to do. I expect the weather will be cool again in a day or two and that also makes one feel much more lively."

"The last few lines of my letter sound rather mournful, but the reason is that I am trying to write in the middle of the afternoon with flies on my nose and everything blowing away which is not firmly held down. I am quite looking forward to going back to R.H.Q. as the food in this battery is very indifferent, and the last two days we have been eating Italian bully beef instead of our own for some obscure reason, as it is not nearly so good. Darling, I am so glad the Brunswick and Dr. H. looked after you so well. I think

we were lucky to find him in Cambridge, and I am sure he has done his best for us even though I had never met him before that day we went to his house together. I am sure Harriet is the most marvellous baby in all the world, and I am sure she is the happiest to be cuddled by my own sweet darling.”

His next letter on 30th July reported some good news: “Yesterday I got your lovely wire in remembrance of our wedding day... Yesterday I also had news that I am to go on leave on the 5th. I shall get some new shirts as the two I have are beginning to fall to bits and I spend my time mending them... I usually put them in the front of the vehicle and then call on a near-by well to wash them myself. Lately I have had large white patches appearing on them, and discovered today that these were due to acid from the accumulator splashing on to them when carried in the front of my bus... I am writing this at 10.00 p.m. by the light of a small oil lamp in the mess. It is a marvellous relief when it gets dark as all the flies disappear like magic. I must go to bed now. I have been covering over 50 miles a day over the desert which is tiring but I am getting used to it all right. My driver has been off for two days but is better again today... I will think of you every night until I come home again.”

On 1st August John made the long journey back from the Libyan frontier to the Regimental headquarters, on his way to having a short leave in Cairo. He wrote the following day: “I must say it is beautifully cool here compared with where I was and it is grand to live in again and get good food. Unfortunately my stomach is just a little bit out of order today for the first time since I got to Egypt, but I am sure it will be all right in a day or two. Every other person seems to have ‘Gippo’ stomach at the moment, but nearly all recover under their own steam... I shall only have about five days in Cairo and will be busy seeing people and getting more outfit and clothes. I shall not get any of your letters when I am there but they will wait here for me, so I shall have lots to look forward to when I return.”

“The new Colonel is a great man for entertaining and good living so we seem to get visitors here every night, which will be interesting although lieutenants are allowed to take only a very small part in the conversation. The M.O. who is relieving me arrives tomorrow so I may get off tomorrow night. It will take me some time (about two days) to get back. I think I shall stay at a hotel – to be really comfortable and enjoy the luxury of sheets and baths etc. though I am told it is very hot there compared with here. I must

have dinner now as we are expected to be punctual here and I have no more news.”



On 17th July Maida was writing to John to say how thankful she was to have received his letter posted on 14th June telling her that the cable announcing Harriet’s birth had reached him in good time. She promised to have a professional photograph of herself taken when she was slimmer again after the birth. Three more letters from earlier in June had also turned up, including one written on June 9th. “Darlingest, it was so lovely to have them, specially the one written on little Harriet’s birthday telling me you had been to Church Parade and were thinking about me just when she was being born, and I needed your thoughts so much.”

“I don’t think I told you that just before I was given the general anaesthetic, and was semi-conscious from the Minnitt’s apparatus*, I came to and realised I had called out aloud to you: ‘Hold me tight, darling’, and had just enough presence of mind to explain to Dr Hedgcock that I wasn’t talking to him; I didn’t tell you before as I thought it might make you feel miserable that you weren’t with me, but now I know you were thinking so specially about me you will like to know that even in unconsciousness I realised that your spirit was with me.”

Following letters contained many descriptions of Harriet, as she longed to share everything with John. This passage is typical (20.7.1940): “Darling little Harriet was so adorable having her bath this morning, crowing and thoroughly enjoying herself; she has now begun splashing a tiny bit in the bath. I brought her down to her pram through the kitchen and her eye was at once caught by the brass and copper pans which she gazed at with great interest and admiration. She is in the garden but not asleep; when I came in just now she was waving her hands about and seemed to be enjoying herself... Did I tell you we now have a very smart gun emplacement at the top of the road opposite the pillar box? It has just been camouflaged and looks most business-like, though so far it has no gun in it. It seems incredible that it should have been

* Minnitt’s Apparatus was an anaesthetic apparatus providing a mixture of nitrous oxide and air and had recently replaced chloroform as a safer form of pain relief for mothers during childbirth.

thought necessary. I shouldn't think that it will ever have to be used. It must be an anti-tank gun as its holes point along the road, not upwards."

"I am now writing on the drawing room couch before Elspeth Wood (who was at Newnham with me) comes to tea... she is expecting a baby and is staying at home until it arrives... We met in the town the other day and she wants advice about baby clothes, so I shall be able to display Harriet's wardrobe as well as her sweet little self. We are not sure if Dr. Wood is in gaol as he was recently prosecuted for his pacifist tendencies* but we can't very well ask, so we hope she will make some remark which will satisfy our curiosity. I believe she was at the original tea-party, darling, to which Robert brought you when we met for the first time. I can still remember how you looked sitting by the fire twiddling the toasting-fork. Precious one, what a wonderful day that was, and we didn't know it."

More letters from John had arrived (dated 16th, 18th and 21st June) in one of which he had advised her to dig a trench to provide a refuge during air-raids. She told him, however, that the corner of the hall seemed reasonably safe as she didn't fancy the idea of lying with Harriet in a cold, damp trench in the garden, so different from the Western Desert. On 25th July she wrote again enclosing some photos of Harriet and described returning from a tea-party to find her in her nightie on Adda's knee ready for bed. When Adda had fetched her in she found her: "...kicking off all the blankets in the pram, waving her legs in the air, and not merely undoing her ribbons but pulling two of them right out of her frock and jacket: I am afraid, darling, we have produced a most lively daughter, who will be a real handful when she gets older. As you can imagine I adore her naughtiness even more than the moments when she is quietly asleep, as she is so amusing."

There was also a rare reference to food rationing. "We are very well off for food, I think, considering it is war time. We have rations for tea, sugar, butter, margarine, cooking fats and (very mildly) meat, but the rations seem to be quite adequate with a little care; the sugar is rather a tight fit, but we get on all right. They are going to add Vitamin D to all the white bread now which seems a good idea. Adda's chief criticism of the present bread is '*It eats close*', which I feel you will appreciate as a specimen of English grammar."

Aunt Tricka had written saying that bombs had

fallen at Llanwnnog near Newtown: "They broke the church windows and blew the Vicar and his wife out of bed but did no other damage. I think the locals are quite flattered at having been visited by raiders, and we were pleased by the news as we felt it justified our decision to remain here." The letter continued on 26th July, when she had received John's telegram sent to commemorate their second wedding anniversary on the 27th. She commented later that all the happy memories of their wedding and first anniversary made her happy and sad at the same time, and: "47 years on I find my letter too poignant to quote. It was to be four years more before we could celebrate together again."

On 31st July she reported having been to St. Benet's Church for a service of thanksgiving for Harriet's birth and had spoken to the Vicar about her Christening. Maida wanted to wait until John came home but the vicar disagreed: "...on the grounds that we should think of her first and not lose time in having her christened, rather than thinking of our own pleasure, as it were, in being together at the service. What do you think, my darling? Is there any chance at all that you might get leave before the end of the year?"

At the end of this letter she described how Harriet had been fitted for a gas mask and this had now arrived: "A Mr. Abrahams, a kindly man, came this morning to show me how to put on and work Harriet's gas mask which, as I think I told you before, is a very complicated affair, which completely envelopes all of her except her little legs, which stuck out at the bottom in her little woolly boots. Harriet didn't mind it a bit, and smiled up at us through the mica window, and it's so made that when she is in it, it is quite a convenient shape for me to rock it on my knee. So it's a mercy to think that if we ever have a gas alarm, which Heaven forbid, she will be quite comfortable in her respirator. I have to keep pumping air into it; it is a marvellous device, and the man said they been using them in hospitals as oxygen tents."

Her letter of 2nd August described another air raid alarm: "I had just put Harriet to bed and gone to bed myself last night when I heard an undoubted bomb explode a long way off. I decided to wait for the sound of aircraft before doing anything about it, and in a few minutes heard some droning very high overhead. So, knowing the German habit of dropping bombs overboard at random from a great height without any warning, I decided to move Harriet down to the hall, and was further convinced that something was afoot by great activity on the part of Dr Leeke and the other

* Elspeth's father was Dr. Alex Wood, a distinguished Presbyterian. Minister and Fellow of Emmanuel College.

wardens out on the road. I was just going to move when the alarm went, and I can tell you I reached the nursery in double-quick time and bundled poor little Harriet in total darkness into her bath on top of the little mattress she had for her Moses basket; we had already decided that this would be the best way of taking her downstairs if the need arose.”

“So as not to alarm you further, I must tell you that nothing whatever happened after this; but we all hurried down to the hall and squashed into the corner, Harriet still sleeping peacefully as she continued to do throughout. Benjie was the life and soul of the party, as he began chasing insects, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. I hear the raid was directed against Mildenhall†, but I don’t know if any damage was done.”

The letter continued: “Darlingest, I am so worried to see in the paper today that in the Western Desert, where I suppose you are, the British troops are outnumbered and facing an increased number of Italians from the Tunisian front. It is hard not to worry about you, my darling, when I think of you perhaps in danger, and certainly trying to do your work in such awful heat with sand getting into everything; and the K. H. Newsletter‡ this morning expects the fighting out there to be intensified... It seems absurd to think of this country packed with far more troops than I should think we should ever need if you are short of men in Egypt... I know I must try not to be anxious, and you need not worry that I am getting depressed, darling, because it very rarely happens, and I am sure that even if the Italians are in greater numbers you will be able to deal with them; but it must be so awful fighting in such heat, and I only hope you are well, darling and safe.” She was, however, cheered up next day by visiting Col. and Mrs. Luard with a basket of plums. “Col. Luard was so scornful of the Italians, and so sure of our skill in desert fighting that I felt much better.”



JOHN’S LETTERS OF 6TH and 9th August were written from the Carlton Hotel in Cairo, while on leave: “It was grand to have a bath and get into sheets again, but the thing I enjoy most is having a room to

myself where I can just sit down and think without being worried by anyone.” He spent the first day shopping for new clothes and medical equipment, and the afternoon sailing on the Nile. The first evening was rather lonely as he had been unable to make contact with any friends and his letter sounded rather depressed: “Darling, it is difficult to look forward now as the immediate future seems to hold so little hope of getting back to my beloved. I am still as determined as ever to take the F.R.C.S. as soon as I get to England. I am sure the change and rest will do me good, and I shall go back thoroughly fit for another three months if need be. The only thing to look forward to at the moment is becoming a Captain which I should achieve on Oct. 13th, the day I was called up last year. It will mean I shall get extra pay and be able to save a little more quickly. Darling, you must let me know if you are short of money at any time as I can easily spare you more if you need it.”

“I have been wondering if our Harriet Nichol has been christened yet? Personally, I don’t feel there is any hurry. You can’t think how much I am longing for news of you both. She is now two months old. I wonder how much she weighs now... I can’t see the war finishing soon unless Hitler attacks England perhaps, and I should not like that, sweetheart, with you there. I think our best hope is that Italy may pack in in the winter, and then with the Mediterranean open I might be able to get to England or you to Egypt.”

The next day he was much more cheerful as he had visited the hospital and been warmly welcomed by several old friends: “It was nice to be in a surgical atmosphere again. I saw Piper, the gunner whom I helped to save in February. One leg is now fine and healed up, but the other has not united and may have to be amputated after all. However, I am sure the attempt to save it was right, and if it had been amputated straight away the extra shock then might have killed him. His mind is now quite recovered and he remembered me at once. Afterwards Major Griffiths and I had tea at the Gezira Club and watched the local beauties bathing. If only I could have you here darling I should be perfectly happy, but I am thankful you are safe in England and I am sure you would not have been so well looked after here as by Dr. Hedgcock, so it is all for the best that you did not join me in Egypt.”

By 13th August John had returned to R.H.Q. “It is pleasant to get the sea breezes after the hot nights of Cairo, and to have all the supplies I need once again. Colonel Campbell is in good form and is helping me.

† Mildenhall was then a key Royal Air Force station used by R.A.F. Bomber Command for operational combat missions.

‡ The K.H. Newsletters were a series of national newsletters written by Sir Stephen King-Hall, a British naval officer, writer, and politician.

He insists that the sand-tight box I had made for my medical equipment shall be paid for out of regimental funds, so I shall get some of the money I have spent back again. This evening we are having a big dinner party and a lamb has been bought locally and killed this morning as a treat. We can buy them from the Bedouins for about 10 shillings. Still no letters from home, so I suppose they are finding it difficult to arrange a regular service... It is three weeks now since your last letter arrived. We are moving to a different place tomorrow which will mean we shall be kept very busy for a day or two... I gather from hearsay that the Germans are beginning to attack our ports with big numbers of machines, but that we are giving them hell. It looks as if they have given up the idea of an invasion for the time being at any rate."

He next wrote from a new position on 19th August saying: "I have not had time to sit down as I have had to cover long distances between small detachments of troops. However, I am enjoying it and the weather is at last definitely cooler and quite pleasant. Just before we left our last position, I got your sweet wire which took five days to arrive. It was such a surprise and told me what I wanted most to know, that all was well with you and Harriet and those at Morwick. I still have no letters. God knows what has happened to the mail. The only compensation is that no-one else has received any, so I suppose there is no regular service as yet. When they do arrive I shall have a lovely big bag full. My work is now much easier since I got my new box for medical supplies. It saves having to lug everything in and out of the vehicle every time one stops." They were still near the sea as he said: "We saw the flashes of the British fleet bombarding Libya, but it was too misty to see the ships." Cross reference to his bird notes confirmed that they were at that time stationed between Sollum and Sidi Barrani (see Map 4).

Three days later on 22nd August he had finally received three letters posted about 6 weeks earlier and enclosing two photos of Maida and Harriet taken in the Nursing Home. "Darling, your letters were so beautifully long and full of all the things I wanted to hear about. My letters have been so short and dull but that is mostly due to the difficulties of writing in a mess full of people talking, with flies sitting on your nose and the wind blowing my writing paper about... I could not have done without your wires sweetheart, which told me you were safe and well when I had had no letter for a month."

"I wonder if you have had Harriet vaccinated yet? It is better to have it done before she is many months

old as it is actually less dangerous and any time over two months is all right. I am sure Dr. H. will advise you about it all, and also get her immunised against diphtheria before long. I think about six months old is the best time for this. I am glad to hear that she is having orange juice and cod liver oil every day, and I agree with all Dr. H's treatments you have told me about."

"Darling, we have just listened to a talk by General Wavell who has just paid a visit to England. His speech cheered me up a lot as he seems to be satisfied that it won't be long before we get all the equipment we need out here to give the Italians a beating." Even better was his news that a regular letter service was being arranged with the U.K. "Life is quite pleasant and very busy for me. Yesterday I was travelling and seeing soldiers with sores from 9.00 in the morning to 8.00 at night, during which time I covered about 120 miles over the desert...Today I had a slack day and have had no work since lunch time. Things are pretty quiet here at present, and there are no scares, although if the Italians are going to attack at all they must try soon. Darling, I am so happy with your letters in front of me, and I shall never want to leave home again when I do get back. Take care of yourself and Harriet. The bombing of England is a worry, but perhaps they will do no more harm than they do here. God protect you both. Your own adoring John."

On 27th August he expressed his appreciation of the photographs he had received: "The one I have looked at far the most is the one of you holding our Harriet and looking so happy and well." Harriet's birth certificate had arrived and been sent off to the Paymaster: "I wonder if you are getting now the £10 a month which I wrote to ask my bank to pay you." Meanwhile, the birding continued: "A few migratory birds have arrived now, and I am itching to have a shotgun to shoot one of each species. As you know, I am against shooting for pleasure, but no-one would believe me if I merely described the birds I see here, and that is very difficult to do without field glasses and never having seen most of them before."

"Darling, I do hope no bombs will fall near you. I have been thinking about air-raid shelters. There is no doubt that out here the safest place to be is in a trench, but as you say the danger of sitting in the cold and damp is probably greater than the chance of a bomb landing near to. I think you will be wise to go on using the hall which is rather a suitable place. If you are caught out of doors with bombers straight overhead, it is much safer to lie down where

you are than to try and reach the nearest shelter.” Reference to the Regimental Diaries suggests he was currently somewhere near the Halfaya Pass, near the Egyptian border with Libya⁸. This was about 2 miles inland from the Mediterranean and was strategically important as it provided a natural route down a steep escarpment into Egypt.

At the start of September (1.9.1940): “I am still in the same place and the weather is now delightful, just right in fact. I am getting just a little bored with things at the moment but next Thursday I may be changing round temporarily with another doctor, which I shall enjoy. Three weeks in one place is quite long enough really though the time goes quite quickly... Darling, there are so many pleasant memories about this time last year — working in the garden and being together all the time, longer than we had ever been before for two whole months. Still, I am thankful you did not come out here as they are now sending families further afield still and turning them out of Egypt. Things have reached rather a standstill here at present and both sides seem too weak to try anything big. However, we are all living for the day when we shall be strong enough to give Musso a knock-out.”

There was indeed a pause in the campaign at this point¹⁸. The British tanks had been withdrawn for repairs at the end of July, and the frontier was being covered by the motorised infantry and guns of the 7th Armoured Division support group, which continued to make aggressive attacks on the Italians, the short raids hinted at in some of John’s letters. Since 22nd June, the date of the French armistice, the French in North Africa had been neutral, and the Italian forces on the Tunisian frontier had been moved to join their Tenth Army. This was now commanded by General Graziani since the former Commander, Balbo, had been killed in an air crash. A full-scale Italian attack on the British forces was expected in the early autumn, and so the British troops spent the summer fortifying their base at Mersa Matruh.

On 6th September John wrote: “Yesterday I changed my abode yet again and am now living temporarily in one of the troop messes. It is a pleasant change, as although the food is not so good it is a much freer atmosphere. There are only three officers besides myself and the highest rank is lieutenant, so we can say what we like when we like. R.H.Q. mess gives one a bottled up feeling after a time, as the Colonel monopolises the conversation and it is almost all about people I have never heard of... We are near the sea and can get a bathe any day, and the weather is now

very pleasant as far as temperature goes.”

He had received three more letters from home: “I have just read again the letter you wrote me on July 27th, our wedding day; darling, it gives me joy to read what you say about our marriage and that with Harriet’s arrival our marriage has been made complete. I can truthfully say that without the happiness you have given me I could never have stood up to my first year of army life out here. I was talking to Capt. Menzies, who is the other gunner M.O. who changes about with me here, and he was saying that the first year in the army is by far the worst as everyone treats you like dirt. I can’t say this has worried me much although I am sure it would have done if you had not given me a much firmer faith in life, so that petty rebuffs and unkindnesses slide off my back like water off a duck. However, I am glad to say there are signs that those in authority are beginning to think that I am efficient and tough and ‘can take it’ as the army say, which is really all I desire or expect. My driver is now a great help to me (the one I sent you a photograph of)... I have been very touched by the way he has entered into my interest in birds although his knowledge is nil. He is quite happy waiting and stopping the car so that I can get my glasses on to anything in sight.”

There were more birds about now and as John was less busy and had managed to borrow some binoculars he was hoping to do more ornithology: “There is a little warbler with a sweet song which has just been singing to me... I don’t recognise the song, but it is a little bit like a robin’s. Today I have also seen what I think must have been golden orioles for the first time and also a flock of big birds with long legs like herons... I must go to bed now, darling, lying on my lie-low, which has ceased to let me down, and looking up at the stars while the sea roars gently in the distance. I sleep very well almost always though I shall need some more bedclothes if we stay here all winter.” Reference to the bird list confirmed that the golden orioles were seen close to the coast between Sidi Barrani and Sollum.

On 9th September John was pleased to report that the letters from home were now arriving regularly and that he had received three more, going back to 12th June: “They have made me so happy, sweetheart; I think the one posted two days after Harriet’s birth must be the last of the non air-mail letters you wrote me and has taken almost exactly three months to get here. I think I shall be getting another leave before this letter reaches you, as several R.M.O.s have dropped



4th R.H.A. John's driver and vehicle.

out of the roster owing to illness, and naturally a new M.O. coming to the front does not get leave for two months so that we old stagers (by now) get pushed up a week or two."

"There are several things I am planning to buy — chiefly of course a shotgun. The last few days I have been making great progress in the local ornithology and have named a few of them with the aid of my 'Hand list of the birds of Egypt' which I bought on my last leave. However, I shall never be happy now until I can shoot one of each kind and make really sure about them. It sounds rather brutal, but my scientific training will not be satisfied otherwise. Don't worry about me, my sweet one, as I am really safer here than I would be further back where they get bombed much more often. There is very little fighting going on at present, and personally I don't think the Italians dare attack us, also we hear that reinforcements have arrived."

"Do you remember that I told you that I played

bridge with a Capt. Goschen in Cairo, who is in our regiment? He has just been awarded the M.C., which is a great honour for the regiment as it is the first medal in Egypt to be given to a gunner. The last of your three letters brought me the four excellent snapshots which show me that Harriet is really a remarkably good-looking baby and will in time grow just as pretty as her adorable mother. Darling, I love you so much for bringing her into the world. It will make me so happy to help you to look after her and watch her growing up."

A few days later (12.9.1940): "We are having a little heatwave at the moment which has rather taken us by surprise... I have heard a good deal about the terrible London air-raids, though I have not been able to listen in myself since I left R.H.Q. I gather that they have been more or less concentrated on London, which is some comfort. I sometimes wish I was now a House-surgeon in London getting valuable experience, but I don't think I would have respected myself if I had stayed... I wish to hell I had passed the last F.R.C.S. exam as I can see that after this war the path to becoming a surgeon will be harder than ever for me with so many people now getting extra surgical experience in London. Still, where there is a will there is a way, and I have certainly still got the will sweetheart."

"I comfort myself by thinking that perhaps the increasing experience of men, which this war is giving me, will more than compensate for the delay in getting surgical experience. I am also amassing more money in the Army than I ever would be able to do as House-surgeon, which will enable me to study in comfort when I do get home... I still have your little green and white handkerchief in my right trouser pocket now, which it shares with my money if I have any. I am glad to say I have not been able to spend one penny in cash since I returned from Cairo, though of course mess bills have been mounting up all the time... I love you sweetheart with all my heart for ever — your own adoring John."

Summary of bird list providing specific dates and locations from John's article in Zoological Society of Egypt, Bulletin 4, showing where he was stationed between September 1940 and March 1941²²

Bird Species	Date	Report
Roller	15.9.1940	Four were seen together 15 miles west of Sidi Barrani.
Golden Oriole	September 1940	Small parties were seen close to the coast between Sidi Barrani and Solum.
Hen Harrier	Late September	Observed twice near Matruh.
Red-backed Shrike	3.10.1940	One seen 15 miles south of Matruh.
Stone Curlew	October 1940 to March 1941	Common along coastal strip from Matruh.
Lesser Whitethroat	11.11.1940	One was shot in the desert south of Matruh.
Cream Coloured Courser	February 1941	One pair was seen in Beda Fomm.
White Wagtail	February 1941	Flocks of 50 seen flying over at Beda Fomm.
Kentish Plover	February 1941	A pair were seen nesting 20 miles east of Matruh on the coast near Beda Fomm.
Blackcap	18.2.1941	Several found amongst the bushes on the coast near Beda Fomm.
Lesser Grey Shrike	20.2.1941	One was observed about 40 miles NE of Antelat.
Dotterel	20.2.1941	On a journey from Antelat to Machili a few were seen about 40 miles NE of Antelat.
Hoopoe	19.3.1941	One was observed at Giarabub.
Woodchat	19.3.1941	One was shot at Giarabub.
Tawny Pipit	19.3.1941	One was shot at Giarabub.
European Swallow	19.3.1941	A large flock was noted at Giarabub.
Subalpine Warbler	19.3.1941	A flock of about 12 were observed at Giarabub.
Lesser Kestrel	23.3.1941	Numerous in the Matruh area.
Common Whitethroat	24.3.1941	One was shot 60 miles east of Matruh.

CHAPTER 4

Under Fire

1940



LIFE IN CAMBRIDGE CONTINUED quietly and quite happily, with Maida's letters full of the joy of looking after Harriet. Writing on 8th August she told John again how much she was missing him and went on to say: "Your love makes me able to bear the war and everything unpleasant that has come of it without worrying or losing faith, and our darling little Harriet is such a marvellous symbol of our love and our faith in the future. I see in the papers today that an attack on Egypt is considered imminent, and I shall go on praying all the time that you will be safe, my darling. There is also a Special Correspondent's article in the Times describing his experiences with an artillery regiment, and it makes me realise how trying the dust and flies must be, darling, more than your cheerful letters have let me see. It is marvellous of you to make the best of everything as you do, and it's such an encouragement to me."

"I'm sure the regiment think themselves lucky to have you, as you must fit in so much better than most civilian doctors would do. That is one good thing about your being with the gunners. I like to think of you having so much responsibility, and really being on your own, instead of having to dance attendance on doctors and surgeons who haven't in most cases any more intelligence than you have yourself. I expect you will have to put up with it for a bit when you come home, and it will be hard to bear at first, but once we are together again no difficulties will matter, and I am so glad you are still determined to become a surgeon. I love to hear of you making plans for when you come home, and thinking of all the lovely things we shall do, just as I do. I can't tell you how much I long for the war to be over, my own sweetheart."



Maida and Harriet. August 1940.

The glorious summer weather still continued. Some of Maida's time was spent exchanging visits with the neighbours, often carrying gifts of plums from the trees in their little orchard which were laden with fruit. On 11th August she sent on a letter from her mother-in-law. Morwick Hall was not far from Newcastle and the nearby shipyards, steelworks and collieries were frequent targets for German bombing raids. Norah reported that three very big bombs had dropped half a mile away: *'which gave the old house a good shaking — all fell in fields, casualty one rabbit — but they are constantly over us'*. Her second husband, Jim Fenwick, was serving in the Home Guard, in command of 900

men. They were having a succession of Army and R.A.F. officers billeted on them and she feared they might have to move out.

Maida was aware that fighting in Egypt was likely to be imminent and reported listening eagerly to the wireless hoping to hear that all was still quiet in the Western Desert and that the Italians might not attack after all. Meanwhile both tea parties and air raids continued at home. On 17th August she wrote: "After ending my letter yesterday by saying that we hardly noticed the war, it was rather forced on our notice by an air raid alarm at 5.30 p.m. — during which aircraft roared overhead and Harriet wept, and the noise generally was quite impressive but there were no bombs. A constant stream of tanks, army lorries etc went along the Hills Road all night making a fearful din... I was wakened by the noise of traffic at 2.0 a.m. and crept into the nursery to see if Harriet was all right... I will bring her cot into my room if the nights become very disturbed and with that in view spent part of this morning sticking the remainder of my anti-splinter netting on the window of our room."

She had also been to the Arts Theatre with some neighbours, enjoying the chance to dress up and go out in the evening again. She described wearing: "... my wedding dress with my black coat and the rings and bracelet and pearl earrings you gave me, darling, and my seed pearl necklace. I did so wish you had been there to hold my hand, especially at the more frightening moments of the play... Mamma and I went to Early Service this morning at the Hills Road church. I hadn't been for months... I was remembering so much the time we went to Communion at Warkworth church together, darling, just about a year ago, and you can imagine how my thoughts were with you this morning."

Continuing this letter the next day, she reported that there had been a loud knock at the door: "...and there to my amazement was Robert Bayne-Powell in uniform with two pips. It appears he is Intelligence Officer to the Armoured Division which I described to you yesterday as rattling past the end of the road on Friday night. They are now stationed near Cambridge, though he wouldn't say exactly where, and today the town is full of their lorries, small tanks etc. It was fun to see him... He asked if he could come for a bath sometimes, as though the divisional headquarters is in one of the stately homes there is only one bathroom available there, which is usually occupied, and he is in any case billeted in the local pub which has no bathroom at all."

"He is hoping that Nancy will come here to see him soon... I have asked him to tell her we shall be delighted to put her up for a day or two while she looks round for rooms. It would be so nice to have her and see something of them both. I have been rather pining for some of our own friends as I have been seeing little but middle-aged society lately... I am perfectly happy with darling little Harriet, but I feel I should be such a dull little wife for you to come home to if I didn't see some young people occasionally. We talked about you a lot of course, and the old Cambridge days, and it made me long for you so much."

On 22nd August Maida continued her account of Robert's visit: "He arrived in a small fast-looking car with a label on the front saying: '*This vehicle is being used on His Majesty's Service in an Emergency*', so he had to bring it up and hide it behind the house... Robert's job as Intelligence Officer sounds a very good one and most exciting. He seems to do such things as I imagined only happened in books and films; he couldn't tell me much about it of course; he says some of the R.H.A. are in his division... Darlinest, it made me long so very, very much for your regiment to be sent home, but I suppose it can't possibly be. Robert's visit and the thought that I haven't any up-to-date news of you since nearly a month ago, when your wedding cable arrived, have all conspired to make me long for you almost unbearably the last day or two. A couple of big tears dripped down on little Harriet as she was having her supper last night. However I soon cheered up, and I will be brave till you come home."

"Only it is hard to think of you in Egypt now in what must be such awful conditions of dust and heat, with the Italian attack still hanging fire and keeping you in a state of tension. Robert seems to enjoy his work and I think he is very lucky to have such a good job as he started not so very long ago as a private... I hope perhaps when he comes again he will tell me more about the R.H.A. so that I can imagine your work better... He had various stories from people he knew who had come from Dunkirk, including Ambrose Hussey-Freke, who you may know by name. He was on the beach for more than two days before getting on board a destroyer and then it was nearly sunk by a bomb."

Maida had also just heard that her Aunt Nonin would be arriving to stay the next day (22.8.1940): "Her letter asking if it was convenient and saying she was bringing a leg of lamb was delayed, so we hadn't time to send any answer but a wire saying: 'Delighted. Don't bring meat', which must have sounded rather

odd to the Post Office. She is the perfect guest as she never brings any luggage but the tiniest suitcase. Nurse Chalmers, who looked after us at the Brunswick, came to tea. I have bought her a bottle of bath salts as a present for looking after us so kindly."

The next day she received three letters from John posted in mid-July together with a cable sent off only the day before. She continued to up-date him on the air raids, which were becoming much more frequent, but she wanted to downplay his anxiety: "Darling, it must be worrying for you to hear about our air raids, though the alarms don't worry us a bit." Nonin had duly arrived and was thrilled with Harriet. Maida was enjoying her company: "She has very kindly been helping me to finish my woolly patchwork quilt, which is now almost complete, so I must write to the Committee for dealing with refugees to see if they still want things; it looks very gay and will be nice and warm."

Maida also reported that Nancy Bayne-Powell had just rung up from Devon to ask if she could come that same day: "I shall very much enjoy having her in Cambridge and hope she will stay for some time. I don't know how long Robert is expecting to be stationed here for. I don't expect he knows himself." Later in the same letter: "Robert and Nancy rang up an hour ago to say they had just arrived in Cambridge to find that Robert is to be transferred elsewhere and is to report at the War Office tomorrow, so they are going straight back to London — so like the War Office: I am very sorry not to be able to see something of them, but it can't be helped. They couldn't even stay to have supper here as the trains don't fit." Maida commented that this non-event showed that life during the war was not without problems even if your husband was stationed in England.

On 27th August she wrote to say: "Nonin leaves us tomorrow morning after a most pleasant visit. She hasn't wanted to go out or do anything beyond coming to the nursery whenever she can to watch and admire Harriet, who rewards her with beaming smiles for all her adoration and also for her power of whistling like a thrush. She also enjoys telling me of her own experiences as a maternity nurse and is very pleased if I take any of her hints as to how to deal with Harriet. I am so pleased she managed to come, as it has given her such joy to see our baby. I don't think anything else would have induced her to move from home in these rather unsettled days, as she is nervous about air raids."

"I'm afraid she had rather a dose of them yesterday

as we had two air raids; the first one was at 2.30 a.m. when we were awakened by bombs dropping and anti-aircraft fire, but oddly enough no sirens sounded; later in the day we had sirens but no bombs. The ones dropped in the night did practically no damage, except to break a few windows I believe; we came downstairs and stayed there for about half an hour, when all seemed quiet again, and we went back to bed... I don't feel we have anything to complain of as we have leisure to rest in the day if we have been up at night. It must be wearing to do a full day's work afterwards... I went into Cambridge this morning, darling, and sent you a cable to keep you going. I also bought some wool for your balaclava which I hope to start soon and send it, as I expect it will take ages to reach you if it ever does get there at all."

On 30th August she was disappointed not to have received a letter: "I hope that perhaps the mails will now be able to come more quickly by way of the French Equatorial territory. The news that it has joined General de Gaulle is very cheering, and I hope that it will also mean that you in Egypt can be more easily reinforced... There is another brood of young swallows in the garage — the third this year — and they have made a new nest to accommodate them. Soon they will be starting off for Egypt, and Harriet and I will send you messages by them... I miss you all the time but I wouldn't have you not doing your bit. I am so proud of you, my darling."

The frequent air raids continued, with four on 31st August: "I decided to bring Harriet downstairs to sleep, and I will sleep with her in the drawing room, not that we felt at all nervous, but I felt you would like me to take every possible care of her, darling, and I thought the ground floor would be better than upstairs... I sleep in the little couch bed which used to be in the nursery in the pre-Harriet days, and Harriet in her cot between the tallboy and the piano... I am so used to sleeping in a living room after our various flats that it doesn't worry me at all, and Harriet is most adaptable anyway; we both slept soundly."

Maida next received a surprise visit from another old friend, Peter Hodgson, with his new wife, Cecill. Peter was on leave from the Colonial Service in Africa and they were on a short visit to Cambridge: "He is due to return to Nigeria this month, but she is not allowed to go with him, poor girl, as the government are insisting on wives staying at home now... It was fun to see them, and coming so soon after Robert's unexpected call has made me feel that the war hasn't succeeded in cutting me off from all our old circle of acquaintances."

“As their call had to be cut short because of Harriet’s feeding time, we asked them to dinner the following day. It’s funny to think I shall be thirty this month, darling; I used to think it would feel like the threshold of middle age, and instead of that I feel younger than ever and full of life and happiness, thanks to your love and our darling little Harriet. Today I feel full of hope that by this time next year the war will be over and you will be home... Even as it is, though we are so far away from each other, I feel so much part of you that it makes all the difference. I could never have faced these anxious and uncertain days of war without feeling downcast unless I could look back at our happy days together... My only worry is that you may be uncomfortable and lonely and sometimes in danger. However, I know you are kept going, as I am, by looking forward to all the happiness that is in store for us when you come home.”

On 2nd September she heard from Robert Bayne-Powell’s mother that Robert had just been sent to: *‘quite a different part of the country’*. She commented: “I am rather surprised he hasn’t been sent abroad; I am sure he will finish up in your part of the world, as apparently his knowledge of Italian is the part of his qualification by which the Army sets most store. I’m sure he doesn’t know any more than I do, so it’s amusing to think that I could be an Intelligence Officer if I were in the Army. I expect they find it difficult to get enough Englishmen with any knowledge of foreign languages at all.”

The following day she wrote from the garden sitting beside Harriet’s pram: “I enjoyed having Peter and Cecill to dinner very much, though we were amused by their unromantic manner. No-one would ever guess that they have only been married since Christmas and are on the verge of an indefinite separation... Today is the anniversary of the declaration of war. The Times is restrainedly optimistic, and talks of the tide, though it has ebbed far, having turned at last, which I firmly believe is true, though I am sure there will have to be some hard fighting yet, and very likely the air attacks on this country will increase in severity before we get to the end of it.”

“We are getting quite used to air raid alarms now: we had one this morning just as Harriet was beginning her 10.0 o’clock feed... Mamma was shopping in Cambridge. It was the first time she had been caught by one in town and we wondered how she would get on, but I said to Adda *‘I’m sure if she’s gone to a public shelter, she will come back knowing the life history of everyone else in it’*. When she came back she reported that she had been ushered into the cellar of the MacFisheries...

and had thoroughly enjoyed herself talking to one of the other customers and one of the fish-men.”

Maida later took Harriet to have their photographs taken professionally (5.9.1940): “Harriet behaved beautifully but wouldn’t produce many smiles... You would have laughed to see us arriving and departing; the taxi driver was most gallant, holding up the traffic for us to cross the road, which we did in state, Harriet in my arms, and Adda behind with the luggage, which consisted of a large carrier bag containing a brass plate, a brass bell, Harriet’s new rattle, a shawl, a change of nappies, a clean frock, her hairbrush and, last but not least, the yellow jerry. I am to go back to see the proofs at the beginning of the week. I wore the frock I was married in.”

Four more letters posted from Egypt in July had arrived on the same day: “I can’t tell you enough, darling, how much they mean to me. You are so brave and patient and make light of all the hardships of your life in the desert, but I have heard from other people who know Egypt how awful the flies and the wind are. The sand that falls out of your envelopes, the blurred patches in your letter made by writing with a hot, sweaty hand, and the occasional complaints which you allow yourself... all make me love you so much, darling, for writing to me so often when every letter must be an effort.”

This was followed by an update on Harriet’s progress, including her vaccination on 10th September: “She was so good over it: much braver than I would have been. Dr. Hedgcock advised me to start giving her prune juice and porridge.” She also reported on the car. “Joe, the next-door gardener, is coming in after 5.00 ‘clock to have a look at Griselda and see if she is all right in her hibernation. He is a chauffeur as well, so it will be nice to have him near to keep an eye on her. I hope he will find her internal workings all right. Her outside is very dirty, though she has been covered with dust sheets to keep off as much as possible of the contributions of successive families of swallows, the last of which fledged a few days ago.”



DESPITE EARLIER EXPECTATIONS, THE Italian commander General Graziani did not advance until 13th September, when his large army crossed the undefended frontier from Libya into Egypt and

continued slowly eastward. Instead of attacking the well-fortified army base at Mersa Matruh, he stopped short at Sidi Barrani and began to build up a series of defensive camps, constructed roads and water pipelines and prepared stores².

Extracts from the 4th R.H.A. Regimental Diaries confirm that John was again very close to the action⁸. On 12th September the diaries reported: *'The enemy advance seemed to be about to start at any moment now... The armoured O.P.* was sent forward to observe and collect information. The enemy was reported well established right on the wire. Batteries of 105 mm were being dug in East of the Wire at Boundary Posts 26 and 27. In the evening 700 enemy vehicles were reported in the Sidi Omar area. This was believed to be General Maletti's mobile 'desert division'. 4 guns of "C" Battery with Bofors† and Infantry escort moved out to engage them'.*

On 13th September: *'Fire was opened at 02.30 hours but after first ranging round could not be observed owing to a thick mist. This did not actually matter as the target was so vast that considerable damage was done. The patrols 11th Hussars reported later that 200 damaged vehicles were left on the position. The most important result, however, was that this force was direct North and all fears of being outflanked in the early stages of the withdrawal were removed. This was a terrific achievement for 4 guns but exacted its toll on the strain felt by all ranks. The night until the mist came down was brilliant moonlight. More than ordinary cautions had to be observed in the approach North to avoid noise. Constantly with everybody was the expectation of being bombed. Italian air superiority was well marked in these days. The complication of the mist was a mixed blessing. It prevented enemy ground observation, but ordinary dispersion has to be observed, and yet it was difficult to keep contact with outlying vehicles'.*

Remarkably, John was still able to send a cable on 18th September, ahead of Maida's birthday on the 22nd. On the 20th September, however, he wrote: "My own precious darling — I have had a very busy week moving most of the time and quite impossible to write letters, but now we have retired to bring the Italians on and make their lines of communication more difficult and vulnerable. I am back in the R.H.Q. mess... Darling, I am thinking of you so much now, and am glad that the war here has started properly, as now the end is in sight and perhaps a decision will be reached this year, which would be just too wonderful... I have been very busy with medical work, chiefly dressing small sores (about 50 a day), but so far the enemy has not inflicted any casualties. I feel sure we

are now strong enough to stop them. I must stop now to get on with my sick parade, and the Colonel has also asked me to be responsible for the mess supplies as Mr. Wolfson is in hospital with a bad foot. Keep yourself safe darling and perhaps it will not be so long now before I come back to you."

This marked the beginning of the Italian advance into Egypt with the Allied troops retreating ahead of them and was clearly a highly stressful time for the 4th R.H.A. The Regimental Diary recorded it as follows⁸: *'A new phase of the war began with the events that followed this Friday. Anxious days followed; days when the enemy seemed to have cut us off. They had five divisions moving against us; days of uncertainty through lack of news; days without rations because "B" Echelon had been bombed; periods without water, when the sappers had to blow up the wells before our water cart. Above and beyond all this was the anxiety that we should not get the guns back because our Dragons‡ — thirdhand at the start — were at the end of their tether. Our paramount anxiety was to let the Italians know some time or other that we were going back not because they were pushing us back with odds of ten to one, but because we were ordered to do so. Every day flights of Italian bombers came over and dropped their bombs as and when they pleased and when they had no bombs left they machine-gunned'.*

More details are provided for the period from 14th to 18th September: *'That day was notable for twenty-two separate air raids on the force South of the escarpment, "B" troop suffered no casualties though two 15 cwt truck of the escorting company of the Rifle Brigade were hit, and one man was killed — a magnificent tribute to the accuracy of the Italian aircraft. One Dragon was machine-gunned whilst being repaired and had to be set on fire to avoid capture. "B" troop withdrew to Bir Enba throughout the night and came into action there to cover the approach from Sidi Barrani. This was the second day without rations, particularly that of water. Thirsts were slaked sparingly with radiator water by some, other tried well water for a change and got it'.*

'In the early afternoon the Troop withdrew and came into action at Sidi Barrani — Sidi Mimir, while "B" echelon withdrew to Bir el Sanawaiyat. This was the worse period during the withdrawal, for water ration reserves were sparingly drawn on and the rest saved for the ever-thirsty Dragons. At this time the utmost any officer or Gunner had to drink each day was a bare half mugful of tea. Had it not been for this abstinence and the lucky discovery of a well — howbeit foul — at Bir Abu Stag, undoubtedly "B" troop would never have got their Dragons safe back home. It was extremely cheering to those who had experienced this to receive the following letter from Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., G.O.C. in C., B.T.E.

* Observation Post.

† Automatic guns used chiefly as an anti-aircraft weapon.

‡ The Dragons were the tractors that pulled the guns.

'Please convey to all ranks "B" troop, "C" Battery R.H.A. my appreciation of their devotion to duty during the retirement from the Libyan Frontier, whereby through the sacrifice of their drinking water they were able to effect the withdrawal of the guns with the loss on only one tractor'. On the third waterless night "B" troop were greatly indebted to Capt. P. W. Hobbs, R.H.A. and 'F' troop 'M' Battery R.H.A. who, in exchange for badly needed petrol, gave the troop twelve gallons of equally badly needed water'.

After the war in 1962 John was asked to contribute to a life of Colonel Campbell, whom he had both liked and admired. Campbell had become regimental Colonel of the 4th R.H.A. in July 1940, when Colonel Latham was unwell, so had been in charge during the retreat from Sollum to Sidi Barrani which has just been described. This he led with great efficiency and coolness. He started the war as a major commanding a battery in the 4th R.H.A. and earlier in 1940 had been promoted to command the artillery component of 7th Armoured Division's Support Group under Brigadier William Gott. As the British Army was heavily outnumbered by the Italians, General Wavell formulated a plan to retain the initiative by harassing the enemy using small, highly mobile columns containing armoured cars for reconnaissance, 25 pounder guns for hitting the enemy and infantry troops to protect the guns and undertake reconnaissance at night. Campbell was recognised as a brilliant commander of one of these columns which were later named 'Jock Columns' in his honour. He continued his distinguished career throughout 1941, being awarded the V.C., D.S.O. and M.C.[§] In February 1942 he was promoted to Major General and given command of 7th Armoured Division but he was tragically killed just three weeks later when his jeep overturned²³.

With respect to John's own recollection of the September 1940 retreat, he wrote: "I think only two troops of guns were involved but these went on firing until the Italian infantry were only a few hundred yards away, when the guns would limber up and retire. During this retreat Colonel Campbell reprimanded me once for making a detour to look at some bustard I had seen some way off in the desert[¶]. He rightly gave me to understand that should my vehicle break down while on my own I should be abandoned to the Italians. He made a habit of driving himself about in a stripped 8 cwt Morris at full speed over the desert hummocks known as 'mole hills'. If you happened to

be his passenger, it required a great deal of physical energy to prevent being thrown out of the car."

Returning to the letters, John wrote on 24th September with masterly understatement thanking Maida for some letters and a wire sent off a few days earlier asking about Harriet's christening: "Darling, it was lovely to get your wire and know that you had survived safely all the fierce air-raids which we hear about on the wireless nearly every night... Also you are a clever darling to tell me Harriet's weight. You know just the things I want to hear about and I have been wondering about how big she was so much lately. I am trying to get a wire sent off to you, darling, but may have to wait until I get some leave, as I have no cash at all now, and it seems impossible to get any here, and the telegraph office is about twenty miles off in rather an unhealthy spot as the Italians like bombing it... I have been very busy again the last few days as one always is after a move; however, by today things have settled down and I have been taking a rest."

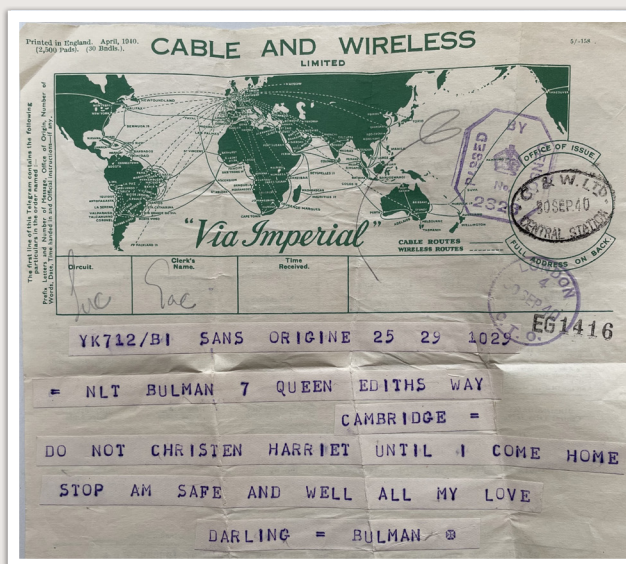
This lull in proceedings is confirmed in the Regimental Diaries⁸, which said that there was: '*No further enemy movement*' on either 22nd or 23rd September, when a relieving force arrived in the evening. From 27th September: '*Both troops were in Camp in their respective areas near the Siwa road, and remained there until October 31st, when each troop moved out as part of the North and South columns respectively. The whole of this period was one of rest, refitting and maintenance. Personnel changes, drafts and fresh equipment was taken over*'.

On 27th September John was able to report that life had indeed settled down again after the excitement of the previous two weeks: "The news from England seems better every day and here we are getting reinforcements and do not feel at all afraid of the Italians. Also, we seem to have more of our own aeroplanes about now, and this has cheered everyone up as there were very few about when we first came out here." He remained very busy treating cases of both indigestion and sores. The latter had increased due in part to the lack of washing facilities: "However everyone is in fairly good heart, and I don't think it can be long now before I get some leave although I have not yet heard when I can go. There are not so many birds in this part, but yesterday evening I saw a beautiful Bonelli's eagle which was resting on a telegraph pole on the roadside."

He had reached a decision regarding the christening. He did not want this to go ahead without him and sent Maida a telegram on 30th September saying: "Do not christen Harriet until I come home."

[§] Victoria Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Military Cross.

[¶] Large birds described in John's article 'Notes on the Birds of the Libyan Desert' as being extremely shy and difficult to approach.



Telegram sent by John regarding Harriet's christening, September 1940.



AT AROUND THE SAME time on 13th September Harriet wore a short dress for the first time: "The first stage in growing into a big girl and looked adorable in it." John's friend, Mary Hughes* rang up and Maida asked her to be one of Harriet's godmothers. She had also heard from Aunt Tricka: "I am increasingly glad we didn't move to Wales, as apparently the German raiders go over almost every night on their way to Liverpool, and one was actually brought down near Machynlleth. They are very busy as they have no maid and the water supply is somewhat scanty, but they all sound very well and Christopher† is beginning to smile." She also enclosed a letter from John's mother, written from Loch Awe where: *'I suddenly decided to bring Heather to stay with the mother of Denis' best girl. They live further down the loch in a delightfully out-of-the-way bay and are charming and kind people. We were having so much bombing at home that I thought I would be much happier if she were out of the way of it all. Needless to say, I am enjoying a few days rest myself, and feel very reluctant at going back, but feel we shall have to tomorrow or Thursday.'*

At this stage of the war the London Blitz had started and air raids around Cambridge were also

becoming more frequent. The Battle of Britain was in full swing with the R.A.F. valiantly defending the U.K. from the Nazi Luftwaffe and the prospect of a potential German invasion. On 17th September Maida reported two warnings in the night and the daytime sky seemed unusually busy with fighters: "I simply can't grasp what the affairs in London must be like... There is half a gale blowing which is bringing down nearly all the apples, but we watch the damage cheerfully when we think how seasick the Germans must be in their barges etc. in the channel."

The English papers and the wireless were reporting the Italian advance into Egypt, so it was altogether a worrying time. On 19th September Maida wrote: "...I don't dare to imagine too much what it must be like, and sometimes I almost wish I didn't know it was happening, but I can't help snatching at every crumb of news about Egypt and am thankful to hear how well the Army and R.A.F. are harassing the Italian advance. I don't for a moment doubt that it will soon be checked most effectively, but there must be danger for everyone, and I can only pray and pray you will be safe, my darling."

To lighten the mood, more news on Harriet followed: "Our daughter gets more adorable every day. As we were finishing our lunch today a heavy thunder shower descended and she was rescued from her pram very much amused by the feel of rain drops on her little face, and by the general fuss. I am sorry to say she welcomes any Act of God, such as a shower, or

* Wife of the owner of Burnham Overly Windmill.

† Molly's baby.

act of man, such as an air raid warning, which causes a fuss to be made about her at an unusual time. As she was wet in front from the rain and wet behind from natural causes, there was much ado about getting her dry and she had her 2.0 o'clock feed in great comfort while her little woolly jacket and trousers hung on the nursery fender; the gas fire there is the greatest blessing."

"Dr Hedgcock came yesterday morning to see the vaccinations and was very pleased with her progress. Having seen no sign of any bill, I thought I'd better mention it, and was quite overcome when he refused to take a penny[‡]. I begged him to let us pay, especially as I'd given such a lot of trouble, but he said no, it was his only way of repaying all the kindness he had had himself from doctors, and he would be all the more unwilling to charge as you are in the army. I feel most grateful: we must give him a nice present... I had such a grand surprise when I went to the Bank this morning and found that your September allowance was £14 instead of £8. It is sweet of you to send me more, darling, as although I told you in my last letter that I could manage all right, I was finding it a little difficult."

The following day (19.9.1940): "The telephone boy ambled up the drive totally unconscious of the joy he was bringing me in the shape of your precious birthday cable with the news that you are safe and well. It was so especially sweet of you to remember about my birthday when you must be so busy, and to send off the wire in such good time. It is simply lovely to have it and it has cheered me up no end... Mamma isn't terribly well these days, she needs a change and she has lost her appetite and got very thin. I hope to persuade her to go away for a little soon, but she won't go as long as the air battle of London continues... The weather has been a little trying, hot and cold in turns. Adda went into Cambridge the other day on what appeared to be a cold morning, dressed in a winter coat, and came back sweating all over. She said to Mamma: *'I was clad ridiculous'*."

Her actual birthday on 22nd September was interrupted by four air raid alarms in just over 24 hours: at 4.0 a.m., 2.30 p.m., from 8.45 until nearly 11.0 p.m. and lastly at 4.30 a.m. the following morning: "Nothing happened except a few thuds, which we were told later were bombs dropped near Royston, but they all wasted time as we still repair to the funk hole... The other thing which made letter writing impossible

yesterday was a lovely surprise birthday party in the shape of Peggy and Raymond. The telephone rang at lunchtime on Saturday, and to my great excitement it was Peggy saying they had moved to Ware and would like to come over to see us, especially Harriet; so they came to lunch and tea."

It was the first time Maida had met Raymond, and she reported: "I like him immensely, and am sure you would too, darling... He is most easy to get on with, and I felt at once as if we were not only relations but friends. They had had a visit from Philip recently. She says he is very grand now and was going on to lunch at the Ritz. He is awfully happy in the army and is very keen to go out East, which is just possible. He was lucky enough to escape all the fighting in France and came back before Dunkirk." In fact, he had only just got away as he had been collecting reinforcements from the base at the time of the German advance and had escaped in the last boat leaving Cherbourg¹.

On 25th September Harriet enjoyed her first feed of porridge. The previous night had seen yet more air raids: "We were up nearly all night for a series of air raid alarms; it was the worst night we have had, Harriet being the only one who enjoyed it as she was asleep cuddled in my arms or Adda's nearly all night. We three and Benskin sat on chairs of varying hardness in the funk hole wrapped in rugs. I am very glad we do not have to resort to an outdoor shelter. Two or three bombs were dropped, which apparently the Germans were very pleased about as I see in the Times that they announced it specially, but actually they fell in Fenners and did no damage beyond breaking a lot of windows."⁸

"Yesterday morning I was amazed to get an envelope with a Paddington postmark and Augustin Jordan's handwriting. Inside was a letter saying he has managed to reach England to join General de Gaulle after a long journey. Poor fellow, it is splendid of him to come and I feel so sorry for him. He has had no news of his mother for two months, and the last he heard was that she was at Alivet, which was occupied by Germans; there had been fighting in the neighbourhood. You can imagine what he must feel like if you think of what it would be like to know there were Germans at Morwick. He says he can hardly realise how it all happened, and I am sure all the best Frenchmen feel the same."

"Mamma told me to write at once to ask him here and let us know if there is anything we can do for him

[‡] This was before the start before the start of the N.H.S.

⁸ Fenners was the Cambridge University cricket club.

but he said in his letter he didn't think he could leave London. Perhaps he has only managed to escape with very little money. I feel rather proud to think that our friends are in sympathy with de Gaulle and are going on with the fight. I wrote a line to Patrick Bury who met him in Paris to ask him to look Augustin up if he is still in town. He must feel so lonely. Luckily he speaks English very well, so it will be easier for him than for many. I hope we shall manage to meet as it would be so interesting to hear his adventures."

Maida also reported bad news concerning an unsuccessful attempt by the Allies to capture the strategic port of Dakar in French West Africa. She commented: "People must have been spared a lot of worry in the days when there were few newspapers and no wireless. Mr. Lloyd George told a friend of Uncle Louis that we are doing nicely but they keep a lot of good news out of the papers to keep the nation at concert pitch — a nice theory, I hope he's right."

A few days later (28.9.1940) she wrote: "The nights are cold now, and getting up for air raid warnings or for Harriet's early meal is a chilly business in the satin nighties I usually wear, so you will be amused to hear, darling, that I went into Cambridge this morning and invested in two pairs of warm pyjamas. You can guess how quickly they will be discarded when you come home even if you arrive in mid-winter, but until then they will keep me warm and cosy. Nonin says they are getting air raid warnings in Bangor now, and the other night she heard gunfire and looking out saw the slopes of Snowdon and Tryfan all lit up with flashes, and a few bombs were dropped at Bethesda, that village between Capel Curig and Bangor. Poor Nonin seems rather upset by it all and dreads the winter. I think it is worse for the people in Wales, as the last war left them practically untouched, and they hoped for the same immunity in this one."

Unsurprisingly, the war was taking its toll, although Maida tried not to convey too much of this in the letters. "I find myself in a curious state of mind these days; it seems hopeless to look forward at all as it is so impossible to form any idea of what will happen or how long it will be before I see you again; it is equally impossible to look back very much, as the thought of our happy days together is too much for me to bear just now; so I just live in the present, quite contentedly since little Harriet is such a joy, but with only half my mind working, the practical half. All imaginative power has to be shut firmly away or it might get out of hand."

"There are many compensations besides the

supreme one of our little Harriet. For instance, the Michaelmas daisies are more beautiful than they have ever been, and an undisturbed half-hour reading by the fire has an extraordinary value because it is rare nowadays. I have so much sewing and knitting to do, and letters seem to accumulate so much, that I seldom have time to read. But I have been very much enjoying John Buchan's autobiography, which I have, alas, nearly finished now. I hope so much that you too are finding compensations, my darling; I know how good you are at making the best of things though it must be hard sometimes. But the thought of the way you always take things is an inspiration to me."

She continued the next day with reference to her previous employment as a teacher at Wycombe Abbey (29.9.1940): "I was very pleased to have a letter from the Board of Education Pensions Secretary this week, telling me that I am entitled to no less than £78.14.2. in repayment of my contributions. Income tax has to be deducted, but even so it ought to be a nice fat cheque. I am looking forward to seeing it as you can imagine... There are fewer aeroplanes about today than there usually are on a Sunday, perhaps because of the high wind. We have seen several big formations of fighters flying over lately; one day 75 went over, very high up and casting shadows on the clouds above them; later the same day 46 passed, and another day about the same number. It is nice to feel we have so many."

"I forgot to tell you Peggy said Philip had seen no fighting in France but had a narrow escape from death when he came home, as he was riding a motor-bicycle without lights near the coast and had a head-on collision with a car. He turned several somersaults and landed on his bottom in a ditch unharmed... I am feeling so well today after a very good night and much more cheerful than when I was writing yesterday. Everything will come right in the end, I'm sure, my darling, however long we have to wait... All my love for always, adored husband, your very own Maida."



OCTOBER WAS A QUIET uneventful month as there was a lull in the desert war while General Graziani was building up his base at Sidi Barrani. When this was ready he proposed to move methodically on Mersa Matruh, but he was in no hurry. General O'Connor had made preparations for a defensive

counter-stroke when they did advance, but they never came far enough for him to execute his plan. Instead, both armies lay apart in preparation during October and November¹⁸.

On 2nd October John wrote home: "The days are definitely getting shorter and cooler now, and we are just about settled down again after a week in the same place without any alarms or excursions. I am still very busy however as I have the whole regiment now to look after whereas previously there had only been parts and pieces in the same place. Once again we have a new Colonel owing to Colonel Campbell's promotion to Brigadier. Lately Col. Campbell has been very pleasant to me, and I had begun to get on with him just as well as with Colonel Latham. It is disappointing to have to say goodbye to him so soon as I suppose I shall have the same palaver with our new Colonel."

"At the moment I am the oldest member of the R.H.A. mess as Bobby Wolfson is sick with sores (his own fault as he would not be bothered to have them looked after). We are to have a 2nd/Lt. called Dick Judd, whom I much prefer, as our Assistant Adjutant. Our new Colonel is called Pat Wilson*. I don't know anything about him yet but he seems a very ordinary Army man; the usual procedure seems to be to sit on all junior officers for the first few months of office, so I know what to expect and shall not be in the least annoyed by it. I have seen lots of interesting birds lately; the most beautiful pair of falcons which were quite tame and sitting on low stones on each side of the road. I presume they had flown a long way on migration and were feeling tired. The male was a very bright blue grey all over except for his tummy and underneath his tail, which was a foxy brown, and his legs which were bright red. They were a pair of Red-footed Falcons."

"It is sad to think that I seem to be almost the only one of my married friends who is languishing so far from his little wife in foreign lands, but at any rate I have the satisfaction of knowing I am doing everything I can to help England when she specially needs help. Also, it looks as if this would be the most important front in the war, so I shall be one up on those who have seen only three weeks fighting in France. I think there is a possibility that we may reach a decision here before Christmas with any luck. At the moment I am sitting alone in the mess with the sun just about to go down in a cloudless sky.

I am wearing a shirt and shorts, and the temperature for once is just perfect. As I look out, I see an almost flat plain as far as the horizon; the ground is mud coloured with sharp jagged stones scattered over it and a few tufts of vegetation which look brown rather than green. The ground is so hard that it is almost impossible to dig down more than 6 inches and there is no sand at all in these parts."

On 7th October he was happy to report that he had just received three of Maida's letters that had been posted at the beginning of July: "It is curious the way the post seems to go backwards, but it is lovely to get them and they are such happy ones written when you were just getting really well again. Three days ago I got your wire in reply to my birthday cable. It reached Cairo on Sept. 30th but took 4 days to reach me here. It is lovely to have up-to-date news, especially as now the post seems to be taking longer again. I have not yet had any September letters."

"Actually, there are not so many sick now but they are very spread out again, and I spend such a long time getting from one place to another over the desert. I am still doing the average 1,000 miles a month that we used to do in Griselda but not nearly so comfortable or fast... Darling, the great piece of news today is that I am going on leave the day after tomorrow. I shall be able to buy everything I want for the winter and, I hope, the shot-gun I have been hankering after. The thing I look forward to more than anything on my leave is to be able to write you a really proper letter in privacy without having my paper blown all over the place and flies sitting on my nose all the time."

The next letter did indeed come from Cairo on 11th October, where he was spending a few days staying at the Continental Savoy Hotel as the Carlton was full up: "I am sorry to say it is the most expensive in the town. However, after two months without any luxuries



Christmas card showing the Grand Continental Hotel, Cairo.

* Lt. Col. CPB Wilson, appointed 2 October 1940.

I feel I can stump up for 5 nights here without having a guilty conscience. You have no idea how much I enjoy every little convenience — clean sheets and clean towels every day, anything brushed and polished on touching a bell and clothes washed and back clean in 24 hours. The food is also a great treat although my stomach is a little weak for banqueting after two months of bully beef, and I have to go carefully to avoid the Gippy stomach. The first dinner I had I missed the soup and started with the most deliciously cooked filleted fish I can remember since I left home. It was cooked just like you cook it with prawns and cheese sauce.”

“As usual I have spent the first two days shopping. It is extraordinary how long it all takes. With the help of a taxi hired for the day, I have managed to get everything I want for the moment, including a small single-barrelled shotgun. This morning I visited a collection of stuffed Egyptian birds made by Michael Nicoll, the author of my little book. I was very interested though rather disheartened to find that the chances of seeing a bird not already recorded must be very slight... I have seen my friends at Helmieh, Major Griffiths, Major MacLennan and Lieut. Lloyd. The first-named is coming to share my dinner tonight. I rang up Roger Low yesterday. He has asked me to tea on Sunday, which I am looking forward to.”

“The Muslim month of Ramadan is in full swing. My taxi driver will not eat between sunrise and sunset which is an advantage in some ways, but I feel it must account for some rather narrow shaves during the latter part of the day. He is a nice fellow called Abbas and is proud of the fact that he served with the R.A.M.C. in Allenby’s force in the last war. Darling, how perfect it would be if you were here with me. It would be a perfect hotel for a second honeymoon; still I console myself by thinking that if you were here you would have to depart for South Africa which would be horrid.”

He wrote again two days later (13.10.1940) giving an account of his shopping and meetings with friends, including the tea party with Roger Low. As on his first leave, however: “I can’t say I have had a very exciting time as most of my meals have been in solitude in the hotel. Darling, I miss you here even more than I do in the desert, as it is lonelier being in a town by oneself. At any rate that will make it easier going back again. All my heart is with you, darling.”

On 18th October John had returned to R.H.Q.: “I got back on Tuesday feeling very much more mentally alive, although the journey back was rather tiring...

I am afraid this will be rather a scrappy letter as I am writing it in the mess full of officers talking and waiting for dinner. I have brought back my new small gun and have already obtained some interesting specimens. It will certainly give me something to think about during the next two months although there are not now so many birds as there were a month ago. Two days ago there were flocks of geese flying south, but no-one managed to shoot one as they were very high up and did not settle.”

Three days later (21.10.1940) he reported: “Life is rather dull here at the moment, and I am beginning to get the feeling of being in a rut. The only thing that is changing is the weather. Today has been or ought to have been a red-letter day as we were scheduled to have a visit from Mr. Anthony Eden*. Unfortunately, however, he failed to find us in the desert, so we have no new news or gossip... I have not yet had any word about being promoted to Captain, but I expect it may take about a month to come through and in any case I will get the back pay sooner or later from Oct. 13th. A Captain in the R.A.M.C. gets about as much as a Major in the fighting branches. As a Captain I should get about £630 next year.” More on the subject of money matters followed, then: “This all sounds very mercenary and you know darlingest that I would much rather come home tomorrow than collect any more balance, but it is nice to find some bright spots to talk about.” He finished the letter with plans to have another baby soon.

On 26th October he wrote: “Egypt is an extraordinary country and I don’t think it is true to say that England has a more changeable climate than any other country. Today we are sweating just as if it were mid-summer with a wind full of sand. In fact it is pretty like the Khamsins we had in May. However, they don’t last long and it has begun to get clearer although it is still pretty hot. The days are slipping by fairly fast but nothing happens, and if it were not for the birds I should be completely bored... The only bright spot is that reinforcements are constantly arriving while the Italians are doing nothing, and we really seem to have air superiority now which is all to the good.”

“The other piece of news is that I believe I have discovered something which does Gippy tummy good, which is M & B. 693. It has certainly done good to all the cases I have tried so far, and if this continues it will be a great help in controlling one of the chief

* *The Secretary of State for War.*

nuisances to living out here. Major Thomas is now our second in command and brought back some butter and stilton when he returned off leave. This was a great treat as a change from margarine, which is our ordinary ration. Actually, we have been feeding rather well lately with the tinned food I brought back from Cairo with me, but these alas are now almost finished. I was looking through 'Country Life' the other day and came across these words: *'He who has once been happy is for aye out of destruction's reach'...* Thank goodness we were married when we were and thank God for little Harriet."

On 31st October he was finding the lack of activity difficult: "I am getting rather bored staying in the same place and, now that I have done nearly 6 months in the desert, I am beginning to feel that I have learnt all that this job can teach me. In fact I sometimes think I should rather change to a Field Ambulance just for the sake of new experience, although I should get even less medicine to do. However, I hardly ever see the A.D.M.S.[†] and have not made up my mind to make a special journey to see him, as I am now so well settled in with the gunners and know most of them by name. My friend Capt. Menzies, who was an R.M.O. for a year, has just been moved to a field ambulance so perhaps I shall be moved about the New Year. I was posted to this regiment on 10th January, so a year will soon be up, and I would rather be told to move than to ask."

"Very little has been happening here, but today we saw some Italian bombers for the first time for about a month, and have since heard that at least three of them were shot down quite close to us which has cheered us up... The Colonel is on leave which is rather pleasant as we can have more fun in the mess. We at the moment includes the adjutant Capt. Haughton, the assistant adjutant 2/Lt. Dick Judd and the Signal Officer Lt. Sam Hood. The latter has superseded Capt. Van den Bergh and is a good chap. He was a farmer in Oxfordshire before the war and educated at Pangbourne. He also has a wife and child at home, so we can grouse together about our hardships."



MAIDA'S FIRST LETTER OF October (1.10.1940) enclosed a studio photograph of herself and Harriet.

[†] Assistant Director of Medical Services.

On 3rd October she wrote again: "You will be amused to hear that I have acquired a bicycle. Miss McKnight, of Newnham, told me some time ago that she had one to sell for a pound, and I offered to buy it, but nothing more had happened. I thought the whole thing had lapsed when she turned up with it yesterday afternoon; we were all, including Adda and Harriet (the latter in a purely advisory capacity) in the orchard apple gathering, and it would have been hard to say whether Mamma, Adda or I looked the dirtiest and most untidy. She was therefore announced by Benskin who appeared with her dog, and we soon saw Miss McKnight following behind. I am quite pleased to have the bicycle as, although I can't bear the things and shall ride it very little and never at night, there are enough occasions when it would be really useful to be worth spending £1 on it, especially as Mamma had just given me that amount for my birthday... It is now sharing the garage with Griselda and Harriet's pram. As soon as I have time I must practice riding it as I haven't been on one for years."

News of the Bayne-Powells followed: "Their flat has been declared unsafe because of a time bomb, so Nancy has gone to Wales and he is camping in the basement of an empty house belonging to his father in Kensington. I think I shall write him a line and ask him to look up Augustin Jordan if he has time; they ought to get on well as they have many common interests."

"I think I told you, darling, I wrote to Patrick Bury with the same object, and had a letter back yesterday saying that unfortunately his Department of the Ministry of Supply has been moved to Warwick, but he will write and ask Augustin to go down there for a weekend, which is very kind of him considering he only met him once at a luncheon I gave in Paris. It will give you some idea of what railway travelling is like in England now when I tell you that Patrick found it quicker to go from Cambridge to Warwick on Sunday by bicycle. Even that took him from 9.30 a.m. to 7.15 p.m... I shall then feel I've done my best for Augustin for the moment. Poor thing, he must long for news from home without any hope of getting any." The final paragraph of this letter read: "DARLING, the postman has just brought five of your letters including three of the ones with one stamp."

On 5th October Maida started by thanking John for all the letters just received saying: "Now I evidently have the complete set of all your lovely letters, which is rather a triumph considering the adventurous journey they must have had by air and submarine infected seas and bombed ports. One thing that amused me



Maida with Harriet, September 1940.



Mamma, Harriet and Benskin the Pekinese at Queen Edith's Way 1940 when Harriet was 4 months old.

in the early letters was to hear of your exciting night drive to give medical attention to an officer called Simmonds, the son of a brewer. It was to their house that I was once taken to a dance by the Hodgsons... The whole house simply oozed money; we danced in a conservatory which made quite a big ballroom and Simmonds beer was liberally supplied throughout the evening."

After reporting an air raid alarm the previous night she continued: "As I want to leave no precaution undone with our precious little Harriet I always take her cot into the funk hole in the hall and sit there beside her; she scarcely ever wakes up now and I am fast developing the faculty which Napoleon is said to have had of sleeping at a moment's notice in any position... My new woolly pyjamas, though slightly uncomfortable in bed, are splendid for getting up at night; last night with them and a rug I was beautifully warm."

She had now finished reading John Buchan's autobiography: "At the end he says that the great service the Dictators have done has been to remind us of the real values of life... I always love to think, darling, that for you no war was necessary to teach you how to get the best out of life, since more than anyone I have ever

known you have the secret of finding happiness in the things that endure – mountains and birds and books (but not too many of them) and a life unencumbered with artificial pleasures. Thank God you taught me to find happiness in such things before I had settled down to liking things which give no lasting pleasure." She was also able to report: "Mamma is much better than she was a little while ago and is eating more. I am fine though I should like my waist measurement to be a little less. Harriet is so plump that she has no waist at all, and it is quite a job to keep her leggings up."

On 8th October Maida described walking: "...along to Trinity and through the Courts and back by way of Senate House, thinking all the time, my darling, of you and the last time we walked that way together just over a year ago, with me feeling so proud of you in uniform. Do you remember I told you I took a walk there in the spring too? This time it was almost as beautiful; the elms were shedding their golden leaves in the sun under the gusts of a stiffish breeze, and the grey-green of the willows looked very lovely in contrast. The river looked quiet and strong, and there was a pleasant autumnal smell in the air."

Two days later (10.10.40) she reported a worrying headline in the Times: *'German-Italian pincers on Egypt'*:

"The papers keep on saying a new attack by Italy is on the point of beginning, and in some ways I wish it would as the sooner it starts the sooner it will be over, and I have no doubt of the outcome." After a detailed account of Harriet's day, she told John that she had now received the Pension Refund from the Board of Education of £68.15.0. and had immediately set off on a shopping spree, purchasing presents all round and shoes for herself, ending by saying: "All this spending gave me a pleasant morning."

October 13th was the first anniversary of John enlisting as a soldier: "I wouldn't have had you stay behind in civilian life any more than you would have wanted to stay, and it makes me so proud and happy to think you have settled down so well to army life, and your letters have been such an encouragement to me as I have waited for you here at home. One great compensation for your having to go so far away has been our precious little Harriet, who would be still unborn if you hadn't become a soldier, and I know it will add so much to the happiness of your homecoming, darling, to think of her waiting for you with me."

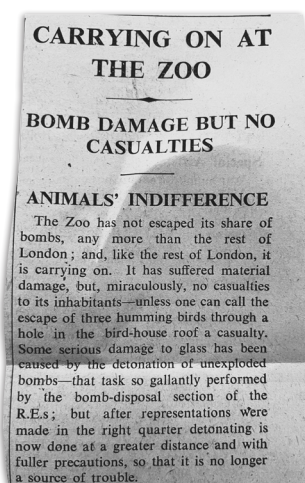
"Cambridge is full of refugees; presumably from London, drawn from every class of society, and it's amusing to see real East-enders bouncing about in its respectable streets. One family was pushing through the crowd waiting for the buses outside the Bank today, a small, grimy but very cheerful boy pushing a dilapidated pram with a little sister inside and a brother half in and half out with his legs protruding and administering hearty kicks to all the bus-waiters who got in his way. As I was on the other side of the pram I could appreciate the humour of the

situation. In the rear of the cavalcade came their mother, who was having some difficulty in keeping up, and who was crying in shrill tones *'Mike 'im git orf. Mike 'im git orf.'*"

On 20th October Maida had received a letter from Uncle Philip: "...saying he has had to leave his flat as all the windows were blown out and it became very cold. He writes from an address in Putney, c/o F. Hayes Esq. I wonder if he is a friend or if it is simply another set of digs. I do hope he will be all right. I wish he would move out of London, but the Londoners generally seem to prefer to stay where they are and face the music." This was followed on 23rd October by another letter from Augustin: "...who is still in London at the H.Q. of the Free French Force. He had been to lunch with Robert Bayne-Powell. I think I told you I wrote and asked him to look Augustin up... Robert in his letter said a bomb had dropped on a building where he was but he seemed more concerned by the cessation of London's intellectual life. Augustin never even mentioned the bombardment; he might as well have been writing from a country village."

In the same letter, Maida enclosed a Times cutting headed *'Carrying on at the Zoo — Bomb damage but no Casualties — Animals' Indifference.'* Of the really dangerous animals: *'...the poisonous snakes and spiders were all destroyed within a few hours of the declaration of war, since it was felt that if released they might elude capture.'* The only others in this category were the larger cats and the polar bears, which were safely shut up at night. *'The Zoo in fact is a microcosm of London. Hitler's bombs cause a certain amount of damage to it, and a considerable amount of inconvenience; but they have not destroyed the morale or the routine of its inhabitants, animal or human, and it continues to function with a very respectable degree of efficiency.'*

On 26th October: "I have had a letter from poor Uncle Philip saying he now has to move all his furniture and offering us some. I have written to say we would love it, and offering to get a remover from Cambridge to fetch it all and store it somewhere in the town if he likes. When things are normal again he can have it back if he wants it or it can be sorted out between us and the others. I hear that London removers are so busy they won't undertake any jobs without about a month's notice, and if it were here I could at least keep an eye on it for him... I wish he would move somewhere right out of London to somewhere a bit more restful." A few days later (29.10.1940) she had heard from him again confirming that they were definitely to have the furniture: "I feel awful in a way having it when he has no home now but it is sweet of him to give it to us."



Cutting from The Times, October 1940.

CHAPTER 5

Sidi Barrani

1940



NOVEMBER 1940 IN EGYPT began with John still stuck in the desert awaiting action but feeling more cheerful despite the approach of winter. On 8th November he thanked Maida for sending wires as well as letters as these arrived much more quickly, so providing up-to-date news: "I have moved to a new place again and am now living temporarily with the Quartermaster Mr Studley and the Signal Officer, Sam Hood. The change has done me good and I am feeling full of beans... I now have a couple of split barrels rigged up over my bed in case we have a deluge in the night, but I am hoping the stories of floods at this time of year are rather exaggerated. It is dark now by six o'clock in the evening so letter writing is easier... In my present position I can finish my work by lunch time which will be a nice change. I have a scheme for doing a little medical research on the troops to find out if their diet is lacking in Vitamin C or not. Many people argue about it and say that the sores they get are due to a vitamin deficiency, though personally I am sceptical... This is of course only an idea at present but, if I do get the opportunity, I will try to carry it out."

On 11th November he was delighted to receive four letters from Maida sent between 17th to 27th September "...and bringing me such lots of news and love and four snapshots of you, my precious, with Harriet... We are all in good spirits today as news of the rout of the Italian Divisions in Greece has just come through." He also returned to the subject of Harriet's christening: "Darlingest, I blame myself for not writing about it sooner and for leaving you in the lurch about it for so long. I shall not mind if she has already been christened but am still hoping that I may

be able to be present at the ceremony. I feel it will do no harm to wait up till a year after her birthday and there is still a chance I may be home in the spring. You will understand, darling, I think a christening without papa is all wrong, and though I should like her to be a Christian, I don't believe it will make any difference to her until she is grown up. In fact, I presume the chief reason for baptising children in infancy is that it is less trouble as they don't know what is going on. I suppose the church would think this heresy, but I am convinced that Christianity is primarily a code for our behaviour in the world."

Three days later (14.11.40): "Yesterday I finished my work early and made a trip in to see George Geddes and get one or two special things I wanted. I found him ... rather sore because they won't give him a specialist's pay although he is doing the job of a surgical specialist. He is still a lieutenant like myself: we presume we shall have to wait another month probably before we get a third pip, as the mail and official workings take such a long time. I rather envy him as he is his own boss and can do as he likes. He gets a good many operations to do and has done an appendix and an amputation for me in the last few months."

"I also had a bathe in a beautiful little cove. It was quite chilly but even so not so cold as that perfect bathe we had on Coquet Island. It did me a lot of good, and you would have laughed to see my towel after I had dried as it was the first total immersion I had had since my last leave. This afternoon I visited Major Morison, the deputy A.D.M.S. and talked to him about the chance of a job. The net result was that I have decided to stay where I am at present. The only alternative apparently is to go to another regiment, where I should have to start again doing the job I have done here getting things into shape in the last six months. It may mean signing on for another

six months but at any rate I know everyone here and know my way about.”

“I was so surprised, darling, to hear you had bought some pyjamas after being such a die-hard nightie wearer. I am still wearing pyjamas here though I have scrapped the thin ones. Some officers have scrapped theirs as it is so cold undressing at night in an arctic breeze and so much easier to go to bed in a shirt. I still wash my teeth and shave before breakfast, but my cut-throat has temporarily fallen into disuse and I use a Gillette as being less trouble... We are not going to wear serge at all this winter so my clothes bill will be nil. It seems funny to think that I have not worn civilian clothes for over six months, and that I shall still have all my old favourites ready to wear when I come home. There is still no activity here worse luck, but the Fleet Air Arm attack on Taranto has cheered us all up.”

This comment referred to a recent British strike on the Italian navy²⁴. When the Italians joined the war they were easily able to supply their troops in North Africa, which for them was a relatively short journey. In contrast, the British supply ships to Egypt had to traverse almost the entire Mediterranean. Although the British initially controlled the sea lanes, the tables had turned by mid-1940 when the Italians outnumbered them in every class of ship except aircraft carriers. It was important to reduce their naval strength before Germany arrived in support.

Royal Navy leaders therefore planned an aerial attack on the Italian fleet base at Taranto, a strategic port inside the ‘heel’ of Italy. Reconnaissance flights from nearby Malta in early November confirmed that the Italian fleet (6 battleships, 7 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers and 8 destroyers) was at Taranto. The attack went ahead on the night of 11th November, involving 21 biplane torpedo bombers from the navy’s aircraft carrier armed with either torpedoes or flares and bombs. The torpedoes had been especially modified to enable dropping from a very low altitude to make them effective in the shallow water of Taranto harbour, representing a first in naval warfare. The attack succeeded in sinking one battleship and badly damaging two others and a heavy cruiser. This halved the Italian battleship fleet in the Mediterranean and caused the Italians to withdraw most of their remaining ships further north to Naples, so relieving pressure on the British supply lines.

On 16th November John sent instructions about paying his Life Insurance premium and explained that it was impossible for him to send any Christmas

cards this year. He went on: “It is grand to think that Augustin Jordan has had the guts to leave his family and fight for freedom... and I am glad you have done everything possible to help him. Tomorrow being Sunday I am giving myself a day off from my 40-mile round. I find it gets so monotonous when one goes on day in day out without any weekend. In any case there are very few sick now and I have not had to send anyone into hospital this last week.”

A few days later (21.11.1940) they had been moved to a new position: “...which has made writing difficult again as I am attached to one of the troops.” Cross reference to the War Diaries⁸ indicates that John was with R.H.A. “C” Battery at Bir el Mumin, stationed in the desert about 40 miles southwest of Mersa Matruh, and they were again actively engaging the Italians. “However the change has done me good and I feel better for it, as I usually do. Besides the gunners, I am looking after small detachments of several other units. The last two days we have seen two thrilling air battles between our own and Italian fighters and have seen two Italian and one British fighter shot down. It is really the most thrilling display it is possible to watch and goes on for much longer than I had expected. In fact, seeing that about twelve machines were engaged each time, it is surprising that more damage was not done. We have not been bombed at all recently, and I am sure, darling, I am just as safe here as you are in Cambridge. I am not quite so hopeful as I was about getting home next spring, but our position is slowly improving and one never knows when a sudden change for the better may happen.”

On 25th November John wrote saying: “I have no special news today, so I will tell you how I have spent my day. We are wakened before the first glimmer of dawn about 5.30 a.m. when the vehicles move out and disperse in case of attack. I do not have to get up then and usually have no difficulty in sleeping until about 7.0 when the sun rises. When I see the sun coming over the horizon I get out of bed and dress. I have now started to sleep in my clothes as we may have to move at night. I only gave up my pyjamas with great regret as I like to cling to civilised habits, but it is the only sensible thing to do and now I have got used to it. Actually I sleep in my shirt and shorts... because I have no clean long trousers and am now putting off washing clothes until I go on leave.”

“Having put on an army pullover, army stockings and boots, I proceed to shave, wash my teeth and brush my hair. I shave in a cupful of water which my driver heats up on our little petrol stove. I balance a

little mirror on the side of my truck and use a sort of long counter along the side of my vehicle to put my things on. This operation is now rather chilly as the wind in the early morning is very keen. By 7.30 I am ready and go across to the mess where breakfast is usually already ready. At present breakfasts are jolly good and consist of two fried eggs and a sausage, and tinned tomatoes if you like them. We have tea and plenty of bread and marmalade and usually marmalade."

"After breakfast I get in my truck and tour round the district from truck to truck, treating anyone who requires it. I have finished by 1.0 o'clock having travelled about 20 miles and seen about 35 patients, almost all of them with sores on the hands. No one has been ill enough to send into hospital for the last two weeks. I still occasionally do a minor operation, such as removing a nail for a whitlow, which have all been successful up to date. We have lunch about one, which consists here of just one plateful of hot food, usually meat and potatoes followed by bread and cheese. In the afternoons I can do what I like. Yesterday I skinned the latest addition to the birds I have collected; today I read a book for an hour and then went out to visit Lieut. Heycock who is R.M.O. to a nearby unit... I am glad to say I think my methods of treatment must be more successful than his judging by the number of cases he has to send in."

"I came back for a cup of tea at 4.30 and am now writing this letter at 6.30 in our little mess, which is a canvas-over-metal framework measuring about 10 ft. by 6ft with a table in the middle and a little electric light in the roof. There are five other officers in the mess including Geoffrey Goschen, who is now a Major commanding the battery. We shall have dinner about 7.30 and then walk across in the dark to the wireless to hear the news at 8.0 o'clock. We then return for a drink and a talk and turn in about 9.0 or 10.0. It gets dark about 5.30 and we are now wearing overcoats which keep us pretty warm. It is very nippy at nights but I manage to keep warm on my lie-low with three blankets and my overcoat on top and a blanket and eiderdown underneath. My head canopy which I had constructed during my last leave is coming in very useful and keeps the wind off my neck."

"We have still had no rain but there are more clouds and this makes the sunsets and sunrises more interesting. The desert is just beginning to show some colour. Some of the dead tufts of herbage have become quite suddenly a purple colour rather like heather... The colour comes from minute little five-petalled flowers which sprout out from the apparently dead stem. The petals are like

waxy paper, almost transparent; their only moisture must come from the dew, which is at present rather heavy. The hummocks of these flowers are dotted about 6 ft. apart, the intervening ground being stony gravel. I have now collected 8 bird skins to verify their identity in Cairo... I now know the names of all the small birds I see every day, though there were a great many more whose identity I did not know during the autumn migration."

"I am finishing this after the news, which is encouraging. Colonel Campbell has been in to dinner and is trying to help me. I may get a more comfortable vehicle before long. However, I am feeling content at the moment as I think this job is doing me more good than a rather junior house surgeon's job in Cairo, which is the only alternative. I am now almost the most senior R.M.O. in the Division. I am very well with no sores or indigestion and the flies have almost disappeared. I can't help thinking that the most hopeless part of our separation is now over and that every day now will bring some tangible evidence of a British victory."

Five days later (30.11.1940): "I have been moving about a lot lately, and the weather has broken up completely at last... we had several heavy showers of rain, and today we are having a mild dust storm. The wind comes from the west and is very cold in the early morning... I manage to keep beautifully warm at night with our opened tar barrel to keep the wind off. I am hoping to start my journey back on leave tomorrow and am looking forward to seeing new faces and talking to different people." In this letter he also asked for information about P.O. Savings and National Savings Certificates: "I am completely ignorant on the subject as I have never been able to save money before. I am sorry darling you have had to give up wearing silk stockings. I fell in love with your pretty ankles the very first time I saw them by the light of the standard lamp at your Newnham tea party. I had no idea that I should one day be the lucky man who would love the rest of you too."



AT THE START OF November (1.11.1940) Maida wrote from the funk-hole offering encouragement: "Darling, even if there are difficulties we will surmount them together, and I'm so glad you are still as determined as ever to go on and become a surgeon. I wouldn't have had you stay behind at the beginning

of the war; I shall never cease to be proud of you for going straight away as you did without counting the cost, and though you may be losing a certain amount of experience of air raid wounds, I am sure you are right in feeling that what you are gaining in experience of men will more than compensate for it. So long as you are safe, my darling, that's all I care about. I would have been very worried if you had been in London now, and as for what I should have felt like if you had been in the Dunkirk show just before Harriet was born just doesn't bear thinking of. I am thankful you were spared that, darling, and so many were taken prisoner at that time; it would have been terrible if that had happened to you. So we have many mercies to be thankful for."

On 7th November Maida told John that Uncle Philip's bombed out furniture was being fetched next week. November 14th was the first anniversary of John's departure for Egypt, and like John she was cheered up by news of the Naval victory at Taranto: "Last night the air raid warning sounded at dinner for the first time for nine days. Mamma said: 'How nice to hear the sirens', which may seem paradoxical but one feels that someone is at any rate on the look-out for the Germans, who usually lately have visited us unannounced... Last Saturday there was a roar of engines and a series of bomb explosions which felt as if they were in the garden. Actually, they were at the far end of that lane with the walnut trees leading down from the Strangeways Institute towards Trumpington Road, and they fell in a neat line across a beet field, eleven of them. The annoying thing about these visitations without warning is that one doesn't know when to assume the raiders are past ... Adda feels a bit nervy when they are about and won't eat any supper."

The following week Maida had a bad cold and sent little news. Her letter of 25th November described going to see Uncle Philip's furniture. There were several pieces of Buhl*, a bronze bust and figure of Uncle Philip on horseback and a portrait of Cromwell, which Maida had always admired. "It is exciting to think of having it in our drawing room one day against the pale grey walls we have always looked forward to." She had received the Cheltenham Ladies' College Annual Report in which Harriet's birth had been announced. It also included an account of the upheavals the school had been through, with most of its buildings being taken over by the War Office. The



Bust of Colonel Philip Bulman, D.S.O. (Uncle Philip) made while on service in India in the 1880s.

few remaining included the swimming pool, where the cubicles had been converted into tutorial rooms and the towel room into the Principal's study.

Maida also reported receiving a letter from Augustin asking if she could send a telegram to his mother to try to get some news. The Jordan family home at the Chateau d'Alivet near Grenoble was now in the region of France being run by the Vichy Government: "He didn't like to involve her in any difficulties by sending one himself, and he was so worried at having no news since August and didn't think his letters could have arrived. I hadn't much hope of getting an answer, but I sent the wire off on Friday afternoon, and it was all too easy. An answer came back on Sunday after lunch by telephone, in fact it came twice as two different girls got hold of it. It was rather difficult to grasp the message as the girls were far from good linguists and insisted on spelling it out very fast — 'B for boy, N for Nellie, N for Nellie, E, N for Nellie... at which point I collapsed into giggles and said 'For heaven's sake, stop saying N for Nellie and send me a copy in the morning'. However, I did manage to get the words 'Bonnes nouvelle'† so I was

* Veneered French furniture inlaid with elaborate tortoiseshell and brass designs.

† Good news.

able to let Augustin know by telegram that all was evidently well with them, and I sent him on the copy which arrived this morning.”

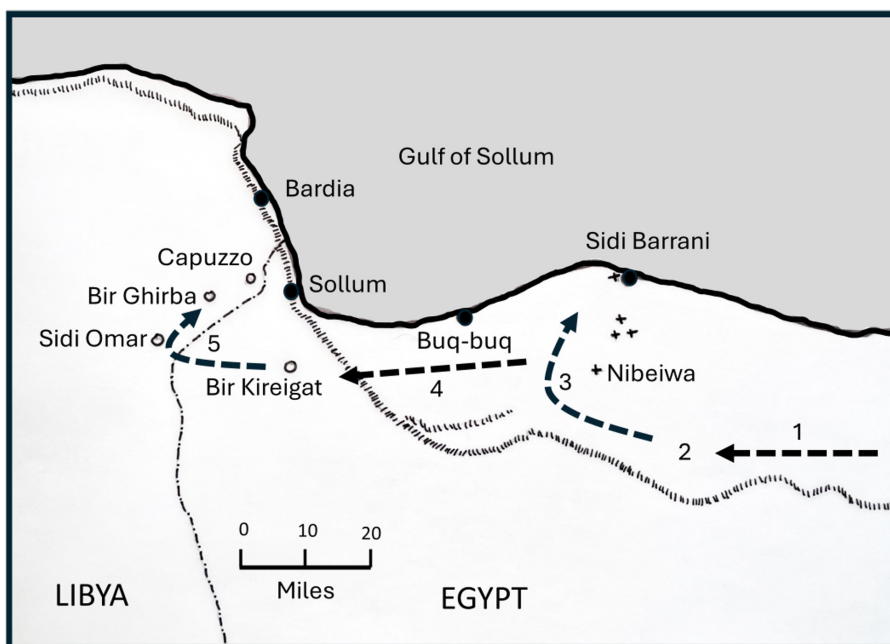
In her letter of 28th November Maida described Harriet’s feeding, with sieved vegetable now being added to porridge and soup: “A gypsy came to the door this morning... I like gypsies, so I gave her 6d. and she wanted to tell my fortune which I refused, but she said: *‘I can see in your face you have a good husband, dear.’*” She had been to an enjoyable ‘At home’ for old students at Newnham College. Adda had been into Cambridge: “...to inspect the crashed Messerschmitt which is on view in the Corn Exchange as part of the propaganda for Cambridge War Weapons Week.”



AT THE BEGINNING OF December 1940, the Allied troops were in final preparation for Operation Compass, the first major British attack of the Western Desert Campaign. The Egyptian port of Sidi Barrani was of key strategic importance but had been occupied

by the Italian 10th Army since their invasion in September. General Wavell (Middle East Command) had therefore prepared a plan to recapture it. The Western Desert Force (W.D.F.) was commanded by Lieutenant-General O’Connor and comprised the 7th Armoured Division, including the 4th R.H.A. under Lt-Colonel Campbell, together with the 4th Indian Infantry Division and the 16th Infantry Brigade^{8,18}. At the beginning of December the Regimental Diary reported that “C” Battery 4th R.H.A. was harassing the Italians at two of their fortified camps situated inland from Sidi Barrani.

The original plan for the W.D.F. was for a five-day raid, capable of being extended if successful. The main activity started on the night of 7th December when the troops made a forced march of seventy miles under cover of darkness to reach a point just a few miles back from the Italian lines. They then had to spend both the day of 8th December and the subsequent night motionless in the open desert in icy winter weather. Fortunately, they were not spotted by either reconnaissance planes or Italian patrols and so remained undetected. Meanwhile British planes passed over to bomb the Libyan airfields and



Map 6. The Battle of Sidi Barrani. (1) The Western Desert Force approached the muster area overnight on 7th December. (2) The day of 8th December was spent waiting in the open desert. (3) The 4th R.H.A. was part of the successful attack on Sidi Barrani on 9th December. (4) On 13th December the R.H.A. engaged the Italians again near Bir Kireigat. (5) They then crossed the Frontier wire into Libya, attacking an enemy position at Sidi Omar on 16th December before resting at Bir Ghirba on 17th and 18th December. + Italian fortified positions.

succeeded in damaging many enemy aircraft and in keeping the Italian air force pinned to the ground. The Royal Navy also approached the coast in readiness to begin a bombardment at first light.

The Battle of Sidi Barrani began on the morning of 9th December. The role of the 7th Armoured Division as a whole was to carry out an encircling movement across the road linking Sidi Barrani to Sollum, so preventing enemy reinforcements from reaching the area. They also had to contain the enemy forces while the Indian Division destroyed four fortified Italian camps. The 4th R.H.A. was part of a northwestern advance beginning at 06.15 hrs on 9th December, passing to the west of Nibeiwa camp to prevent interference with the Indian Division attack. During this advance they were shelled by two hostile batteries. Although many of the soldiers received flesh wounds from splinters, only 11 men were seriously wounded of which 6 had to be evacuated. The whole troop was praised for its coolness and presence of mind in a very disadvantageous position against an enemy that was well dug in. Action continued on 10th December but then the Battery withdrew to Ghot Shalludi in the morning of 11th December.

Returning to John, he wrote to Maida on 2nd December, himself unaware of these plans: "My own sweetheart — I am not going on leave today after all, as leave has been temporarily suspended. However, I have had a compensation, as your Balaclava and gloves have arrived this morning; darling, they are exactly right. I have tried them on and they fit beautifully without being tight. I think I shall sleep in the Balaclava as my head gets cold in the early morning; the only thing against it is that it makes you feel so cold when you take it off in the morning."

"As it is I am back at R.H.Q. but things are rather disorganised. I came back here after handing over my medical equipment to a relieving M.O. and did not know that my leave was cancelled until I arrived, so at the moment I have nothing with me to practise my trade. I have not seen our Colonel yet but am hoping he will let me reclaim my truck — otherwise I shall spend a week on leave in the desert without any transport or medical equipment... We are all in pretty good heart and reinforcements arrive continually... I have news that a cable has arrived for me which I expect was from you, my darling, but unfortunately it went up to the front as I came back, so I shall not get it until tomorrow."

The next letter on 5th December was written just before he moved forward with the regiment to

wait for their attack on the Italian forces, although it contained no hint of the excitement ahead. John had been reminiscing with other officers about earlier Christmases at home: "My own little darling — Winter has come in earnest today and I have been wearing my overcoat all day long to keep warm from the bitter southwest wind. It has also been cloudy all day but we have had no rain yet. Personally, I much prefer it to the hot weather; it is easier to keep clean when you don't sweat and the flies have practically disappeared... getting up is certainly chilly, but no more so than some of that cold weather we had together at Terry Road. I shall never forget that last day of term two years ago when we packed up and made for Cambridge just in time to avoid being snowed up. It was the first married Christmas we had spent together, darling, and certainly the happiest in my life. I am now beginning to look forward to Christmas 1941, which I am sure will be happier still after such a trial as we are undergoing at present. I am even optimistic enough to think that by the time this reaches you the end of Italy will be in sight, which will be the first step on the road."

He managed to write again on 11th December during the rest period following the attack on Sidi Barrani, although he was very limited in what he could say: "My own darling — We have just returned a little way after giving the Italians 'what-for' for two days. I am quite safe and well and the regiment has had no fatal casualties although some have had close shaves. The weather has been rather unpleasant, very cold at nights and dust storms in the middle of the day, but it has been well worth it. I am wondering what will have happened by the time this reaches you. I live in hopes but I afraid we may have to wait a bit before finishing them off."

"It is a long time since I had any letters but I am expecting one any day now, my sweetheart, and I received your wire sent off on Dec. 5th several days ago. Darling, I wish I could send you a wire as I know it is a long time since you had one, but it is quite impossible at the moment... I am afraid it may be a week or more yet before I get my leave as operations are still going on, but I will send one or get one sent at the first possible moment... It is more than eight weeks since my last leave and I am badly in need of a wash and brush up. I now have no clean clothes to put on as all the last lot of washing I sent back was lost — not very valuable but very annoying, as it is unpleasant doing one's own washing in this cold weather, and impossible at present as we are ready to move at any

minute and water is always precious. I am praying that this is the beginning of the end of Mussolini — what a day that will be. We must live in faith and hope a little longer. It is terribly hard, but we will win, my beloved. Your own John for always.”

The Regimental Diary⁸ reports that two days later there had been some reorganisations within the army. On 13th December R.H.A. “B” Troop “C” Battery became part of the 4th Armoured Brigade and were active throughout the day about 6 miles N.E. of Bir Kireigat. At 23.30 hrs they crossed the Frontier wire into Libya to Bir El Haraga and continued advancing the following day, under heavy bombardment. On 16th December it was discovered that an enemy position at Sidi Omar was still being held in strength and the 4th R.H.A. was withdrawn to attack this at first light in support of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment. Following heavy shelling the British troops were able to capture the fort area and the enemy commander surrendered. That night “C” Battery moved on to Bir Ghirba where they rested on 17th and 18th December, with the records saying that the weather continued bitterly cold with a sharp frost.

On 15th December John himself was clearly under fire. He had scribbled down notes of the bombing they were being subjected to written on the back of an envelope of a letter from Maida postmarked 18th October. These read: 10.00 am, 3 bombers, 3 bombers. 10.15, 3 bombers, 3 bombers. 10.20, 3 bombers, 3 bombers. 10.30, 24 fighters. 10.45, 6 fighters. 1 lorry burnt.

He was next able to write on 17th December, the day after the successful capture of Sidi Omar: “My own darlingest — This is just a short note written in the back of my truck which is the only possible place as the mess is not allowed to be put up during the daylight. I have just received five of your October letters, sweetheart, which are so full of faith and cheerfulness that I feel so proud of my little wife. Operations are still in progress but I am expecting any day to get on leave and send you a wire to tell you how well and happy I am that we have dealt the Italians a whacking blow and driven them out of Egypt. I cannot tell you about all the excitements we have had but I am sure I shall remember it all and tell you sometime next year when we are together again.”

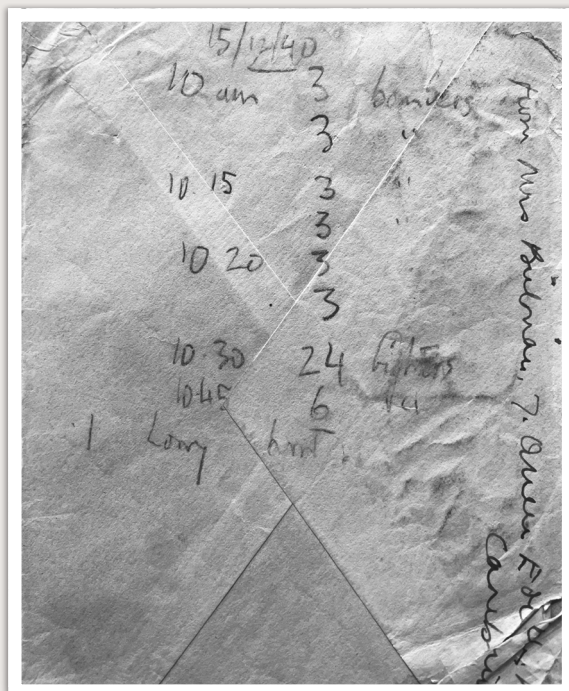
“The weather as I feared is bitterly cold especially at night. The wind goes through you like a knife and numbs my nose when we move by night in the moonlight. I have not taken off the balaclava you made me for several days and nights. I have acquired some Italian ground sheets to make a bivouac at night now,

which makes me nice and warm. In spite of it I am in the best of health and spirits as I feel we are getting on with the war at last. I see a lot of the morning star as I know it is time to get up when I see it getting above the horizon. We breakfast in the dark at 6 a.m. It is lovely to think that you are also looking at it then. I am sure I shall know all about Harriet when I get home, sweetheart, and will feel as if I had known her ever since she was born. I love you to tell me about her.”

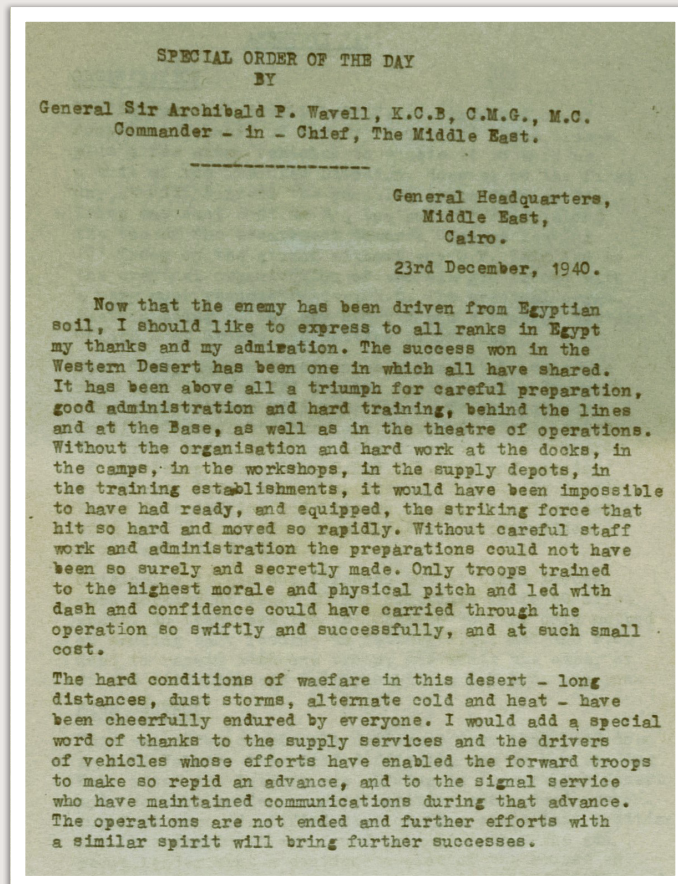
He next wrote on 20th December: “This will be another short note to tell you that I am alive and kicking and feel as well as the infernal cold wind will let me. Today is really arctic in temperature with a strong west wind. In fact today is as unpleasantly cold as June 20th was hot. There was definitely some ice on a bowl of water left out last night, and it certainly feels just as cold as the coldest day I have ever been out in England. As we are continuously moving it is impossible to make any shelters or heating arrangements, and I really don’t know how some of the men are sticking it. Our latest successes have cheered everyone up and made them ready to put up with a little extra discomfort. There does not seem any prospect of getting back to Cairo this month. We are living on bully and biscuits now which is another trial almost as bad as the cold. However, all this is easy to bear when I think that the beginning of the end of this part of the war is in sight, perhaps sooner than we thought possible a month ago. We did not expect to take the offensive until next spring, and the past fortnight has been a glorious surprise.”

“I have just been reading your last lot of letters, sweetheart, which cheer me up so much... you say you can cheerfully go on waiting for me until I come home, which is just what I wanted to know most in all the world, darlingest... I am worrying today because I can’t see any way of getting a wire back to you for Christmas but, if it is possible to find someone going back, I will get one off. I shall be terribly disappointed if you go without any news and I know you will be just a bit worried after all the fighting out here. I am feeling a bit numbed by the cold today but I am sure the weather will change for the better in a day or two. I love you darling with all my being. Every day’s news is good news at present. Your own adoring John.” At some point he did indeed manage to send a telegram which reached Cambridge on 29th December.

By this time the initial five-day short raid by the Western Desert Force had become a major victory. The Italian 10th Army had crowded onto the coast road during their retreat from Sidi Barrani and Buq



John's notes on the back of an envelope while experiencing Italian bombing on 15th December 1940.



Message to the troops from General Wavell following their success in December 1940. Extract from War Diary 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery WO 169/246.⁸

Buq and became easy targets for navy bombardment. During the capture of Sidi Barrani the Allied forces had taken 38,300 prisoners including four generals together with 73 tanks and 237 guns for the loss of just 624 men who were killed, wounded or missing. General O'Connor was now keen to press on as rapidly as possible in pursuit of the remaining Italians who were retreating towards Bardia, a key port in Libya, via Fort Capuzzo and Sollum.

O'Connor wanted to block the coast road, called the Via Balbia, between Bardia and Tobruk before the Italians could get there, so trapping them in Bardia¹⁸. This was indeed achieved by the 4th Armoured Brigade, who reached the Via Balbia on 14th December. There was then a brief lull while O'Connor tried to organise his supply line back to the Egyptian

base at Mersa Matruh. Churchill sent a telegram to General Wavell, to congratulate him for the success at Sidi Barrani and on 23rd December Wavell in turn passed his own thanks on to the troops for all that they had achieved in a pre-Christmas message⁸.

The Regimental Diaries report that the 4th R.H.A. moved again on 21st December, once more under heavy bombardment⁸. Three days later on Christmas Eve John was still stuck in the desert: "So far there has been no sign of leave but things are rather quieter now and I live in hopes. I had a lovely surprise yesterday when four of your letters arrived and two Christmas cards from you and Mamma; darlingest; how clever of you to send them off just at the right time so that I am the only officer in the mess to get one here before Christmas... but even more exciting than

the Christmas cards were the snapshots. It does me so much good to see you are happy and well.”

He wrote again on Christmas Day: “We have just had our Christmas breakfast. For the last three weeks we have had little else but bully and biscuits with no bread or vegetables. However our adjutant, who is sick in Cairo, fortunately sent us a hamper which arrived yesterday, so we have had a lovely treat this morning of fried ham and tomatoes with white biscuits and butter and marmalade instead of the army biscuits which are very dull. I miss the bread most of all with eggs as a close second. I am continuing this letter after lunch and feeling more replete than for ages. We have no turkey, but we had ham (this time cold) plus lettuce and fresh tomatoes.”

“I spent the morning testing the water from a local well for poisons etc. The water we are supplied with is very salty, so we have been trying to source locally. I shall not be able to attend Communion today as the nearest padre is miles away and we don’t know where he is. Still I have been thinking of you and looking forward to next Christmas. I kept your last letter of Nov. 8th to open this morning as a Christmas present. I am amused at you reminding me of wearing a vest day and night, as now I have easily broken all my previous records. I have not had my trousers off since the 9th. This is due to the fact that I have no clean ones to put on as they got lost in the wash. I don’t know how long this state of affairs will go on; we are hoping Bardia will fall very shortly, but we really don’t know much more about it than you as we get the news from the wireless as you do. In spite of everything darling I am much happier this Christmas than last as I feel we are getting on with things and I hate having lots of parties without you... We shall soon be listening to the King’s broadcast which will reach us at 4.0 p.m.”

On 28th December: “We are still in the same place as on Christmas Day and feeling slightly fed up, partly because of inactivity and partly because a sandstorm is blowing round us this afternoon... Yesterday was about the first decent day we have had in December, warm and sunny with very little wind. At midday I took off all my clothes and sponged myself down and washed my hair. I only had about a couple of pints of water as we are chronically short of it, but I felt a new man afterwards. My only trouble was that my towel is now so dirty that it puts on more dirt than it removes... I am rather afraid the Germans will have another attempt at invading England. Thank goodness, Cambridge is some way from the sea, my precious one.”

“You cheer me up when you say we will surmount all future difficulties together. I am sure I shall be able to do surgery one day if I have your help. I have acquired a set of Italian operating instruments which I am carting round with me. They are unfortunately not made of stainless steel but may be quite useful in spite of that, if only I can get them home. The desert here is very dull — no sign of anything flowering and no new birds. A day or two ago I drove up to a Marsh Harrier before it flew away, such a beautiful bird. I have never had a better view of one even from the hide at Horsey Mere where I waited two hours for the hen to return to the nest. Darling, I love you with all my heart and am so proud of little Harriet. I hope she will have been immunised against diphtheria by the time this reaches you. All love precious one. Your own adoring John.”



IN CONTRAST TO ALL this activity on the Egyptian border, Maida commented that the first three December letters she sent were very dull. This was partly because Mamma and Adda were both ill with gastroenteritis, so she was almost too busy to write. When she next wrote on 10th December news of the advance in the Western Desert had come through on the radio: “At 6.0 p.m. yesterday Mamma told me that she had heard on the news that your advance against the Italians has begun at dawn. My darling, you can imagine what my feelings were and still are to think of you in what is bound to be a big battle.” This left Maida anxious although she was confident that she would be informed if anything were seriously wrong with him. She was also delighted that the news was so good, hearing the following day that Sidi Barrani had already been captured.

On 13th December she wrote saying: “Today we have heard in greater detail the thrilling news of the victory of Sidi Barrani; darlingest, I know you must be very proud to be serving in such a splendid army, and I am so happy too, if only I could be sure you are safe and well. I long and long for news, though I know it must be some time yet before you can possibly let me have a cable. I wonder so much what you are doing and what work you have just now. The papers say there are bad sandstorms which must be terribly trying. I wonder what you are doing at this

moment. You ought to be asleep but perhaps you are too busy for that; perhaps I shall have to wait till you come home for a real account of all your doings. Oh darling, the thought that perhaps the happy day of your homecoming is brought nearer by all this fighting helps me to bear the anxiety of not knowing how you are getting on in the midst of it all. My thoughts and love are with you always.”

By this time Adda was better, but Mamma was still poorly: “One good thing about Adda’s illness was that having been forced to stay in bed through one very distant air raid, because she wasn’t well enough to come downstairs, she now realises the stupidity of coming down in the cold and wearing herself out sitting up in the kitchen whenever the sirens go, which is what she has been doing. Last night we had an alert lasting from 10.00 till 4.00 a.m., and she and Mamma did what I have been doing for weeks i.e. took no notice but simply went on sleeping, which was much the best thing, as no bombs were dropped at all as far as we could hear.”

Maida went into Cambridge for shopping but: “I don’t feel a bit like Christmas, darling, without you, in fact none of us do, and we aren’t going to take much notice of it, and I am giving very few presents. Tomorrow Augustin Jordan comes for a night’s leave. He wired a couple of days ago to ask if he could come, and though it will be rather a strain, especially with Mamma not feeling too good, we felt it would be unkind not to let him come as we had said he could come any time and this is his first leave. It will be strange to see him again; so much has happened since we last met in Paris — apart from political events, I feel quite a different person, having met you again, darling, and married you and been made so very, very happy. I have always regarded Augustin with the completely unsentimental liking of a kind of honorary cousin: so it will be nice to tell him about you, darling, and hear about all his adventures, which must have been quite exciting; though all the time I shall be thinking far, far more about what you are doing.”

The next day she was writing at 5.30 a.m.: “I don’t think I’ve ever written to anyone in the world at this time of day, or rather time of night. You must just be beginning another day now, though ours hasn’t begun yet. I can hear the wind roaring outside, and it is very cold, not that it is ever very warm at this time, and the drawing room looks rather cheerless with the ashes of the dead fire in the grate, but the real emptiness is inside me, darling, where there is such a longing to have my sweetheart back again.”

“Saturday night 10 p.m. The house is quiet once more after a full day; the loveliest thing that has happened is that I had one of your precious letters this morning, written on October 26th. When you wrote it nothing was happening, and you sounded as if you were all a little bored, so it is strange to read it now when so much is going on — the fighting you have all been waiting for and all your thrilling successes.” Augustin had duly arrived and had reported that his brother and brother-in-law were both prisoners. He was still at de Gaulle’s Headquarters in London acting as Liaison Officer with the Foreign Office but hoped soon to be sent to the Middle East.

On 17th December Maida wrote: “I can’t tell you how much I long to hear that you are safe and well amongst all the dangers and discomforts of the battle; my own sweetheart, I am so very proud to think that you are taking part in such a splendid action, but I can’t help worrying although I still feel that so far you are all right.” Three of John’s letters had arrived to cheer her up: “The sandstorms and rainstorms must be so terrible, as well as all the suffering and noise; but I do hope that the exhilaration of being so splendidly victorious helps you to forget it all, and I am sure you are glad to have work to do, darling, as I know how you hate marking time.” Like John she was remembering their happy Christmas holiday together in 1938: “I look forward to future Christmases when we shall be happy together again.”

On 19th December she was able to report: “Tonight I feel so much better and the invalids are well again, the Christmas cards and letters dispatched, and there are no visitors in the offing so that I look forward to a succession of peaceful days, which will be very pleasant.” She had been to a christening in Trinity Chapel, followed by a large tea party. One of the guests was Dr. Canney, a local G.P. and gynaecologist: “He thought you were to be envied for being in Egypt from the medical point of view. I said I thought you had been feeling rather out of touch with surgery, but Dr. Canney said that war really brings surgery to a standstill and anyway most of the doctors, civil and military, in this country are now having rather a tough time. Dr. Canney’s son is doing his first house job at U.C.H.*, and they have hardly any patients. Several days after bombs had fallen quite close they had no water, gas or sanitation, and the house men’s meals were cooked on a brazier outside on the pavement. Everyone was very sympathetic over my anxiety for

* University College Hospital in London

you, darling, but they all told me not to worry.”

It was difficult to be cheerful at Christmas without John, but Harriet was a great comfort: “I am going to put her presents in one of your red socks and see if she will take them out herself at playtime on Christmas Day. She will like the colour of the sock anyway.” On Christmas Day Maida went to church in the morning: “After our midday Christmas dinner Harriet opened her presents. I never really expected that she would enjoy them much and filled her stocking chiefly to cheer up the rest of us, but to our surprise she was simply thrilled. I only wish it had been possible to take a photograph of her with all her things round her. I put down her mat in the drawing room and gave her my present first, the powder bowl and puff. She liked it quite but specially enjoyed crinkling the tissue paper it was wrapped in. In your stocking she had the cup and saucer etc. your mother sent her, which she liked very much and used tonight for her barley, and a pink rattle in the shape of a bell sent by Tricka, which was also much appreciated.”

“Mamma gave her a Savings Certificate, but the real favourite was Adda’s present of a lovely woolly lamb about 9” high and very cuddly with a squeak in his tummy. He had to have a name of course, and I instantly thought of a new novel by Robert Graves which I had seen reviewed called ‘Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth’, so he was called Sergeant Lamb, which suits him very well I think... Harriet loves him dearly and spent a long time cuddling him... She will soon be able to sit right up without support, I think, just for a minute.” Maida also had to tell John the sad news that Glen Ogilvie, his great friend at Rugby, had been killed in flying operations.

Her last letter of 1940 was written on 28th December. There was no especial news except about Harriet, who had been found sitting up in her cot looking over the side: “She now rolls over constantly on the floor and seems to wriggle along a little on her front, but with so slight and imperceptible a movement that it can hardly be called crawling.” A postscript, written on the 30th December was very happy and excited as John’s Christmas cable had arrived. This read: “All well. I shall have very cheerful Christmas. All my love darling. John Bulman.” She replied: “It is wonderful to know you were so well and cheerful such a short time ago... All my love and a thousand kisses, precious one. I love you with all my heart. Your own Maida for always.”

CHAPTER 6

To Beda Fomm and Back Again

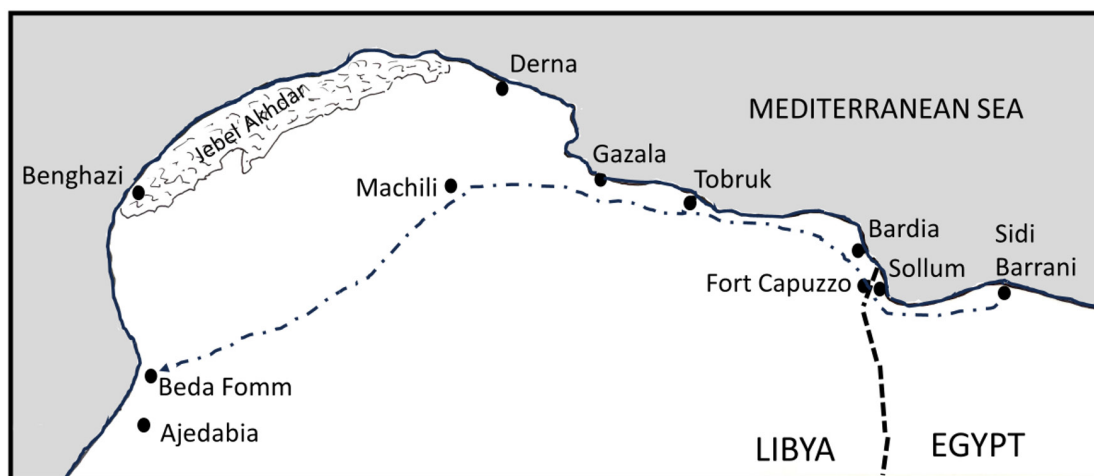
1941



ON 1ST JANUARY 1941 the Western Desert Force was renamed 13 Corps and the 7th Armoured Division began the year by moving to block the coast road west of Bardia. The weather remained bitterly cold with heavy rain and sleet, icy winds and fog. The 4th R.H.A. 'C' Battery War Diary entry began the year as follows: *New Years Day! The enemy had definitely been pushed beyond the Libian Frontier. There still remained however that well defended town of Bardia as a threat to the Egyptian Frontier. This had already been cut off from reinforcements from Tobruk. The 7th Armoured Division had the task of carrying out harassing operations with any penetration of the defences possible whilst reinforcements for the assault were brought up.*⁸

John managed to start the year by sending another cable: "My love for 1941. Have had Xmas in the desert.

All well. Bulman." This was followed by a long letter written on 4th January: "My very own darling I have not been able to write for the last few days because I have been living with a battery for the recent fighting and we had no mess at all. My driver and I looked after ourselves cooking our own meals. We have had no casualties, but I always have a good many sores to treat every day. I am still learning a good deal of cooking with the limited choice we have. You would laugh at some of my dishes. I have found a good substitute for porridge in the shape of rice pudding (of a sort) for breakfast. I boil the rice in water during the afternoon and next morning warm it up with tinned milk and sugar — jolly good when you are cold and hungry. Another popular dish is spaghetti and bully stew; we have captured a good deal of spaghetti lately and we would have done badly without it. I had no idea we would miss bread so much, but biscuits don't



Map 7. Egypt and Libya illustrating the main area of fighting involving the 4th Royal Horse Artillery during Wavell's offensive in the winter of 1940/1941. The 4th R.H.A. left Sidi Barrani on 9th December 1940, were involved in attacks on Bardia (5th January), Tobruk (21st January), passed Machili on 24th January and attacked the Italian Army at Beda Fomm on 5th February 1941 during the Italian retreat from Benghazi.

seem to satisfy anyone and hurt one's gums rather."

"Today I am back at R.H.Q. and found that the adjutant had just arrived back from Cairo by aeroplane bringing with him some bread and butter with which I have gorged myself for tea... We have as much as we want of the things we do get. It is the lack of variety and especially lack of bread which is trying. However we don't mind a bit today as we have had another success and feel that we shall have more before this letter gets to Q.E.W... it is difficult to think of time out here. Days come and go and the only time-points are attacks or moves. I think the cold weather also makes it difficult to get things done."

"I expect you are wondering why I am not a Captain yet, and I am beginning to wonder myself, but so far have not seen the A.D.M.S. to ask him about it. I feel sure it is only due to delay and that one of these days an official notification will arrive. It is three months tomorrow since my last leave so I am rather out of touch... Darlingest, I don't know what I should do without the woolly balaclava you knitted me. It is quite my most valuable possession and is the envy of the other officers. I wear the gloves most of the day too. We are getting a little more acclimatised to the cold now and have been issued with leather jerkins which keep the wind out, but 7.30 p.m to 11 a.m. is still pretty trying. My latest piece of news is that Colonel Campbell has come back as Colonel of the regiment, as he has changed regiments with Colonel Wilson. Darling, this year has started well and every day I pray that we shall see each other before it is finished. I love you sweetheart more than ever and live for the day when you will love me again. Your own adoring John."

On the following day, 5th January, the Western Desert Force had another important success. The assault on Bardia had begun at first light on 3rd January with a naval bombardment. The War Diaries state that the 4th R.H.A. 'B' Troop's observation post⁸: *'...was nearly removed by one of our own 15-inch guns. The shell failed to burst and went bouncing straight for the guns. These it missed owing to a slight leg-break. From 15.00 – 16.00 hrs two enemy batteries were engaged. In all 734 rounds of HE* were expended by the battery. During the day the Australian Division penetrated the defences and took over 8,000 prisoners. The attack continued through the following day and on 5th January Bardia fell, with over 35,000 prisoners being taken. At 12.00 hrs on the 5th, 'C' Battery R.H.A. came under the command of 7th Armoured Brigade and moved to Nza El*

Chelb. Meanwhile the 11th Hussars had pushed their patrols right forward to the Western approach of Tobruk. El Adhem aerodrome South of Tobruk was reported clear with 68 enemy aircraft destroyed'.

John himself had a good day on 8th January: "I have just had the nicest surprise for months, the Christmas presents from Q.E.W! Everything has arrived in perfect condition. We have already made a good hole in the chocolates, which everyone enjoyed. The hankies from Harriet have arrived at a most fortunate moment as I have not quite got rid of my cold, and the four handkerchiefs I now possess are a very dingy brown in spite of frequent washing. I have put Mamma's box of toffee away until we have finished the chocolates, but they look delicious too. I have almost given up hope of ever seeing Cairo again as we get further and further away, and our clothes get dirtier and more torn."

"I don't think I can ever have looked such a ragamuffin as I do now. My nice army overcoat is filthy with grease and sand and half the buttons are off. I wear this practically all the time, though I am glad to say it has been warmer this week. Under this I wear my white sweater, then another pullover, a shirt that is filthy round the neck — no tie of course — and a vest, which I have worn night and day for a month. On my bottom half I wear a pair of torn faded canvas trousers which still have your little hanky in one pocket and a pair of pants. My boots are the ordinary army issue which have not been cleaned or polished for a month and a pair of army issue grey socks. I am able to keep my feet clean as I wash them nearly every day, and fortunately I managed to get a dozen pairs of socks from the quartermaster before we began. The awful thing is that there is no sign that we shall be able to get anything washed or repaired for weeks. However everyone is more or less in the same boat so we just don't take any notice and carry on."

"I got your telegram which I think was sent off on Dec. 28th. It made me rather sad as you had evidently not got my Christmas wire by then. This letter has on it the last four stamps I have left, but we are hoping that someone will be able to go back for some soon. In spite of being dirty and rather disgruntled with the food I am really feeling happy that things are getting a move on at last. I shall have been R.M.O. to this regiment for a year on January 10th which is quite an achievement as many of the others have been unable to stick it. My latest acquisition is a kitten which I found today on an abandoned aerodrome... When I have nothing to do, which is very seldom fortunately, I

* High explosive.

(ii) OFFICERS ATTACHED FROM OTHER CORPS.					
Substantive Rank	Higher acting or temporary rank if held	Name and Initials	Corps	Date of attachment	Nature of attachment
Lieut		John P. [unclear]	RAMC		M.O.
2nd Lieut		[unclear]	[unclear]		[unclear]
		[unclear]	[unclear]		[unclear]

4th Regiment, RHA (Unit.)
12th January 1941 (Date of Despatch.)

Commanding 4th Regt. [unclear] (Signature of Commander.)
4th Regt. 7th Armoured Div. (Bde., Divn., Area, etc., with which Unit is serving.)

Nominal Roll of Officers of the 4th R.H.A. taken on 12th January 1941 showing John (entry highlighted in red) listed as the Medical Officer. Extract from the War Diary of 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery WO 169-246⁸.

long for you with a terrible ache, my sweet, and think of the day when we shall have a home of our own, but I am mostly too busy to think much. All my love is waiting for you and the thought of you waiting for me keeps me going. Your own husband John."

According to the War Diaries for the 10th January⁸: *'Both Troops were some forty odd miles west of Tobruk. In view of the transport difficulties, it was hoped that the battery would not be recalled for the assault of Tobruk. Some of the vehicles had been on the go since the outbreak of war. Ever since the crossing of the Frontier the going had been indescribably bad. The major part of the ground covered in Libya so far has been of the camel hump variety and guns and vehicles has taken a terrific beating. Meantime though so far west the situation was quiet apart from the occasional visit from enemy fighters. These did not worry us overmuch as our light A.A. gunners were very much on their toes'. Their role there was to support the cavalry units of 7th Armoured Brigade in preventing enemy reinforcements from reaching the Tobruk garrison, either by the coast or inland. Their guns were situated to command the junction of the Machili track and the Bomba to Tobruk road.*

John wrote on 13th January: "We are still moving on slowly and are now in a country with a good deal more vegetation although there are no trees yet. However there are plenty of gazelle, which are beautiful little creatures about the size of a greyhound. We shoot them for the pot as they make a nice change from bully, though not as good as mutton or beef... Tonight we are having a special delicacy in the form of

a bustard, big birds rather like a turkey though brown in colour. We have been trying to get one for ages, but they don't usually allow you to get within a hundred yards... I have just spent two days and nights with one of the batteries thirty miles away, so am glad to get back to a comfortable mess and good food again. The weather has been much milder for the last fortnight thank goodness. Long may it last as the very cold weather knocks all the stuffing out of everyone."

"I am still waiting for your next mail, which should be coming any day now. I am afraid they are taking two months now that we are getting further away... I am feeling fine except for occasional toothache caused, I think, by eating bully and biscuits. I have not seen a dentist since I left Cairo last May, so I expect I shall have a few fillings to be done when I do get back. I saw Lieut. Heycock yesterday. He has had jaundice and has just returned after three weeks in hospital. I found out from him about promotion to Captaincy. Apparently, it is just as I thought and it takes up to six months for promotions to reach here from England, but this does not prevent us getting all the back pay to which we are entitled... I am wondering how poor old Griselda is getting on in her solitary confinement... I suggest it would be a good thing if the plugs were taken out, a little oil inserted and the cranking handle turned a few times to prevent the inside of the cylinders rusting... Our first drive in her when I get home will be a great treat after my bumpy desert cart."

On 17th January he was able to report: "I am

back at R.H.Q. and having a bit of a rest before our next move on, which I expect may begin tomorrow. Everything goes on just the same day after day and my only piece of news is that I may get on leave at the beginning of February. I long to get to civilisation for a week to get my clothes washed and get some more supplies. Everything is very peaceful at the moment as the Italian Air Force are hardly ever seen now although we may have some Boche planes against us soon. We continue to get a good many gazelle and bustard which helps out the bully and biscuits, and except for occasional toothache I am really very well. Things are going a bit slower than I hoped but at any rate we are moving slowly in the right direction.”

“Darling, I have been wondering so much how Harriet is. I expect she will have several teeth by now and eating all sorts of delicious food. Every time I look through the photos of her, which I carry in my pocket-book, I get to know her better, though I know that I shall love her if she takes after her Mamma even a little bit. Are you getting plenty of food at home now, darling, and have you plenty of food to carry on with? I don’t hear much news of rations in England and whether the price of food has gone up. This will be a short letter today as I am just going off to wash some of my clothes as I have heard of an Italian water tank where we can get some free water... I have been nearly a month without an English mail now but it is the same for everyone and it will come any day now.”

By the 19th January the War Diary reported⁸: *‘Tobruk was now completely invested, so the Battery was in high hope of being left in peace. Orders however had been received that we had come under command of 4th Armoured Brigade. Consequently ‘A’ and ‘B’ Troops returned from their positions, covering the Trigh Capuzzo and the Bomba road respectively and the Battery leaguered that night in the ghot to N.W. of El Adem aerodrome’.* The following day they were preparing for the attack on Tobruk and the battery was firing on the S.W. sector of the Tobruk defences, to give the impression that an attack was to be made there.

Zero hour for the attack was at 05.40 hrs on 21st January, with the Battery’s role to protect the left flank on the Australian Division by observed fire. *‘It was soon seen that there was very little depth to the Tobruk defences. The Australians made very rapid headway in the centre, overrunning battery positions, stores and headquarters and capturing large numbers of prisoners’.* They did then encounter some resistance and an account of one of the 4th R.H.A.’s more dramatic actions was described in their war diary in an extract entitled ‘A tale of a minefield’⁸.

This involved an officer Lt. Duncan Simmonds, whom John had treated for sandfly fever the previous June, and read as follows: *“Early in the afternoon of the assault on Tobruk Major Goschen was required at R.H.Q. and officers had to be sent out with a W/T 8 cwt to take over the ‘A’ Troop O.P. 2/Lt E.D. Simonds was sent with directions to meet the Major through the gap in the wire where the main attack was made. On his way there his truck struck a minefield and his driver’s arm was blown off. Lt Simonds and the wireless operator were untouched though severely shaken. The car was wrecked with its rear still across two unexploded mines. Immediate help for the driver was essential. Lt Simonds elected to get it from a British tank a mile further in the Tobruk defences. This however was abandoned as the area was still in Italian hands. Lt Simonds tried to retrace his steps but was sniped fast and furiously by some Italians who had plucked up courage at the sight of a single British officer. Eventually a lucky bullet hit him in the arm. Deciding they might be luckier still in a moment Lt. Simonds immediately “died an agonising death” hoping to get away in the approaching evening. The Italians however became brave enough to inspect the “corpse” but they were surprised to find it much alive. They took Lt. Simonds back to an A/Tank gun emplacement where his wound was well dressed. Meantime Australian Infantry attacked behind “I” tanks and for better security Lt. Simonds was pushed under the tripod of the A/Tank gun which vainly tried to incapacitate an approaching tank. The only injury inflicted was on Lt. Simonds eardrums, which were perforated by the 70 rounds fired. This failing, the Italians fled a little way and then surrendered to Lt. Simonds and the “hand to hand fighters”. He returned to the wrecked 8 cwt truck to find that his driver Ashton had been evacuated and that the wireless operator DeVille had re-established W/T communication with Capt. Hughes, who was even then cautiously navigating the minefield. Capt. Hughes reached them in the nick of time as the sun set and brought them safely off despite the unexploded mines. All have survived the experience.”*

The following day at 16.20 the 4th R.H.A. received a signal to move on and the Battery covered 17 miles to Trigh Capuzzo. After only a very brief stop, they set off again at 03.00 hrs the following morning. They were to go with the remainder of 4th Armoured Brigade to capture the Fort of Machili, which was situated at a tactically important crossroads. By 08.00 hrs on 23rd January they had covered 80 miles and were 12 miles due East of at Machili⁸. *‘During the night orders came from Brigade that by first light the 7th Hussars were to be astride the track running N.E. from Machili in the area of Cot Breiber. “D” Battery were to be in action in a position to*

* Simmonds’ name is spelt incorrectly in the excerpt.

cover Machili and the tracks running N.E., E. and S.E. from the Fort. Accordingly at 05.00 hrs on 24.1.41 the 7th Hussars with the Battery moved 8 miles N.E. First light showed that the Fort instead of being S.W. was in fact N.W. On this being reported the 7th Hussars were ordered to move to the Cot Breiber area but the Battery were told to remain in action in their present position, provided that they could carry out their task from that area. In justice to the navigator, it must be remembered that the 100 mile advance had been over featureless desert and that the scale of the only map had been 1/500,000'.

On January 24th the Battery was now 5 miles S.E. of Machili together with the 7th Hussars and they were under attack from a combination of fighter planes, bombers and a large number of enemy tanks that had just arrived from Derna as reinforcements. Despite all the travelling three of Maida's letters had managed to reach John, and he wrote back in reply (24.1.1941): "I have not told you that lately I have turned dentist in a small way. Many men have toothache, and to get one out by the army dentist may take days off and involve going a hundred miles. I was asked by a gunner to take one out to save him leaving the battery. When I told him I had no instruments he produced some Italian captured ones. I extracted his tooth to his great satisfaction under local anaesthetic."

Meanwhile the engagement with the enemy continued for a further two days⁸: *'The Battery then targeted the fort, firing 50 rounds in 30 seconds. They continued in the same position the following day. During the morning while in action "A" Troop were attacked by five enemy dive bombers and six fighters. Although one fighter was shot down, Sgt. Bradley was killed and one gunner was wounded. At first light on 27th January it was seen that the enemy had evacuated Machili during the night. Fire from 4th R.H.A. had rendered the Italian position untenable and taking Machili secured the Southern flank of the Italian main line of supply between Bengasi and Derna.'*

The Battery moved again at first light on January 28th and regained contact with the garrison force that had just evacuated Machili. This involved a 30-mile journey requiring great determination, as the last 10 miles were across: *'...the most broken country yet encountered... At one point where deep water-channels cut into the sand were encountered, ramps to get the vehicles across had to be made by the men with shovels. In spite of these difficulties the Battery completed the journey of 9½ miles in 1½ hours. The steep wadis and very rocky going made it unlikely that they could attack the Machili garrison, who were still withdrawing N.W., so the Battery were ordered to leaguer that night on the Elonte track. Apart from one unsuccessful air attack, the next three days were generally quiet. They were moved 40 miles west and spent*

*the rest of the time on necessary maintenance.'*⁸

At the end of the month John was, however, finally able to return in the opposite direction for his much-delayed leave period. He stayed one night with some officers: "...who are in charge of the evacuation of casualties. They are housed in an Italian house and I am now sitting in a nice room with a tablecloth on the table and a soft chair to sit on. Also I have put on the last remaining pair of clean trousers and my clean jacket which I have been carrying round the desert all the last four months. Considering how it has been carried in the top of my valise, it doesn't look at all bad. On the way back I met some old friends at the field ambulance. The Colonel has told me that I can put up my three pips now and become officially a Captain. Apparently, I could have done it months ago on Oct. 13th but in the desert it makes no difference." He then went the rest of the way back to Alexandria by boat in lovely weather and enjoyed the sea trip.



IN CAMBRIDGE LIFE AT the start of 1941 went on quietly and the good news from the Western Desert was very cheering. Harriet was making progress in moving and learning to crawl. On New Year's Day Maida was invited to a luncheon consisting mainly of French refugees. There were a good many of these in Cambridge, including some distinguished scientists who had been brought over from France to help with the war effort. The hostess produced a main dish of *'tripes à la mode de Caen'*, which she thought would make the French feel at home. Maida commented that it was probably the only kind of meat she could buy in sufficient quantity owing to rationing, and that it was not at all nice.

On 12th January Maida wrote enclosing a letter from John's mother giving the news that Denis and Kitty had been married at Falmouth very suddenly in a registry office: "It is funny to think that we were so apologetic (or pretended to be) about the unconventionality of our wedding now that Peggy and Denis have been married with so little pomp and circumstance... I hope they will be very happy." There had also been some correspondence about the Life Insurance which John had taken out when they were married, and Maida had been to a solicitor to make a Will, although John had still not done so.

On 14th January she reported receiving a letter from cousin Margie who was now working at the F.A.N.Y. Headquarters at Camberley in Surrey*. This was a charity whose members rescued the wounded and gave first aid at the front line, ran field hospitals, drove ambulances and set up soup kitchens and troop canteens: "Her job being to teach recruits to drive and service army transports and drive in convoy etc. She says it is so dangerous she is thinking of writing her memoirs and calling them 'Driving with Death'. Remembering the network of roads in those parts, I can imagine it must be a nightmare; the new war regulations about removing all signposts won't matter so much there as there weren't any anyway, and what there were, were meaningless."

The thick snow and frost were continuing, making it hard to take Harriet out in her pram. On 17th January: "I went into Cambridge this morning with Mamma to help her with the shopping, as she always has two big baskets to carry home on Fridays. I was just succeeding in training her to order from Sainsbury's by telephone to save struggling in the crowds, when we discovered that the girls at the desk would often accept the order and then, when the things were delivered in the evening, we would find that supplies had run out and by that time it was too late to try to get them anywhere else. So it seemed better to continue the old method of going down to fight in person for the little packets of butter etc. It's not really so bad as this sounds, darling, and you mustn't imagine we are short of food, but it just takes rather a long time." She had finally received two letters from John written on 30th November and 2nd December, just before the desert campaign started. These gave the welcome news that the knitted balaclava and gloves had arrived just in time for the very cold weather.

Her letter of 21st January started with mention of their rather meagre finances although: "...it was marvellous for us to have any money at all." This was followed by further news about Harriet: "I was looking just now at her little hands holding my breast so firmly; they are real baby hands with lovely dimples and yet so strong and vigorous compared with what they were when she was born. I can remember her tiny hands better than her face in those first rather bewildering days... The little hands I watched tonight with rather black fingernails told of adventurous wriggling over the edge of her mat and the determined little mind that directs their movements." She had also

received an update from Augustin Jordan who had just received unexpected orders to go overseas somewhere in North Africa: "He is very pleased to be going to do a job which he hopes will be *'un peu plus sportif'*[†] than his present one. He was rather fretting at being kept in London."

On 24th January Maida had been listening to birds while pushing Harriet along Long Road: "I heard tits and a robin ... and saw rooks beginning to build (Mamma doesn't believe this but I'm sure the nests weren't there last time we went). I heard, and later saw, a woodpecker which was nice... I saw it quite distinctly going round and round on a dead tree and then flying off with an undulating flight... I also saw snowdrops out in a garden, and this morning I found one lovely little aconite out in our orchard and several more of our daffodils coming up."

There was news on the wireless that British troops were approaching Derna: "Otherwise there doesn't seem to be very much war news, though I expect a lot is going on behind the scenes. Darlingest, I don't think I have said what joy you gave me in your last letter but one by telling me that you are feeling more at home in the army every day. You know how I love to hear that you are happy with the people you are working among... You are so cheerful about all the hardships of life in the desert; I can't bear to think of you with nothing but a tar-barrel over your dear head, yet I am grateful to it for keeping the wind and rain away."

On 27th January Harriet was now able to roll over at speed and was cutting her first two teeth. Maida's letter of 4th February described getting her own old highchair down from the attic, as she was planning to start weaning Harriet who was now 8 months old. She had got a book from the library called 'The single-handed mother': "Not that I can call myself single-handed with two such willing and devoted collaborators as Mamma and Adda. I shall feel rather sad at beginning the process." Harriet was thrilled with the highchair and: "...has sat in it twice very upright and interested. Dear old Bamps[‡] would have liked to know that his little great grand-daughter would sit in it so happily one day."

She had just received a cable: "Enjoying leave Cairo. Lovely letters received to 26th November. Have been promoted Captain. My love darling. Bulman." She described its arrival: "As I was hanging out the nappies on the line, I saw a bedraggled-looking urchin

* First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

† 'A little sportier'.

‡ Maida's Grandfather.



Harriet with Maida in February 1941 aged 8 months.

in extremely drab and unofficial clothes proceeding up the path at the peculiarly slow dawdling pace common to telegraph boys... I was put off the scent by his costume and thought he must be the laundry boy. Then I saw him pulling a yellow envelope from some inside pocket, and I rushed to take it from him and tore it open then and there. When I read it, darling, I was so thrilled that I told him to wait while I fetched him 6d. as a tip for being the bearer of such a lovely message."

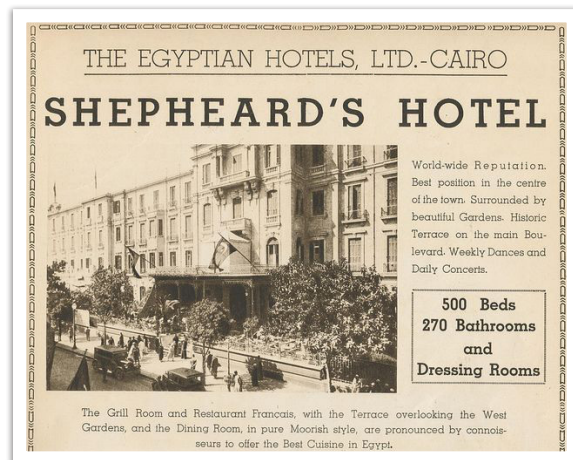
Maida was thrilled to hear on the news about the capture of Benghazi. In England they were, however, anticipating a German invasion. She wrote on 7th February: "Here at home the long-promised invasion is beginning to loom rather large again; indeed as the R.A.F. are bombing the Channel ports again it looks as if the German preparations are ready. I hope very much, and feel sure really, that it will be thrown back and destroyed before it ever really begins. If it does develop, it will be rather frightening while it lasts, though no doubt the reality will be less alarming than the anticipation. My chief worry would be that you would be so anxious, darling, if you heard on the wireless that there was fighting going on in this country... I am not really expecting anything of the sort to happen at all."

"I wonder when I shall have another letter from you. It seems odd to think that the last was written on Dec. 2nd, not very long ago really, and yet such a historic campaign has been fought since then, which will rank as perhaps the greatest episode of this world-shaking war, and you have been in the midst of it. Darling sweet, what marvellous stories you will have to tell me when you come home." There was then a ten-day gap in her correspondence, suggesting that some of Maida's letters sent at this time were lost.



AT THE START OF February John had finally reached Cairo on his long overdue leave. He was staying at the famous Shepherd's Hotel and enjoying getting clean again and doing odd jobs including having his teeth put in order by an army dentist. On 6th February: "I am going to have my photo taken today and send you one just to show you that I still have two eyes, two lips and two hands." Unfortunately this turned out so gloomy that he later had: "...some cheerful photomaton ones done to show you that I can still smile."

While John was enjoying the luxuries of Cairo, his Battery was still fully occupied as part of 4th Armoured Brigade taking part in the final phase of General O'Connor's campaign, during which he drove his troops westwards into Libya as fast as it was possible to go¹⁸. On 1st February the enemy were still



Advertisement for Shepherd's Hotel.

retreating southwards from Benghazi. The Battery were ordered to strike N.W. from their present position as quickly as possible in an attempt to cut them off by blocking the coastal road between Benghazi and Agedabia⁸. Two reconnaissance parties found that the intervening ground: *‘...proved unbelievably bad and broken up by precipitous wadis scored and lined by innumerable water channels. One of our 8 cwt. accompanying a patrol of the 2nd R.T.R.* achieved the first 8½ miles in 3½ hours’*. The going over rocky hillsides was so bad that the tanks could not keep up with the required time schedule. A flying column of about 2,000 men under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Combe was therefore sent ahead. This included six 25-pounder field guns of “C” Battery 4th R.H.A., commanded by Major Goschen.

In order to stop the Italian army from escaping southwards from Benghazi this column had to cover over 160 miles of unknown desert in two days and had no information regarding the enemy dispositions in the area chosen as their final objective. Shortly after the march resumed the force struck better going and put on speed to make up for the earlier delay. They managed to cover 87 miles and then leaguered that night three miles short of the fort at Msus, which had been evacuated. They continued at first light the following day, February 4th, and reached a position commanding the coast road south of Benghazi at 13.00, close to a large white block-house about 8 miles south of Beda Fomm.

They were only just in time as shortly after their arrival a column of about three lorries supported by anti-tank guns came down the road and were at once engaged by R.H.A. “A” Troop⁸. The column halted and the Italian infantry in the lorries took up positions in the ditches and scrub alongside the road: *‘Lt. Col. Campbell collected any men and trucks he could find in the observation post area and engaged the enemy with light automatic and rifle fire. 300 prisoners were taken in this manner and the only casualty being Capt. Davis who was killed while prisoners were being collected’*.

More columns were soon reported advancing from the direction of Benghazi. As lorries appeared down the road they were engaged by the gunners and none succeeded in getting past the block-house. *‘The men in the lorries, however, owing to lack of supporting fire, generally managed to get clear of the road and by 17.00 hrs there were upwards of a thousand men with some automatic and A/T† weapons in the rough ground east of the road immediately in*

front of our foremost localities. Both observation posts were at times shooting 100 yds in front of their own positions. This was the state of affairs at last light’.

By dawn on 5th February R.H.A. “A” and “B” troops both had their guns ready in position to cover the entire area from 3,000 yds east of the blockhouse to the sea. At 08.00 12 lorries full of Italians came south along the main track and surrendered promptly when they came under fire. At about 10.00 a much larger column supported by three 105 mm guns, four 75 mm guns and three medium sized tanks[‡] approached. This group offered considerably more resistance, but their guns were in full view of the observation posts so were quickly silenced, two of the tanks were destroyed and all resistance had ceased by 11.00 hrs.

While this action had been in progress another very large column of some 200 lorries with guns in support was approaching cautiously along the coastal track, offered some protection by the sand dunes. When “B” Troop fired on this column, the majority of the vehicles halted and the men scattered into the dunes. A few more adventurous lorries dashed across the open towards the main road but then ran into the fire of both R.H.A. troops and these Italian soldiers also abandoned their vehicles. *‘The remainder of the morning was spent in rounding up prisoners from these columns and that of the previous evening. By 14.00 hrs between ten and eleven thousand had been collected’*.

Meanwhile the main part of 4th Armoured Brigade, who were ten miles to the N.E., reported that they had destroyed around sixty Italian tanks, but at least another 30 had slipped through and were still at large. There was some regrouping and by last light on 5th February defensive fire had been registered, roadblocks covered by A/T guns had been put out on the main road and mines had been laid across each convoy’s front. Soon after dark there were reports of further vehicle movement and defensive fire was called for. At about 20.30 an enemy column headed by tanks succeeded in breaking through the roadblock on the main road and getting clear. Later in the evening allied guns ignited an ammunition lorry in another enemy column and its four leading tanks were blown up on land mines. Other columns also tried to get past later in the night but the defensive fire prevented any more enemy vehicles from getting past.

Firing resumed as soon as it was light enough to see on the morning of February 6th, when the leading enemy tanks were found to be only 200 yds away

* Royal Tank Regiment.

† Anti-tank.

‡ Known as ME 13s.

from the battalion H.Q.⁸. Most of the H.Q. staff were quickly evacuated and withdrew to a vantage point some thousand yards to the S.E.: *‘The two A/T guns in this area knocked out 7 ME 13s and forced the remainder to “huddle” just east of the road about 300 yds south of the block-house. Here they came under intense fire from “B” Troop while “A” Troop dealt with the “soft-skinned” vehicles of the column the tanks were protecting. “B” Troop put 120 rounds into this tank concentration and after 5 minutes it was apparent that this column’s resistance had ceased. 23 medium tanks were captured or destroyed as a result of this action’.*

The War Diary’s conclusion to the Battle of Beda Fomm was as follows⁸: *‘During the 48 hours operation 16,000 prisoners including one Army Commander and one Corps Commander had been captured, 27 ME 13s, several hundred lorries, 82 x 75mm. guns and 23 x 105 mm. guns and a large amount of A/T and automatic weapons had been captured or destroyed. In contrast, the R.H.A. Battery had no casualties. The King’s Dragoon Guards had five cars put out of action but the crews in each case escaped. Later that day the Battery was relieved and rejoined the 4th Armoured Brigade at Beda Fomm’.*

Although John missed this battle he returned from leave to rejoin his unit very soon afterwards, writing on 8th February: “I am full of beans and am starting back tomorrow. I don’t know how far we shall have to go now that Benghazi has fallen, but the news is so marvellous that I don’t care. I pray every day now that it will be only a month or two before I shall be on the way home. Of course, it is just possible that we may have to go to the Balkans but I am trying not to think of that.” It took him four days of travelling to reach the 4th R.H.A. who were still near Beda Fomm. His bird records confirm that he was between Antelat and Machili on February 18th and 20th: “It was rather fun coming back as most of the way I came by sea on a naval vessel... I am feeling a thousand times better for my leave and must have put on pounds in weight. We are living much more comfortably now with better food and drink and beer has again appeared on the menu. The weather is like May at home today. There has been some rain while I was away, and the ground here is sprouting green grass and a sort of lily with a long stem and a whitish flower of pleasant smell.”

“It is nice to read your letter written 2 months ago in which you say on the first page *‘I wonder if there will be any important development in the situation in Egypt’*. Well, there certainly has been although we still have some way to go. Personally, I am rather hoping that even if I can’t get back to England in the summer we may be in a different country. I have no desire to spend another

summer in Egypt. I expect the next month will bring some important developments and then we shall know where we are. As long as Turkey stands by us, I am sure we shall be all right in this part of the world.”

“It makes me sad to think of you going through these anxious times with me too far away to kiss my precious one better. You are the bravest little wife in all the world, sweetheart. I have been thinking things over and am going to see how the land lies about getting home as soon as I have the chance. It seems to me stupid to stay here a moment longer than I have to as I feel I have done my duty here and the sooner I get to England the sooner I can take the F.R.C.S. As for going to a more dangerous battlefield, I don’t think there is much in that either now that the Italians are beaten; it will be Huns wherever we go. I don’t think I shall be able to see the A.D.M.S. until we are relieved, but I shall take the first opportunity.”

The capture of Benghazi and subsequent destruction of much of the Italian 10th army at Beda Fomm turned out to be the climax of General O’Connor’s campaign and marked the end of the Allied advance into Libya¹⁸. On 9th February Churchill ordered the advance to stop so that troops could instead be dispatched to defend Greece as he thought that a German attack through Macedonia was imminent. The British were in any case unable to continue further due to the very long supply line distance from their base in Egypt, extensive vehicle breakdowns, and exhaustion of the troops, who had been on the go constantly since November.

On 18th February the pressure was off for the time being and John wrote: “Tomorrow we are setting off back and I hope to be in Cairo again in a little over a week. I have enjoyed myself the last few days as the weather has been perfect and the countryside quite pleasant with a variety of little flowers. I have managed to borrow an Italian shotgun and I think I shall have enough information about the birds to write a paper when I get back. The great majority of the birds round about are larks, but there are also large flocks of Dotterel which are very rare in England. We are getting well fed and no bombing and everyone is looking forward to being in sight of civilisation for at least a short time. I lay awake a long time making plans for when I get back. It would be nice if you could meet me with Griselda — but then what would I do with the luggage?”

C H A P T E R 7 :

Raids And Bombs

1941



AT THE END OF February John and the 4th R.H.A. were returning from Beda Fomm to Cairo and John was able to turn his mind towards ornithology: "I am writing this today (23.2.41) as we are having a day off on our way back. This afternoon I have been down to the seashore with my driver looking for birds. I found a good many in a deep wadi, which was the only spot for miles where there were any bushes. I took a shotgun which I have acquired from the Italians but did not use it. There were several types of warbler which I did not know... I shot my first bustard two days ago from my truck when we were going about 30 mph. It is a difficult but exciting sport as they fly at about 40 mph and in most places the ground is too rough to make it possible to travel at this speed. We ate it the same night. They are very wild and always start flying when you are at least a hundred yards away. In some places there are flocks of 20 and 30 of them and they seem to thrive in the middle of the desert where there is nothing else but a few larks. I am beginning to feel sure now that there will be a fight in the Balkans before this war is over, but I am going to try and get back this year whatever happens. If I don't succeed I can put up with another year, but I am praying it will not be necessary. There must be lots of M.O.s who have sat at home all the time."

They reached base on 27th February, and he wrote the following day: "I am living in a tent again at last not very far from Cairo and I so much want to write you a really long letter especially as I have received six of your precious letters when we arrived yesterday. However, fate is against me at the moment as I have been so busy with sanitary arrangements in the camp all day that I couldn't write during day light and this

afternoon a sudden storm got up and blew the tent flat. After supper tonight I got the tent put up with the help of my suffragi (named Hassan) and now it is 11.0 p.m. with only a very small piece of candle left." The camp was at Ben Yusef, which at that time housed the 7th Armoured Division, some Royal Engineers and a number of Italian prisoners of war. It was located at the edge of the desert where it met the green Nile delta. Another source²⁵ confirmed that the sanitary arrangements were poor: *'Here we lived in holes in the sand; these were rectangular and covered by tents. However, we suffered from a plague of fleas, and there were also mole crickets, harmless but rather alarming to look at'*.

More letters from home arrived on 1st March: "My own little darling, yesterday I had another lovely surprise when I found three telegrams and two letters for me from you. The telegrams were most exciting telling me of Harriet's teeth and Denis' marriage." His earlier optimism during the successful desert campaign that the war was going well was wearing thin: "Now that we are back, the first reaction is to realise how little we have done and how much remains to be done. However, the depressing nature of these reflections is offset by the enjoyment of fresh bread and butter and eggs. We unfortunately have no baths even here but can get them in town at a hotel for 10 piastres. The A.D.M.S. went on leave when he got back so I have not been able to see him yet. I am not feeling too optimistic about the outcome, darling, but at any rate you and I are both alive and well and we must put up with our heartache if we are called upon to do so to beat these bloody Germans."

John's pessimism was shared by others. Although the Italian army in Libya had been decimated, the Germans had already sent a detachment of their own to Libya as reinforcements. These arrived in Tripoli on 11th February, forming the first units of the Afrika Korps under the command of General Rommel. It



Denis in his naval uniform with Kitty.

was later estimated that Churchill's decision to pull back at this point rather than going on to capture Tripoli probably prolonged the war in Africa by a further two years¹⁸.

On 5th March (his birthday) John wrote again: "My own sweetheart — today I have been very busy getting the anti-typhoid inoculations done. When I was doing them this time last year I never imagined I would be doing the same men in a year's time in much the same place. Still I can truthfully say that my 30th birthday has been happier than my 29th as I am now more part of the regiment... I have had no celebrations as it seemed rather pointless, and I had plenty to do to keep me busy." He had hired a car from a fellow M.O. for a fortnight: "...which will be a great blessing as we are so far out of town and I have a good many odd jobs I want to do there. This morning I was not altogether sure that I had been wise as the water pump was out of order and one tyre had a slow puncture. However, I persuaded the regimental mechanics to put it right."

By 8th March: "Yesterday we thought we were settling down peacefully in the camp and things were getting a bit more straightened out, but this morning we had news that we may soon be on the move to another camp, though not too far from here. It is aggravating as I am in the throes of inoculations. I have played two games of squash at the Sporting Club which have been very good fun. I would rather play tennis but at the moment it is apparently impossible to get any tennis balls ... This morning I took my bird skins to the curator of the Museum again and got them correctly named according to Meinerzhagen's edition of Nicoll's *Birds* 1930, which differ a good deal from my edition, the small book on *Egyptian Birds*. I have one skin of a

crested lark which completely defeated him. He could not find a skin like it in Nicholl's collection, so it will be interesting to take it to South Kensington* together when I get back."

"I have had another of my sore throats since Monday morning... I spent Monday and Tuesday resting and today am feeling fine again." He had also heard from Maida the unexpected news that his sister Helen had been married: "What wonderful news about Helen. I got your darling cable on Monday when I was feeling particularly minging, and it cheered me up completely." He had also been to lunch with Roger and Vera Low: "I always enjoy their garden so much, which is the only spot in Cairo which reminds me faintly of an English garden... I have not seen the A.D.M.S. yet but I know he is back from leave so I may have a chance tomorrow morning. Unfortunately, he is a long way from here, but I will try as he is most elusive and we may be moving any time."

A few days later John reported the first khamsin of the season: "My tent was blown flat this morning due to the stupidity of my suffragi, which has to be experienced to be believed. I had made sure that the pegs would not pull out, and as the tent was in good repair I imagined that it was safe against the wind. However, nothing is ever safe in Egypt unless you are there to look after it, and when I got back at lunch time I found that the pole had snapped due to allowing it to blow over to such an angle that it bent. I did not see the A.D.M.S. though I shall see him this evening at an R.A.M.C. dinner which he is giving."

He continued later that night: "I have just returned from the dinner which was a big success. I naturally could not talk to the Colonel personally, but he was very pleasant to me, and I think there is just a chance that I may get a surgical job yet, though it is naturally pretty slight without the fellowship. I shall have a try as soon as I can, my sweetheart, as you know I shall be happiest doing that job... I can at any rate say that I am glad and lucky to be qualified, and there is nothing else in the world other than medicine I would rather use my brains on in making a living. It is extraordinary, I find, how many people are interested in the subject and would like to be doctors, and also how much they have found out for themselves. It is the only profession with such a combination of human and scientific interest."

The following week John was unexpectedly back in the desert again, as part of a short but exciting

* *The Natural History Museum in London.*

expedition to capture the oasis of Giarabub*. This journey is shown as the dotted line on the bird map†. Giarabub was an oasis in the Libyan Desert about 200 miles south of Bardia and was the southernmost frontier post for the Italians along the border with Egypt. For them it was therefore at the end of a long supply line and the last relief convoy trying to reach it had been destroyed by the R.A.F. on 8th January 1941¹⁸. The allied forces also damaged the airstrip and, as airdrops of supplies were insufficient to feed the garrison, the Libyan troops supporting the Italians started to abandon their posts. The 6th Australian Divisional Cavalry Regiment had begun a siege in December 1940 but lacked sufficient strength to mount an attack on the position, which had strong natural defences of bluffs, cliffs and marshland.

The Allies therefore assembled Wootten Force from the 2/9th Australian Infantry Battalion, reinforced by an infantry company, three platoons equipped respectively with mortars, machine-guns and anti-aircraft guns together with a Battery of the 4th Regiment R.H.A., who provided twelve 25-pounder field guns^{8,26,27}. The 4th R.H.A. left their camp at Beni Yusef on the evening of 12th March and set off back towards Sidi Barrani accompanied by bad dust storms. Reconnaissance by the Australians had revealed a track across the surrounding marshes to Giarabub and a gap in the frontier wire large enough for vehicles to pass through, but which was overlooked by an Italian observation post. The Australians took this position on 17th March and initially pressed on further towards Giarabub before being forced back by artillery fire.

The following day the R.H.A. Battery including Colonel Campbell and Major Goschen moved forward to join up with the Australians. On 19th March they advanced again, with four guns of R.H.A. "B" troop sent forward to support the Australian infantry. The remaining section of "B" Troop under Lieut. Wolfson went forward to a position just inside the wire entanglements and engaged the Italians. The final four guns also advanced just as it was getting dark, which involved dragging two of the guns through the marsh, causing much trial and tribulation due to the very bad going.

On March 20th the Italians were still occupying the high ground in and around Giarabub and the R.H.A. troops were kept busy registering the target

* Also spelt Jarabub.

† See Chapter 3 p43.



John's driver standing in a captured Italian gun emplacement in Giarabub.

areas in preparation for providing fire cover the following day. Two Australian companies were then to make a main attack from the south, with another subsidiary attack from the north to take the airfield. A sandstorm blew up while preparations were in progress, helping to obscure the troops but clogging up all their weapons, which then needed cleaning. Zero hour was set for 5:15 a.m. on 21st March when the weather was again appalling, with another sandstorm in progress. The Australian "A" Company moved to within 50 metres of the Italian wire to exploit the reduced visibility, but this proved a fatal mistake as the gunners miscalculated the effects of the swirling wind and their opening barrage dropped short, killing twelve of the Australians and wounding a further twenty.

The Allied bombardment did, however, succeed in stunning the Italians, who did not offer much resistance to the subsequent Australian advance, so by 7.30 a.m., the 2/9th Battalion had occupied the first four knolls. The Italian defenders on the last knoll and around the fort then rallied but the Australians captured the fifth knoll just after 9:00 a.m. and by midday they had entered the fort and ended the siege. In the final assault, the 2/9th Battalion lost 17 killed



Lt. Wolfson and John with his Medical Officer's vehicle during the expedition to Giarabub.

and 77 wounded, while the Italians lost about 250 men killed. Over 800 prisoners were taken, including the Italian colonel in command of the garrison, and 26 field guns were captured. Despite their success the Australians withdrew from Giarabub after just two days because the now combined Italian and German forces were advancing eastwards across Libya^{26,27,28}.

The R.H.A. Battery set off on their own return journey on the morning of 22nd March, arriving back at Beni Yusef on 25th March. The whole expedition had taken just thirteen days and during this period they had covered over one thousand three hundred miles and fought a small battle. Only five of their vehicles were out of action during this period and of these all except a burnt-out store's lorry were later recovered.

John was able to write home on 20th March, just before the attack started: "Since my last letter we have been continuously on the move over the desert and if you read your papers for March 22nd I expect you may find out where we have been. We have been getting up early and on the go most of the time so it has been impossible to write, and indeed I shall not be able to post this until we get back in about a week as there are no communications. I am very well and

enjoying life in spite of wind and sand which now seem a part of my existence and not worth worrying about."

"I did not manage to discuss my future with the A.D.M.S. but hope I shall get a chance when we get back again next week. I hardly dare look much ahead as everyone seems more and more certain that the war will not be over this year, though personally I think there is a good chance of us finishing this off in Africa, after which there will be a better chance of a trip home. At the moment it is 7.30 p.m. and we are sitting in the mess, only about three miles from the Italians. A thunderstorm is going on, the first I can remember in the desert, but there have only been a few drops of rain so far. I am hoping no more will come as I am sleeping out in the open, not having had time to fix up a shelter before we left camp. It is rather warm and muggy and the weather has been very changeable with ice one morning and 80°F in the shade in the afternoons. However, it is a thousand times better than the summer as the flies have not started yet, although we got swarms of midges last night when we were near a salt lake."

"I had one or two snapshots taken a day or two ago which I will get developed at the first possible moment and send on. I hope it will not be very long before I get some more of you, my darling. I carry about 20 of you and Harriet with me, picked from all those you have sent. I still have the one with me which was taken at Di's before we were married. I always used to like it the best, but now I have the one of you sitting on the stone toadstool outside the front door on top. You are wearing the green suit I helped you to buy from the Jersey Company and look so slim and sweet... you were certainly wearing silk stockings that day sweetheart."

"I loved to hear about Harriet's Christmas and how she enjoyed her presents, though it seems hard to think that two of our three Christmases have been spent apart — still Christmas this year did not really count for either of us. I am afraid I am getting a little melancholy myself darlingest but actually I am more cheerful than I used to be and find so much more in the army to laugh at than I did a year ago. I must try and find my bed now which won't be too easy as it is pitch dark and the moon is not yet up. If only you could spend just one night with me here what a difference it would make. Sweetheart, I love you with all my heart. My best consolation is to think that every day gone is a day nearer our being together again and by the time this reaches you it will be a whole two months nearer. Your own big loving John."



John and Maida at Underhill, Wittersham, Kent while on holiday with Diana Tuely before they were married.

His next letter was written on 27th March after they had returned to the camp at Ben Yusef: "I have just got back from our expedition which was completely successful, though I had rather an anxious time coming back as one of the big ends on my car came loose and it was doubtful whether we should get back under our own steam. The last 300 miles we covered at 15 m.p.h. in two days. There was one advantage however in going slowly as I managed to collect a good many birds en route. I skinned most of them and took them straight to the Museum for identification but found that although I had learnt a lot from it, I had not got anything very rare. Still, if only I had a few spare days, I think I have sufficient notes to be worth sending to 'British Birds'."

"That will have to wait until I have waded through the present pressure of work with inoculations and official returns of all sorts to compete with. One advantage of being in the desert is that one avoids most of the red tape, but once in camp the documents roll in in a steady stream asking for numbers and dates and names. I find it rather difficult to compete with as all my secretarial work must be done in a tent with the wind blowing through it. However, as you know I like to be busy and if I am left in peace for a week

and the sandstorms give me a chance, I shall soon get things straight. Sweetheart, I found five of your lovely letters from January waiting for me when I got back, and also a cable sent off on 14th February telling me that all was well and sending me your love... I am just a little cross with you for saying in your last letter that your letter before was dull. Every one of your letters is a treat for me and not even the tiniest bit dull."

"I saw the A.D.M.S. for just a second and he told me I was most likely going to a base hospital where I might manage to get some surgery; the time did not seem propitious for asking about getting home after he had told me that off his own bat, so I am awaiting developments for a short time. I have just heard the good news that Keren has fallen which I feel is one more step towards my homecoming — also the diplomatic victory on Yugoslavia, which will mean a blow to German prestige. Still, although victories make life more bearable, they are not compensation for being separated from my darling."

Keren was a tactically important town in the colony of Italian East Africa, with main road and railway routes to the colonial capital of Eritrea at Asmara and to the Red Sea port of Massawa. It was attacked by combined British and Free French forces during the East African Campaign, starting on 3rd February 1941, with surrender on 27th March. Massawa also surrendered after a subsequent attack on 8th April. The British were quickly able to re-open the Massawa-Asmara railway on 27th April and by 1st May the port was also brought back into use. This marked the end of organised Italian resistance in Eritrea and so ended their threat to Allied shipping in the Red Sea²⁹.



IN EARLY 1941 MAIDA'S life in Cambridge continued to have its ups and downs but was generally much less exciting than John's. On 17th February she wrote: "My own precious darling — I have had a very specially busy day today and have spent the afternoon you'll never guess where — the Infant Welfare Centre at Cherry Hinton acting as Mrs. Clapham's assistant. I am to go once a fortnight; Mrs. Luard goes the other Mondays. Mrs. Clapham kindly picked me up in the car today, but later on I hope to go on my bicycle. My job was to weigh the babies and Mrs. Clapham wrote

down the weights on the various cards, and at the same time did all the business of the Mothers Savings Group, putting stamps on their cards, filling in their completed National Savings Certificates and so on."

"Although you might not think it, my job needed just as much arithmetical ability. I had two scales to deal with, one on the kitchen model with a scale-pan and big weights for the tiny babies, and the other one of the kind they have at chemists with weights which shove along a bar for the toddlers to stand on. As several of the weights were lost it was necessary to combine and subtract till I felt quite moidered, and then I had to give Mrs. Clapham the weights in stones, pounds and ounces, and I never could remember how many pounds went to make a stone. Added to this was the strain of trying to calm the infant's cries, dodge the pools they almost inevitably made at the moment of being put on the scales and show a kindly and pleasant but not patronising interest in the mothers: I can tell you it was one of the most wearing afternoons I have ever spent. But I enjoyed it, and though I am sure I got several weights wrong and sent the mothers away worrying because their child had lost, or gloating because it had gained, all without a cause, I hope to become efficient in time. It's nice to be doing some outside work again and going just once a fortnight will be a pleasant amount to begin with."

"Some of the mothers were priceless; I said to one 'What is your baby's name?' 'Pearl' she replied '*aow naow, it's Ruth Edna, I have so many so near together I sometimes can't remember which is which.*' One baby was only five weeks old, the first its parents had had after being married ten years. The poor mother was so inexpert at undressing and dressing it and it had on such a phenomenal number of layers of clothing that they were there the best part of an hour. Various utensils were provided for the convenience of our patrons, and I heard one mother's voice raised in rebuke: '*Ere, Jimmy, you mustn't roll the chyrnbers around.*'... by 4.0 o'clock the floor was liberally adorned with wet patches. I feel it's all very good for me and hope that if I ever have to prove my worth as a doctor's wife in the various good works usually thrust upon such people, I shan't let you down. Besides, having such a lovely baby of our own has made me eager to help mothers who can't do as much for their babies through having more time and money to spend."

The war news both at home and abroad was, however, worrying: "Turkey's pact with Bulgaria looks as if we were going to be let down yet again. I shall be terribly worried if you have to be in the

Balkans, darling. We have been having fairly frequent air-raid alerts the last few days and nights. A packet of incendiaries were dropped near the chalk pits, much to the disquiet of the Miss Towlers, who farm the land, as their eager putters-out (what superb English and entirely original) trampled down all the new wheat. We heard it all but were not unduly perturbed. These incendiaries fell on Saturday just before 11.0 p.m. with a scream, a plop and a series of pops, which brought Mamma and Adda smartly out of their beds. They couldn't put the landing light on because of Harriet, who had just gone to sleep, so they had to feel their way downstairs in the dark somewhat precariously, accompanied by Ben who I had to rescue half-way down."

"I got into bed... Adda and Mamma sat gloomily by the fire and, just as I was dropping off to sleep, I heard an acrimonious conversation going on in subdued voices. Adda was rebuking Mamma for not leaving her bedroom light on long enough for Ben to be picked up before the descent began... the last I heard was Adda saying morosely '*You would 'ave 'ad something to laugh at if anyone 'ad tripped over 'im*'. Her h's always go all anyhow under stress of emotion. Ben, I may add, is the only one of us who still suffers from nerves when the sirens sound in the daytime. One only has to say '*Mind the Germans*' to bring him in from the garden at full speed, if he has not already arrived. One day Adda and I observed him coming up from the end of the orchard absolutely flat out the moment the wailing began. We wonder what his conception of the Germans can be."

Maida's letter of 20th February gave thanks to John for his letters of early January telling her how dirty and bedraggled he felt: "I'm so glad your Christmas parcel arrived at last, darling. Just three months it took, what a journey. Harriet has been gaining weight steadily and can raise herself off the floor now, supporting herself on arms and knees. She wore the little jacket Nannie sent her for the first time this afternoon as she has just grown into it. It is very pretty but has bows at the neck, waist and wrists, which Harriet finds altogether too tempting. Instead of going to sleep, she undid all these bows and the strings of her gloves and her bonnet ribbon and came home looking like an unplaited maypole."

On 24th February Peggy and Raymond came to stay for the night, and three of Maida's old university friends also descended unexpectedly on Queen Edith's Way and were invited to tea: "It was all fun, though I should imagine that of all our vast and variegated

acquaintances no three could have been found less likely to appeal to Peggy and Raymond. However, I felt since they were in Cambridge it was quite fitting for them to meet people of exclusively intellectual charm. Peggy told me about Helen's quiet wedding, and said she looked very happy; she also described Kitty's attractive looks and musical talent." Helen had apparently been dating Leslie Holland since the previous autumn, when she had taken him to Morwick to meet her mother, but there had been no mention then of marriage. When he was on leave in February he had, however, invited her to visit him and they had decided to get married at very short notice. The rest of the family, while pleased for Helen, considered this somewhat rash as he had no money apart from his army salary and no apparent relatives, as his parents were both dead.

Maida also reported that the following night they had an air-raid which: "...turned into the most blitzish we have had here. It even got me out of bed. I was wakened after half an hour of pleasant sleep by a series of such big bangs that I went to the hall and sat by the cot with Mamma, Adda and Benskin close by... As we sat there we could hear much roaring around of aeroplanes, and several more whizzes and bangs and general 'Boum und Krach', but it seemed to die down after about half an hour, and I was far more sleepy than frightened... However, we heard this morning that it been quite an imposing affair, and a good many houses in the region of the station, Brooklands Avenue and the Catholic Church are damaged."

This air attack on February 24th is confirmed by historical records³⁰ indicating that eleven people died, including wardens and firewatchers on duty: *'The attack started with incendiaries being dropped in the Cherry Hinton Road area at about 10 pm. At 10:35 pm two H.E's* made a direct hit on a house at Grantchester Meadows, killing two women. At 11.15 a whole batch of H.E's and a score of incendiaries fell on Hills Road between Hyde Park Corner and Station Road. Wardens and firewatchers were caught up in the attacks, while others were injured in their homes'.*

Two days later (26.2.41) Maida was concerned to hear that British troops had occupied an island off Turkey and also that the Germans: "...claim to have mechanised troops operating in Libya... I'm not really worrying, darling, as you know I am trying to be brave all the time, but I can't help wishing I knew what is really happening... Adda has been with us thirty years today. She went to Cambridge this

afternoon and brought back some chocolate eclairs to celebrate. We all enjoyed them including Benjie and little Harriet who had several tiny pieces."

On 3rd March Maida described her second time helping at the baby Clinic: "I'm bound to confess that I didn't look forward to it particularly. However, I enjoyed it very much, and am sure I shall now continue to find it very pleasant. It was a lovely afternoon, so I went to Cherry Hinton on my bicycle, its first outing... I was soon enjoying pedalling along in the most glorious sunshine with lovely clouds to watch. The hedge near the path leading to the chalkpits was alive with yellow hammers and the fields with plovers." Around this time Maida also made some rare comments on the availability of items in the shops. Oranges and talcum powder had now disappeared, but she could still manage to get nice soap. She had been buying lengths of material to make dresses for Harriet at a later date. Although shortages were only just beginning, they seemed likely to become worse.

Two days later March 5th was John's 30th birthday. She wrote: "My own adored darling, it is nearly the end of your birthday and I have been thinking about you so specially much today, sweetheart, and hoping that it has been a happy day for you. It made me feel rather sad in bed this morning to think of you spending it without me, and I'm afraid I shed a few tears over poor Harriet who was having a cuddle. She couldn't make out what was wrong, but she seemed to understand that I needed comforting, and stretched out her little hands so sweetly and gently to touch my face, and so managed to cheer me up and ever since we have both had a happy day. The news is becoming rather exciting these days with our breaking off relations with Bulgaria; one feels that any moment events may begin in those parts, and in several other places too. I fancy the attacks on our shipping will get heavier with perhaps greater difficulty in getting food, but I don't believe the Germans can keep up a concentrated submarine offensive for more than a few months."

On 8th March 1941: "I had a letter from my American Uncle David this morning, thanking me for my Christmas card which arrived in February. He sounds rather gloomy, and doesn't think enough help is reaching us yet from the U.S.A. I think I told you before that he said Roosevelt's administration was a bunch of crooks, and all they were sending was old junk. However I don't go much by what he says, as he is one of those people who are always more ready to criticise than praise." Maida finished weaning Harriet a little sadly. Harriet adapted to this perfectly but

* HE: high explosive shell.

Maida had to see Dr. Hedgcock with a painful breast: "I might have known that the left breast would have one more fling before being put on retired pay, as it is the one which has been troublesome all along."



THE BEGINNING OF APRIL saw major changes to both the military situation as a whole and to John's army career. General Rommel and the Afrika Korps went on the attack on 31st March, only six weeks after they had landed and far sooner than the British Command had expected. They then swept eastward through Cyrenaica^{2,18}. The Allied forces who had just captured all this area had already been so depleted to form an expeditionary force to defend Greece that

they put up virtually no resistance. They were at that time under the command of General Neame. General Wavell became concerned and on 2nd April he sent for General O'Connor from Egypt, with the intention of placing him in command in Cyrenaica because of his great experience of desert warfare. O'Connor duly arrived back in Libya on 3rd April, but Wavell then decided to leave General Neame in command, with O'Connor to help and advise him. Following this move O'Connor had to part with the 4th R.H.A., who were remaining in Egypt, and sent a very touching special order thanking them for their: '*Outstanding fighting spirit and enthusiasm*' during the previous campaign.

On 6th April the car in which both O'Connor and Neame were driving got lost in the desert and ran into a German detachment, who duly captured them. They both had to spend the rest of the conflict as prisoners of war, leaving the British forces temporarily leaderless. The only place where the Allies did continue to resist the Germans was at Tobruk. This important port was held by a mixed force of Australians and British with great gallantry; in three months Tobruk withstood 1,000 violent air raids as well as repeated attacks by ground forces. Supplies were landed and casualties evacuated through the shattered harbour during the hours of darkness¹⁸.

As for John, he cabled home on 29th March and followed this up with a letter on 31st March saying: "...the big news with me at present is that my days as R.M.O. are numbered, and I am going to a hospital, probably in the town where I was stationed when I first came to Egypt and possibly in the same hospital. Although I shall be sorry to leave I think it will be the best thing for me, as even though I don't actually do any big operations I shall be in touch with surgery again, and I have been away from it for quite long enough. I have no news yet of what date I shall go but expect it will be this week sometime. I rather hope I shall get in touch with Major Brandon again who came out with me and is quite a good surgeon, as well as a good tennis player."

He therefore left his position with the 4th R.H.A. and arrived back at the General Hospital in Alexandria after a trying journey with too much luggage. The hospital had by then been renamed from 2/5 to No. 64. He next wrote on 4th April: "Here I am again posted to the hospital where I started my army jobs. I had hoped that I might be in a position now to get some more surgery, but everything depends on the precious F.R.C.S. and I don't see myself getting a proper surgical job. Still I shall be able to rub up

NOT TO BE PUBLISHED IN THE PRESS

SPECIAL ORDER OF THE DAY

BY

LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR RICHARD O'CONNOR,
K.C.B, D.S.C, M.C.
General Officer Commanding in Chief,
British Troops in Egypt.

Headquarters,
British Troops in Egypt,
Cairo.
2nd April 1941

It is with great regret that I take leave of the 4th R.H.A. on its transfer to another command. What is Egypt Command's loss with be another's gain, as the Regiment has one of the finest fighting records of any unit in the Middle East. Its experience has been unique and there has been practically no fighting between MATRUH and AGHELA in which it has not been represented.

Its first major action was carried out during the British withdrawal last September when its fine shooting took a particularly heavy toll of the advancing Italian columns. Then in the recent Libya campaign it played a most important part on the advance to SOLLUM; in the battles for BARDIA and TOBRUK; and finally on the last decisive battle of BEDA FOMM.

Its outstanding fighting spirit, and enthusiasm is due to the fine example set by its commander back up so well by all the officers and other ranks in the Regiment.

The 4th R.H.A. has fully maintained the high traditions of the Royal Regiment, and I wish all ranks good luck in their new Command.

Message sent from General O'Connor to the 4th R.H.A. in April 1941. Extract from the War Diary of 4th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery WO 169/246³.

my knowledge again which is something, and I may be able to get posted to England though this is very uncertain. Since I left in January 1940 the place has changed a lot. The mess is more comfortable and a great many additional beds have been added in huts. Major Brandon and Capt. Fawcett are still here, but most of the others have just arrived from England. There seem to be plenty of them without any jobs so far, so it has given me hope that I may get back."

He was initially given a House Surgeon's job and by 8th April he was able to report that: "At last I have got my things straight and am beginning to feel at home. My old cut-throat razor has come out of the bag he has lived in since last summer, and I shaved with him for the first time this morning... I am looking after two minor surgical wards at the moment as one M.O. is ill with a sore throat. So far I have only done two whitlows in the theatre, but this evening I am doing an operation for varicose veins, and as time goes on I hope to get a few more interesting things to do. However, I am up to my eyes in work as I have over 100 beds to look after and most of them have nasty wounds which are very septic. It will take a little time to get to know them all, and I never really manage to take as much interest in patients I have not seen from the start. The chief trouble is that all the dressings are changed in the mornings and it is impossible to see everyone at once. I am enjoying it all the same." As this was still before the arrival of penicillin, sepsis of wounds remained a major issue.

John had requested a posting back to England as he was missing Maida, writing on 11th April: "How I have been longing for your help these last few days when I have been working almost all day and needed the rest and happiness in the evenings which you alone can bring me... I feel a kind of loneliness which you alone can cure. However, there is nothing for it but to look forward to the future, as I had a reply from the authorities today in answer to my application to be posted to the U.K. It says: '*The circumstances stated in Captain Bulman's application reveal a situation that is more or less common to all of us and do not amount to the interpretation of compassionate grounds*'. The C.O. of the Hospital had forwarded my application on the grounds that I had been away from home for sixteen months and never seen Harriet. It is perfectly true there are plenty of other people equally as homesick as I am, so I suppose I have no grumble, but I wanted to make sure."

"I am now looking after the old ward I had when I was here in 1939. It is very much the same with a hundred beds though almost half of them are empty at

the moment... The worst cases at the moment are bad burns which are very septic and slow to heal. There are also many more naval ranks in the hospital now as a result of recent actions. I am so sleepy now that I can hardly keep my eyes open so I must hop into my bed, which is very comfortable though peculiar in construction. I am still so much enjoying having sheets."

On 14th April: "I have got my work settled down to a routine now and do not have to visit the ward in the afternoons. In some ways minor treatment is more difficult to do in hospitals than in the desert. This is because the M.O. does not do the dressings and it is difficult to get the sisters and orderlies to put them on as you want them. Also, if a man wants his ear syringing or eye seeing to, he has to go to another department instead of doing it on the spot... The news so far about the recent fighting is confused but I am not very worried about Libya, as having seen the difficulties of fighting and transport there I feel sure the Germans will exhaust themselves in time. Still they are certainly a great deal more dangerous than the Italians and we don't seem to have dealt with them yet." This prediction proved correct as Rommel did indeed run out of fuel and water shortly after, so was forced to halt his advance on the Egyptian frontier at the start of May. This was followed by a temporary lull in the war, with practically no more fighting in the Western Desert until the middle of June.

A few days later (17.4.1941) John received a letter from Maida postmarked 19th February enclosing: "...four adorable snapshots, three of Harriet and one of you both, which I like the best. I feel so proud of you both and you both look so well and happy, though a little thinner than you used to be. Darling, I hope you are getting plenty to eat in England now. Feeding Harriet for eight whole months must have been a big strain on you, though the result is the most perfect little girl in all the world... I am amused to hear that Ben has become siren-trained. We shall have to present Mamma with a small one after the war to act as a whistle, as obedience has never been his strong point... We are now in the most critical part of the war and everyone here is feeling the strain a bit. I am rather worried that the Germans may start an attempt to invade England in May especially as they have started big scale bombing attacks again." He also reported that they were all very busy at the hospital with incoming convoys of wounded troops.

On 21st April: "The days slip by slowly and we are slowly recovering from the initial surprise of the

German attack. However, we shall not know how things will turn out for another month. I am still rather worried about what may happen in England next month, but I hope Hitler's plans will come to nothing again as they did last autumn... I have been moved to a medical ward for the moment owing to the fickleness of the Services. There were too many surgical M.O.s and the Navy gets the first pick as the surgical side is commanded by a Naval Commander. I was furious at first but am now enjoying it as there are many interesting medical cases to treat and in any case I was not getting any real surgical cases in my other ward. As it is, I am learning a lot about treating dysentery, Bilharzia, scarlet fever and all sorts of obscure diseases which I have never treated before."

"Tonight I am getting my Bird Notes out to see if I can make them into some sort of paper for British Birds. I have just been sent the Zoological Society of Egypt's Bulletin, which is managed by a Mr. Duncan Mackintosh who lives in Cairo next door to the Lows. He was always away when I was there, which was a pity as I should have enjoyed talking birds with him. He sent me a nice letter with the Bulletins and I shall write and send him some of my notes I think. At the moment I have been too busy to do any birding since I left the regiment and feel that at present social activities are more important."

On 26th April: "I have just returned after a 24-hour journey travelling on a troop train. Every train has to have an M.O. and we take turns at doing it. It is rather a boring job, as there is seldom anything to do, but I rather enjoyed it as it meant spending the night at a Hospital where Major Harland works. I came out with him and had not seen him for over a year, so I enjoyed comparing notes and having a talk... The war situation is still worrying, but not so bad I think as a week ago, as we seem to be doing fairly well at Tobruk, and in any case we were expecting to have to evacuate Greece. May will be the most anxious month of the year, I think. I am afraid the news is rather hot and bothered at times but perhaps Mr. Churchill will be able to say something more cheerful tomorrow night on the wireless. At any rate the difficulties have been foreseen and I have great faith in General Wavell."

"Whether we shall be able to send another expeditionary force to help Turkey remains to be seen. There are reports that the Russians are moving troops over to the Bessarabian frontier from the East, but I am afraid they will not attack unless they are attacked. That is the tragedy of this war — Hitler can do his attacks one at a time and in his own time

whereas if Turkey had attacked a month ago, things in Greece might have been very different. We still don't seem to have enough aeroplanes and tanks. One consolation is that 1941 appears to be similar to 1917 in the last war and if this is true this war won't last more than a year longer. If Turkey is over-run, we may be defending Egypt on two sides, Palestine on the North and Tobruk on the West. We shall then get it pretty hot here, but I don't expect they can take Turkey at any rate till the end of May, and by that time the Abyssinian campaign will be finished and we may have new supplies of aeroplanes. I expect you will laugh when this reaches you in June and my forecasts have proved all balls, but still it is fun guessing the future, though it would be a hundred times better if you were with me, sweetheart. We are well away from the harbour here and have air raid shelters, so you need not be worried about me".

John's next letter of 28th April was written on an air-letter and arrived at Queen Edith's Way on May 19th: "These airmail letter cards are a new idea and I believe may get home much quicker than the ordinary airmail. At any rate, they can't be any slower so I am trying one and will be interested to know when it reaches you. Some people tell me they get home in a fortnight, which sounds almost like a fairy tale. At any rate some air-mail postcards with threepenny stamps on them reached here in a fortnight from England. I still have no news of you since Feb. 19th, but there have been no big lots of mail in recently and they are sure to take some time to go round by the Gunners, so I am not worried dearest, though I scan my little pigeonhole hungrily for a letter every day." The following day he sent a brief telegram to provide reassurance, just saying: "All my love darling. I am very well and quite safe."

On 1st May he received his first airgraph from Maida: "My own darling — I have just received your p.c. sent off on April 6th. It is so exciting to get news from you written in your own handwriting only three weeks ago. I expect I shall get the next one in even less time, as you did not know my new address when you sent it off and it has had to travel through devious channels. The airgraph service is a new idea. I wonder if you will be able to read it all right. We shall be able to send at least one a week. The other four snaps of you and Harriet have not turned up yet but I loved the four which came about a fortnight ago... I am very well and fit, and bathing almost every day. We are very hopeful here in spite of the evacuation from Greece, and many new tanks etc. are arriving. The

next month is going to be exciting, I think. All my love darling, John”.

On 5th May another four of Maida’s letters had arrived. John had been dinghy sailing in the harbour and much enjoyed it, a hobby that he continued with after the war: “I have not very much work to do at present as we did not get as many casualties as we expected, and the hospital is very empty with a great many medical officers. However, I have more patients than many of them and you will be surprised to hear that I am looking after the fever ward which is in a house away from the main hospital. The army’s policy is to give everyone a turn at everything (except surgery) and I must say I find it interesting for a change. There are no epidemics at present but I have some scarlet fever, diphtheria, mumps, German measles and chicken-pox cases to look after.” He enclosed a little present for Harriet: “The little star that I am enclosing as Harriet’s first birthday present comes from an Italian prisoner. Give her a kiss from me and tell her that Daddy says she is not to eat it.”

His next letter sent on 8th May reported more sporting activity: “I had a good foursome at tennis yesterday with Capt. Williamson and two sisters at the Sporting Club. In the evening I was Orderly Officer and managed to get an interesting operation to do in the theatre tying an artery in the leg of a Greek airman. He had had a machine gun bullet through it about ten days ago without doing much harm. On arriving in hospital the artery which was damaged gave way and blood spurted out for a short time. I was much honoured by the surgeon on duty allowing me to do it.”

In an air-letter sent on 15th May John was wondering how quickly it would reach home: “It may perhaps arrive round about Harriet’s first birthday, in which case I want it to be a special birthday letter for her to bring her all Daddy’s love and kisses which you will give her from me, sweetheart... We are still all right here and there now seems little possibility of Egypt being invaded from the West, though there seem to be signs of trouble in Syria and Iraq in the East. I am afraid I am beginning to hate the French for their cowardice in giving in in Syria and Algeria, although I expect there are many good ones amongst them. I am afraid the whole French fleet as well as all the French war industries will be against us before long.”

“I had a good game of tennis today with Major Aylott and am feeling pleasantly tired and happy tonight. We still seem a long way off victory and cannot claim to have beaten the Germans anywhere except at

Narvik — but however long it lasts, sweetheart, I love you just as much as I did that last November day when I left you. We have beaten the Italians at any rate which is something and perhaps we shall soon have beaten the Germans in the Western Desert, where the gunners are fighting hard again. I sometimes wish I was still with them. Your own adoring John.” This reference was to the Battle of Narvik, which had taken place on 28th May 1940 as part of the Norwegian Campaign. This was the first time that British, French, Polish and Norwegian forces had fought together and they had recaptured Narvik from the Nazis, representing the first major victory of the war for the Allied forces.

Meanwhile further action was happening not far away in Greece. British forces had initially garrisoned Crete when the Italians had attacked Greece at the end of October 1940. This suited the British as Crete provided the Royal Navy with excellent harbours in the eastern Mediterranean. Although the Italians were repulsed, the Germans successfully invaded Greece in April 1941, requiring the evacuation of 57,000 Allied troops by the Royal Navy. Some were sent to Crete to bolster its garrison until fresh forces could be organised, although most had lost their heavy equipment. A German invasion of Crete began on 20th May, initially using a massive parachute attack followed the next day by amphibious landings^{2,31}. The British troops were pushed southwards after fierce fighting and the British Navy managed to evacuate about 18,600 of the 32,000 British troops on the island between 28th May to 1st June. The remaining British were forced to surrender on 1st June, leaving around 12,000 British and Dominion troops behind on the island. The local population put up a stout resistance, but many armed and unarmed civilians were killed by the Germans.

After little news to report on 19th May, a few days later on 22nd May John wrote saying that he was: “on the move again”. The reason behind this arrived later: “I have not been able to write a letter for a week because I have been posted temporarily to assist an R.M.O. in the Queen’s Royal Regiment. However, I am back again and safe and sound.” This had been a short but exciting expedition to help with the Allied evacuation: “Since my trip to Crete, which I can now tell you about, I have been quite thankful that I am in the R.A.M.C. and not the Naval Medical Corps. We set off twice but were unable to land owing to bombing and came back again. Fortunately, we were not hit but had several bombs very close. The evacuation of Crete has given us another shock rather like the evacuation

MICROGRAM
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Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F.S. Regs. Part II, and the Staff Manual respectively. Title pages will be prepared in manuscript.

WAR DIARY
or
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY

Unit 64 General Hospital.
Commanding Officer.....

Month and Year JUNE 1941. (Erase heading not required).

Place.	Date.	Hour.	Summary of Events and Information.	Referen
ALEXANDRIA.	2/6		Capt. BULMAN reported back from T/Duty as 2nd R.M.O. to Queen's Royal Regiment.	
			Convoy admitted 31/5 from Tobruk of 50 cases.	
			Ambulance Train departed Victoria at 0800 hours - 188 N.Z. cases from this hospital were transferred.	
			33 Ratings were admitted from H.M.S. "Calcutta".	
			101 Other Ranks were admitted in convoy from Docks ex Crete.	
	2/6		Capt. CARPENTER returned from conducting duties.	
			A convoy of 17 lying cases and 24 sitting cases was admitted.	
	4/6		60 lying cases and 100 sitting cases were evacuated by Ambulance Train from Victoria at 0800 hours. Cases were British Army, A.I.F. and Allied Units. Lt. WYLIE supervised. 27 sitting cases and 22 lying of N.Z.E.F. were transferred from Alexandria Main by train departing at 1400 hours. Lt. THOMSON, No. 3 General Hospital, attached this unit, was detailed as conducting M.O.	
	5/6		Admiral CUNNINGHAM, C. in C. Mediterranean Fleet, visited the hospital	

Mention of John's return from his temporary posting to the Queen's Royal Regiment⁷ (entry highlighted in red). This entry also shows that the Hospital was receiving casualties from Tobruk, Crete and the navy during this period. Extract from the War Diary of No. 64 General Hospital, WO 177/1319⁷.

of Greece. I expect we shall recover in about a fortnight and then the Germans will attack somewhere else, but the nearer they come to us, the better chance we shall have of beating them, as our Air Bases are close at hand. Our aircraft production is meant to be equal now to that of Germany, so in a few months' time we should definitely be superior in numbers."

"It is nice to think that almost exactly two months ago we were wondering whether the Germans would have taken even Alexandria itself by this time. Most people seem to think it will be about a month before the Germans can attack again, and by that time we should have been able to make good our losses in men in Greece and Crete." After the war John revealed to Maida that this description had underplayed the serious situation he had been in. His ship had managed to take some troops on board but they had been hit by incendiary bombs that set the deck alight while he was dealing with casualties down below. The fires were apparently extinguished by having barrels of lentils poured over them.

Back in Egypt, John was unimpressed at the way the army were treating him. Having got off the ship he was next sent to an unspecified desert camp (29.5.1941): "I am feeling rather annoyed at being moved about so much at present... The worst of being in a hospital is that you are not permanent and can be posted away to anyone who needs an M.O. at a moment's notice, and this is the third time in two months. Still I have had some interest out of it this time as I had several

bomb casualties to operate on which I enjoyed doing in a well-equipped theatre belonging to the Navy."

"I have given up hoping to get any decent job as far as medical work goes in the army; all one can do is to go where one is told and carry on until the war is over. This last move was particularly annoying, as I had just entered for some sailing races in the harbour and was really having a pretty good time. Today I am living in a tent in the desert with the other M.O. and an R.C. padre. The padre is fortunately keen on bridge which helps to pass the time. I have no medical duties whatever to perform at the moment but as I say the posting is only temporary and I expect I shall be able to give you more cheerful news in my next letter."

By 4th June he was once more back at 64 General Hospital, where he was happy to receive a lot of mail and had been able to compete in his first ever sailing race, which he had thoroughly enjoyed. A few days later on 8th June he reported: "We are also beginning to get air raids at last, and there was quite a bad one yesterday though no bombs were particularly near the hospital... We are all very excited today to hear about the news from Syria, and we are hoping that we shall be able to occupy it before the Germans, which will compensate us for the loss of Crete."

"This afternoon I had a ride on horseback, the first time since I have been in Egypt. There is a small stables about two miles away and a friend Captain Carpenter and I had a very nice ride round the sand hills... No amount of amusement can make up for

your love darling. Life for me is empty without you. I have been longing for you very badly today. In fact, the only thing I really get much enjoyment from is work and while I have got that to do I shall be able to keep going. Some people are alarmed at the prospect of parachutists landing here as in Crete. Although it is on the cards, I think we shall have no difficulty in beating them if they do... All my love precious one — our separation cannot last for ever.”

This letter was referring to the British Empire forces invading Syria and Lebanon on 8th June, with the aim of preventing Germany from using them for attacks on Egypt. This region was then controlled by Vichy France: the British were led to expect that it would offer little resistance but instead the Vichy government ordered its troops to fight the Allied forces. Nevertheless, a successful advance continued and a ceasefire came into effect on 12th July. This provided the British with naval and air bases north of Suez, so increasing the security of the important oil route from Iraq to Palestine³².



ONLY FIVE OF THE letters which Maida wrote to John between April and early June 1941 have survived. In one she commented on the newly introduced air mail postcards: “They will go all the way by air for 3d. I don’t think they will be very satisfying really, as somehow a postcard is so public, and they will muddle the sequence of news in letters, but it will be nice if they arrive more quickly.” There was little news in her letter of 3rd April although: “It had been depressing to hear of the recapture of Benghazi... We have taken on such an immense job in setting out to beat the Germans that I can’t feel it can end yet awhile.” Referring back to her diary, Maida noted that April was a dull month, mostly spent helping Adda with the spring cleaning. She was also worrying about news of the Allied retreats in both Libya and Greece.

At the start of May she was also feeling lonely and commented: “Mr. Churchill keeps saying that *‘the struggle will be long and hard’*. I wouldn’t mind it being hard if only it could be short and you could come home to me, precious one. However so long as you are safe and well I can go on being brave.” She sent news of the garden and Harriet: “It is a heavenly May morning and the garden looks lovely, though it will be even



Harriet with Ben and Adda in the garden at Queen Edith’s Way, April 1941.

better in a few days when the apple blossom comes out... Unfortunately, it isn’t warm enough to sit out yet, but soon I hope to be able to write to you sometimes in the garden again as I used to do this time last year when we were getting so excited at the thought of how near little Harriet’s birth was getting... She crawls all over the place now, and on Friday came all the way in here from the far end of the dining room, exploring all on her own with a look of suppressed excitement on her little face. When she arrived here she discovered the waste paper basket and I found her sitting on the

floor methodically taking everything out of it, and she has evidently not forgotten the pleasure it gave her as she is now doing the same thing again.”

On 18th May the weather was the first warm, sunny day of the year and Maida welcomed this by: “...putting on my old black dress with yellow butterflies, which always reminds me, darling, of the first day I came to see you in Lambeth wearing it, and feeling so thrilled and so nervous in case after so long we might find we had nothing in common any more.” This reminiscing related back to their meeting up again in 1937, three years after they had both left Cambridge when John had just qualified as a doctor: “I can feel myself now waiting on the doorstep for Madame Lang to open the door, and she said: *‘You know the way’* and I said *‘No, I’ve never been here before’*, so she explained which your room was, and I climbed the funny little poky stairs with the big window and the tree outside, and tapped on your door... Poor Madame Lang, I’m afraid she and her house may have been flattened out by a bomb by now as that part of London has had such a bad time; we must go to see when you come home, darling, if fate has spared such an historic spot.” They confirmed later that the house in a terrace opposite the hospital had indeed been totally destroyed.

Maida continued the letter later that evening, describing her current bedtime routine: “One of the reasons I like to stay in the drawing room now that the warm nights have come is that I can have a last little walk down the orchard all alone before turning in and blacking out, when I feel specially near you, my darling. I have just returned from tonight’s walk; the orchard is like fairyland with the apple blossom and primroses glimmering in the dusk. Unfortunately, when the world looks especially beautiful, I miss you more than ever.”

June 2nd was a good day as she received John’s long letter of 5th May containing the star for Harriet, together with a letter card and cable: “Harriet was delighted with the star, her first birthday present, and I gave her your love and a big kiss and told her you said she wasn’t to eat it, and she never put it near her mouth but put it in each of our hands very gently and picked it up again lovingly over and over again with the sweetest little smile.”

Maida went into Cambridge to buy a wooden horse on wheels to push along for Harriet’s birthday. Clothes rationing had just been announced on the radio and she was annoyed to find out that material for homemade clothes would also require coupons. This was because raw materials such as wool and

silk were now in short supply and were needed for the manufacture of war essentials such as uniforms and parachutes. Each civilian received a ration book of 66 coupons which had to last for a year. Every item of clothing had a coupon-value attached to it. Considering that coats needed 16 coupons and a child’s dressing-gown was 6 coupons, it became hard to keep a family properly dressed. This explains why Maida spent so much time making their own clothes, often from recycled material.

She wrote again on 9th June, Harriet’s birthday: “I didn’t begin my letter until tonight because I wanted to tell you all about our darling baby’s first birthday before anything else; and now it is 7.0 o’clock and she is in bed after a very happy day. Sweetheart, wasn’t it lovely, your lettercard written on 15th May specially for her birthday arrived this very morning, and you may be sure I gave her the special kisses you sent her with all the love I could put into them.” She had had a party with three little boys and one little girl: “Sophia was the only one who could talk but couldn’t walk, so she sat on the bathmat in the middle of the floor talking. Harriet and the three boys, who could each walk a few steps but couldn’t talk, went round and round her in silence.”



HARRIET’S FIRST BIRTHDAY WAS a landmark which gave them both mixed emotions. John wrote home on 11th June: “It is exciting though rather sad that Harriet is now one year old and Daddy is still so far away. How I long for you both darlinest, and yet there seems little hope at the moment. I didn’t think Mr. Churchill was very consoling in his last speech when he said that we should be pleased if in six month’s time things were no worse than they are today. Still I hope this may prove to be a gloomy picture, and perhaps we shall have Syria before the end of the month, which would compensate for the loss of Crete.”

“I am very busy and well occupied at present though one’s duties are apt to make arranging amusements difficult. I can never tell whether I can go out of the hospital the next day until midday the day before. Then another rule has been introduced that we must be in between 5.30 and 7.30 and not out after 10.0 p.m. in case of air raids. However, I had two sets of tennis the day before yesterday, and a bathe

in the sea yesterday. Today I had to attend a lecture on malaria all afternoon which, while interesting, has interfered with any possible recreation. Actually, I have four officers with malaria in the Officer's Ward under my care, so I am getting quite a bit of experience in tropical medicine."

A few days later the Allied forces made an ineffective attack in the Western Desert, known as Operation Battleaxe³³. The British still held the strategically important port of Tobruk but it was being besieged by the axis forces commanded by Rommel. The British launched a three-pronged attack on 15th June in an attempt to raise the siege and re-capture eastern Cyrenaica from German and Italian forces. However, they lost over half of their tanks on the first day. On 17th June they narrowly avoided complete disaster by withdrawing just ahead of a German encircling movement. Churchill had pressed for this attack although many others considered that it had been premature. He was, however, very disappointed when it failed and unfairly blamed General Wavell, who was still the Commander-in-Chief Middle East. Wavell was therefore transferred to India and replaced by General Claude Auchinleck. These events led to a general mood of depression and frustration amongst the British troops.

Also on 15th June, John was again fretting about army mismanagement at a personal level: "I have been working hard and have not been out much lately. Though I enjoy my work I am not really very settled here as I may be sent away at a moment's notice without being consulted at all, which is rather trying. In fact, I sometimes think I would rather be in a job like an R.M.O. where you know where you are. However, I have had a bit of useful experience, and a nice rest from the desert, wherever I may be sent in the future. Things are looking slightly better though I feel very gloomy at times. The weather is getting warm now, and it will soon be midsummer. I do wish things would get on a little faster. Darling, I long so much for your comfort and help, but there seems no chance of leave at all in England... Still I am not unhappy all the time, and if I do go back to the desert I shall be able to continue with my bird study. I am at present having my paper typed out."

CHAPTER 8

In Alexandria
1941

ON THE 17TH JUNE John sent an air letter with better news: "The letter I wrote two days ago was rather gloomy... I am now cheered up completely and am feeling better than ever. The chief reason is that I have been posted to a new job, although I am going on living in the hospital... I have not been very content and happy here as I have been moved about so much... I have done nine different wards in the last two months and three odd jobs outside the hospital, all at a moment's notice and without being consulted. I had begun to dislike the Colonel intensely, as I was doing far more than my fair share, and there are many people who have never been out of a base hospital, or in any kind of danger."

"So it was quite a relief to be moved to a job where I shall know where I stand, as you do as an R.M.O. I shall also be able to say what I like about the Colonel, who is a conceited little general practitioner and got his position by being in the Territorials. My new job consists in looking after the Medical Reception Station at a barracks close to here... Take care of yourself, precious one, until I come back. The news gets brighter every day. Give my love to Mamma and a big kiss for Harriet. Your own adoring John." The 64 General Hospital War Diary confirmed that on 18th June he was transferred to become the Officer in Charge of the Reception Station at Mustapha, a military barracks outside Alexandria⁷.

By 21st June he was able to describe the new post in more detail: "I am quite enjoying my new job where I see about 50 patients every morning and can treat them as I like without anyone's interference. I finish work at 1.0 o'clock and have the rest of the day free. Yesterday I went sailing in the harbour with Gervase

Markham, which was good fun; I like him because he is not at all parsonical in manner and behaves like an ordinary human being." Gervase was an old Cambridge friend, now serving as a chaplain in the R.A.M.C.: "Afterwards we had a game of ping pong in the boat club in which he beat me by two games to three to his great glee. After that we went back to his mess. He is attached to a Casualty Clearing Station, a medical unit which has just come out and has no job to do at present. They are living in tents on the sand at the edge of the town... I realised that in some ways I am very lucky to be doing all the medical work I am doing. They have done nothing but wait about since they left France last June, so you can imagine they were feeling rather sorry for themselves."

"I think I have told you that I am hiring a little car by the month at present. It is a little old ramshackle Fiat, but gets along all right and is a godsend for getting about in. I hope you will not think me extravagant, sweetheart, but I shall still be able to save quite a lot on my Captain's pay, as well as run it. Also, I felt I might only be here for a short time so that I might as well make the most of it. I drive down in it to my new work every morning which is about three miles away. We were a bit disappointed that things did not go better in the Western Desert last week, but at any rate we captured 200 Germans and 500 Italians. I do hope things will get a move on in Syria before the Germans have time to give them any assistance." This was followed by some reminiscences about their happy time together at High Wycombe, which: "...all seems so far away."

The following day on 22nd June Hitler's armies began an invasion of the Soviet Union, code named Operation Barbarossa^{2,34}. This was the largest land offensive in human history, with over 10 million combatants taking part along an 1,800 mile front. In the previous two years Nazi Germany and the Soviet

Union had signed political and economic pacts for strategic purposes. The German High Command had, however, begun to plan an invasion in July 1940 with the aim of acquiring the oil reserves of the Caucasus in addition to the agricultural resources of various Soviet territories including Ukraine and Byelorussia and potentially using some of their inhabitants as forced labour for the Axis war effort.

This offensive marked a massive escalation of the war geographically. It not only opened up the Eastern Front, but also brought the USSR into the Allied coalition. Although Churchill had loathed the Communist regime ever since the Russian Revolution in 1917, he realised that the Russians must now be treated as allies. The UK therefore signed a declaration on 12th July 1941 known as the Anglo-Soviet Agreement. In this the two sides pledged both to assist each other and not to make a separate peace with Germany. This development was somewhat difficult for British public opinion to adjust to and at the time it was not generally expected that the Russians would be able to defend themselves successfully. Maida's letters from this time are unfortunately lost, but she remembered going to a Russian propaganda film shown in Cambridge later in the war in which lovely girls drove huge tractors over immense fields.

John next wrote home on 26th June making little reference to Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union beyond mentioning that he had heard Churchill's speech on the radio saying we must help Russia, and: "...perhaps there is just a chance that the Russians will beat the Germans." He was instead more interested in the Egyptian birds: "I have got my bird notes typed now, but there are so many mistakes that I shall have to have them corrected before I can send them in. I am not sure that 'British Birds' will want them, as the birds I describe are not British, but I may send them to Witherby to see if he does." Even though it was midsummer he also remembered back to a Christmas card sent by Mr and Mrs. Hughes showing the Burnham Overy windmill, which they owned, and which he had visited during his time at Cambridge: "I hope we shall all be able to go there one day when the sea lavender is out in August; it is a lovely wild place which we have not yet visited together."

At the end of June (29.6.1941) he was continuing to enjoy the current job, which involved hard work in the mornings but with time off in the afternoons to sail or bathe: "I am improving a bit in the sailing races and have not come in last during the last week although I have not yet got a place in the race. We are



Card of Tower Mill, Burnham Overy Staithe.

getting occasional air raids, but very little damage is done and very few casualties, so no-one worries much although many of the natives have done a bunk to the surrounding country. Personally, I feel more optimistic than for a long time, as the Germans do not seem to be having it by any means all their own way. Even if they do manage to beat the Russians before the winter, it is bound to exhaust them and use up supplies."

"I think I said that if we were still here in July, we should have turned the corner, and I think that is true. Also, the Air Force offensive over Northern France is good news as it shows we are getting some of our own back at last. It will be grand when they start bombing Berlin every night for a month... Darling I am sure I must sound very frivolous in my recent letters as I tell you about one long round of amusements — if only you were with me it would be perfect. I am really getting quite fond of this place and would like to come back here with you some time in the future." Continuing later that evening, however: "The news is rather depressing tonight. I wonder what Russia will be doing by the time this reaches you. I only hope she will still be fighting. So far Hitler's campaigns take slightly less time than one of our letters."

The sailing news continued on 3rd July: "Yesterday



John birdwatching beside the car he was hiring.

I came in second out of six yachts in the harbour race, which is the best I have done so far. I got a great thrill out of it and thoroughly enjoyed the race, which lasted 2 h 15 minutes. Actually, I overtook the boat ahead just at the finish owing to a tug backing across our path. He went in front and I went behind, and it just made the difference and enabled me to beat him.” However: “...it is twenty months since I held you in my arms. If only the Russians could do the seemingly impossible and keep the Germans at bay it may not be so long, but I am afraid it may be another year yet before we are together again.”

A few days later on 7th July the workload was increasing: “I am becoming busier and busier in the mornings. This morning I attended to 115 patients, and I usually have a few odd surgical jobs to do at the end, though these are only minor things such as whitlows. Tomorrow I am going yacht racing again. Yesterday I went for a drive in my car along the freshwater canal. The road passes along through the cultivation which looks a little like the flat part of Norfolk with dykes and rows of trees every here and there. The difference is that there are no pretty villages and no rivers. The villages are filthy and odd houses of mud border the road the whole way... I was disappointed not to

see many birds — in fact almost the only ones were Egyptian swallows with their rather bilious salmon pink tummies and sparrows. I saw two larger waders which might have been godwits.”

He next sent off an air letter on 15th July: “My biggest piece of news is that I am almost definitely going on leave to Palestine for 10 days on 2nd August, so I may be there when this reaches you. I am going with Surg. Lieut. Gothard, whom I have known for some time. He works in the hospital and has been sailing with me most afternoons. I have actually come out equal top in one series of races though I have never won a race yet.” The following day he wrote again to say that he had just received two postcards sent on 18th and 24th June and was happy that the post was becoming more regular again: “I don’t know whether I told you that Augustin Jordan had written to me telling me he was in Palestine in May. I have written to him today thanking him for his letter and telling him that I shall be looking out for him when I get to Jerusalem in August. It is a job finding anyone when you are not allowed to mention place names, but perhaps I shall meet other Free French officers who may know him. Now that the fighting there is over, perhaps he may come back to Palestine, though I am afraid it is more likely he will still be in Syria.” In fact, they never did manage to meet until after the war.

On 19th July John had received three more letters from home, in one of which Maida had enclosed one of Harriet’s eyelashes: “I was amused to find that Harriet’s eyelashes are already longer than Papa’s... I was surprised that they were so dark... I wonder if her hair will be as dark as yours.” John and Maida then exchanged brief cables to commemorate their third wedding anniversary on 27th July. John also wrote at the end of the month: “I have just bought a small photograph album and stuck in it all the snaps you have sent me; also I have enjoyed myself cutting out the polyphotos of you. I find it impossible to do with less than 25 of them sweetheart, so it shows you how much I like them. I have definitely fixed up to go Palestine on 2nd August. I am very well darling and feeling fairly hopeful now that the Russians are not doing so badly. I am hoping the Germans will not have taken Moscow by the time this reaches you.”

“Besides my Reception Station, I have to look after some Italian prisoners now. There are five qualified medical officers amongst them (about 500 in all), so all I have to do is to control and advise them on medical matters. I am learning a little Italian, but you know darling how bad I am at languages. They are quite



Polyphotos of Maida in 1941, looking rather tired.

interesting and mostly quite content. I find the chief doctor spent most of his time fighting close to the front line where we were fighting last year, so that at many times I may have been within ten miles of him in the desert... Last year at this time was about the worst part of the year in the desert. I had not much hope then that we would be together again now, but this year I feel there is a good hope that we shall celebrate our next anniversary with much wine perhaps at the Ecu de France if that has not been destroyed."

"It is interesting to think that at the beginning of last year I went to Cairo on my first leave, and I shall be going on leave again this year in a week's time. There are not many more places in Egypt I want to visit, but if I am still here I may go to Luxor in the winter. It is much too hot there at this time of year. I am beginning to feel it is time I did some active service again, but most of the people here have done a good deal less than I have, so that does not worry me at the moment. I think I shall have as good a chance as anyone of getting home before the war ends although so far there has been no mention of it. It would be much better to be in England at the finish, as then I could find out what is being done about the F.R.C.S. at present. I shall have another shot at it when I have been here two years. Perhaps we shall have control of the Mediterranean by then. I would hate a six-week journey round the Cape."



THE LETTERS SENT BY Maida from mid-June to August 1941 were again scanty, with only seven out of the 27 she sent surviving until after the war.

According to her diary it was, however, a quiet and uneventful time. Adda went away for a holiday in early July, making Maida extra busy. A letter written on 10th July reports: "Adda's Daily Mirror is collecting letters from its readers describing what effect army life has had on their relations, the theory being that no-one can remain unaffected by it and everyone must change for better or worse. It amuses me to wonder how this theory could be applied to you, my sweetheart. I know you won't have changed for the worse, and I can't see how you could possibly be changed for the better, since you are my own perfect darling already." A rather sad letter sent on 15th July ended: "I felt very lonely for you last night when I went to bed and cried for the first time for ages but am feeling quite brave and cheerful again today."

A postcard sent on 26th July reported Maida's first visit to London with Mamma since Harriet was born. According to her diary they had a depressing bus ride through the bomb-damaged City but were still able to have a good lunch at the Criterion Restaurant in Piccadilly. The next surviving letter sent on 27th July, their wedding anniversary, continued in low spirits: "I expect you have been feeling rather miserable today, as I have, at the thought of this being our third wedding anniversary and we have been together so little of our three years. I started off very well and cheerfully and went to St. Benet's on my bicycle to Early Service, as it was such a special Sunday morning... But by this evening, although I can be thankful from the bottom of my heart for the perfect love you have given me all these three years, I can't help feeling rather depressed and less brave than usual at the thought of the many months of separation which I'm afraid must still lie ahead. Still, darlingest, the war news really does sound better with Russia fighting so well, so perhaps it won't really be so very, very long. I pray, darling, we

won't have another of our anniversaries apart... I read the wedding service over this morning and realised more than ever what tremendous promises we made, and how wonderful it is that there is no single vow of love and faithfulness that we would not make again now with even more feeling than on our wedding day... Even as I write I can feel you comforting me and cheering me up from far away and making me brave again... Bless you, darling, I do so hope it's been a happy day for you."

The following day (28.7.1941) she was once more both busy and happy and described her sewing and gardening activities, which John liked hearing about: "The phloxes are out in the garden now and look rather lovely, especially the gorgeous purple one near the lilac tree with a very pretty pink one beside it. Later on Mamma and I hope to trench and replant the border at the back running down to the drawing room window, as it's in a tangle now and the level of the earth needs raising. Goodness knows how I shall find time as I never seem to get to the end of my sewing, but I am determined to manage it if I can."

By 12th August six more letters from John had arrived, including his miserable one written on 15th June when he was fed up with working in 64 General Hospital, followed by the happier ones a few days later following his move to the Medical Reception Station: "Sweetheart, your sad letter was so brave that I don't think I would altogether have realised how lonely you were if you hadn't written the letter-card as well to say you had cheered up... You are so far away from home and everyone. Never mind, my darlingest, the end of this separation will come sometime and then how happy we shall be."

She sent an update on Harriet's latest developments: "You can see she is busy learning words as she asks me to repeat things and after hearing the name of a thing twice or three times she knows it and will look at the thing if you say the word later on; but she doesn't talk yet herself, and I don't think she will until she can say a whole sentence... It is nice to hear you are seeing something of Gervase and that you enjoy his company. It is nice that we both know him, so he is a link with the happy days when we first knew each other."

The next letter of 17th August was almost entirely about Harriet: "I am glad you were satisfied with her menu which is still very much the same as when I wrote before, as it is impossible to get much else to give her; she has liver now and beef-tea in which little bits of meat are left, but we can't get sweetbreads or chickens, so she has to have chiefly eggs and fish for

her first course at lunch, and sometimes grated cheese on her vegetables." Food was becoming more difficult to obtain and they were increasingly glad of the home-grown vegetables and fruit coming from the garden at Queen Edith's Way.

On 19th August Maida began her letter in the evening: "The reason I am so late starting is that for the last three quarters of an hour I have been reading all the letters in my new bundle, which now consists of 12 letters and several cables beginning on June 8th. Darlingest, you do write me such lovely letters, I am never tired of reading them again, and couldn't possibly exist without them as they bring you so close to me... This afternoon we had a tea party consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Cobham and Colonel and Mrs. Luard. They seemed to get on splendidly and it went off very well... the prize for the afternoon however goes to little Harriet, who captivated the whole party, and made great advances to Colonel Luard in particular... She looked so sweet in her little white smock, and behaved beautifully, playing by herself when no-one was talking to her. You would have been so proud of her, darling, as I was. She is going to have a great excitement tomorrow, as we are taking her into Cambridge to be fitted for the shoes with heels which she ought to be wearing now and will make her first journey in a red bus. She always admires them so much and has never been in one yet."

"Yesterday we had a visit from Diana Low's sister Margaret and her sister-in-law Helen... It was nice to hear about Di and Clissold... I felt rather annoyed by the way they, particularly Margaret, talked about the war. Considering that their intellectual set were the chief critics of the Government of the last few years for not standing up to the Fascists, it seems rather incongruous that now we are pursuing the policy which they presumably wanted they seem eager to get the slackest and safest jobs, since to their annoyance and surprise no-one thinks they are too valuable to be kept out of the Services."

"Margaret was beautifully dressed as always, and looked fairly well and has just been passed fit by a doctor to do a job again, but her hair looked a queer colour, all streaky and lustreless, so I hope her recovery really is permanent, poor girl." Margaret Low had been at school with Maida. She was married to Humphrey Spender, brother of Stephen Spender the poet, and referred to in his autobiography as one of the most vital people he had ever known. Sadly, she developed Hodgkin's Disease and died young. Maida never saw her again after this visit and when she re-



Harriet August 1941.

read this letter she regretted that she had not found something nicer to say about her.

The following day she resumed the saga of Harriet's shoes: "The morning dawned fine and warm, so we were able to go into the town according to plan. Adda came with us to help as we also went to have Harriet's photograph taken, just cheaply, at Eaden Lilley's where they do six for 3 shillings, rather like polyfotos but nicer. We went there first but, alas, Adda, the photographer and I were almost exhausted by our efforts to make her laugh... She simply sat, as she had done all the way down in the bus, transfixed with excitement and taking everything in with large round eyes and an intense expression. The only time she smiled during the whole expedition was at the shoe shop. We also took her to be weighed, and she was found to weigh 1 stone 10½lbs. with her clothes on, which is apparently a very good weight, a little above the average for her age. In spite of her being so solemn, I think she much enjoyed her outing and evidently felt it was a great adventure: as soon as we got home she rushed to tell Ben all about it."

"You asked about the lilac tree in one of your letters. Mamma was very pleased and asked me to tell you that it is flourishing, though it hasn't flowered yet;

we hope for flowers next year. Harriet can now climb unaided on to all the armchairs, the couch and has even proceeded from the armchair in the dining room on to the chest. It's very difficult to know what to do about it. Adda, of course, thinks I ought to watch her continually and not allow her to climb up for fear of her falling down, but I think it's much better to let her try her experiments and learn from experience... She is learning to look after herself quite well I think, and I notice her getting more self-reliant in many ways." One more August letter contained very little news and the rest were lost.



JOHN'S CORRESPONDENCE RESUMED

WITH an air letter sent on 11th August, after his return from the holiday in Palestine: "My own darling, I am writing this today to try and fill up the gap while I have been on holiday. I wrote you a long letter yesterday telling you about the beginning of our tour, but I expect that will take a fortnight longer than this to reach you. As we were moving about every day during our trip we had no time for letter writing... I will make up for it now by writing more often, as it will take several letters to tell you all our adventures. The five of us who went on the trip were Major Jones, Capt. Boon, myself, Surg. Lieut. Gothard and Arthur Youssouffian, whose car we borrowed. He is the son of an Alexandrian jeweller... Unfortunately, as he owned the car, we had to let him drive most of the way and this was rather nerve racking. However,



John on holiday in the Sinai desert with Sgt Gothard, Capt Boon and Arthur Youssouffian. John is on the right.

we got home safely without damage. In peacetime he is a Movietone news photographer, but at present is working in the hospital X-ray department as an assistant radiographer.”

A couple of letters with more news of the trip are missing but in another, sent on 22nd August, he told Maida that four lengths of material he bought in Palestine for making pyjamas all turned out to be too short, so he had instead sent it home. She noted that this proved very useful as clothes rationing was beginning to bite and she was able to turn it into dresses for herself and Harriet. John’s letter continued: “I am enjoying my present job more than any I have had so far. It gives me plenty of freedom and a thousand different interests... P.S. As this may arrive about the time of your birthday, sweetheart, I shall be thinking of you especially on that day and that next year we shall celebrate it together.”

More medical news followed (24.8.1941): “Another week has started and today I am feeling particularly happy because the patient I think I have already told you about with *Myasthenia gravis* has been almost completely cured temporarily by my treatment. She is the wife of an R.A.F. Sergeant and has been almost a cripple for two years. Three days ago I started new treatment and when I went to see her this morning the change was quite dramatic. However, how long she will keep up the improvement has yet to be seen*. Almost every day I have some new interesting case at present, so life is quite bearable. The last few days I have had more to do in the mornings than I could manage, so have been having a sleep in the afternoons and going down again at about 5 p.m. for two hours after tea.”

John had also been re-reading an earlier letter of Maida’s describing how she had found an alternative use for a yellow waterproof cycling cape they had bought while on their honeymoon in the Lake District: “It brings back memories of the rain at Ullswater. How I should enjoy being out in a real downpour now, though I must confess that the absence of rain is one of Egypt’s strongest points. Still, clad in an ‘*imperméable*’ any rain is quite fun, and especially when you are by my side, sweetheart. Do you remember that terrible long motor drive we tried which was a great deal longer than we expected? ... I remember particularly passing an overladen Morris-eight on the very steep hill above Seatoller. Also that Griselda boiled on the other pass

in the mist coming from Coniston to Patterdale.”

John’s letter of 28th July enclosed more holiday snapshots and went on: “I am very busy and happy with work at present... My latest occupation is photographs of the skin diseases which I treat every day. I have just borrowed a good camera which will take big photos close to and am going to try and get records of some of the interesting things I treat. It will also be useful perhaps in publishing a paper in the medical journals later on, though this is only a hope at the moment. There is so much I want to get done and so much difficulty in getting theory put into practice. Still, I can honestly say I am doing my best at the moment, as I have only had one afternoon off during the past week. I have seen an interesting series of shingles, a rather rare disease in the army, and am trying a new treatment for that. So you see I have plenty to keep me busy and interested. Yesterday morning I was rewarded with a very cheering sight while I was doing my sick parade. There was suddenly a deafening roar overhead and two formations of fighters in V-shaped formation came swooping low overhead. This is the first time I have seen so many together in this country, and it bucked us all up.”

His letters continued to report a mixture of work together with sporting and other social activities. At the start of September (3.9.1941) he was looking back to 1939: “These last few days I have been thinking about what we were doing two years ago. On Saturday 2nd I think we motored to Ipswich to see about my joining a Field Ambulance there. As it has turned out, I was quite lucky that they could not enrol me, as I think Field Ambulances are the least interesting units from a medical point of view. My present job has a great many advantages as I have the work of an R.M.O. and at the same time have the facilities of a hospital... Last night I was invited to a cocktail and dancing party by my C.O., Major Capstaff, who lives with three other Majors in a private house close to the hospital... The weather was cooler and we danced a bit on the flat roof in the moonlight to a band which was mostly composed of Dutch Naval Officers.”

In his next letter (5.9.1941) he described more of his medical research opportunities: “I am just starting a little Pathological Laboratory in the Prisoner of War Camp. It is going to be rather fun I think as there are lots of things we do, and I am absolute boss of the medical show there. At the moment I am getting a small incubator made, so that we can grow bacteria. They grow on all sorts of queer ‘media’, but mostly on a jelly made of broth and agar (a sort of gelatine)

* *Myasthenia gravis* is a chronic autoimmune, neuromuscular disease that causes weakness in the voluntary muscles of the body. It is incurable but may go into periods of remission.

to which you add egg, blood etc. according to the idiosyncrasies of the particular bug... I am praying that the Russians may be successful though I must say it is disappointing that we can't do more ourselves after a whole year's preparation since our defeat in France. Still I expect the War Council have it all worked out for the best, the idea being not to strike until we really are strong enough. It can't be long now before we have another go at them somewhere."

On 8th September he reported having just received two letters posted three months apart on 5th April and 18th July, illustrating the vagaries of the postal service. He went on: "I wonder how Harriet is getting on with her talking. I believe 18 months is considered to be the age when they should begin. I expect by the time I get home she will be asking questions all day long. I was a particularly inquisitive little boy, I believe, or so our Morwick gardener used to think, as I used to interrogate him from 7.0 to 8.0 every morning while he worked before breakfast."

More medical news followed on 20th September: "I have seen several interesting cases lately, one of cancer, the first I have seen in the army, and another which may be a rodent ulcer. On the whole the health of the troops is improving and I am not quite so busy in the mornings though I still see about sixty cases daily. About ten of these are ear trouble which is particularly prevalent out here... This evening I had to go and examine a man in the Egyptian Hospital, which has 1,000 beds. He had been knocked down by an army lorry, and I had to make a report on the damage... It is a government financed Hospital and is not thought much of, but I must admit he seemed to have had sufficient treatment and was quite happy." He also sent off a cable for Maida's birthday on 22nd September, which amazingly arrived on the right day, saying: "Many happy returns of your birthday darling, all well."

By the next letter (25.9.1941) his workload was again increasing: "I am busier than ever at present and find that I have to work in the afternoons as well as the mornings now to get everything done, as I am doing what was previously done by two M.Os. Medical Officers seem to melt away as soon as they arrive, and whereas there were too many about in May, there now seems to be rather a dearth... Tomorrow I have to invigilate for an examination being held for some of the R.A.M.C. Other Ranks, two three-hour papers. I have never done it before but I know you have and will sympathise with me; at any rate I don't have to correct the results... I remember how you loathed the

exams when we were living at Terry Road. I love the photos of Harriet which you enclosed with your letter of Aug. 13th. She looks so very much more grown up and quite steady on her feet. When you have another film darling get Mamma to take some of you all by yourself, as Harriet figures so much lately that I have not had a good snap of her mamma for a long time, except of course the polyphotos which I liked so much."

John sent an air-letter on 3rd October reporting that he had just sent off a parcel of food: "My only fear is that it will be spoilt by crossing the Equator twice on the way." This did, however, arrive safely and contained Turkish Delight and other sweets. Maida commented that these were very welcome as they were by then almost unobtainable in England. On 9th October he took part in a tennis match against another hospital and had been sailing with Major Jones as crew: "...and finished up third, which was better than I have done for some time as there are so many experts from the Navy going in for the races lately."

"I don't think I have told you that we keep bees and geese now at the prisoner-of-war camp. I was called in the other morning to treat a goose that was behaving in a strange manner, staggering about and being partly paralysed. I am afraid I could not help it and it eventually died. I rather suspect the trouble was due to bad feeding, a kind of beriberi*, and have advocated that they should be dosed with yeast. However, time will show if any others go the same way. The Camp Commandant is very keen on his bees. This morning I met him hurrying along accompanied by an Italian carrying a box from which bees swarmed all over the place in a cloud round about. They seem to be extremely tame bees (at least no-one has been stung yet) but I have always treated bees with suspicion since we kept them at Morwick. I expect I shall soon be called in professionally to attend them also." He was feeling homesick again: "Darlingest, I long and long to have you lying beside me in the dark so that we can discuss each day's happenings together and be perfectly happy again. Although I know plenty of people here, it is impossible to make a real friend of anyone."

The next letter enclosed a photograph of himself on the Hospital balcony close to his room: "I had a good sailing race this afternoon with Major Jones crewing for me. I came in third again out of seven, which I was quite pleased with especially as I was

* Vitamin B deficiency

very nearly second. The Russians seem to have had another big withdrawal in the central front, which is disappointing, but at the same time I feel that this will be the last big German push before winter begins, and with any luck the Russians will hold on to Moscow for the winter. At any rate Lord Beaverbrook seems to be optimistic.”

On 18th October he mentioned that: “...a Commission is coming to examine some of my sick prisoners with a view to repatriation. I really don't think it would hurt to repatriate all the wounded Italians, as I am sure they will not want to fight us again.” The following letter (21.10.1941) had more talk of the family finances, as money continued to be in short supply. He was, however, able to say: “Darling, I think it is marvellous of you to be so economical and manage on so little money, so I am enclosing a cheque for £5 for a Christmas present which I want you to spend all on yourself.”

At the end of October (28.10.1941) he sent a long and chatty letter saying: “I have not written for a few days because at the moment I seem to be almost swamped by an orgy of games, and something fresh has cropped up every afternoon. I will tell you what my day consists of now. I get up at 7.45 after being called about 7.30 by my suffragi, Ali. He is quite a good servant, as most of the Sudanese are, but can only speak very little English, and is inclined to call me later and later every morning. It is all right in the summertime, when there are no buttons to clean as we wear only shorts and a shirt, but now we have started wearing jackets which need their buttons cleaning every morning it is rather a race against time from his point of view. He looks after about three officers and waits on us at mealtime, so he is kept fairly busy.”

“I try to have breakfast at eight o'clock but this is frequently a struggle as I am usually the first one up and the cook is not ready. The messing is done now by an Egyptian contractor to whom each member of the mess pays 14 piastres a day for food and service. Our drinks and cigarettes are extra and my mess bill comes to about £16 a month. Breakfast begins with grapefruit (now the new season has just begun) and is then followed by bacon and eggs. The bacon is tinned but it is nice to get any at all after being without since about May... The meal is completed with tea, toast, butter and jam.”

“I leave the hospital by the tram and travel to my Reception where I arrive about 10 minutes to nine. The Reception Station is an old ‘families’ hospital, and there are some small wards (about 14 beds) where

patients can be detained for 48 hours. There are usually one or two who have been admitted during the night from accidents etc. I examine these first and decide whether to send them in to hospital or back to duty, or sometimes keep them a few days when the diagnosis is not certain. I then interview the ‘sick parade’ which consists of about 50 soldiers attending for out-patient treatment from the units stationed round about. This takes me roughly until about 11.0 o'clock and is the most interesting part of the morning.”

“I have three camps where I do a sanitary inspection once a month. I may have to visit a sick officer in the town, or the wife of a soldier. Occasionally I have local recruits to examine medically before admission to the army. British prisoners who have been sentenced to field punishment also have to be medically examined before leaving. There are anti-typhoid injections to give once a year to every soldier. Civilian employees of the army come to me for treatment, and anyone who happens to feel ill while on leave here. Finally, there are always a few natives employed in the camp who injure themselves.”

“When I have finished these odd jobs, I go up to the Prisoner-of-War Camp which is about a mile away. I don't usually have much to do there as the Italian medical officer does most of the medical work. I see any of the British staff who are ill and any cases the Italian M.O. is worried about. There are about 20 prisoners who have been wounded fighting, and some of these are interesting cases. I have made a little Pathology laboratory with a microscope where I can examine any interesting slides when I have time. I then return to the Reception Station about 1.0 o'clock and get back here for lunch about 1.30.”

“At the moment I am also giving lectures on hygiene, as the Commander-in-Chief has directed that all troops should be given three lectures on keeping themselves fit. I quite enjoy these as it makes me look things up... Except for one day in ten, when I am on duty all day as Area Medical Officer, I have nothing to do after lunch, but once or twice a week I go down in the evenings to do odd jobs such as replying to official letters etc. At present I am collecting information on ‘Desert Sores’ of which I see a great many. I photograph them and try different treatments. A great many are infected with a Diphtheria-like bacillus which prevents them healing.”

Despite the workload there was also plenty of sporting activity: “This afternoon we played a return match against our rival hospital at tennis and beat them quite easily. Captain Freshwater, the old Davis

Cup player, was their only good performer, and he and his partner were unbeaten. ... Yesterday I played hockey for the hospital against the R.A.F. We had a good game and ended by drawing at two goals all. On Sunday I was asked to play tennis in a four by my superior officer, Major Capstaff, who is a Territorial Major from Newcastle. He is not much good at tennis but is a good C.O... I enjoy it and it keeps me very fit though at times I think I should be better employed doing more reading. However, as this is just the beginning of the season, I expect things will ease off again soon...We usually collect in the mess at about 7.30 for a drink, and then listen to the news at 8.00 with dinner at 8.15. Afterwards we talk and play ping-pong or sing songs with the piano... The other evening I played Major Aylett at ping-pong for 50 piastres and won. There has been no bridge lately, but darts has had quite a vogue. I expect you will feel quite envious of me darling, and I certainly am having a pretty good time, but I shall not be happy until I have you to love again and share all my hopes and fears."

At the start of November (2.11.1941) he reported that Captain John, another medical officer: "...has returned from his illness and will now be helping at the Reception Station so work is not so busy." He followed this up on 8th November saying: "I am putting in for a week's leave starting on the 17th November but do not yet know whether I shall get it. The biggest piece of news is that Major Capstaff has left here and my immediate C.O. is now Major Jones, who was working in the hospital before. I think I told you that Major Jones has been sailing with me on several occasions and I know him and like him quite well... Meanwhile, though I need a change, I am still getting plenty of interesting work to do."

On 11th November he sent a funny little Christmas airgraph designed for the troops with a picture of Father Christmas riding a camel labelled 'Valentine', the name of the new tanks now reaching the army. There was little room for writing, but his message began: "Tails up for our third Christmas of separation." A few days later he finally received letters from Maida dated 18th and 22nd September, the first mail to arrive for several weeks: "My big piece of news today is that I am going on a trip to Luxor on Monday. Tomorrow I am going to hear the London Philharmonic Orchestra playing Haydn, Beethoven and I think Stravinsky. This is one of their six-monthly visits and I am much looking forward to it. Perhaps there is just a chance that the war may finish next year especially now that America has amended the

Neutrality Act and the Russians are holding their own again."

In the 1930s the majority of American public opinion did not want the U.S.A. to become involved in another war centred on Europe. The U.S. Congress took action to maintain their neutrality by passing three successive Neutrality Acts between 1935 and 1939 which prohibited the export of '*arms, ammunition, and implements of war*' from the United States to foreign nations at war, the first of which prevented American merchant ships from transporting arms to belligerent nations, barred all belligerent ships from U.S. waters and discouraged American citizens from traveling in war zones³⁵. President Roosevelt did not support this approach and managed to get a concession included in the Neutrality Act of 1937 which allowed America to sell vital raw materials such as oil to Britain and France.

Following the actual outbreak of war, the Neutrality Act of 1939 lifted the arms sales embargo but still prevented American ships from transporting goods to belligerent ports. By October 1941 public sentiment in America was, however, finally becoming less isolationist and Roosevelt was able to persuade the House of Representatives to revoke a section of the Act which had forbidden the arming of U.S. merchant ships. Following a series of deadly U-boat attacks against U.S. Navy and merchant ships, the Senate passed another bill in November 1941 that repealed legislation banning American ships from entering belligerent ports or 'combat zones.'

John's letter continued: "Last time I was on duty as Area Medical Officer, I had an exciting time, as I was confronted with one unconscious Polish soldier escorted by about five Polish Military Police, none of whom could speak English, who apparently wanted me to certify that he was drunk. The trouble was that no-one knew his name and I was not certain whether he might not have been hit on the head. While dealing with them there suddenly arrived two unconsciously drunk sailors escorted by an extremely offensive and rowdy British sailor. I immediately arrested the latter and sent him to the cells at the Naval Patrol-house and kept the other three unconscious men for further observation. Next morning I had a busy time writing out chits certifying that they were drunk, as they had all recovered and were then able to give me their particulars. I have never wanted so much to be a linguist before, as here we may get almost every nationality. The only language I have picked up a smattering of is Italian from the prisoners."

The next three letters dated 20th, 23rd and 27th November gave an account of John's leave in Luxor and Cairo. This time he travelled alone and was guided at Luxor by an elderly dragoman called Mustapha: "Although affable and pleasant I found his knowledge of English distinctly rudimentary and his knowledge of antiquity entirely of the parrot variety." As well as commenting on the architecture of the temples and tombs, John also kept up his biological interests: "In Karnak temple I was interested to see a colony of huge bats which made an incessant weird chattering noise in the roof. They looked about the size of pigeons when they flew about. Close to Karnak is a sacred lake which is filled by a salt spring. In it the bodies of the dead used to be dipped before burial, chiefly as a preservative I should think, as it is much saltier than seawater. Mustapha told me confidentially that Arab women who are sterile still go there by night and bathe in the water immediately after they have had a period. They then return immediately to their husbands and a fruitful union frequently ensues. I was interested in this because it is just possible that the alkalinity of the water might have a beneficial effect in certain cases."

"We were dogged by a snake charmer who seemed to think that we would enjoy seeing snakes miraculously appear from every nook and cranny. The Arab hawkers are the chief menace of the place... It is no use telling them you don't want their trinkets; they catch you by the hand, stand in your way and hold the thing within an inch of your nose. When you get slightly annoyed and knock the thing out of their hands as I was forced to do on one occasion (a scarab reputed by its vendor to be worth £25 and actually worth about a penny) they become quite annoyed and hurt as if one had let them down badly. If I go there again I shall get the largest scarab I can find and hang it round my neck to show to all the world that I am at any rate fully supplied with this useless commodity."

"After tea and just as the sun was setting, we went for a sail on the Nile in a ramshackle little felucca. The owner was a fine waterman and had to row hard at first to prevent us being carried by the current... We soon got out of the current and into a light breeze which sailed us about a mile up the river. The Nile here is at least a quarter of a mile across, and the banks are about 20 feet high on either side. From the top of each bank there is about three miles of flat cultivated and irrigated land to the edge of the hills and desert. These hills are, I should think, about 2,000 feet high and look very striking with their cliffs and jagged

skyline. At their foot on the Saharan side are the great majority of the ancient monuments, many temples and tombs and the Valley of the Kings and Queens. The hills on the Eastern side stretch across over 100 miles of Arabian desert to Kosseir on the Red Sea. There are no remains on this side which is interesting as it shows that they valued the early morning sun, as anyone would who has experienced the chilliness of the desert before daybreak. Their chief God was of course Ammon Ra, the god of the sun and the reason is obvious."

On the second day of the visit, 18th November: "Mustapha and I left the hotel at 9.0 o'clock with a picnic lunch and sailed across the river to the West side. Where we crossed the river it is divided into two by a mud bank. Having sailed across the bigger half we were landed on the mud island and walked across to the smaller bit. Here we were met by a rowing ferryboat. The margins were shallow and extremely muddy and I wondered how I was going to get on to the boat as all the natives were paddling about with bare feet. I soon found out as two rather diminutive Egyptians from the boat suddenly picked me up and carried me bodily across the intervening mud."

"Once we had got across we got into a very ramshackle taxi and drove about three miles up to the foot of the hill. Here we entered a dry precipitous valley running up into the hills, and after bumping along for a mile or two uphill reached a vast amphitheatre of rock about a mile across with rock precipices rising sheer several hundred feet all round. It rather gave me the impression of being in the bottom of a huge quarry, especially as there were heaps of loose shale scattered over the bottom... This was the Valley of the Kings, and I was soon whisked off by Mustapha down some steps into the ground. I felt rather like Alice in Wonderland not knowing what would happen round the next corner. On the surface there is not a single sign of a ruin or monument, only an occasional hole at the foot of a heap of shale leading down into a shaft in the solid rock. I visited during the morning about half a dozen different tombs."

As well as the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens he also saw various temples and the Colossi of Memnon before returning to the hotel: "Mustapha tried to persuade me to stay another day and go to see some of the other numerous temples which are within a day's trip of Luxor; Edfu, Abydos and Assuan. However, I felt I had seen all I wanted to see of this particular type of thing, and after an early dinner set off by the 7.30 train back to Cairo. I arrived there at



Postcard from the Sakkara tombs.

7.0 a.m. the next morning and went straight to the Carlton Hotel and wallowed in a hot bath, which had been impossible at the Luxor hotel. I was determined to see the Sakkara tombs and antiquities which come from the 3rd to the 5th Dynasty and are nearly a thousand years older than the Luxor monuments.” John was indeed able to visit these monuments on 19th November and also had his first ride on a camel. On the way he saw the big alabaster sphinx at Memphis: “The sphinx is meant to have the face of a woman signifying beauty, the head of a man meaning brains and the body of a lion standing for strength — rather a nice combination.”

While in Cairo John also had: “...a most interesting morning seeing over the Egyptian Rabies Treatment Centre which is close to the University... I went without any introduction and was very well received. The Director had qualified in Edinburgh and so spoke good English. The Egyptians come from all over the Delta to be treated after dog bites. If the injections are given before rabies develops practically no-one dies, only about one in a thousand, whereas if the symptoms develop in a man it is impossible to save him. Actually very few, only about 20 a year, die in Egypt from rabies, but there are always rabid dogs about and about 50 people were having their course of 20 daily injections.”

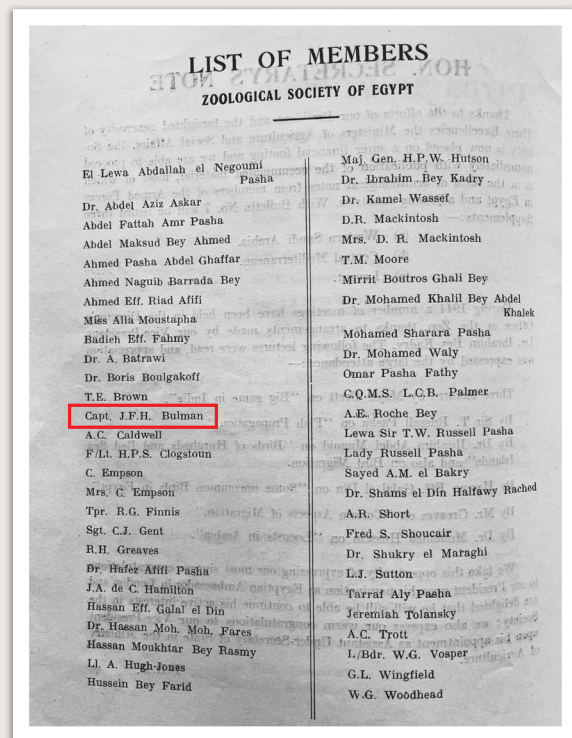
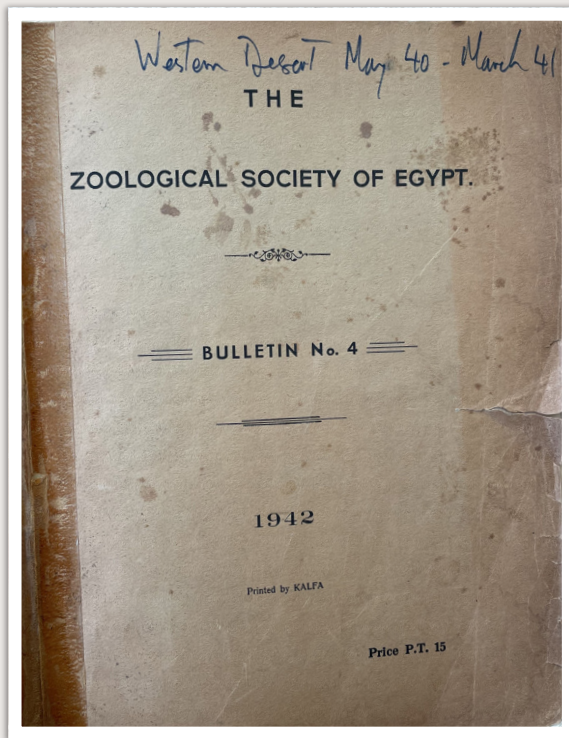
What gave him most pleasure on his leave was, however, lunching with Duncan Mackintosh, ‘the chief bird expert in Egypt’ to whom he had been given an introduction by his friend Roger Low. Mackintosh was also the General Manager of the Shell Oil Company at Cairo and John had arranged the appointment on his outward journey: “At one o’clock I called at the Shell House and was jerked up to some top storey in an ultra-rapid lift. It was obvious that he was a man

of some importance. After waiting about ten minutes he appeared, a pleasant wiry middle-aged man with sharp features and greying hair coupled with a quiet and unassuming manner. He ushered me back into the lift and out into a posh chauffeur-driven car.”

“As I think I told you before, his house is next to the Lows and on the way we picked up a Mr. Greaves, who is the doyen of the ornithological community of Egypt, and has known Nicoll and Meinerzhagen personally. I didn’t like him much although Mackintosh thinks a lot of him. At any rate he must have a lot of money of his own as he has a big house and garden bordering the Nile. We motored on to the Bulak Dacrou (a district of Cairo) and the door was opened to us by Mrs. Mackintosh, a good-looking woman with the same rather shy manner. At any rate I saw at once that I was going to enjoy the company and I spent two very happy hours there talking almost entirely birds. I showed him the notes I wrote on the desert birds and he wants to publish them in the Egyptian Zoological Society’s Bulletin. I agreed as I don’t think they will be of much interest to ‘British Birds’, though he told me that the ‘Ibis’ might have them.”

“After lunch Mrs Mackintosh disappeared to carry on her work at one of the hospitals, and I sat in the garden with him with a pair of binoculars beside us. We soon saw a robin, a graceful warbler and a warbler we thought was a whitethroat. He told me that the three resident Egyptian warblers are the Graceful, the Rufous and the Olivaceous. His two little children then appeared with rather a scruffy nurse... We listened to the news at 3.0 and drove back to the Shell building where he left me with the invitation to stay with them whenever I felt inclined. He also told the chauffeur to take the car wherever I wanted to go.”

On his return from leave John found several of Maida’s letters waiting for him including a full-length photograph of her wearing her long black dress, for which he bought a scarlet frame. He had also been pleased to hear from his old Trinity friend George Blaker, another keen ornithologist: “What a pity I did not know sooner as I could have seen him when I was on leave. He is private secretary to the Minister of State in Cairo, but didn’t say very much else except to ask me to send you his regards. I hope I shall soon be able to meet him.” Back in Alexandria he found that both Captain John and Captain Clune had been posted away from the Reception Station and left him alone again with Major Jones. Also: “The prisoner-of-war camp has unfortunately moved so I shall not have the opportunity of speaking Italian any more. I shall



Publication of John's bird notes in 1942 and list showing his membership of the Egyptian Zoological Society, along with Mr and Mrs McIntosh and Mr Greaves²².

miss that as I was getting just good enough to get on without an interpreter."

Also while John had been away on leave, a new Allied offensive code-named Operation Crusader had begun in the Western Desert. This had two main objectives, firstly to recapture Cyrenaica, and secondly to relieve the Allied garrison at Tobruk, which had now been under siege from Axis forces for around seven months. Earlier in the year Churchill had applied considerable pressure on General Wavell to attack Rommel before the Allied forces were ready. After the second attack in June had failed Wavell was replaced as Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East by General Claude Auchinleck. Auchinleck insisted on waiting until November before trying again, by which time a key railway and fuel line to supply the frontier was due for completion¹⁸.

Auchinleck put General Sir Alan Cunningham in command of the troops in the field, now renamed the Eighth Army. Cunningham had previously had considerable military success in East Africa, but he had no experience of tank warfare and soon became

overwhelmed by the vast scale and complexity of the military operations in Egypt. His decision to split the army into separate infantry and armoured forces provided a much less flexible arrangement than that used by the Germans, who combined their field artillery, infantry and tanks into the same unit. While the Allied plans for Operation Crusader were being prepared, Rommel was also keenly interested in Tobruk. He wished to capture it before any further Allied offensive could take place, as it threatened his left flank. Access to the port would also make his supply line easier. He was given permission to attack, with the date set for 23rd November^{18,36}.

Cunningham, however, started first. The Allied forces advanced into Libya and Operation Crusader began on 18th November. The plan was to provoke a decisive tank battle in which the British hoped to destroy Rommel's tanks and force him to retreat out of Cyrenaica. Although they started well, heavy fighting between the two armies continued for five days with mixed success, and during this time over 200 Allied tanks were damaged or destroyed. Cunningham

became increasingly concerned at their lack of progress and was seriously considering cancelling the offensive. He therefore asked Auchinleck to visit his H.Q. to advise him. Auchinleck chose to continue with the attack, a risky decision as the German armoured formations were by then in better shape.

Luckily for the Allies, Rommel decided not to finish off the Allied armoured Corps on 24th November when he had had the opportunity, considering that they had already been defeated. He judged instead that the time was right to complete the destruction of the entire Eighth Army and decided to press on towards Egypt, referred to subsequently as his 'dash to the wire'. He led two Panzer divisions eastwards towards the frontier which they reached on the evening of 24th November. The following day the attack into Egypt was repulsed with the aid of the Desert Air Force. Rommel's forces were also running short of supplies and lost their momentum. The Allied repair teams meanwhile managed to get 70 of their damaged tanks back into action, altering the balance of strength.

General Cunningham was by this time suffering from both mental and physical battle fatigue and on 26th November Auchinleck replaced him with General Sir Neil Ritchie as commander of the Eighth Army. In effect Ritchie was second in command, as Auchinleck himself took an increasingly hands-on approach. By 28th November Rommel realised that his attack into Egypt had failed, and ordered his forces to move back westwards towards Tobruk. Here they encountered the survivors of 7th Armoured Brigade, who happened to be heading east towards the frontier at the same time. A further period of intense combat followed, with Ritchie and Rommel mounting further unsuccessful attacks. By 7th December the German troops were running out of supplies, ammunition and tanks, both the Panzer divisions had lost their commanders and Rommel had to admit that the battle was lost. He therefore began to retreat towards a new defensive position at Gazala and the siege of Tobruk was finally lifted^{18,36}.

Although Wavell tried to cut Rommel off, this was unsuccessful and by the end of December Rommel was back at his starting point around El Agheila. Operation Crusader was therefore Rommel's first defeat in North Africa, and left John feeling optimistic. At the end of November (30.11.1941) he wrote saying: "I think we have beaten the Germans on land at last... Today's news is the best we have had for two years, the Germans are being defeated on land in Libya and in

the south of Russia; what a glorious thing and one that makes the end of the war in sight at last." Operation Crusader was, however, an indecisive campaign and Rommel was subsequently able to reinforce and reorganise his remaining army.

In John's next letter of 5th December he was looking ahead: "I have been here eight months now and have been very content ever since I got the job I am now doing. I expect I shall do about a year before being moved, unless of course something special happens. I have just been reading again the last of your September letters darling, when you had just got letters suggesting that I might get home. I have given up hope for the time being as it looks now as though they intend leaving people here until the war finishes... There are always odd ones getting home for medical reasons, but I have no intention of being among them. Actually, in this mess there are two others, Captain Archdale and Captain Fawcett, who came out with me and Major McLardy and Captain Boon who were on the same draft. Of the original thirty I should think at least half have now fallen sick, so I feel quite proud of my record."

At this point, both Japan and the U.S.A. also entered the war². Japan had for months been negotiating with the Americans over the future of the Pacific. Although the Americans were still neutral with respect to Germany and the war in Europe, they had sanctions in force against Japan, and were aiding China in the Second Sino-Japanese war. The Japanese wanted to weaken U.S. naval strength and capture strategically vital oil supplies. On 7th December they therefore launched a surprise air attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This massive offensive involved over 350 aircraft from six aircraft carriers. Of the eight U.S. Navy battleships present at the time, four were sunk and the rest were damaged along with three cruisers, three destroyers and over 180 US aircraft: 2,403 Americans were killed and many others were wounded.

Japan declared war on the United States and the British Empire later that day. The British government declared war on Japan immediately after learning that their territory had also been attacked, while on the following day the U.S. Congress also declared war on Japan. Three days later, on 11th December, Germany and Italy each declared war on the Americans, who responded with a declaration of war against Germany and Italy³⁷. In the middle of all this activity John commented on 10th December that: "The whole world seems to be in a state of flux at the moment, but at any

rate both ends of the pincers which were to nip Alex have been themselves pinched for the time being, so it is impossible not to feel slightly elated in the Middle East Forces, whatever happens in the Far East.”

“I often think of the R.H.A. and wonder how they are getting along now, especially as the 11th Hussars have been mentioned in the recent fighting; and also today El Adem is stated to be captured by us where I spent most of January last year... We have had no air-raids here for two months I think so conditions are almost peacetime. I had a game of tennis on Monday and I am playing my weekly game of hockey, which keeps me fit... I am beginning to feel rather what is known as a ‘Base Wallah’ i.e. an officer who sits at the base and never does any fighting. I comfort myself with the thought that the rest of the officers in the mess, with the exception of Capt. Archdale, have never seen any at all. However, I am content to be here for the present.”

“I am hoping that the German withdrawal from Russia does not mean they are going to try an invasion of England. I think it is just possible and that is the one thing which would really make me worry, sweetheart, although I am sure we would be quite ready for it. However, I am happy because I think the turning point of the war has passed with the double defeat of Germany in Russia and Libya. I am sure the U.S.A. will beat the Japs in the end though they will take some hard knocks first.”

This year it was easier to send a Christmas cable and John’s last remaining letter of 1941 was written on 29th December, when he was still feeling cheerful: “...today I have received two more of your letters dated Oct. 28th and Nov. 5th and still more exciting a postcard dated 14th December, which I think has broken all records. In it is the good news that my parcel* and second cheque reached you safely. It was such happiness to me to know that they reached you before Christmas and that you like them so much. I have thoroughly enjoyed my third Christmas in the M.E.F. It was fun without being too drunk or rowdy. We had a good Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve followed by much singing to the mess piano until we retired to bed about midnight. On Christmas morning I slipped down to work at nine feeling fine, and soon stitched up the few broken heads which had been split on Christmas Eve. All my love darlingest. Writing to you makes me so happy. Your own adoring John.”

Although John had an enjoyable Christmas, the



Christmas dinner 1941. John is sitting second from the front on the left hand side of the table.

second half of December was not a good time for General Auchinleck, his Commander-in-Chief, as the declaration of war with Japan required troops to be sent to the Far East. Churchill therefore informed him that a significant amount of reinforcements (both people and supplies) that were originally intended for the Middle East would not now be available. He was also to lose four fighter squadrons and two Australian Divisions. In addition, some of his tanks were despatched to Malta as an invasion there was expected. At the same time Auchinleck’s own responsibility was extended, as he was now also expected to provide northern defence of the Persian Gulf oil fields in the event of a Russian collapse in the Caucasus. He therefore ended 1941 knowing that Rommel had not yet been finished off but without having sufficient troops and transport available either to attack himself or to provide adequate defence if Rommel mounted a new offensive^{2,18}.



MANY LETTERS SENT FROM Maida to John between September to December are missing. Based on her diary entries she commented that life over this period was usually uneventful and often depressing and that John’s letters from Egypt were very irregular in arriving. On 6th September: “It is rather sad not to have had a letter from you today. I hoped Saturday might bring one, but now I am looking forward to Monday which is often a lucky day; I have only had one lettercard in three whole weeks; but I am getting

* This was a present containing some jewellery.

good at being patient now. I finished my last letter in a great hurry as I was just off to a flick... When we came out there was the most brilliant moonlight I think I have ever seen in Cambridge, the full Harvest Moon. As you can imagine, darling, the ache for you became almost unbearable when I thought how we should have revelled in such beauty together, and how mocking it seemed without you. Precious darling, how long will it be before I have the joy of being with you again? Harriet is exhaustingly full of energy and chatters like a magpie in her own language; I wish I could reproduce it for you, but it defies transcription into any alphabet that I know.”

On 23rd September she replied to the birthday cable from John, which had amazingly arrived on the right day. However, Harriet had a bad cough and milk rationing was about to begin. After another long gap the next surviving letter was sent on 15th October: “My own darlingest, I had such a lovely surprise this morning — your lettercard of August 22nd and your letter of September 3rd, the first mail from you for ten days. You see, darling, that the lettercards take just as long as the letters now, but I would rather wait a long time and have something that you had really had in your own dear hands than airgraphs which are so impersonal, almost like telegrams and without the advantage of speed, as I expect they take about a fortnight now too... Also to let you know at the first possible moment that I would just love you to get me some silk stockings which are now completely unobtainable here... I wonder if you will remember the kind of colour I like, darling. I may put a little bit of old stocking in to show you; it won't be hard to find as I have just torn a pair to bits apple gathering (they were beyond darning anyway).”

“Apples, with a capital A have been the keynote of this week so far. I have picked them, weighed them, packed them for Newnham, stored them for ourselves, telephoned to the carriers about them, dreamt about them and eaten them. Monday and today have been chiefly devoted to picking; on Monday I spent between four and five hours in the tree-tops and today I have been either there or perilously perched on the stepladder for about 2½ hours this afternoon and 1½ hours after tea. Yesterday was wet so all that could be done was weighing and storing those already picked. The net result is 5 cwt. for Newnham and about 1½ cwt. for ourselves, the latter including a really magnificent basket of Newton Wonders, about 60 lbs, so large and rosy they looked a picture.”

“We are hoping to have a nice fat cheque from

Mrs. McVie* but, apart from the pleasure of looking forward to this, I have thoroughly enjoyed picking them, though I am quite glad to have finished the job now... I felt very cheerful and satisfied as I packed up tonight with our harvest safely gathered in. Dear little Mamma is so thrilled and the money will make such a difference to her.” Maida had also now got a small job teaching French to a niece of the Dean of King's College, which she enjoyed. At the end of the month, to her great relief, John's letters had started arriving again and she had received most of those sent in the period between August 22nd and September 12th.

On 27th October she reported that Aunt Ah had arrived to stay with her dog, Dan, a shaggy Aberdeen terrier: “Mamma and I had rather dreaded the visit but it passed off better than we expected. I am writing this in the kitchen as it is warmer than the dining room and quieter than the drawing room where Aunt Ah keeps up a perpetual flow of rather uninteresting conversation punctuated by Mamma's comments made in a tone loud enough to penetrate her deaf ears. She isn't nearly as deaf as Uncle Philip, about half as bad I should say. Still she's marvellous for anyone who will be eighty next year, and really I don't find her visit as trying as I expected. Luckily she and Harriet have taken a great liking to each other, and it is often possible to leave Harry in her charge for a short time, and know she will be quite happy.”

“I think I have told you about Aunt Ah's passion for cleanliness. It is even greater than ever and she spends the best part of the day over her own toilet and Dan's. She has at least three prolonged sojourns in the bathroom daily, the first one between about 9.0 and 10.30, the second in the afternoon or evening, and the last at bedtime... As you can imagine, she is an authority on the washing arrangements in the houses she visits, and was describing Robin and Dorothy's bathroom to us yesterday; she approved of all except the bath itself which she thought too large and steep-sided, ‘a *perfect barracks of a bath*’ she said, a phrase which I noted to report to you, feeling it would tickle your sense of humour.”

“Dan, as I have said, is an unwilling devotee of the same cult and gets not merely brushed every day, but has his face sponged and his teeth cleaned. In fact, Adda says she washes him all over. However, he seems to survive and is a nice little dog, incredibly patient with Harriet who pulls him along by the tail, and very pleasant to take out as he obviously enjoys his walks

* The Steward of Newnham College.

and follows nicely. I didn't expect to be able to manage the two dogs with the pram, but I rather enjoy it as Ben really follows better when he has a companion, and Harriet loves watching them. Yesterday a shower began as we were on our way home, and as I had no umbrella and was wearing my fur coat, I decided to make a bolt for shelter, so I bundled both dogs into the pram much to their and Harriet's indignation, and ran all the way home, hell for leather...By the time I reached Queen Edith's Way I was laughing so much I could hardly get along, but we managed to reach here without any mishaps to any of the party and my coat was none the worse."

"I am glad my mention of the '*imperméable*' brought back so many happy memories[†]. I well remember helping you buy it at Penrith, and I certainly remember our long drive in that awful rain and how ill I felt at tea-time. It is funny to think of it now, but at the time it was a tragedy as I remember feeling I should never be able to make you happy. I felt so very inexperienced, and how I cried and cried with the rain beating against Griselda from all quarters at once, and you trying to cheer me up and feeling pretty miserable yourself I expect. However we cheered up after that and felt quite excited as Griselda panted up the Kirkstone Pass, and we saw the remains of another car that had overturned and was draped round a telegraph post overhanging a precipice. Darling, what fun it all was, especially the lovely walk we had along the lake on the Sunday afternoon, our last day there, when the sun came out when all the rain was over. I so enjoyed reading the sentence in which you said you would like to be out in a real downpour again."

Reporting on Harriet and her meals she continued: "Sometimes we get a few fresh oranges, otherwise she begins her day with some other fruit juice, apple, blackberry or fig usually. I think I have told you in an earlier letter the answer to your question about the amount of milk she gets; she has at least a pint to herself every day. Unfortunately it is getting difficult to get some of the things she can eat, fish for instance; since the price was lowered it has become almost unobtainable. Fowls are rare and eggs scarce: however we have some preserved eggs to fall back on, and soon babies are to have an extra egg ration. She does pretty well really with soup and vegetables and the nice wholemeal bread which is supposed to be good for everyone. She certainly seems to thrive as she is growing fast and is in cracking form."

[†] See John's letter of 24.8.1941.

"I hope to pay the cheque you sent me into the Bank on Wednesday and will try to see Mr. Farmery and find out what figures I ought to give you for your Income Tax return. I am glad you are saving again, darling, as although I love to hear of you making the very most of all the recreation that Egypt can offer, I think it must be difficult for you to realise how prices are going up here and will remain up I feel sure for a long time after the war. We shall need a good deal of money to settle down, especially if we are going to have a little brother or sister for Harry."

The next surviving letter was sent on 16th November. During this time Adda had been in Addenbrooke's Hospital for a week having a small operation, so Maida had been very busy and also had a bad cold: "My own beloved darling, the second anniversary of your going away has come and gone, and though it made me very sad to think of how long we have been parted, I feel better now that we have begun a new year, and more hopeful than I have been for a long time that perhaps we shan't have to wait till the end of it before you come home. I am thankful to say that life here is gradually returning to normal. Adda returned from Addenbrooke's on Wednesday, but until yesterday she was in bed most of the time, and is still having breakfast in bed, though she is down now at 10.30 and seems full of beans."

"Poor Mamma is looking very tired and will soon have to have a day in bed to recover. To add to the general confusion, Aunt Ah bent her last insulin needle yesterday morning and insisted on Mamma escorting her into Cambridge in the afternoon among all the Saturday crowds. She proceeded to fall down the steps to Boot's, much to the annoyance of Mamma, who was too exhausted to think it funny, though she has laughed a bit in retrospect. However, Adda is getting better every day, and Harry and I are both in the pink... I am due to go to the Infant Welfare tomorrow. I expect there will be a large attendance, as it has just been announced that the government is to give free blackcurrant and orange juice to babies under two through the Welfare Centres, so probably any mothers who haven't bothered to come much will turn up in the hope of getting something for nothing."

There was then another three-week gap in John's letters and several of Maida's are also missing. From her diary she noted that the second half of November was very dreary. Aunt Ah finally departed with twelve separate pieces of luggage leaving Mamma too tired even to feel relieved until the evening, when they enjoyed sitting quietly together. On 5th December a

welcome cable from John arrived and Maida replied: "My very own darling — Your precious cable for which I had been longing so much, though I hardly dared hope for it, arrived this evening... It is so marvellous to know for certain that you are all right, and I now feel perfectly satisfied that you haven't been moved from the hospital, as it couldn't have come so quickly — only two days — from anywhere in the desert. I hadn't really been worrying about you, sweetheart, as I felt sure I would know if you were in the fighting, but it's marvellous to have the cable, and the news is better again tonight too, so altogether I am very happy."

Her social life was also picking up, and she had been to see both a French play and another at the Arts Theatre. There was a forthcoming leaving party at Newnham College for Miss Strachey, the retiring Principal. She also reported that she had to go to the Women's Labour Exchange to register with other women born in 1910: "It will be amusing to look round the crowd and see which of us looks youngest for our age. I imagine it will be just a matter of form for me as I have Harriet to look after... Mamma and I are hoping to do some gardening again soon. The autumn tidying has been sadly delayed by Aunt Ah's visit, Adda's illness and chiefly the bad weather. There are leaves to be swept up and much to be done in the borders; but flowers are beginning to come out again, the winter ones with spring-like colours — the lovely velvety mauve *stylosa* irises, the yellow jessamine and the little exquisitely scented white heads of the *Viburnum fragrans*, all of which is very cheering."

The comment about the Women's Labour Exchange referred to the activities of the British government in mobilising the civilian population into war work. From early 1941 it had become compulsory for women aged between 18 and 60 to register and conscription had begun in December. Unmarried 'mobile' women between the ages of 20 and 30 were called up first and given a choice between joining the services or taking on paid work in factories, agriculture or the transport network. Pregnant women, those who had a child under the age of 14 or women with heavy domestic responsibilities could not be conscripted but were still encouraged to contribute to the war effort by volunteering to work part-time³⁸.

Later in the month (18.12.1941) two lettercards, four letters and the Christmas airgraph from John all turned up: "The only sad thing was that you seem to have had very few letters from me during all that time." Although the news from Libya was encouraging, the Allies had lost two battleships in the

Far East: "There is much wrangling going on in the correspondence columns of the Times as to whether Admiral Phillips was right or wrong in risking the two battleships without air cover. There is to be a secret debate in the House of Commons, which I suppose will be secret for as long as it takes for the members to get outside to their homes or clubs, and will, I should think, do more harm than good." The rest of the letter mentions that it was difficult to get toys and books for Christmas. She was trimming a doll's cradle to give to Harriet as well as a rocking horse.

Maida's final letter from 1941 was sent on 27th December. They were all ill with flu before and after Christmas, but fortunately were more-or-less all right on the day itself: "I have such a lot to tell you in this letter, all about Christmas which was a very happy day when everything went right, but unfortunately before and after Christmas have not been so successful as you will see. However the good things have far outnumbered the bad." She had walked into Cambridge to go to church at St. Benet's, there being no buses, and returned by taxi, a rare extravagance. After a good dinner Harriet came into the drawing-room to see the Christmas tree, which she had been too small to enjoy the year before: "She came running in all unsuspecting and didn't see it at first but suddenly she caught sight of it and stood rooted to the spot, her arm outstretched and her finger pointing, and her little mouth rounded into a long 'Oo-h-h-h ...' After a moment of silent wonder, she tore to the armchair and climbed up to get a better view, and since then it has never lost its charm."

On Boxing Day they were all feeling worse, and she had to ask Dr. Hedgcock to come to see Harriet: "You can imagine how specially much I have been thinking about you these last few days, darling. I so wanted you to share the fun on Christmas Day, and I longed for you even more yesterday when I felt we all needed you to look after us. I felt sure you were listening to the King's speech on Thursday and perhaps to Mr. Churchill's marvellous speech to the American Congress. I love to think there is that link between us, darling, but the link of our own thoughts is even stronger and I felt certain that your thoughts were flying all the way to Q.E.W... P.S. Sunday. We are all better today and I had breakfast in bed which was a nice rest. A big kiss and one from Harriet."

Maida's diary for 1941 ended: 'Wrote to John. Don't feel very New Year-ish. If only next year brings him home!'

CHAPTER 9

Move To Safaga 1942



THE CONTINUING EVENTS IN the Western Desert again formed the background to John's activities in 1942. At the beginning of the year Rommel had retreated to El Agheila in western Cyrenaica and on 17th January the last of the Axis garrisons he had left behind along the Egyptian frontier surrendered, marking the end of Operation Crusader. Meanwhile Auchinleck's strength had been depleted by the transfer of some of his forces to the Far East and Malta. Both armies therefore needed time for rest and reorganisation. For the Allies, General Ritchie should ideally have been replaced as commander of Eighth Army. Although he had technically been in charge in the final successful stages of Crusader, it was in reality Auchinleck himself who made the most important decisions. No obvious successor with the necessary skills and leadership was, however, available, so Auchinleck decided to leave Ritchie in post¹⁸.

While Auchinleck deliberated over how quickly the Allied forces would be ready to mount another attack, Rommel was the first to make the next move. He received a significant number of tank reinforcements in January bringing his total to 117 German and 79 Italian tanks, whereas the Allies now had only 150 available. Rommel advanced rapidly on 21st January, repossessing much of Cyrenaica and driving the Allied troops back in disarray with significant losses^{2,18}. By 6th February, they had retreated to a line from Gazala on the coast just west of Tobruk to Bir Hakeim, an old fort situated 50 miles inland to the south. The Gazala line consisted of a series of defensive boxes each accommodating a brigade. These were laid out across the desert protected by minefields and wire. Rommel was by then short of supplies, so he stopped at this point

and both armies remained facing each other in the barren landscape around Gazala from then until May.

Only three of John's letters covering the period from January to April 1942 have survived but during this period he continued to work at the Medical Reception Centre at Mustapha in Alexandria. The first two focussed on his latest bird watching activities and the third was written entirely in Italian, which he had been learning from the prisoners of war he had to deal with. On 22nd March he was on leave in Cairo, where he was invited by his old Cambridge friend George Blaker to come to lunch in a big house where he was working for the Ministry of Economic Warfare



Mr and Mrs Greaves in their garden near the Nile.

as Personal Assistant to the Head of the Intelligence Department. Afterwards they walked in the garden and saw a turtle dove nesting.

Continuing the letter the next day, he described a lunch party at a club with Mr Mackintosh and Mr Greaves and then went home with the latter, to be shown sunbirds in his garden. The following day he met up again with George Blaker for another good lunch followed by a walk in the Delta: "The best sight of the afternoon was a flock of about 50 storks flying over the great pyramid." On 6th April John had another outing with an officer in charge of the local Ack-Ack* unit: "We visited one of his out-of-the-way gun sites which is near a lake. I saw lots of birds including a curlew whose call gave me the greatest thrill."



AT THE START OF 1942 life in Cambridge continued uneventfully. The Christmas tree was taken down and Harriet was beginning to enjoy having books read to her. It was another very cold winter. When Maida wrote on 26th January she was depressed by the war news: "We are evidently being prepared to hear that Rommel has defeated our army at Jedabia. Oh dear, if only we could have driven the wretches right out of Africa I should have hoped that there at any rate the war might be over before very long. Now it seems likely to drag on there like everywhere else, and there seems little hope of seeing you for such ages, my darling, and your letters make me long so much to have the real you to love again."

The shortages in the UK were getting worse: "There is really practically nothing to buy in the shops now, and everything one does buy is treble the price. Otherwise life would be very economical for the simple reason that there are no luxuries and very few necessities to spend money on. Besides price, one has to consider coupons, of which I had to disgorge nine this morning for a mackintosh. I had to buy one anyway as my old one had gone stiff and I am glad I went this morning as they are getting very scarce now too." Maida commented that shopping for food was also becoming a long and wearisome business. She nearly always had to do the household shopping herself now as Mamma was nearly seventy and going

into Cambridge and grappling with the long queues had become too tiring for her.

At the start of February Maida managed a rare trip to London to meet Molly and Reggie Cook for lunch at Gennaro's in Old Compton Street: "I am looking forward to it very much, as I have been at home now for such a long time that a day off is quite exciting... We woke up this morning to find everything covered in quite deep snow, which made Mamma and Adda fuss and say I wouldn't be able to go; but luckily I was able to say that as I don't know where they are staying I shouldn't be able to cancel the appointment, which settled the argument. I shall be wearing the little black hat you bought me just before you went away, darling." While in London she also had time to visit an exhibition of French paintings before catching the train back to Cambridge.

Between this and her next letter the whole nation was shocked to learn that two German battleships had managed to sail through the English Channel and out into the Atlantic to prey upon the Allied shipping without being intercepted. It was also about this time that Singapore fell to the Japanese, so the war was generally not going well.

On 7th March Maida described meeting Felix Harta, an Austrian artist who had escaped to England at the beginning of the war. She was introduced to him by Miss Waring, their neighbour and friend, who had given them her painting of their orchard at 7 Queen Edith's Way as a present. Maida wanted Mr Harta to paint Harriet's portrait: "Miss Waring thinks he might not charge more than £5.0.0. I certainly don't think we could afford to pay more." Harta had enrolled in the Art School at Dachau in Southern Germany in 1905 and later travelled extensively around Europe,



Painting by Lily Florence Waring of the orchard at 7 Queen Edith's Way.

* Anti-aircraft.

developing an international reputation for both his portraits and landscape paintings³⁹.

John had finally agreed to Harriet's being christened without him, so this was arranged for 21st March at St. Benet's Church, Cambridge, where they had married. The service was conducted by Noel Davey, who had officiated at their wedding and was also a good friend. Harriet's two godmothers, Mary Hughes and Isabella Bayne-Powell, were both able to come in person and their Best Man Roger Tredgold was on leave and stood proxy for her godfather, John Arbuthnot, who was serving abroad. Maida described this event in detail: "We got all the flowers from the garden except a dozen daffodils and two bunches of primroses. I had sprays of Mamma's pretty yellow-flowered dogwood in a great jar standing on the floor by the font, with the daffodils in with them; and on one corner of the font a small bowl of spring flowers, daphne, *Viburnum fragrans*, jessamine, hellebore and the primroses: so it was all yellow and mauve with green. Mrs. Eagleston had put a nice rug in front of the font, and there was a little stool beside it for Harriet to stand on, so the whole corner by the door where the entire ceremony took place looked really charming."

"We had lunch early so that Adda was able to get it all cleared away and tea set ready before we all changed, as I was very keen for Adda to come to the service; we left Ben in charge of the house. I changed into my grey jersey suit with a yellow blouse and my black straw hat, black bag and shoes and silk stockings as it was such a very special occasion, with taxis both ways so there was no wear and tear on my feet. Then I dressed Harriet in her lovely white frock and white shoes and socks. She looked simply exquisite... She sat on Adda's knee in the front of the taxi going down so as to see everything."

"When we entered ... Harriet was simply thrilled and insisted on exploring the church, dragging me with her by the hand... Finally, she was ready to join the others by the font and soon Mr. Davey appeared in a beautiful golden cope... I thought I was going to have a great job keeping Harry still but eventually she sat down on the old black oak seat behind us and played with my bag during the opening prayers, with her pretty lacy skirt spread over the dark wood and her lovely curls bobbing on her little head, looking such a darling. When the time came for the actual baptism, Mr. Davey told me to lift her up on to the stool, and he put his arm round her and she stood as good as gold and most



Maida and Harriet outside Queen Edith's Way before the christening.

interested to see what was in the font, and after she had been baptised I lifted her down again... Mr. Davey ended by praying *'for this child's family, especially her father in his absence'* which I thought so sweet of him. It was a lovely service, and I made up my mind that whenever we have our next baby, we must bring it here for Mr. Davey to christen, so that you will know just what Harriet's service was like. She thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it."

Maida noted from her diary that she spent a good deal of time that Spring helping Mamma in the garden, digging and planting vegetables. She also attended several more services at St. Benet's over Easter and went to various plays and concerts in Cambridge. On 11th April she mentioned to John that she had received an airgraph from Augustin Jordan the day before: "He says his work is now different and he has been moved nearer to you." In fact Augustin had volunteered for the newly formed S.A.S.[†] in which he had *'an exciting time'*. He was initially second in command of 52 Free French paratroopers who joined the S.A.S., coming under overall command of David Stirling, who had founded the regiment in 1941 to undertake small-scale

[†] Special Air Service.

raids behind enemy lines. Augustin later took over as leader of the French when Colonel George Bergé was captured in Crete in an undercover operation in June 1942⁴⁰.

The news in April had been depressing and Maida's separation from John was dragging on: "I am truly thankful that you aren't in Burma or anywhere frightful, my precious one, but from time to time I miss you so terribly." On 17th April she reported that spring cleaning was resulting in shortness of temper all round at Q.E.W., but she managed to escape from it on two successive afternoons, firstly by going out to tea and secondly by visiting Mr. Harta, who arranged to paint Harriet's portrait the following week: "He is coming here to do it instead of our going to his studio, as he thinks the only way to keep her still will be to have her in her own high chair."

Work was continuing in the vegetable garden, an important source of food: "I planted a row of peas tonight, which ought to come along as the others are finishing; the latter are coming up splendidly and are now about an inch high. The broad beans are also coming up one by one; nearly all have now made their appearance. The swedes are also through, I think, but I am not quite sure whether they are really swedes or weeds... The carrots haven't appeared yet, nor the lettuces and potatoes, but if rain is really on the way, it will help them along." Writing the next letter on 23rd April was delayed by the need to hunt in the garden for Mamma's glasses: "...which she thinks she left in an apple tree. Alas, poor Mamma: it is only a few months since she lost a pair irrevocably in the same way and had to pay £3.0.0 for new ones, so I very much hope they will turn up." Fortunately on this occasion they were eventually found in a flowerbed.

On 25th April Maida commented on her letter writing, which was such an important aspect of their relationship: "I haven't been a bit pleased with the letters I have written lately. I have so often longed for the evening to come and bring letter writing time, and have thought of lots of things to say to you at odd times during the day, and then when I could at last settle down I seemed to have no inspiration and could only write a dull letter. Perhaps I have been doing a little too much and getting too tired. I must never get too tired to write to you properly since my letters are my only way of telling you my love now and for how much longer?... Never mind, it can't go on for ever, and some day my darling will come home to me."



Portrait of Harriet holding Dick the rabbit, by Felix Harta.

Harriet duly had her portrait painted, with Mr. Harta arriving at about 3.00: "He began working at about 3.20 and finished about 4.30. Adda said afterwards she wished she could earn £5.0.0 so quickly! I think it is a great success. He has caught her expression wonderfully well. She is the first dark baby he has done, and he seemed to enjoy putting in her dark curls with sweeping movements of his pencil. It was very interesting to watch him work, though I couldn't really do much watching except out of the corner of my eye as I had to be looking after Harriet. She herself was thrilled with it, especially when she noticed that Dick was in it too and gave crows of excitement."

"Mr. Harta stayed to tea. He is an interesting man; he was interned among the first in Austria and was also one of the first to escape from the camp. I asked him how he managed it, but he didn't say, only that it took him 3½ months. His wife is here with him. They have been in England for three years but in Cambridge only a few months... I am very glad I had it done, and think it is really cheap as it is so good. I love to think her adorable baby face and lovely colouring have been preserved in a way

no photograph could ever show them. Darling little girl, how thrilling it will be for us to watch her grow together. I know I shall often be tempted to try to shield her from difficulties, and yet I know the best way for her to find real happiness is to work out her own life and make her own decisions.”



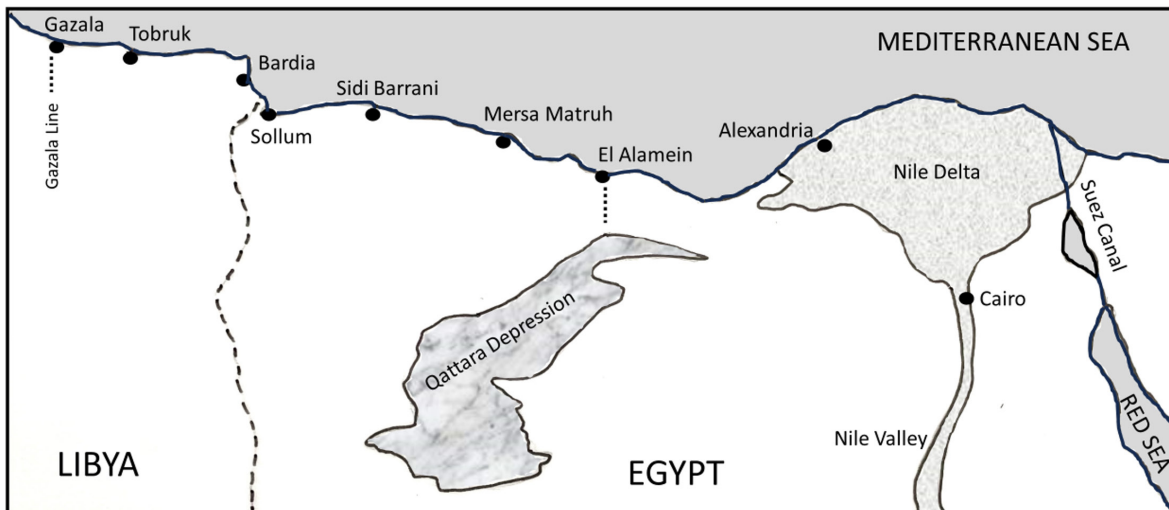
BETWEEN FEBRUARY AND MAY the Eighth Army under General Ritchie was based near Gazala preparing for another offensive, again under continuous pressure from Churchill. Ritchie was also trying to secure the defence of Tobruk and Eastern Cyrenaica, but he was not an experienced desert general and the disposition of his forces was too static. He ignored advice from General Auchinleck and disbelieved British intelligence that a German attack was imminent. Rommel, however, began his next advance on 26th May. He again outmanoeuvred the Allied forces and by June 11th the Gazala line was broken and Ritchie had to pull his depleted forces back. Further withdrawals from protective defences around Tobruk left this key port vulnerable. It fell to Rommel on 21st June, when the garrison of 33,000 men was captured together with over 1,000 vehicles and significant supplies of food and petrol. The loss of Tobruk was described by Churchill as one of the

heaviest blows he could recall during the war^{18,41}.

This success opened the door for a German invasion of Egypt, potentially leading in turn to the Suez Canal and the vitally important oilfields of the Middle East. The threat to Cairo and the Nile Delta was so serious that huge numbers of troops and civilians left for Palestine or South Africa via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. There was panic in the British headquarters at Cairo, and many papers were hurriedly burned in anticipation that the city could fall. On 25th June Auchinleck finally dismissed Ritchie and himself assumed command of the Eighth Army.

His inferiority in armour after the Gazala defeat had left him unable to prevent Rommel either breaking through his centre or enveloping his open left flank to the south. Auchinleck therefore decided to employ delaying tactics while withdrawing a further 100 miles eastward to a more defensible position near El Alamein, a village on the Mediterranean coast. The steep slopes of the Qattara Depression were situated 40 miles inland and this natural barrier effectively limited the width of the front Auchinleck had to defend as it prevented the Axis armour from outflanking his southern defences. It was, however, only two hours driving time from Alexandria.

The Axis forces approached the Alamein position on 30th June. Until this point Rommel had maintained a rapid advance, hoping that this would not allow the Eighth Army sufficient time to reorganise their defences and that his momentum would enable him



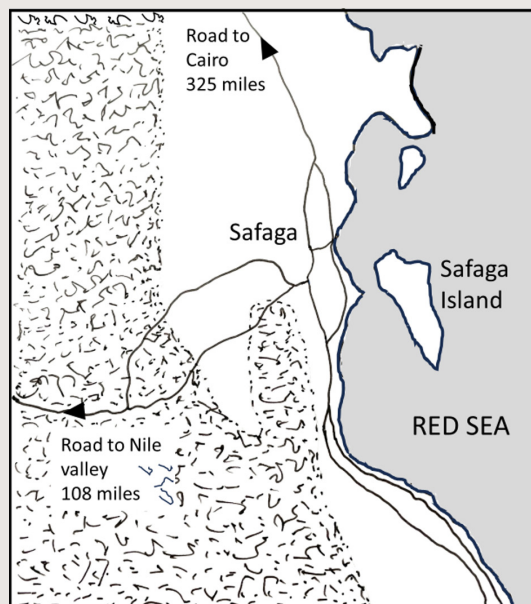
Map 8. During Rommel's offensive in the summer of 1942 he broke through the defensive Gazala Line on 11th June and captured Tobruk on 21st June. His eastward advance into Egypt towards Alexandria was halted by General Auchinleck at the First Battle of El Alamein in July.

to break through the gap at El Alamein and continue onwards into the Nile delta with minimal opposition. Due to their relentless speed of progress Rommel's troops were, however, exhausted, understrength and running short of supplies. They nevertheless mounted a series of attacks that continued throughout most of July in what became known as the first Battle of Alamein. In this both armies suffered high numbers of casualties, but the Axis forces were unable to break through the Allied defences. The battle eventually ended in stalemate but, crucially, it had succeeded in halting the Axis advance on Alexandria^{2,18}.

The relevance of these events to John was that at the beginning of May 1942 he was moved from the Medical Reception Centre at Alexandria to an address given to Maida as APO 55 287 M.E.F., which later turned out to be at a small port on the Red Sea called Safaga. This was originally developed for the export of phosphates, which had been discovered in the area in 1911 and had led to a significant local mining industry. The port lay on the arc of a wide bay sheltered by an offshore island measuring about 5 miles long and up to 2 miles wide. Safaga is Arabic for 'hot dusty winds' that frequently blew up the Red Sea and the climate was hot and dry.

Safaga had previously been identified as being of potential strategic importance if the military situation in Egypt worsened, as it could be used either to land reinforcements in Egypt's defence or to evacuate large numbers of troops in a hurry if the country fell to the Axis forces. It had therefore been decided both to enlarge the port significantly and to locate a hospital there. Details of the hospital formation were outlined in its first Quarterly report, covering the period ending 31st December 1941⁴². The new unit was first established at the Base Depot in Helieh in mid-November, and then shipped to Safaga via the Suez Canal, arriving there on 25th November. It started as a small, tented hospital which was intended to have 50 beds but initially only managed 34: *'owing to deficiency of Hospital Extending Marquee tentage'*.

The hospital opened for patients on 1st December 1941 but there were only around 5 cases per day from the 500 to 600 troops stationed in the area from transportation and engineering units. In the first quarter of 1942 development continued with the arrival of a small Indian section (with 6 beds), two refrigerators, and a dental officer together with a dental clerk and dental mechanic. They now averaged about 10 beds occupied at any one time, representing mainly minor injuries and mild respiratory infections.



Map 9. Safaga.

In January work began on building a new permanent hospital⁴². The majority of the labour for both port enlargement and the hospital development was provided by recruits from the local population.

John's first impressions on his arrival were not favourable and he wrote home on 10th May saying: "This is a place which is only slightly more comfortable than the Western Desert. Yesterday it turned much colder but also started to blow a gale which has continued since. My tent was rendered quite unusable and I am now sleeping and writing in the Major's tent, which is a superior brand. The sand blowing about was worse yesterday and by today all the loose sand has departed. However, that has not stopped it blowing. I had my first interesting case yesterday. He was a third engineer from a passing steamer and was at first thought to be an appendicitis. However, I decided not to open him and today he is much better. Tomorrow I am doing my first small operation. We have all the tools and quite a good theatre orderly, but patients are few and far between. However, I am responsible for a tent holding about 20 beds which is half full of men with sores and burns."

"On Thursday last I did a hundred-mile trek to relieve another M.O. for three days at a reception station in the wilds. It was extremely hot but I quite enjoyed the adventure and returned yesterday

SUBJECT :- Quarterly Report ending 31 Dec. 1941. MILITARY HOSPITAL,
SAFAGA, M.E.F.
Ref. No:- FH/ S/4.

D.M.S.,
G.H.Q., M.E.F.

SECRET

19 April, 1942.

Report as laid down in D.M.S. Administrative Instruction dated 25 November, 1941 for period ending 31 December, 1941.

1. A complete new unit formed on 10 November, 1941 at R.A.M.C. Base Depot, Helmhieh.
2. Moved to Suez on 13 November, 1941 and embarked on 23 Nov. 1941 on M.V. 'Irisbank'.
3. Arrived Port Safaga on 25 Nov. 1941.
4. Tented Hospital established on 26 Nov. 1941 and opened up for reception of patients.
5. Primarily had 14 beds equipped but increased to 34 beds on 7 Dec. 1941. Full number of beds equipped (50) not established owing to deficiency of Hospital Extending Marquee Tentage.
6. First admission on 1 December, 1941 and average of 5 cases per day for period established consisting of minor injuries, and 'Common Colds'.
Number of troops at Port during period 500 - 600 consisting of Transportation Unit (R.A.S.C.) and Technical Engineering Units.

[Signature]
Major, R.A.M.C.
O.C., Military Hospital.



The Officer's lines at Safaga showing the tented accommodation.

Extract from the Quarterly Report ending 31st December 1941 of the Military Hospital, Safaga. WO 222/914⁴².

morning. The journey takes about five hours. I saw quite a few interesting birds and I got stuck once in the sand in the ambulance, but otherwise nothing very exciting occurred. There is a good deal of typhus fever about owing to the lousiness of the local populace, and I saw about twenty cases in the local hospital, but we have not had any definite cases here, although I think one Indian soldier whom I was asked to see had it. However, I am not looking after the medical side, so I have to leave them to Capt. Fava."

"I am writing this by the light of a paraffin lamp. I am using my old valise and lie-low again which are old friends and very useful... I won't say I am particularly pleased with the change but in three months' time the place may be completely changed, and then I shall either be getting plenty of surgery to do, or else they will send a more experienced surgeon and I shall go elsewhere. Naturally I hope for the former... I am very well and fit; the change of air has made me sleep extra soundly, and I have to get up earlier to hold a sick parade at 7.00 hrs in the morning before breakfast. I must go to bed now. All my love, darling from your own husband, John."

A few days later (15.5.1942) he had received a telegram from Maida to let him know that his sister Peggy had just given birth to her daughter Ann: "I shall so much look forward to hearing all about the meeting at Ware when my mother saw her first two

grandchildren for the first time. I am so glad she has seen Harriet at last, I am sure she will be pleased with her. I still have not had a letter from you here, in fact your wire was the first communication I have had here which was especially nice as it was sent off this month and brings me your love only a fortnight old."

"I am quite enjoying life here watching things develop... the place grows up like a mushroom from day to day. We may be able to move into the new hospital by the end of the month. The wind has gone down again now and the weather is comfortable. I am sleeping outside my tent and actually need two blankets in the early morning, so you can see I am not dying of heat. I have had no major surgery to do yet but am looking forward to getting an appendix to do one of these days. The chief difficulty at the moment is the lighting, as we use a tent for an operating theatre, and there is no electricity. The only lighting provided is acetylene which cannot be used with ether anaesthetic... I am spending a good deal of time now trying to learn Egyptian as we have hundreds of Egyptian labourers whom I have to treat. They work quite hard for 1/- a day and considering their numbers they are extremely healthy. I hold their sick parade at 7.0 each morning before breakfast and there are usually only about 20 out of 2,000."

"Yesterday I went for a trip to a nearby island on

a motorboat. There was nothing on the island except sand and crabs, which run away like rabbits when you approach and disappear down holes. We did see a few birds, however, the most interesting of which was a pair of spoonbills, beautiful large white birds with long beaks spoon-shaped at the end. Another queer large heron-like bird paddling in the shallow water and running after fish was, I think, called an Open-billed stork. On the way across, which is only about a mile, we saw a new type of gull with black heads and very dark grey-brown backs, and a very white eyelid, which I think were called White-eyed Gulls. I must stop now as it is nearly midnight and I have to get up early... The news continues to be good. There may still be a chance for the war finishing this year though I am afraid I shan't get home for some time after that."

On 19th May he wrote again saying: "I am now well settled into my new job which gives me a good deal more surgery to do than my old one. I have something to do almost every day, which I enjoy. I am also getting more used to the heat which is at least 100°F* in the shade at mid-day... I shall not feel I really belong to this place until I get a letter from you addressed to me here... It has been a bit of a wrench being parted from Alex, which I was so fond of. However I have certainly a better job here. We seem to be right out of the war as we seldom get any papers, and there are no obvious signs of war, no blackout even. This is a pleasant change as one can sit out in the evening to enjoy the cooler air instead of having to have all the windows tightly closed."

A few days later he described his new routine: "I get up about 6.15, leave my tent for the Egyptian Labourers Sick Parade at 6.45, and reach the labour camp at 7.00. I then see about 40 natives before 8.00 when I return to the Garrison Mess for breakfast. I quite enjoy this sick parade as I try to learn Egyptian from them. I am helped by two Egyptian orderlies and one Palestinian corporal who can interpret if need be. After breakfast I return to the Hospital and do my ward round, seeing about 20 patients in a big tent. I then usually have one or two outpatients to see, and usually some small operation. This morning I removed a small tumour from the arm of a New Zealander. Yesterday I opened an abscess near the elbow, the day before I did an operation to cure an ingrowing toenail, and the day before that I opened an abscess behind the knee."

"By this time it is 12.0 o'clock. I have lunch about

12.30 and get back to my tent about 1.30. I then sleep or rest during the hot part of the day until about 3.30, when a local from the mess comes up and gives me about three quarters of an hour lesson in Egyptian. About 4.30 Major Butler (the Garrison Commandant), Capt. Cogden (the Dental Officer), Capt. Fava (the Medical Officer) and myself go for a bathe, usually in an ambulance. The water is quite cold as it is very deep close to the shore, but you get warmed up the moment you get out. We come back about 5.30 and I have another look at the patients before going down to dinner at 7.30. Rather a monotonous routine compared to Alex, but it might be a lot worse and I may get more interesting operations to do later on. I have not minded the heat since I started sleeping outside in my tent — although last night I nearly had my sheets blown away."

"I have been made Entertainments Officer for the Company R.A.M.C. which comprises about 80 men. We are holding our first organised meeting next Wednesday. It consists of a spelling bee and a short talk by one of the men. There are also attempts at getting tennis courts made though I don't expect they will appear for about six months... We usually get the papers a day late here if at all, but today I did see yesterday's paper which seemed pretty good news with the Germans retreating. As the weeks go by I feel more and more hopeful that the Germans may be beaten this year, especially if we manage to attack them in France. The days go very slowly here compared with Alex as it is rather an effort to do anything extra. However, I have my surgery books and plenty of interest to read so hope to occupy the evenings in study. The trouble at the moment is that I have no decent chair to sit on in my tent."

"Only a fortnight now until Harriet's second birthday. I remember so well two years ago when I was counting the days near Mersa Matruh and how your wire arrived just before we started off to meet the Italians. It was a Sunday with a terrible sandstorm when she was born and I got the wire on Monday afternoon June 10th. We started off at 5.0 p.m. and reached Sidi at 6.0 a.m. next morning. Everything about the desert seemed so new and exciting then, whereas now I feel there is nowhere in Egypt I wish to visit. I somehow feel rather homesick tonight."

On 29th May he was delighted to have received a postcard sent from Maida three weeks earlier and addressed to Safaga, although he was still missing a number of letters which had gone to Alexandria: "I am general factotum here with a hundred and one

* 37.8°C.



Bathing party on the beach at Safāga. John is on the left hand side.

different jobs which suits me very well. I get some sort of operation to do almost every day... The weather is by no means bad at present though occasionally the continual wind gets on your nerves. When it starts blowing it lasts for about three days but fortunately there is not so much sand round about here and the wind comes almost over the sea, so the result is nothing like so bad as in the Western Desert. The heat hasn't worried us at all lately as the wind keeps you cool."

"Yesterday I gave my first blood transfusion here to one of Capt. Fava's patients who was unconscious from cerebral malignant malaria. He was a Greek seaman from a ship which called. The transfusion was given successfully, and he improved, but did not regain consciousness and died this afternoon. I am becoming an expert stitcher of skin. Every day some Egyptian workman arrives with a big gash in him somewhere which I have to sew up. I am also beginning to get the hang of their language a bit. I can now take their sick parade without an interpreter. I can tell them what I want but still cannot understand them much... I am not attempting to learn the Arabic script so I write down the words in English as they sound to me."

"I went up to look at our new hospital today which is being built only about ½ mile from here. They are

getting on with plastering the walls now but it will be a week or two yet before the electric light etc. is in. It will be very luxurious after our present hospital, which has nothing but tents with no electric light or water laid on. The officers will still sleep in tents though for some time, as although a stone Officer's Mess is planned it will probably not be built for some months. It has the advantage that one draws an extra 2/- a day for what is called 'Field Allowance'... I now have the attentions of half a batman — that is, he looks after two of us. He is a Scotsman from Dundee called Stewart and looks after me pretty well."

"I had an interesting job two days ago of acting as defending counsel for an R.A.M.C. private who was up for a Court Martial 'for knowingly making a false declaration', in that he signed two Pay Books, the second of which was wrongly filled in. As a soldier is only supposed to have one, I tried to plead that it was not his official duty to sign a second one. However, the court decided that if he signed an official document at all, it was his duty to see that the entries were correct. He got 56 days Field Punishment... It was the first Court Martial I had attended. The Court consisted of three officers (it being a Field Court Martial) who were a Major, a Captain and a P/ Lt."

On 5th June the missing mail from Alexandria had still not turned up but he had had a significant excitement at work: "I have been rather lucky in a way as the two richest civilians in the place are now my patients. Last Saturday we suddenly heard that Mr. and Mrs. Crookston, the owners of a phosphate mine who live here, had had a car crash on the desert road. Nothing more happened until I was woken up about 11.0 p.m. and found they had both arrived in the hospital by ambulance. Mr. Crookston was only cut on the forehead, but Mrs. Crookston was badly injured on the R. side of her head and her right arm was paralysed. She was in a very weak condition and it seemed likely that her skull was broken."

"She was admitted to the male surgical tent where we screened off the end of the ward for her. There were only two other British women in the place, and we managed to get them to take turns looking after her. It was 2.0 a.m. by the time I had finished sewing up their heads and got everything settled. On Sunday and Monday I had rather an anxious time as she was unable to pass her water and needed constant catheterising. She was sick and had a frightful headache and wouldn't eat anything. On Tuesday a civilian nurse arrived to help us out from Cairo, and with a sigh of relief I permitted her to be moved to

her own house. On Wednesday she began to pick up strength, and today I think is out of danger though still terribly weak and no sign of being able to use her right arm. However, I am pretty sure she will be all right apart from her arm and I visit her every morning.”

“They own the biggest and best furnished villa in the place and the only one which has any vestige of vegetation round it, so I enjoy my visits and get treated very well to drinks etc. A nice thing that I have discovered is that they are friends of Mr. Greaves of Cairo, the bird man I have told you about who has sunbirds in his garden. They also possess the big volumes of Meinerzhagen’s ‘Egyptian Birds’ which I can consult at any time. Actually they (or their forebears) are the founders of this place. There are three cousins here now, Mr. and Mrs. David Crookston, Mr. George Crookston and Mr. Andrew Crookston, a younger man not much older than me, who was at Cambridge. They are a pleasant Scotch family and I am very pleased to have made their acquaintance so soon after arrival.” An earlier Andrew Crookston, a trained geologist, had received a concession to explore the new phosphate ore deposits discovered in Safaga in around 1910.

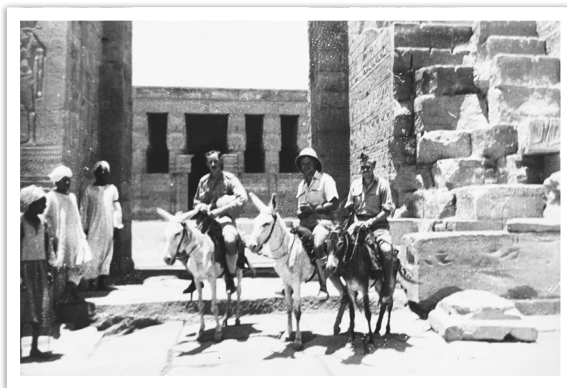
“The new hospital has still some way to go before completion, and it now seems likely we shall be here until almost the end of this month. I looked at my spacious theatre this morning. The walls are not yet plastered and the floor is not yet tiled, but they were busy working on it. Today is very hot and I am writing this in my tent stripped to the waist and still pouring with sweat. It is one of the few evenings with no breeze at all and the air is rather humid. However, I seem to have got quite used to the heat now. Crickets go banging around the tent attracted by my paraffin lamp. Talking of cricket, I have been chosen to play for the Garrison team against the New Zealanders next Sunday. I played for the first time last Sunday and actually made 16 not out, which apparently impressed them... I am doing quite a lot of surgery although no appendix has turned up yet. I am looking forward to a lovely big pile of your letters one of these days and in any case I may get them coming here direct in another fortnight.”

A few days later (8.6.1942) he was again sent off to do a locum at a Reception Station 100 miles away: “I am quite looking forward to it as it will make a pleasant change and a bit of a rest after the rather busy time I have had here recently. I am rather sorry to have to leave my private patient Mrs. Crookston for two days, and when I told her this evening she said ‘*That will be dreadful*’, but she took it all right when I promised

to come back, and I think she is really out of danger now. I took the stitches out of her head this morning and was able to leave off the bandage. Her husband and cousin complimented me warmly on the success of my sewing which was nice of them. I am afraid she will end up with a withered right arm though.” He had enjoyed the cricket match in which they beat the New Zealanders. He was also thinking of Harriet just before her second birthday and had sent her a card.

On 13th June: “The great day has arrived at last when fourteen of your letters have reached me from Alex. I got back from my locum at the Reception Station yesterday rather depressed to find that the post had still not arrived. I was in the middle of my afternoon nap today when I saw the military postmen advancing on me with a huge pile of mail including Lancets, News Letters, letters from my Bank and a letter from Mother and one from Merle. Your letters are all the ones from March 7th to April 26th. I had to give a lecture on First Aid at 3.30 and then have been busy with patients, so it was not until just now after supper that I have been able to begin to enjoy them all. I am not going to read too many at once as I think it is nicer to keep a few for every day.”

“I had quite a good time the three days I was away and saw the old temple at Dendera which was built by the Ptolemy who was Cleopatra’s brother. Actually, it was the first temple I have seen which could be called architecturally attractive. The building itself is complete with roof and staircases, everything in fact except its statues. We had an amusing ride on donkeys to get there as it is about 2 miles from any road. I went with our medical Colonel and an Air Force Flying Officer. The man who hired us the donkeys insisted on running behind



John (on left hand side) and two colleagues on a mounted visit to the Dendera Temple complex.

us and driving them on at breakneck speed. As I had the smallest donkey my animal came in for most of the encouragement, which consisted of loud cries of ‘Harr’ accompanied by a whack on its backside. The animals stood up to it extraordinarily well and I couldn’t help admiring the way they took us over stones and ruts without stumbling or even seeming out of breath... Coming back we thought both the donkeys and ourselves would prefer to go slowly, so I pinched the donkey-driver’s stick from him and shouted ‘Harr’ occasionally myself to keep him quiet.”

“I got back yesterday morning to find my patients doing well. Mrs. Crookston is all right except for her R. arm which I am afraid is going to be almost completely useless. I am going to let her sit up tomorrow. Last night her husband Mr. David Crookston asked me to dine with them, them being the two sisters looking after her with Mr. David and Andrew Crookston. I enjoyed it immensely as it was a nice change being really civilised again in a house with nice furniture and pictures on the walls.” Two days later he sent Mrs. Crookston off to Cairo by aeroplane to see a neurosurgical specialist about the excruciating pain in her arm.



ONLY THREE LETTERS FROM Maida dating from May and June have survived. On 13th May she was unhappy about her inability to contact John following his recent move: “I asked again on Monday if I could send you a cable, but I still can’t to your new address. I am longing to hear that telegrams can be accepted, as I hate to feel that I couldn’t get in touch with you quickly if I wanted. Also I hate having no idea where you are... The robin has just arrived on the windowsill for his supper; in spite of rations, he still gets the cheese rind and a good bit of the inside too. He brought his baby today, very pleased with himself, though the baby looked terrified and immediately took refuge in the *Viburnum fragrans*.” She ended with a long list of words that Harriet could now say, including calling herself *Allit*’.

In the absence of letters, Maida referred back to her diary, in particular a memorable sighting on the evening of May 30th: “Looking out from Harriet’s bedroom window, I saw for the first time an apparently un-ending procession of our bombers on what turned out to be our first big bombing raid on Germany. I

counted over 60 in half an hour. They looked so sinister, but I couldn’t help being pleased that we could now hit back after the terrible raids on London and the British cities.”

On June 12th she commented on the news of the fighting in Libya and was hoping that the Allies: “...may at last manage to drive the enemy out of North Africa and use the Mediterranean for shipping again. It would make so much difference to the letters as well as bringing the end of the war so much nearer. The fall of Bir Hacheim isn’t very encouraging, but I hope there may be better news soon.” Bir Hakeim was an oasis in the Libyan desert south and west of Tobruk. This position had been defended by the 1st Free French Brigade from 26th May until 11th June. They suffered serious casualties and were finally forced to retreat, but their bravery delayed the Axis offensive towards Egypt^{2,43}.

The bad war news together with the lack of information on John’s whereabouts was a difficult combination and Maida was feeling dispirited: “Darlingest, I long for you more and more, I can’t bear it if you don’t come home soon. Still, if I hear you are doing useful and interesting work, and specially if I know you are safe and well, my beloved, I have really very little to grumble about when so many people have such terrible troubles to bear... Harriet is being rather naughty too; she has developed a tiresome habit of screaming with excitement after being put to bed, and I have tried everything I can think of to stop her without success... Her squeals have now stopped, so I fancy the poor lamb has fallen asleep. I am thankful not to have to face Mamma’s and Adda’s accusing glares any longer. I could feel they thought I ought to be firmer, but there it was, I just couldn’t. The poor little darling had such a bad fall yesterday, and cut her lip, which simply streamed with blood. However, your treatment of sugar, for which I can never bless you enough, stopped the bleeding and the tears, though there is still a scar and swelling.”

She had arranged a short holiday with Harriet to visit Uncle Louis and Aunt Tricka in mid Wales: “We go to Newtown on Wednesday leaving by the 8.30 a.m. train, arriving at teatime... It will be a long journey, but I expect Harriet will sleep a good part of the time... We shall be going through High Wycombe and West Wycombe, and I shall look out for many spots of enchanted memory, my darling... Then you were in London, which seemed a long way, although it was only 20 miles, and now you are many thousand miles away I suppose at the very least.”



Harriet on the left with Christopher Cooke playing by the River Severn.

The next letter was written on 21st June following their arrival. The house was on a hill overlooking the River Severn and Tricka's daughter Molly Cooke was also living there at the time with her son Christopher, who was almost the same age as Harriet: "I already feel enormously better for the change of air and scene... Little Harriet is in splendid form too... She is rather unkind to Christopher and takes very little notice of his advances, and I'm sorry to say she has bitten him once and knocked him over, producing tears each time. However, he got his own back this evening by dropping a stone on her accidentally when they were paddling. Although it didn't do her any harm, it has given her somewhat more respect for him... Yesterday and today have been very hot, and we have taken them down to the river to paddle; actually they prefer sitting side by side on warm stones with their feet in the water... splashing pebbles into the shallow pools."

"The country was looking most beautiful and the air is so exhilarating I can hardly believe I am the same person as left Cambridge less than a week ago. My first visit to the top of the hill was at sunset a couple of evenings ago and a group of Austrian pines up there added the most glorious shades of purplish-red and gold to the surrounding green. Molly and I have bathed in the Severn the last two evenings just after putting the children to bed; it is a most beautiful reach and splendid for the birds." While they were in Wales they heard the news of the fall of Tobruk, a shattering blow which gave Maida a great shock. It seemed to signal a real breakthrough by the Axis army in the Western Desert and was followed by many anxious days before the enemy advance was finally checked at first Battle of Alamein.

Only two letters sent by Maida in July have

survived. On 9th July she thanked John for a parcel containing some pretty yellow cotton from which she made herself a dress. There should also have been a pair of silk stockings, but these had disappeared during the journey. She asked him to send her a black bag, but this time not to risk the post. Instead, their friend George Blaker later brought it back with him. She had now received John's first letter written from Safaga: "I am looking forward to hearing that you have moved into your new stone hospital and have your beds full of patients on whom to practice surgery... It sounds a real outpost of Empire."

She continued with news from home: "Since I wrote on Monday we have had some rain, but not enough to do any real good to the garden... I now have your patch well stocked with greens for next autumn and winter, which I hope will do well. Harriet and I go round every morning looking for caterpillars to squash... I don't think Harriet has any idea what the purpose of the tour is, but she comes along behind me, busily lifting up the leaves and looking at their backs where the creatures usually lurk... She has just woken up from her siesta. As it looked rather like rain again, she has been sharing the garage with what she calls the '*fwallows*'. There are five babies, who are not quite ready to fly and as they have completely wrecked their nest, they are perched precariously on the bar above the door looking sleepy and melancholy... They have a very fussy mamma, who will now have to begin teaching them to fend for themselves."

"Adda is going away next Wednesday for a week to her cousins at Worksop. I hope it will be warm so that we can do without the kitchen fire thus saving coal and hard work. We are doing without it quite often now and find we can fill Harriet's bath enough with a big kettle and a saucepan boiled on the gas ring and oil stove... I went to visit Uncle Philip's furniture in the storeroom this morning to see how it was getting on; it is in a very satisfactory dry place." She had heard that Dr Hedgcock had been called up for the R.A.F. and asked John if he agreed that she should now return to Dr. Budd. He was her original Cambridge doctor who had been released from the army back to his civilian practice. Dr. Hedgcock eventually returned to find that his own obstetric practice had melted away, so he went into medical administration, later becoming Secretary to the British Medical Association.

On 15th July Maida reported that Adda was indeed away on holiday, and she was enjoying doing the cooking: "I made an omelette for lunch with the new tinned dehydrated eggs. I rather wondered if they

would work all right and was delighted to find the result was very good... Darling, I have got all this way without telling you that two of your precious letters reached me on Monday written on May 10th and 15th. You sounded rather lonely, I thought, but I do hope the work soon became more interesting and that you felt happier. It made me sad to read that you think you won't get home for some time even when the war does end... It will be just heaven when you come home at long, long last."

This letter also enclosed another sent from Tricka to Mamma, saying how much she had enjoyed having Harriet and Maida to stay in Wales. This instructed her to: "Send this letter to John and tell him that Maida used to walk up alone to the top of the hill behind the house after supper, to think of him, I always thought, but after the bad news from Egypt the darling couldn't face it alone."



BY MID-JUNE THE WAR news was indeed becoming very alarming and John wrote on 19th June saying: "We seem to be having a reverse in Libya at the moment, but I am hoping it will not last long. I suppose we shall have the same sort of flap as in May last year." Tobruk fell on 21st June and the Allied army was now in full retreat. On 22nd June he commented: "We are all very depressed about Libya but can only continue to hope for the best. The Americans must count in the end. However, the next month or two will be trying... I am better off here than many M.O.s in the Eighth Army who must be prisoners by now. All my love to you and Harriet, and tell her Daddy likes her in her christening frock."

He was sufficiently distant from the fighting to be able to do more sightseeing, this time visiting a Roman camp about 60 miles away in the hills: "Actually, my official excuse was to examine a detachment of men on the way for their monthly skin inspection. We spent some time looking at the Roman camp, which is not very extensive or well preserved, but is chiefly notable for the huge amount of old broken Roman pots lying about... The walls are built of a sort of marbly stone which glitters in places like gold. I am told it is really iron pyrites and known to the locals as 'Fools Gold'. However, the stones are not at all carefully hewn and the whole place is rather a disgrace to Roman building I think — no nice square blocks like the Roman Wall

in Northumberland. It was cooler up there as it is about 3,000 ft. above sea level and much drier."

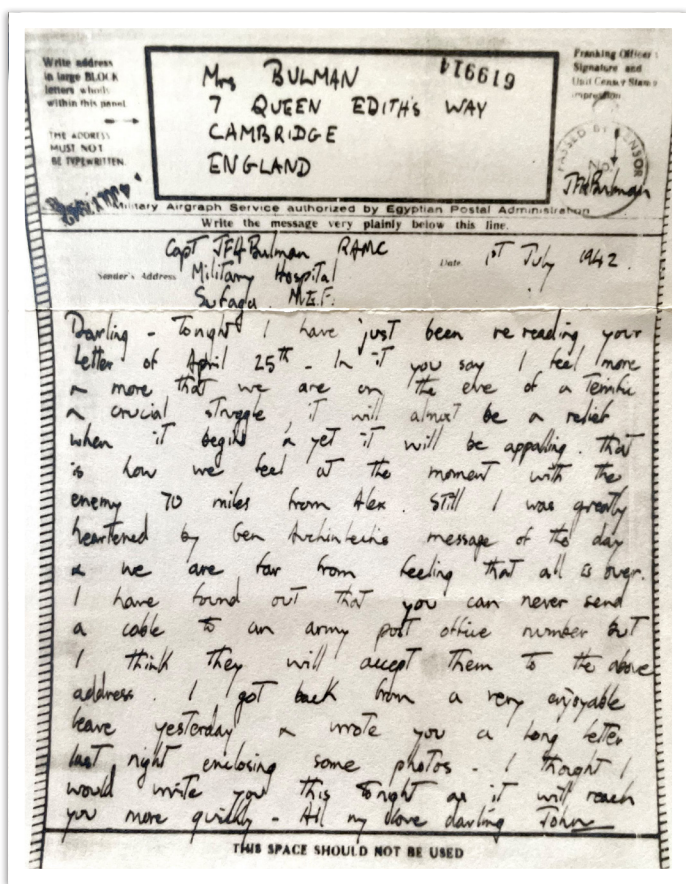
This excursion was followed by five days leave in Cairo, described on 30th June: "It was really quite cool there and I stayed at Shephard's Hotel. I have not been there for over a year, and it really is a pleasure. The service is extremely good and everything so clean and well looked after. Considering what you get, it is extremely cheap. My hotel bill for the period was only £3 for bed and breakfast... I did all my shopping and saw George Blaker, Mr. Greaves and Mr. Mackintosh."

To try and provide Maida some reassurance in the face of the ongoing war news he sent a brief telegram on 1st July: "Return from leave today. Don't worry. All my love darling. Bulman." An airgraph sent at the same time read: "Darling — Tonight I have just been re-reading your letter of April 25th. In it you say: *'I feel more and more that we are on the eve of a terrific and crucial struggle; it will almost be a relief when it starts and yet it will be appalling.'* That is how we feel at the moment with the enemy 70 miles from Alex. Still I was greatly heartened by General Auchinleck's message of the day, and we are far from feeling that all is over."

He expanded on this in his next letter of 4th July following his return to Safāga: "My own darling sweetheart — On the whole we have now got over the initial shock of the Axis advance, though we do not yet feel that we have beaten them. Everyone at any rate is now prepared for anything that may happen, and we are still hoping that defeat may be turned into victory. We feel rather out of it here* and do not know any more about what is happening than you do — that is from the B.B.C. Empire broadcasts. Still, Churchill's optimism and the House of Commons support for him keeps us hopeful that perhaps we may have a surprise in store for the Axis before long. At any rate, darling, you will not be so worried now that I have moved from Alex. The only reason that I am glad to be far away from the front is that you will be less worried."

"Our move into the new hospital is still unaccomplished — what with one emergency and another it seems to get held up. However, I visited it yesterday and found that the theatre was now plastered, although the tiled floor and the washbasins are not yet put in. There is so much building etc. going on that it seems almost wrong to use valuable labour on the new hospital when we can manage fairly well here. I have just written a report for the last quarter on

* i.e. in Safāga.



John's airgraph from 1st July 1942.

the hospital surgery. We have done thirty operations, almost all since I arrived... I have thoroughly enjoyed doing them, although the heat makes it very difficult not to drip sweat into the wound."

"If only by some miracle we could push the Axis out of Egypt again I would be satisfied for the time being. If we have to leave Egypt I shall feel very depressed, as I am really beginning to like the place in a way... Also it will make me feel rather hopeless, as I have done the last few days. However, whatever happens, darling, I am well and fit, and I shall come back to you just as soon as I can. All this letter seems to be about the war, but that is what is on my mind, and I feel much better for telling you what I feel."

Two days later (6.7.1942) he had been cheered up by receiving two letters and a postcard from Maida: "One contained the postcard of the beautiful portrait of Harriet. I was delighted with it the moment I saw it. It is exactly what I had hoped only a good deal better. The other excitement is to hear you have been to Newtown... I do hope you got a good rest as I do not

want you to get any thinner, precious one. I am sure from your letters you are doing too much hard work and pram pushing... We are now feeling easier about the war news, even though we haven't been able to push them back yet. I took out my first appendix here two days ago. The patient is doing all right, although naturally the conditions are rather trying."

More good news followed on 8th July. John had been hoping to get a piano as a reward for his services to the Crookston family as his army post had precluded him from making any financial charge: "I have had such a busy and happy day today. The first pleasant surprise came when my own piano arrived sent up by Mr. Andrew Crookston. It is terribly out of tune, but I got all the tuning instruments required and a certain amount of tuition from a music shop in Cairo when on leave, so I am looking forward to setting to work on it. Secondly, two of your letters dated 6th and 16th May reached me unexpectedly before lunch. Thirdly, I spent all afternoon from 3.0 to 5.30 sailing in the harbour. A Palestinian doctor from a ship came here the other day to get some arsenic to kill rats. I managed to persuade him to take me sailing, so he and the First Officer and I went out in their boat. It was the first sail I have had here, and it was a refreshing change... At 6.00 we had an A.R.P.* practice which consisted in sitting about with gas mask and steel helmet... I am glad to hear Griselda's value has appreciated although I think it will be better to keep her even after the war. It will be a pity if the tyres are requisitioned as I believe they were almost new." This was a possibility at the time due to a shortage of rubber, but fortunately Griselda survived the war intact.

The next two letters from John sent in mid-July reported that he was keeping himself busy with trying to tune the piano, bird-watching and learning Egyptian: "The weather here is hot again: over 100°F in the shade today and a horrid damp wind from the South yesterday, so that one's clothes wouldn't dry. I am very busy as Capt. Fava went on temporary duty yesterday so I am doing all the medical work in the hospital... The unfortunate thing is that Capt. Fava is not much use as an anaesthetist which makes operating a trying business. Several cases have started struggling on the table... I still have not received my A.E. Housman but dug up 'Alice Through the Looking Glass' yesterday and read 'The Aged Man' with much relish. I must go to bed now, my perfect, darling. Your letters keep hope alive. Your own adoring John."

* Air raid precautions.

On 20th July he reported that: "The last two days have been very busy for me with both the medical and surgical sides to look after, and an increase in the number of patients owing to the heat and sores. However, Capt. Fava arrived back last night and brought with him an R.A.F. aircraftman with a dislocated hip from an accident. I have never actually reduced one before, but naturally I didn't tell them that. Within an hour we had him in the theatre tent anaesthetised and I got it back after a good deal of pulling and hard work. It was a very interesting case to do, though I wish I had Watson-Jones 'Fractures'[†] which I hope will be on its way by the time this reaches you. Fortunately, I was able to get a Ft/Lt. Taylor (an R.A.F. M.O.) to give the anaesthetic, and I am sending the patient off to Cairo by air tomorrow... The flap about the war has died down here at the moment and everyone is intent on local development, which certainly progresses at a good rate."

By a posting miracle both John's cable saying: "All my love darling in remembrance of our fourth anniversary. All well. Letters received to May." and his airgraph of 1st July arrived in Cambridge on 27th July, the appropriate day. In the latter he commented: "There has been a gap in the post again and May 27th is still the last of yours I have had... We now have a definite date for moving into our new hospital, August 1st. We look like being extra busy as many new troops have arrived."

At the end of July he had another three-day trip doing a locum at the Reception Station: "Yesterday I spent examining natives who are required to do army work. They were volunteers from a native village, and naturally the ones who wanted to go most were the young boys and the old men, who were unable to get a living where they were. These take some excluding, as they try again and again to get past, and sometimes will buy a ticket from a healthy friend whom you have let through. However, this time we stamped each man we passed with an indelible ink stamp on his arm in order to prevent traffic in tickets. They are organised into gangs of 25 under a foreman or 'rais'. They get paid 10 piastres a day, which is very good money for them. They work well for a time but don't like being away from their families for long so that they are always deserting and going home on their own, and their numbers have to be constantly made good with new recruits."

"We went to rather a nice village with lots of date-palms and fields of maize round about. The room where they were examined was a dusty place with no floor (other than dust) and one or two plush chairs. Everyone in the village turns out to watch especially the little children who push in every way, even climbing in the windows, and have to be constantly chased out with sticks. Everyone shouts and argues but very little damage is done and everyone seems to enjoy it."

During this trip other matters were also on his mind: "I was thinking about you as we drove out in a very bumpy Ford car and longed to be driving again in Griselda with one hand on your knee... If only we could get a second front going soon with the Americans to help. I somehow feel it will not be long now before something is started again in Europe." An airgraph sent on 30th July informed Maida that her anniversary cable had reached him and that the move into the new hospital was finally under way: "I am going to use the massage department as a theatre until the proper theatre is finished. It is all very exciting after three months although the staff will still live in tents. We are going to get concrete floors though, which will be a luxury instead of dust."

[†] A classic text book dealing with fractures and joint injuries.

CHAPTER 10

Montgomery and El Alamein 1942



THE FIRST BATTLE OF Alamein had continued through June and July and, crucially, the Line had held. By August the immediate threat to Egypt was therefore averted but this was not the only danger zone. As Commander-in-Chief of the whole Middle East theatre of war, General Auchinleck had to prepare for the strong possibility of the German forces in Russia breaking through the Caucasus within a month, thus bringing them to the borders of Persia and Iraq. In the Far East (Singapore, Malaysia and Burma) there had also been a series of Allied defeats². At home Churchill was being strongly criticised for his direction of the war, and at the end of June the Coalition Government was heavily defeated in a by-election at Maldon¹⁸. A vote of censure in the House of Commons, though defeated by 475 – 25, did not put an end to the discontent. Consequently, major changes were made in the Middle East Command.

Winston Churchill and General Sir Alan Brooke — the Chief of the Imperial General Staff — visited Cairo together in early August. Churchill wanted General Auchinleck to launch an immediate counterattack against Rommel but he argued that his men needed more time to regroup and receive reinforcements. Like Wavell before him, Auchinleck was dismissed and replaced by General Sir Harold Alexander as Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command. It was also decided that Persia and Iraq should be split off from Middle East Command and Auchinleck was offered the post of being their Commander-in-Chief, which he refused.

William Gott was given command of the Eighth Army. He had previously been the commander of 13th Corps and had been fighting in the Western

Desert all along. However, the aircraft in which he was travelling on his way back from the First Alamein battlefield to Cairo was unfortunately shot down on 7th August and he was killed. Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery was then appointed in his place and took command of Eighth Army on 13th August. He had previously shown his leadership potential as commander of the 8th Infantry Division in Palestine during the Arab rebellion in 1936-1939. This was, however, going to be his first high command in battle and he was not yet experienced in desert warfare¹⁸.

Back in Safage, John was able to report on 3rd August: “We are in our new hospital at last, and to celebrate it I had a lovely batch of your letters.” He had also had a card from his mother and a letter from Uncle Philip, so he was well up on family news: “The last few days have certainly been pretty hot, about 102°F in my tent most of the day and about 90°F at night. Still, the excitement of the move has taken our mind off it, and it is quite bearable so long as there is a breeze. I have lots of work at the moment, two operations to do tomorrow, one for hernia the other for circumcision.”

“Also, the Italian prisoners have arrived and I am again looking after them. I find I haven’t forgotten much in the interval, though I began by saying the Egyptian ‘aywher’ instead of ‘si’ for yes. I now have an electric light in the room which is my temporary theatre. The proper theatre will not be ready for a fortnight and in any case we have no running water yet. I am in my new tent, which has a lovely view of the harbour. Also it has a concrete floor which is a great blessing and seems to make it larger. I took the temperature of the sea the other day while bathing and found it was 86°F, just right for swimming. All love sweetheart. Your own John.”

Two days later the war news was also improving. John wrote: “I sometimes feel sure I shall get home

within a year now especially as the news has been better in the last few days. I believe Mussolini thought he was going to capture Alexandria in the last push, and actually came to Africa to enter the town himself... I am very well and fit though I am looking forward to the cooler weather... I sleep outside my tent so as to get every bit of the breeze. The Plough here gets so low in the sky that the bottom two stars actually do plough the earth. I wonder if this has anything to do with the derivation of the name." He also reported calling on the Crookston's, receiving their usual kind welcome and the good news that Mrs. Crookston's arm was finally beginning to improve.

On 9th August John was: "...enchanted with the seven birthday snaps of Harriet which I have spread out before me at this moment... I have been terribly busy the last few days with work of all kinds and I have not had a moment to spare. An officer was sent in two days ago with a temperature of 110°F. He remained unconscious for 24 hours and then died. It is the first case of heat stroke we have had... I am well though rather exhausted. However I shall get a rest tomorrow afternoon."



Harriet standing next to Mamma and Ben at her second birthday party, June 1942.

He remained tired and busy on 12th August: "I was up for two hours in the middle of last night with a Norwegian sailor with dysentery whose temperature was 106°F. We got him cooled down and he seemed very much better at breakfast time, but, alas it did not last and he died at tea time. The worst part of our new hospital is that our tents are about quarter of a mile away and it is rather exhausting in summer walking backwards and forwards up and down. However, it is already a tiny bit cooler and I expect we shall enjoy the

exercise in the winter. Leave has been started again, but now we must go to Palestine from here — such a long way and I was rather looking forward to seeing Alex again in October. All my love sweet. We must just go on hoping at present. Your own adoring John."

In his letter of 14th August John described an 'average day': "I get up at 6.15 almost at the same time as the sun rises over the sea. I am called by a batman with tea and shaving water. At 6.45 I take an ambulance to the Egyptian labourers' camp which is about two miles away. I get there about 7.0 and see from 25 to 50 sick with the help of an Egyptian tomagi. They can't speak any English, but I have learnt enough Egyptian to be able to diagnose roughly what is wrong. I get back for breakfast about 8.0. At 8.30 I do a quick round of my surgical ward of about 20 cases and prescribe treatment. At 9.0 I hold a sick parade in the Italian P.O.W. camp, where I usually see about 30 sick. I get back about 10.0 to see outpatients and do any operations and other jobs required... We have lunch at 12.30 and from 1.30 to 4.0 I usually try to have a rest, though this is frequently interrupted by patients arriving in the afternoon. Four o'clock is teatime, and after tea the C.O. almost always goes for a bathe in the sea. I go with him about every other day chiefly to keep clean, while on alternate days I like to do odd jobs. I look into my ward again about 7.0 before supper, and that finishes the work for the day. When written down it does not sound much, but it certainly requires most of my energy... This afternoon we had a very good bathe and I saw two interesting birds, a Spoonbill and a Bosun bird."

"I am getting quite fond of my new tent site. My tent measures 14 ft. wide and 13ft. long. The floor is dug down 3ft. into the ground, which is a big advantage as I can walk all over the space now without having to stoop. My furniture consists of one card table supplied by the British Red Cross, one chair of split palm wood supplied by myself, one washbasin and jug. I have a supplementary table made of my surfboard, which is useless here, balanced on the legs of my camp bath. I almost forgot to mention my piano which I am very proud of, as I have spent so much time tuning it. It is now almost perfect but still requires frequent tinkering to keep it in tune. If I had a little more time I would improve a lot I think, but at the moment I cannot find time to play every day."

"My bed, which is outside, consists of a palm hurdle on four petrol tins on which I put the lie-low. It is very comfortable though my lie-low frequently loses its air in the night. I also have all my luggage in

my tent. This consists of my big blue cabin trunk, two suitcases, a wooden box full of books and my valise. I really make myself pretty comfortable. If only I had you, my darling, life would be perfection. Still in many ways it is a healthy busy life, and we now have some good months to look forward to before Christmas... Your own John."

On 17th August he was pleased to have received a cable from Maida sent off on August 6th with the news that she was visiting Peggy in Ware. He had also received the book of Housman's poems at long last, after a five-month journey: "I am so pleased to have them as I have so many old favourites amongst them which I had almost forgotten. One of the charms of 'Last Poems' is that, each time one reads them, one finds some fresh meaning in them, and I am still guessing about many."

John's next letter of 20th August started with war news: "We have all been very excited about the Dieppe Raid but were a little disappointed to find today that it was not the beginning of an invasion. However I expect it gave them a fright at any rate." This referred to a brief Allied attack on 19th August against the German-occupied French port of Dieppe². It was intended to test the feasibility of landing on the French coast and they hoped to destroy German defences and boost Allied morale by showing a commitment to reopen the Western Front. Over 6,000 predominantly Canadian infantry troops were landed by the Navy, supported by a regiment of tanks and R.A.F. fighters. The raid was not a success as there was insufficient aerial support and the tanks became trapped on the beach. Over half of the men who landed were killed, wounded or taken prisoner, the R.A.F. lost 106 aircraft and the Royal Navy lost 33 landing craft and a destroyer. The Allies did, however, learn important lessons regarding coastal assaults that later contributed to the success of the D-Day landings⁴⁴.

The letter continued: "We have had a nasty gale here for about a week, which has just subsided but not before it had broken the ridge pole of my tent. However, the whole tent did not come down, and it can soon be replaced. Today is calmer and cooler, and when we went down to bathe I saw the first of the migrants — 2 types of plover, a kind of gannet and a blue kingfisher, rather exciting really, as it means autumn has begun and we are a season nearer to being together. I wonder whether this will reach you before your birthday, darling. It brings you my special love and hope for the future... Churchill has always talked about 1943, and soon at any rate we won't have

the excuse of saying we haven't got the material."

"As I am writing my little pet lizard is running about, or rather making darts at flies on my surfboard. Between dashes he stays so still you would think he was dead. I share his desire to kill flies, the beastly things, so we have something in common. I am very well darling, though feeling a little homesick at present. Your own adoring John." The homesickness continued into his next letter of 25th August. He was also concerned about income tax and had heard nothing from Maida for some time, ending: "I am so much looking forward to your next letters."



AS MENTIONED IN HER cable, Maida had been to stay with John's sister Peggy in Ware for much of August. This was quite a long stay of about three weeks, and the letters explaining the reason for the visit are lost. She sent three letters while there saying that she quite enjoyed herself although it was rather hard work as Harriet had few of her own toys with her so needed more entertaining: "The nicest thing was having Raymond and Denis and Kitty at weekends. I much enjoyed getting to know them all better. Denis was marvellous at playing with Harriet. Kitty is perfectly sweet, just the kind of person I like best... We all said often *'If only John could be here'*." Maida found, however, that being with two other loving couples made her miss John even more than usual, although his letters were arriving regularly.

On returning to Cambridge several of John's letters were waiting for her, one enclosing a snapshot. She wrote back on 30th August: "You look well and cheerful although you were rather depressed in your letters. Anyway I know from your more recent ones that you cheered up as the news got better, as we all did over here too. Denis said the German industrial organisation was in a far worse muddle than ours. In fact, he thinks we are the best organised nation in the world, so that was good news even though he was pessimistic about the length of the war."

"He hasn't any opinion of the Germans as individual fighters. On his expedition to Vaagsö at Christmas they got right up the fjord without a shot being fired, although they went under the noses of innumerable batteries, as all the German army was sleeping off its Christmas celebrations. They

reached the village, and still not a sign of life until the inhabitants of a large house, which turned out to be the German H.Q., began to draw back the blackout curtains. The moment they were certain that the British destroyers that met their sleepy gaze were only too real, they simply tore out of the house and ran like hell up the mountains in whatever garments they had on — full dress, pyjamas, night-shifts etc!! No-one thought of stopping to fight.”

Denis had taken part aboard his destroyer on a raid in December 1941 led by Lord Louis Mountbatten, then Director of Combined Operations. He wished to undertake a surprise attack somewhere on the occupied coast of Europe and had selected Vaagsö in Norway. The object had been to harass the German coastal defences, destroy both military and economic targets in the region and capture or sink any shipping found in the adjacent waters. The raid was generally considered successful and caused Hitler to divert 30,000 troops to support the Norwegian defences as he thought that the British might subsequently mount a full invasion⁴⁵.



WHEN GENERAL MONTGOMERY ARRIVED in Cairo in mid-August to take over in charge, he found a ready-made and experienced army of nearly 200,000 men waiting for him. The Eighth Army also had 767 tanks ready for action, fixed defences were in place to protect against the expected Axis advance on Alexandria and he inherited a plan for what would shortly become the Battle of Alam el Halfa. This had all been organised already by Auchinleck and his senior staff and the Allies at that time also benefitted from air superiority in the region. Montgomery happily took all these assets over without giving due credit to the previous commanders who had just been dismissed¹⁸. What he did, however, provide was energy and supreme confidence in his own leadership abilities.

At the same time, Rommel's health had broken down from the strain of two years of fighting in the desert, and he was no longer the same force to be reckoned with. He nevertheless decided to attack again on 30th August, in an attempt to defeat the Eighth Army before Allied reinforcements arrived. Montgomery was forewarned of this by British intelligence and knew that Rommel planned to attack

the southern sector of the front, near the impenetrable Qattara Depression. He left a gap in his defences there to tempt the Germans forward and deployed the bulk of his armour and artillery 20 miles behind the front in a defensive position on the Alam el Halfa Ridge¹⁸. German attacks on the ridge failed and, with fuel supplies running low, Rommel was forced to order a withdrawal. By 5th September the battle was over. This turned out to be the last big offensive undertaken by the Axis forces in North Africa as they had now lost their initiative. Montgomery decided not to pursue the Germans immediately in their westward retreat as the Eighth Army was still in the process of reorganisation following the arrival of new troops, so he bided his time for a later autumn offensive.

Shortly after these events John had another trip to the Reception Station, where he was again doing a locum. On 11th September he wrote: “I am going to be away from the Hospital longer than I expected. Last night I was invited with most of the other officers here to a party at the Sergeant's mess... we had a very good time with the help of darts, beer and singing... This evening I have been invited to have dinner in an R.A.S.C. mess whose C.O., a Major Luke, was a patient of mine when I was here before*. There is a general feeling of optimism here now, especially since Churchill's speech, and we are all hoping for good news before Christmas.”

The speech to which John referred was given in a House of Commons Debate on 8th September in which Churchill described the changes he had made in the leadership of the army in the Middle East. He then went on to say⁴⁶: *‘In spite of the heavy losses which I mentioned, the Army of the Western Desert is now stronger actually and relatively than it has ever been. In fact, so large have the new reinforcements which have reached this Army been, that what is to a large extent a new Army has been created while the fighting has actually been in progress’*.

With assistance from President Roosevelt, who had supplied shipping transport, the Allies had been able to move over 40,000 additional troops to the Middle East. Churchill continued⁴⁶: *‘In consequence at the critical moment we had rounding the Cape a very large and well-equipped force which could be directed immediately to Egypt. It is to that that the improvement in our affairs... in that region must largely be attributed. Besides this a broadening stream of drafts to replace casualties, of equipment, tanks, anti-tank guns, “Ack-Ack” guns and vehicles of all kinds has been flowing from*

* The Royal Army Service Corps was the unit responsible for keeping the British Army supplied with provisions.

this country and from the United States to the Middle East, and we now have in Egypt a very good, strong, well-equipped and resolute Army barring the further advance of the invader'.

In the same letter (11.9.1942) John asked Maida to get Mr. Harta to paint her own portrait: "I should prefer an unconventional one, I think, in working day clothes, preferably a jumper and skirt. I miss the English fruits terribly at this time of year — no plum tarts or any reasonable stewed fruit, only sickly-sweet dates and grapes which get stuck in my teeth. We also get no English vegetables here only queer things called egg fruit and ladies fingers and vegetable marrows. Today we had a treat for lunch in the shape of lobster, extremely good... Tomorrow I am hoping to meet a Major Treganzer, who has been here as schoolmaster for 14 years. He is a Cornishman and keen on birds, rather of a retiring disposition... I must stop now darling as it is time for me to go out to dinner. Your last letters are so nice and have cheered me up."

On 13th September John had been at the Reception Station for four days. The Egyptian R.A.M.C. officer with him had suddenly been posted away, so he was required to stay on a few days longer to deal with recruiting more Egyptian labourers: "I am really quite looking forward to it as it means visiting places which one would never go to normally, and it makes a sort of holiday... I have already had a good rest here... after being a bit tired when I left Safaga. Yesterday afternoon I went out birdwatching along the Nile, which is now in full flood. It was a lovely change to see so many birds and so much green and luscious vegetation. We saw lots of birds, including White Storks, European Bee-eaters, Little Egrets and a beautiful Masked Shrike, which has a black back and an apricot-coloured breast."

On 16th September he wrote again while waiting for his transport back to Safaga: "The last two days I have been staying in very second-rate Egyptian market towns with the Major in charge of recruiting native labour. We stayed at the best hotel in each town, each of which had about 50,000 inhabitants, but even so no-one at the hotel understood one word of English. The food is not bad although quite different from what we usually eat. The bread is baked in flat unleavened cakes and the flour consists of $\frac{2}{3}$ wheat and $\frac{1}{3}$ maize meal. Actually, it does not taste bad, but they never have any butter. I suppose this climate is too hot for it."

"Their idea of a good meal is to have one plate full of meat (about 4 chops or half a chicken or half a dozen thick slices of mutton) and another soup plate full of vegetables stewed in oil... The chief vegetable at

this time of year is bahmia (or ladies fingers as we call it)*. A third plate is provided with raw tomatoes and onions sliced up with some very good salad dressing strongly flavoured with juice from fresh limes. The quantities are at first rather nauseating, but as you get only one course, the best way is to go at it slowly, and keep pegging away. At any rate I rather enjoyed my meals... The sanitary arrangements were primitive, the lavatory being of the squatting type without seats and never cleaned out, although there was a water carriage system in both places. The water and electric light plants in these Nile towns is good and up to date. There are a few Greek people living in them but no other Europeans."

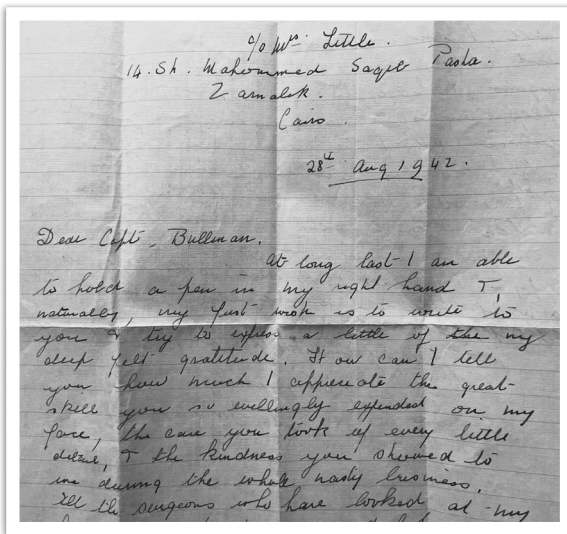
"I found Major Treganzer an interesting companion: he is interested in education, geology and exploring, so we had plenty to talk about... In peace time his job is to teach the Egyptians in the Secondary Government schools. The great bar to education here is the difficulty of the written Egyptian language. Sometimes after studying it for five years they are still not proficient. The reason for this is that the language they are taught is that of the Koran, which is as different from the modern spoken Egyptian as Chaucer's English is from modern English. The result is that no modern books are yet written in Egyptian except the newspapers and one has to use words not spoken at all nowadays. The reason for this failure to bring things up to date is chiefly religious, as the priests cling to the Koranic traditional Arabic."

"I managed to scrounge 2 lbs of sugar to send for a Christmas present, darling. I am having a wooden box made this morning for it so I hope it will reach you safely. It is not much but as much as I am allowed to send. The Helawa is a kind of sweet made of honey and sugar I believe, which I thought Harriet might like. I have just been reading a review in the Lancet about a little pamphlet on burns which I would like you to get for me, darling, when you have time. It is called 'Hospital Treatment of Burns'. E.M.S. Memo No 8. Edinburgh, to be obtained from H.M. Stationery Office for 9d. I must run now or the man who is making me a box will have gone to lunch. All my love darling. Your adoring John."

The main news in his next letter on 18th September followed his return to Safaga: "I am glad to be able to tell you that the New Zealander whose appendix I took out two months ago is now back at work. It was the first case I had done entirely by myself, so I am

* *Okra.*

feeling rather proud of myself.” On 21st September John sent home a nice letter from Mrs. Crookston, written while she was being treated in Cairo. He had never expected she would recover the use of her arm, so it was a particularly pleasant surprise when she wrote as follows: *‘Dear Capt. Bulman, At long last I am able to hold a pen in my right hand, and naturally my first wish is to write to you and try to express a little of my deep-felt gratitude. How can I tell you how much I appreciate the great skill you so willingly expended on my face, the care you took of every little detail, and the kindness you showed to me during the whole nasty business. All the surgeons who have looked at my face have paid you wonderful compliments on a job well done. The marks are very slight indeed, when I think what it might have been, can you wonder that I feel gratitude from the bottom of my heart. My arm too is recovering wonderfully well. I can now move my whole arm, but so far can do very little with it. Here again I have to thank you for the help you so kindly gave me. Can you believe it? I still wear your splint. They brought another one from No. 1. Scottish Hospital but it weighed quite a ton — so I went back to yours again. I hope to see you when I return to Safaga. All my thanks to you. Yours sincerely, Leila Crookston.’*



Start of the thank-you letter from Mrs Crookston.

On Sunday 29th September John went on an enjoyable trip to Safaga Island: “We started at 11.30 in the morning and took lunch with us, which was carried by two batmen. Our first difficulty was landing, as there is no place where a boat can get right up to the beach. The first place we tried we had to stop about 500 yards from the shore. The Major jumped overboard wearing his bathing suit and a topee and

found himself above his waist amongst considerable breakers... We pushed out and tried another place where we got much closer, within a hundred yards... I took my gun and obtained a specimen of what I think is a Green-backed Heron. I have skinned it and am rather excited about it as it may be the first specimen to be shot in Egypt. They normally occur further South in the Tropics. We also saw very close two beautiful Ospreys. They are big hawks which live on fish; also a large bird which looked almost like an Ostrich in the distance, which turned out to be a Grey Crane.”

“We picnicked in a rocky cove on the other side of the island. While having lunch we were discussing whether to bathe when we saw a big shark rolling about right in the shallow water. I saw it first and thought it was the wing of a bird sticking up but later I saw the whole beast with two great long fins sticking up from his back. We got back about 4.00 for tea and it really was a great success as the Major enjoyed it. It is a place which children would love — hundreds of crabs and shells and sand, and a few mangrove swamps and small bushes of other kinds.”

There was more birding news on 3rd October. “I don’t think I have told you that I received a nice complimentary airgraph from Mr N.B. Kinnear, the ornithologist attached to the South Kensington Natural History Museum. A copy of the Egyptian Zoological Bulletin had evidently reached him. He says: *‘I was very interested in your notes on Libyan birds and found it useful in preparing a case for the museum’*. I was very pleased and rather honoured to get it... I have now got some proper sinks in my theatre, though this does not make much difference as there is still no running water or furniture... At the moment both the dispenser and the laboratory man are on leave, which makes things rather difficult as they are more or less irreplaceable. Still they certainly deserved some, so we must manage as best we can.”

On 5th October John had received a cable for his sister Helen telling him that she had had a baby girl, called Sally. His letter also reported: “...the first rain at Safaga since I arrived. It came with a terrific thunderstorm after two days of wet winds from the southeast off the sea. The rain lasted only two hours and has done little damage, though I had a busy time shifting things in my tent to avoid the leaky corners.”

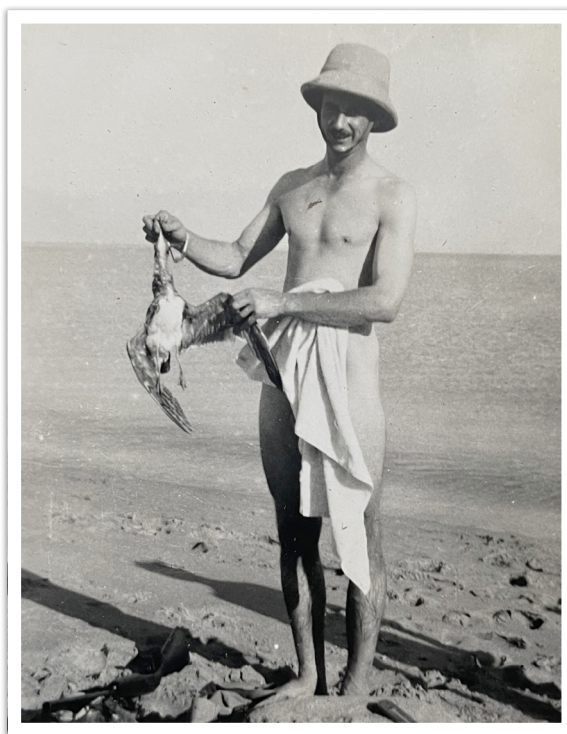
A few days later he was tired after a busy period at work together with a late season heat wave: “As I was wondering what to say next a locust came hurtling into the tent attracted to the light. They are alarming, as they seem to be entirely out of control

when they get into the light and may fly straight into your face, in which case they are hard and heavy enough to give you a nasty knock... Most unpleasant companions, though not quite so noisy as the crickets. I am glad to be able to report that there are fewer large ants in the tent today... The number of birds has decreased again though I expect we shall get another influx when the autumn migration finishes.” He was getting on well with their new A.D.M.S. Colonel Joss, though: “I am afraid he rather takes the view that not having an F.R.C.S. I should not attempt to do difficult abdominal operations. I had to send a case of appendicitis by air to Cairo today, which was a pity. However, I am doing better here in the surgical line than in Alex.”

On 14th October: “My own little darling — At last, I am getting a bit of a rest after a very strenuous fortnight. Today has been a very pleasant day with a good breeze from the North which has made it much cooler. I finished my medical work at about 10.30 this morning, and after doing a few odd jobs practised my piano until 12.30. After a good lunch of tripe (which I don’t much like) and Cornish pasties made of bully, I retired to snooze in my tent until 4.00. We then had tea and went down to the shore for a bathe... I am enclosing a photo of myself holding up a Caspian Tern which I had just shot. I am standing on the beach where we bathe, hence the scarcity of clothing, and you can just see the island in the distance. It is just possible that I may not be here very much longer, as Colonel Joss has recommended that I should go to a General Hospital to be graded as a surgical specialist. In a way this will be a step up for me if anything happens, though I shall be sorry to leave here in many ways.”

“Today is the first day of my fourth year in the Army, and I can’t help thinking back to those happy weekends three years ago when I was at Crookham. I shall be thinking of them all the next month, and especially of the last few days when you came to Fleet and we were so happy together. I am looking forward to my next leave now and will have to get my service dress out of my trunk for a brush up in a few days’ time. I am hoping it will last another winter. If I am still here I shall hardly need it as I can wear my battle dress on the few cold days. However in Cairo and Alexandria it is nicer to have service dress.”

A few days later he was already starting to think about writing a Christmas letter as the irregular posts made it almost impossible to guess when they would arrive: “I think I told you before that my small



John on the beach at Safaga holding a Caspian tern that he had shot to identify.

Christmas parcel left me about a month ago and brings you, Harriet and Mamma all my love if very little else. I have just realised the awful fact that this will be our fourth Christmas apart.”

On 22nd October he wrote: “This will be a short letter because I have been up since three o’clock this morning treating some badly injured seamen who were injured in a raid last night. They were particularly difficult cases because they had been in the water for some time and were very cold and shocked. Two of them died in spite of everything we could do, but three are still alive and likely to survive now. One of these was a very near thing and I feel that if he is all right tomorrow we have at any rate saved one life for the allies, which is some return for ones’ labours. The moon is full tonight and the Axis seem to be taking an increasing interest in this place, though so far they have confined their activities to shipping.” This episode was reported in the Quarterly report of the Hospital which mentioned that: *‘enemy aircraft torpedoed and sank a dredger with considerable fatal casualties. Some (non-fatal) casualties were received and treated here and eventually transferred to hospitals in Cairo’*⁴².

John’s letter continued: “Yesterday we had a pleasant day with the afternoon off for a trip to the

island. This was because the A.D.H.* was here and keen to visit it. I shot a most beautiful plover which I have never seen before. It is called a white-tailed plover but is much more interesting than its name sounds. The colouring of the underparts is a beautiful combination of soft shades — the upper breast being brown, the lower breast ash-grey and the belly a delicate apricot colour. We also saw some duck which I think were gadwall and many pretty redstarts which are rather like robins.”

At the end of October (26.10.1942) the war activities in Safaga were ongoing: “We are still getting air raids here although we have not had any casualties since the Indian crew arrived. However we miss a certain amount of sleep through them. We had five alerts last night, and I was on duty, though I have had time today to make good my lack of sleep... I am in my proper theatre at last, and have done two operations in it although there is still no water and very little furniture... The news seems brighter than it has since June, and I am hoping for great things before Christmas. We must be just about ready at last, and at any rate there is no one left to come in unexpectedly on the other side as the Japs did last year. It is all most exciting as every allied victory will seem like a step nearer home.”

The Allies were indeed ready as the Second Battle of Alamein had just begun on 23rd October. By this time the Eighth Army had 195,000 men and 1,029 tanks to begin their offensive against the 116,000 men and 547 tanks of Rommel’s Panzerarmee^{2,18,47}. Following the retreat after their abortive attack on the Alam el Halfa Ridge, the Axis forces had taken up a defensive line to the west of the Allies between El Alamein and the Qattara Depression. Rommel’s continuing ill health had forced him to return to Germany on 23rd September and he had been replaced by General Stumme. Montgomery mounted a two-pronged attack across a broad front and by the following day, 24th October, the Germans were already in some disarray. General Stumme went forward to investigate and after coming under fire he suffered a heart attack and died.

Rommel was flown back to resume command, arriving on 25th October, but he could do little to rectify the situation. On 2nd November he sent a signal to Hitler saying that the army’s strength was so exhausted after its ten days of battle that it was no longer capable of offering effective opposition. Hitler

nevertheless replied the next day ordering him to stand fast and deploy every man and gun into the battle, concluding ‘*as to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death.*’⁴⁷. Rommel was forced to comply although he considered these instructions to be impossible. On 4th November the Allied troops broke through his line and there was no option but to retreat with the Eighth Army in pursuit. By 11th November the remaining Axis forces had been pushed back out of Egypt, so eliminating the threat to the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern and Persian oil fields.

Churchill made one of his famous speeches at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet on 10th November describing the victory and saying⁴⁷: ‘*This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning.*’. He later wrote in his memoirs: ‘*It may almost be said, Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat.*’. The victory revived the morale of the Allies and church bells rang out in England for the first time since 1940.

Although the battle was some way distant to Safaga, it still impacted on John’s promised leave. On 31st October he wrote: “Alas, my leave, which was to have begun on the 29th, was stopped at the last moment owing to the push. In the last week this place has been turned upside down with various changes. Major Capstaff has gone today to become a Colonel A.D.M.S. in Mena. Capt. Fava has become Major commanding the hospital. This was not altogether a surprise as he is a regular soldier of eight years’ service. The unfortunate thing is that he is ill again with his stomach, so I have done practically the whole work of the hospital for the past month. My own position has also become uncertain as the Colonel wants me to go to a General Hospital where I would get more surgery under a qualified specialist. I am a bit doubtful about this, as I was had last time when I went to 64, and also would like to stay here for the winter. I expect you will get a wire to tell you where I have gone before this reaches you, though nothing is certain in the army until it happens.”

Throughout November John was waiting for details of his next move but was now resigned to leaving Safaga and was quite looking forward to a change. The army were all very much heartened by the news of Operation Torch on 8th November, when British and American forces began the invasion of French North Africa. Although they met some stiff opposition the Allies secured Morocco and Algeria and the invasion succeeded in bringing French North African forces back into the Allied fold².

* Assistant Director of Hygiene.

John's letter of 20th November contained a rare reference to his religious views, which at that time were agnostic. He ended by saying: "If there is another world we will find out about it soon enough when we get there." This upset Maida who was a devout Christian. At the end of the month he was still in Safaga: "Tomorrow I start my fourth year in Egypt, which makes me feel quite an old soldier though that does not count for much. What is more important is that I am hoping that it will be my last... Yesterday the hospital celebrated the anniversary of its arrival here, and there are about ten men who have been here the whole year... We had a very good concert using my piano and practically everyone including myself giving turns. The beer flowed freely and we all enjoyed ourselves and feel better for it today."

He sent an airgraph on 8th December thanking Maida for her Christmas presents, which were handkerchiefs and a book 'Poems of this War'. This was followed on 10th December by a standard letter. "My own darlingest — I am still very short of your letters but your Christmas parcel has made up for that. Since your letter of Sept. 23rd I have only had two, so I am beginning to fear that some of them may have got lost at last. Actually, I don't think any have been lost up till now, which is rather surprising after three years of U-boat war. Hats off to the Navy."

"I am hoping to go for a week's leave on Tuesday 13th; my posting seems to have been postponed. I shall get back in time for Christmas if my leave is sanctioned. R.A.M.C. leave has been officially restarted, but the trouble is that I do practically all the work here so they will be short-handed while I am away. Two days ago I shot a huge bird like an enormous heron. It is five feet long. I can't find it in the bird book but will find out what it is when I get to Cairo. I have skinned it and stuffed it with cotton wool but even then it is a bulky great thing to carry about."

The next letter was sent on 23rd December when he had just got back from his week's leave and sounded very cheerful: "I have really had a grand time and have got done everything I set out to do for once. When I got to Cairo last Tuesday I found I could not get a room anywhere in a hotel so I parked my luggage at Shepherd's and treated myself to a bath, shave and breakfast. I then rang up Mr. Mackintosh, who I rather hoped would fix me up. However, he was terribly full up with Managers meetings, and said he could not get off all day... I took my bird skins to the Zoo museum and saw the Egyptian curator, who told me straight away that the big heron was called a Goliath Heron,

and it was the first time it had been obtained in Egypt. It normally lives in the Sudan. He said if I came back on Saturday with Mr. Mackintosh he would be there and have all of them definitely identified." The rest of his week was spent visiting Alexandria, where he found various medical friends and did some useful business at the Bank, before returning to Cairo where Mr. Greaves put him up and made him very welcome.

At about the same time he sent off a Christmas telegram and a small parcel of odds and ends including an ivory paper knife, which Maida used all her life. The next letter on 26th December signalled his next move: "This is definitely the last letter I shall write you from Safaga as I am leaving in a little over an hour." He had had an enjoyable Christmas, including a walk up the nearest hill with Capt. Smyth who was taking over his job: "I was quite glad to have his company as I couldn't get anyone else to do any walking. In fact, it is the first time I have been up any hill here as the weather has only been cool enough recently. We had lovely views from the top, though could not see Arabia which is about a hundred miles away."

"I shall get to the Base Depot R.A.M.C. in Cairo tomorrow morning and may be there a few days before they give me a new job. Anyway, I have no idea what it will be yet. I am quite excited at the prospect though I am sorry to leave Safaga at just the best time of the year. I don't think I finished telling you about my leave in my last letter. On the last Sunday afternoon we went to watch a Rugger match between two Army sides at Gezira which was very pleasant. On Monday George Blaker and I went for a trip to Lal Karoun which is in the Faiyoun, a cultivated patch of country about 50 miles South of Cairo. We saw all sorts of exciting waders and also pelicans and cormorants and had a thoroughly good day together... Williams, the R.A.F. bird man in Cairo, showed me how to skin birds properly, so that in future I shall be able to make a better job of it. I will wire you as soon as I know my new address... All my love, sweetheart; everything seems brighter now than last year and I really will be able to ask to get home next year as it is my fourth, even though the war may not be entirely over."

After a brief note from the Base Depot and a cable with his new address, No. 6. General Hospital, M.E.F., John sent an airgraph on 31st December to conclude his 1942 letters: "My own darling — I have just arrived here and have finished unpacking my things in an E.P.I.P. tent* which at the moment I

* *European Privates Indian Pattern (military tent).*

have all to myself. Most of these tents are meant for two, so perhaps I shall not be alone for long. I have an Egyptian batman who is quite impressed with my scanty knowledge of his language. I have already met several people I know though I shall not be given a definite job until tomorrow. As far as I can make out, they are pretty busy which will be a pleasant change from the past few weeks, though I may have to give up piano and birds for the time being.” The Safaga hospital Quarterly report mentioned that during this last quarter of 1942 there had been a marked decline in both the number of troops in the area and the number of patients⁴². The new hospital, which was not occupied until August, therefore received very little use.



ONLY THREE OF MAIDA'S autumn letters survived, so she used her diary to supplement what was an uneventful period. Mamma went to Newtown in Wales for a fortnight's holiday, but Maida remained in Cambridge, spending her time dressmaking, gardening and going for long walks with Harriet in her pram. Following John's earlier request, she had had her portrait painted by Mr. Harta; it took three sittings and was exhibited at Heffer's Gallery in Cambridge. Unfortunately, when John eventually returned home he disliked it so much that he put it on the bonfire. She was feeling tired and generally rather low, despite being cheered by the good war news. None of John's letters reached her in November, which did not help. She did, however, go into Cambridge on Sunday 15th November when they rang the church bells to celebrate the victory at El Alamein.

Harriet, however, continued to cheer her up and was now learning nursery rhymes and building with her bricks. Maida wrote on 1st December: "She was making a train the other day and when I asked what was in the trucks she replied promptly '*Coal and sugar beet*', things she has noticed in the goods trains going under the railway bridge. The next night the train was a different shape with a high front and marbles and other things arranged along the top. It turned out not to be a train at all, but what she calls an '*aeroplane car*', i.e. one of the very long R.A.F. lorries which we often see transporting crashed aircraft or sometimes parts of aircraft. I thought it very clever of her to build one



Postcard showing portrait of Maida by Felix Harta (later destroyed by John).

all on her own, especially as we haven't seen one for quite a time. Army cars and trucks she calls '*soldier vans*' and when a big four-engined aeroplane goes over she cocks a knowing eye at it and says '*Bomber*'. She is very much a child of her age."

Two letters of December 25th and 28th described a quiet Christmas, cheered by the arrival of a few letters from John: "After complaining to you last night about the cold, I heard on the wireless that people have been writing to the B.B.C. saying that they were picking summer flowers and raspberries on Boxing Day as the season was so abnormally mild. Well, all I can say is they should have been pushing a pram on Wort's Causeway yesterday afternoon, they wouldn't have had much thought of raspberries. Though I'm bound to admit there still are marigolds flowering even in this road, so the cold can't have been as bad as it felt." The year ended with a little party for Harriet and she commented in her diary: "We could not play '*Oranges and Lemons*' as no one of Harriet's generation had ever seen a lemon."

C H A P T E R 11

Cairo and Tel El Kebir 1943



IN JANUARY 1943 PRESIDENT Franklin D. Roosevelt and Churchill held a famous conference in Casablanca to plan the next stages of the war². The victory at El Alamein in October 1942 had saved Egypt from the Axis forces, and at the start of 1943 the German and Italian armies were in full retreat westwards pursued by the Eighth Army led by Montgomery, with support from the Desert Air Force. The Allies captured Tripoli, the capital of Libya, on 23rd January 1943. The Allied First Army was also now present in North Africa. This had arrived as part of Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French-held Morocco and Algeria in November 1942. It initially consisted of both British and American formations, with this invasion marking the first mass involvement of U.S. troops in the European–North African theatre of war. French units were added later. During the winter of 1942–3 the First Army was responsible for clearing Nazi forces out of Algeria. Although Rommel had managed to withdraw to Tunisia, he therefore now had Allied armies threatening him from both East and West^{2,18}.

The Battle of Stalingrad was also drawing to a conclusion at this time². It had begun in August 1942, when Nazi Germany and its allies tried to capture Stalingrad, a major industrial and transport hub on the Volga River which also provided access to important oil fields of the Caucasus. By mid-November the Soviet defenders had been pushed back into a small area and much of the city was reduced to rubble. In severe winter weather the Red Army then launched a successful counterattack and managed to cut off and surround the German 6th Army of over 300,000 men in the Stalingrad area.

Hitler was determined to maintain his hold on the city, so he issued orders forbidding the 6th Army from trying to break out and instead tried to keep it supplied by air. The Soviets were, however, able to stop sufficient food, fuel and ammunition from getting through. After experiencing increasingly desperate conditions as their supplies dwindled, the Germans finally surrendered on 2nd February 1943. This was one of the bloodiest battles of World War II, with enormous casualties on both sides. The ultimate Soviet success marked a crucial turning point in the European theatre of war, as the loss of the entire 6th Army used up vital Axis resources and also provided a major psychological boost for the Allies^{2,48}.

Back in Egypt, John's first letter of the New Year was written on 2nd January 1943 and described his new job. This was at No. 6, General Hospital M.E.F. which was located to the east of Cairo, between there and Ismailia on the Suez Canal: "My own precious darling — I have now got to know my new job with its various advantages and disadvantages. I am nominally in charge of three surgical wards with about 25 patients in each, so I have plenty of patients again. They are mostly interesting cases wounded in battle, which I have not previously had much experience of. The disadvantage is that I do not have complete control over them, as there is a surgical specialist who does a round every day, and I have to carry out the treatment he advises. However, this does not worry me much at present so long as I see the cases."

"The surgeon in charge of my ward is Major Brandon who came out with me in the same draft and was at 64 General Hospital for a time while I was there. I did one operation for him today, and I hope he will give me a certain amount to do when I have been here a bit longer. The other disadvantages are that as far as I can make out there are no birds round about here, and it is doubtful whether I shall be able to get my

piano here. However, I am not worrying much about that just now as it is a pleasant change to be in a big hospital again. It is parked on the desert with nothing to see all round except flat sand but we are really quite comfortable with a large hut as a mess sitting room in which we have ping pong, darts, a bar and a fire of cotton seed cake in the evenings. There is also a camp cinema, which does not interest me greatly, and a tennis court which I have not yet seen, but which is said by Major Brandon, who is a very good player, to be in a bad state."

"I have been so preoccupied with my new surroundings that I have not had much time so far to think of all the good news from the desert and Russia... I gathered from yesterday's papers that the Russians have scored their first really big victory and have completely wiped out the Germans near Stalingrad. We still seem some way off getting the Jerries out of Africa but, when we do, things may begin to happen here as we may not be needed any longer. I am told that the latest German prisoners captured think that they are going to be beaten in Africa, which is an excellent sign... Darling, it is lovely to start the New Year with so much good news for the future."

In his next letter written on 6th January he had just received Maida's letter of 8th December, which had been redirected via Safaga. He reported that the weather in Egypt had finally become wintry: "I have also had a post card from Mother saying that Philip has been ill with pleurisy and is at home on sick leave. I hope he will make a more rapid recovery that I did when I got it at about his age. I never cease to be thankful that the war did not start until after we were married, darling. I am sure it is the happiness you have brought me that has kept me in such good health. I am very well with plenty to do and interesting cases to look after."

Unfortunately, this positive situation did not last much longer as by mid-January John was himself ill and had to be admitted to his own hospital. In an attempt to reassure Maida as far as possible he underplayed the seriousness of the situation in all his subsequent letters. On 22nd January he wrote from his hospital bed: "My own darlingest — Your first direct letter dated 9.1.43 has reached me this morning. It was such a nice quick surprise that I feel strong enough to write and tell you that I have disgraced you at last and am in hospital as a patient with pneumonia. However I am almost better now after a pretty uncomfortable time, and am eating lots of food though not allowed up yet."

"Col. Jones from St. Thomas' has been looking after me though I don't feel particularly grateful to him as he almost killed me with huge doses of M. & B. 693. However, all is well and I am quite comfortable and happy in a little side ward in the hospital. So I am preparing to lead a life of ideal luxury for a week or two... I got the Moonlight Sonata the day I came into hospital, which is just what I want, but have no news whatever about the piano yet. It is nice to have such good news to read when there is so much time to spend. Things really do seem to be going better than anyone expected though the U-boats are still doing too well... All my love, darling. There is no worry. I have no temperature at all now. All my love to you and Harriet, John." Maida noted that John later told her that the reason he was put in a side ward was that his incessant coughing had been disturbing the other patients too much. Coincidentally, Churchill also became ill with pneumonia at about the same time, following a trip to Algeria in February, and was treated with M. & B. 693 in the same way⁴⁹.

The following day John reported: "I am not getting up yet but am feeling completely well now and have only a very small cough left, so I don't think it can be long before I shall be getting on my feet. Meanwhile life is passing quite pleasantly with very little to do but plenty to read and think about, and quite enough visitors to prevent me feeling at all lonely... We have the good news today that Tripoli has fallen and from our end too. I am afraid the First Army must still be very inexperienced, and the Americans don't seem to do anything at all except in the air. The general scheme seems to be to arm the French so that they can have a bang. All my love, darlingest, John."

On 26th January he had received Maida's letter of 1st January describing Harriet's party: "I am wondering whether perhaps I could send you some icing sugar for such occasions. I am ever so much better now and scarcely cough at all. I have been outside in the sun from 10.0 to 2.0... I am allowed to wash myself now but am not officially getting up, which is a nuisance as I feel I shall get weak on my legs if I stay in bed any longer. However, I manage to get a little walk round while I wash, and sleep marvellously, so you can see there is not much wrong now. Perhaps I shall only be in hospital another week. At any rate that is what I am hoping for as, if I am in more than three weeks, I may lose my job here which would be very annoying." Regarding the war, he was expecting that the fall of Tripoli might lead to him being moved on from Egypt and he mentioned India as a possibility.

By 28th January he was beginning to get up a little, and on 31st January he was able to say: "I am writing this in a chair and feeling absolutely O.K. although I doubt if I shall be allowed out of Hospital for another week. I am terribly disappointed at being ill. Please don't tell anyone else about it as I don't like being thought an invalid. Anyway, I will be back at work in no time now. I am well looked after and have a little room to myself. I have some nice wild-flowers brought back from Palestine by one of the Palestinian A.T.S.* returning off leave... If only I had Watson Jones† to study now, but I expect it will be two months before it arrives... I am sure I should never get ill if you were with me to give me the peace and rest which is heaven on earth. Your own adoring John."

He continued to minimise the severity of his illness, saying in successive letters written in February that he had recovered. On 7th February he reported: "Needless to say I am feeling perfectly all right with no pains and no cough, the food is good, and as the days pass I feel more contented as this is really a holiday under ideal conditions for reading and thinking, which I have not enjoyed for three years. However, I shall be very glad to be out as invalids are no use to us in wartime."

The same theme continued on 9th February: "I am now getting up all day and fully dressed, and am feeling fine, so I shall be leaving hospital any day now I expect. I enclose a cutting from last Sunday's Egyptian Gazette about the Herons of Egypt written, I think, by Mr. Greaves in which he mentions my name." The following day: "My latest X-ray shows that the pneumonia has completely gone. However, I shall still be here a few days, I am afraid, and then go on leave." He was finally discharged from hospital on 16th February, about a month after his illness had started.



Owing to the lag in the postal service, none of the letters written in the early stages of John's illness reached Maida for some time, so the first she heard about it was in a telegram from the War Office, which arrived on the evening of 27th January saying that he

was seriously ill with pneumonia. This was a terrible shock and she wrote in her diary that she: "Felt dazed and miserable, though I reprove myself for lack of faith. I feel he will be all right, but it will be a long time." She telephoned Dr. Budd, her original Cambridge doctor, to ask for enlightenment on the wording of the telegram. They concluded that, if he was not already dead, then he must be improving.

Maida wrote an emotional letter to John the following day (28.1.1943): "My own, own darling — It was so sad to have the War Office telegram last night saying you are seriously ill with pneumonia. I could hardly believe it at first, when only a few days before you had written so cheerfully about your new job, my precious one, and I had been feeling so happy after getting your letter on Monday. I somehow feel sure you are getting better now, beloved, but oh how I long and long to have reassuring news of you. I suppose I shall be told when you are getting better. Darling, I think of you all the time, and pray and pray that you are getting on all right and are being well looked after; but I'm sure you are, as you sounded so pleased with the hospital that I am sure the doctors and nurses must be very good."

"It's harder to bear than anything that has happened to us yet, sweetheart, but I won't worry and perhaps it may mean that you will come home all the sooner. I have sent you off a cable this morning; I hope it will reach you soon, darling. The telegram arrived last night about 8.30 by special messenger. I rang up your mother to tell her; she was just writing to you and you can imagine how sorry she was. Philip is at Morwick for a month getting well after his pleurisy; it is consoling in a way to think that he made such a good recovery, and I feel sure you will do the same."

She went on to report some more family news: "Denis and Kitty are very well and have just reached Portsmouth for his 8 month's course. Helen and baby Sally are also well; but poor Peggy is in trouble as Raymond is in the Westminster Hospital and has had a bad operation to try to cure his boils. He sounds very poorly. Of course there wasn't time for a long conversation. Your mother sounded quite well herself. You will be hearing from her soon I expect. Mamma will be writing too; she is terribly sorry about you, darling, and as for poor Adda she looked about as stricken as I felt. I told little Harriet this morning, and she looked so sad, and we both asked God to make you better soon."

"If only I could be with you. I long to see you more than ever before. I know how disappointed you will be

* Auxiliary Territorial Service.

† A classic medical text on treating fractures.

at having to go to bed when you had just begun your new job but be a good patient and take real care of yourself, my sweet. If only you get really better soon, nothing else matters. Perhaps I shall hear from the War Office again soon... God bless you and make you well soon. All my love for always and always. Your own adoring Maida."

Mamma did indeed also write a letter saying: "My dear John — I am so very sorry to hear last night that you have pneumonia. Maida and I were in the drawing room, Maida having just put little Harrie to bed, when the wire arrived, which was a terrible blow to my poor Maida. We shall be anxiously awaiting to hear again, and hope and pray it will be better news. It seems to alter our whole outlook on life to think of John being ill. Your little Harrie was so sweet the other day before we heard of your illness. I was pointing to a picture of Egypt in the book I was reading and said *'Look, this is Egypt where Daddy is.'* 'Yes' she said, *'My Daddy is making sick soldiers well'*. The little darling, she is so very human and understanding, and so penitent after being naughty."

"We have had a very mild winter so far, Xmas roses, aconites, snowdrops and the purple hellebores out in the garden and orchard, so I hope if we are to have cold weather it will come soon and put things back a bit... I am glad to say Harrie and Ben are devoted to one another now, the only flaw is that if Ben jumps on my knee then Harrie tries to push him off. I take her every morning before 11.0 o'clock for a walk and today we heard a lark for the first time. She knows blackbirds, thrushes and robins quite well now, and is thrilled by their antics over the cheese on the windowsill. My very best love and take every care of yourself, my dear John, ever your affectionate M. in L. Mamma."

After three days waiting in anxious suspense, another cable arrived on 30th January and Maida wrote again the following day: "My own beloved darling, Last night about 8.0 o'clock I heard footsteps tramping up to the door again, and my heart turned over; but it turned out to be another telegram with the splendid news that you were taken off the 'Seriously ill' list on the 23rd. Precious darling, you can imagine how very, very happy I was, and all of us. I rang up your mother again at once, and she too was delighted."

"You must just go on recovering as fast as ever you can and perhaps by now you will have been able to write to me yourself. I will send you another cable tomorrow in case you think I am still worrying... When little Harriet woke up this morning I told her

the good news, and she said in ecstatic tones: *'Daddy's better, Daddy's better, Daddy's better'*. She then wanted to know who was looking after you. Last night when she was saying her prayers she said, as she has done for the past 3 nights, *'God bless Daddy and make him better'* and went on *'and Ben's got a bit of something in his eye, so he must be made better too'.*"

Maida's letter continued by saying that she had been to church with a very thankful heart: "How different I feel today; though I never lost faith that you were all right, it is lovely to have the good news in writing. But poor darling you must have had a very bad time... I have no plans for next week beyond the Infant Welfare on Tuesday and I am going to do a turn at a Service Canteen on Thursday... The garden is too wet to work in and I have no sewing at the moment, so it seemed a good time to do a little work outside home. Social activities seem at a standstill. I can't say I miss tea parties in the least. We are all very well and so happy to think of you getting better now. All my love for always and always, precious one, your own adoring Maida."



John's next three letters came from Cairo, where he was spending a fortnight's sick leave. He wrote on 18th February saying that he was staying with Mr. Greaves, his ornithology friend, and feeling himself again: "I am now considerably fatter than before Christmas... Mr. Greaves has just brought in a Painted Snipe which is bigger and more beautiful than the Common Snipe. We are going to skin it together after supper. I lunched today with George Blaker. I was astounded this morning to wake up and find a picture of George welcoming the new C. in C. General Wilson on the front page of the local paper."

"I was greatly honoured to be lunching with the Great Man the same day. We had an extremely good lunch at Maxim's, which is the best restaurant in Cairo. I had pork followed by strawberries and cream. He seemed rather tired and overworked but otherwise quite well. He confided to me that he had had to walk home about 6 miles last night because his pocket wallet had been stolen, so he had plenty of reason to look tired. He thinks he may get a holiday in May or June and we discussed possible places to go. The weather is just perfect, still nice and cold at night... The news is so good that it is difficult to feel depressed, though it will

be nice when the promised new front begins.”

On 21st February John was: “...much enjoying life what with odd tea parties, bird talks and walks with Mr. Greaves, and an occasional shopping expedition into the town. I have also had the courage to have my photo taken which I am sending off to you today... The only annoyance of being on holiday is that I don’t get your letters, but I hope there will be a nice collection for me when I get back again... Anyway, I am feeling tip top now and ready for anything... Today George Blaker asked me to lunch and told me that he is now expecting to go home in the near future by air for a new job in London, the lucky blighter. I am afraid Tunis has got stuck a bit, so my prospects are still rather vague... Tomorrow we are lunching with Mackintosh, which will be interesting. He visited Safaga shortly after I left, which was a pity for both of us as I should have had so much to show him.”

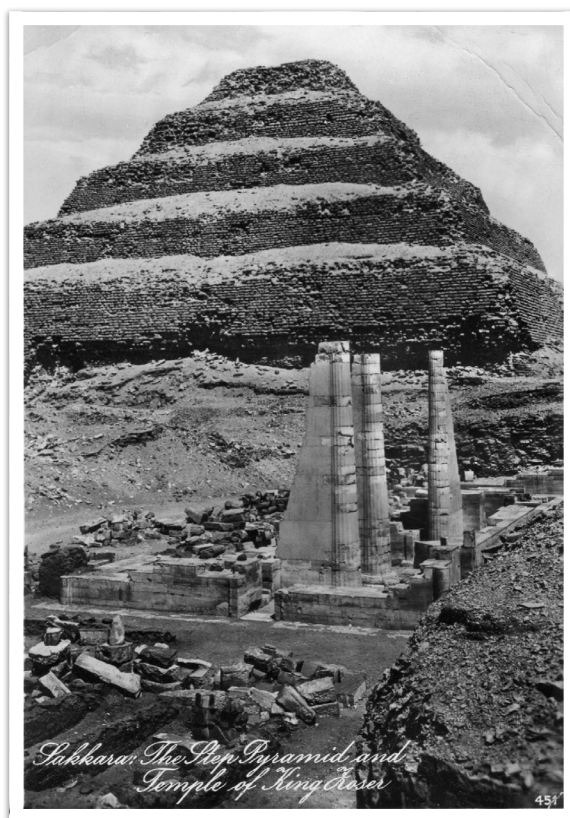
He continued in a similar vein on 25th February: “I am having a splendid time in Cairo with Mr. Greaves. We seem to have plenty to do every day and in fact I could spend a lot longer here and be quite happy

meeting the Cairo people and talking about birds. Today I was intending to get my ‘Notes on the Birds of Safaga’ written up, but unfortunately for me two Egyptian ladies arrived who are said to be princesses. They were about 50 years old and spinster sisters but were so full of talk that it was 11.0 o’clock before they left. Mr. Greaves then wanted to go to the Zoo to look at some bird skin or other and spent the rest of the morning there.”

“The Princesses have invited us to a picnic lunch at Sakkara* on Sunday where they are going to take us in their car to see a new tomb which has coloured bird pictures in it. Tomorrow I am going to Alex for one night to get my camera which I stupidly left there in December to be repaired. The weather is still chilly in the evenings, as there is no coal. However, we make a little bonfire in the grate with sticks and put on our overcoats. It is nice and warm in the middle of the day. I feel fine now and will be glad to be working again, though the present holiday is very pleasant.”

John returned to No. 6 General Hospital on 1st March and wrote home the following day: “My own darlingest — I got back to the hospital yesterday to find a huge pile of letters waiting for me, the latest of which is February 13th. I was X-rayed this morning and was rather depressed to find that there was still something wrong with the left side. However, Col. Jones does not seem to think it very serious, and I am hoping I shall now be able to get on with my work, though I shall have to take things very easily. I have made a Will at last. I went to Alex last Friday and got the Bank solicitor to make me one on Saturday morning, which he did for nothing.” John had now been in an active war zone for 3½ years but it took this illness to motivate him to write his will, even though Maida had first urged him to do it in May 1940, shortly before Harriet was born.

On 3rd March John was finally back at work: “I am so glad to hear that my Mother has invited you to Morwick in the summer, and that you are thinking of going. I am now doing my full work again. I think I shall be regraded as B† for three months, which will suit me, as I shall then have to remain working at a Base Hospital and may be able to get my surgical grading. We are fairly busy here at present as we get cases all the way from Tripoli and sort them out here. I am back on the same wards where I worked before.”



Postcard of the Step Pyramid at Sakkara, sent to Maida in February 1943.

* An Egyptian village containing ancient burial grounds of Egyptian royalty which served as the necropolis for Memphis, the ancient Egyptian capital.

† Army classification indicating unfit for general service but fit for base or garrison service at home and abroad.

Following his birthday on 5th March he wrote: "I am beginning to feel horribly old now at 32. I celebrated it by buying some chocolates made by Groppi's in Cairo. We shared them between three of us in the evening and almost finished them at a sitting. I am astounded to find there are two other officers here interested in birds besides myself. This afternoon I went with a friend to the Canal between Cairo and Ismaili... I had a letter today from Mrs. Crookston explaining why my piano had not arrived. Apparently they can't get wood to make a packing case for it. Still there is hope that it will come yet and then everything will be splendid. You certainly sound in good training, pushing a pram to Great Shelford and back. More than I could do I reckon."

To his great annoyance John was moved again after less than a week back in his old job, writing on 9th March: "I had another shock this morning when I was posted to be M.O. to the R.A.O.C./R.E.M.E. Base Depot[‡]. I had not imagined that I would have to go away so soon. However I think it may possibly have a good effect, as I complained to the Colonel and also Lt./Col. Marnham, the officer commanding the Surgical Division. The latter said he would try to get Col. Ogilvie to order a posting for me to be graded. So far I have been unable to get anyone to take up my cause to this extent. Also my posting is only a temporary one, and I shall almost certainly get back to No. 6 within 2 months."

This latest job was at Tel el Kebir, the site for the Eighth Army Base Vehicle Depot, which also included medical facilities associated with No. 8 Military Hospital and a large ordnance depot. It was located about 70 miles north-east of Cairo between there and Port Said, on the edge of the Egyptian desert and next to the Ismailia Canal. Both the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers were based there and it housed many mechanical and electrical workshops for the repair of armoured cars and other weapons⁵⁰. John's letters indicated that he had been tasked with upgrading the Medical Inspection (M.I.) facilities. These facilities were used to treat minor ailments and injuries for the troops stationed at the depot and typically included between 6 to 12 beds to accommodate patients expected to recover within a few days.

On 13th March John was looking back over some

of Maida's earlier letters: "I have also been reading the one about digging in the winter so that the frost will improve the soil. Actually, there is a scientific reason for this as the water in the soil freezes and breaks the soil up in the same way as it breaks water pipes... My job here keeps me pretty busy all morning — rather like the Alex job, but not so interesting as there are no Egyptians, Italians or families to vary the fare. However I might be a lot less comfortable, and I hope it won't be long before I get back to the hospital."

By 15th March he was enjoying himself more: "I have now been doing my new job for a week, and I am getting quite a lot of fun out of it, as I have more responsibility and power here than in hospital although less medical work. At the moment we are engaged in smartening up the M.I. room and have at last managed to claim the attention of the painters. After that I shall have a go at the garden in front... I am glad that you are doing more war work now, darling, helping with a canteen. I think everyone in England who is not too old should be doing something by now, preferably in the factories. I wonder if any of your acquaintances are doing that sort of job, but I suppose there is no factory of that kind near to." He also mentioned that he was putting on weight as the food was very good but exercise was difficult as walking on the busy roads was unpleasant.

A few days later he received a parcel containing 300 cigarettes from the Warkworth Women's Institute, a village near his family home in Northumberland: "I enjoyed getting them though I have given up smoking since I was in hospital." He was becoming more hopeful of being finally able to return home on leave: "In today's paper I see several M.P.s have been asking questions about leave in the Middle East. The only answer they got was that in certain cases they should get back to the U.K. after 6 years, but then only when the exigencies of the service permitted."

"We had an E.N.S.A.[§] show here last night, the Globe Trotters, which I saw before in Safage. They had greatly improved in the interval. Afterwards we had a sort of party in the mess during which I made the acquaintance of an officer who commands some army horses close to, named Major Bancroft. I liked him as he has the same pleasant horsiness as Mr. Fenwick[¶]. He has promised to let me have a ride one of these days. You will be interested to hear that I have now become interested in a garden. It is a tiny patch

[‡] Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

[§] Entertainments National Service Association.

[¶] His step-father.

in front of my M.I. Room which is entirely devoted to decoration, as there is no shortage of food here. I am trying to get grass to grow on about half of it and am hoping to get some turf to give it a start.”

On 21st March he reported the first bad Khamsin of the season: “Fortunately, we had quite a lot of rain last night so the dust has not been so bad. This morning I had a lovely ride on one of Major Bancroft’s horses, named Abu Sultan. He is a beautiful grey and a great joy to ride. I am hoping to get quite a bit of riding as they are only about half a mile away. It was windy and with a little rain in the air but that made it all the more enjoyable... M.I. Room painting will be finished in a day or two, and I hope to take on my new Corporal before the end of the week. Give my love to Harrie and tell her to learn the alphabet before her third birthday. All my love, sweetheart, John.”

A few days later the painting was done and half the new lawn had been laid. He was hoping that he would be sent back to No. 6 Hospital after he had finished sorting the Camp facilities out. He also wanted to enlist Maida in getting him sent home on leave: “If there is no sign of my getting home towards the end of this year, then I think you will have to agitate with your local M.P. to ask some more questions in Parliament. I think four years seems a reasonable time for the Army as the R.A.F. and the Navy only do two. Of course, it should only be done if it is not interfering with the war effort. At present one would think many ships must go home empty... The spring bird migration is in full swing at present though I haven’t much time to observe it.”

On 27th March work was still keeping him busy: “One of my orderlies has been on leave the last few days, which has made us harder work than usual. In addition, I have had to do extra inspections for lice, which are always getting around unless one keeps a constant lookout for them. The native Egyptians live in such a state of poverty that practically all of them have lice and give them to us if we get anywhere near them. I don’t know if I shall be able to get a ride on Sunday as Major Bancroft told me yesterday that the horse I had last week was out of action owing to hurting its leg in the stall... I have found quite a nice little walk for myself the last few days, which avoids walking all the way on the road. I try to get off for an hour between 4.0 and 5.0 as I feel awful if I don’t get any exercise... The news in Tunisia seems better and I liked General Montgomery’s speech before the battle. I feel sure he will win soon.”

The good news from Tunisia continued on 31st March. A promised day off to go to Cairo and see Mr. Greaves about the ‘Bird Notes of Safaga’ had to be delayed by a case of typhus in the Camp. He had seen another picture of George Blaker in the Egyptian Mail taken with Mr. Casey, the Minister of State for the Middle East, and a Ministry of Information official: “The latter was on an air visit so I think perhaps George may even be home in England by now. What a thought! At any rate it looks as if I should come home through the Mediterranean, as I have always wanted to. I think the Eighth Army is splendid, and feel sure Tunis is in its grasp at last... I feel nearer home than



Map 8. The Axis forces retreated into Tunisia in early 1943. The defensive Mareth Line was broken by the Allied forces on 26th March, Tunis was taken on 7th May and the Axis forces surrendered on 13th May.

for several years, even though Churchill forecast we should not win until next year.”

After Operation Torch the Allies had made slow but steady progress in forcing the Axis troops into a pocket along the north central Tunisian coast. In the late 1930s the French had built up a system of fortifications in southern Tunisia known as the Mareth Line, intended to protect Tunisia against a potential Italian invasion from Libya². Following the French capitulation in June 1940 the line had been demilitarised but when the Axis forces retreated into Tunisia in 1942 they refurbished it into a defensive position. Both British and American forces co-operated in the Tunisian campaign and General Alexander became deputy to General Dwight D. Eisenhower in Allied Forces Headquarters. General Wilson had then succeeded him as General Officer Commanding Middle East Command in February 1943.

The Eighth Army made an initial frontal assault against the Mareth Line on 19th March 1943. This was repulsed but a second attack on 26th March was successful, the line was broken and the Axis forces retreated to Wadi Akarit. On 7th May the British 7th Armoured Division captured Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and the U.S. II Army Corps captured Bizerte, the last remaining port in Axis hands. Six days later on 13th May the last Axis resistance in North Africa ended with the surrender of over 260,000 German and Italian troops².



Only three of Maida's letters sent in February and March have survived. John's enquiry about doing factory work clearly annoyed her as she replied on 27th March: "Yes, one or two of my friends are working in factories, but they have to leave their babies to be brought up by Nannies; I simply couldn't trust Harriet to a nannie, nor bear to leave her all day. She is so adorable and a very fulltime job, what with all her dressmaking and so on. I couldn't leave her more than I do now, just for the Welfare and Canteen, darling, as Mamma gets tired if she has her for too long and, as I have told you, I do nearly all the household shopping for Mamma now; the war has told on her a good bit, as it has on most people, and she gets tired more easily than she used to, though she still does lots of hard work in the garden. I have certainly never been so

busy in my life, the weeks fly past now that there is the vegetable planting to see to as well, and I am always completely exhausted by bedtime."

Mamma was now over 70 and becoming increasingly dependent on Maida for assistance. Although Adda was devoted to Harriet she had become very tired and nervy during the war, and the housework and cooking took up most of her energy. Maida also commented on the lack of household aids then available, such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines. It would therefore have been difficult for her to take on a full-time job while leaving Harriet in the care of Mamma and Adda. She was also finding the waiting for John to return was becoming increasingly hard and later in the same letter had put: "I suppose I shall just have to go on waiting, but it is harder to be patient now, I sometimes feel as if I have almost reached the end of my tether."

Harriet fortunately continued to provide Maida with great joy and interest and she was able to tell John about her antics. In February she described Harriet's realistic approach to life: "She is devastatingly matter-of-fact and has little use for the Beatrice Potter books, which she evidently thinks just silly. She was looking at one the other day and said: '*Look, the doggie's writing a letter*'. I said: '*You've never seen a dog writing, have you?*' She replied '*No, he couldn't, he's only got toes, no hands*', then added, as if to clear up any misapprehension on my part, '*Dogs only write letters in books*.' She much enjoys looking at the illustrations in 'The Battle of Egypt': tanks and guns mean far more to her than bunnies dressed up in suits and pinafores."

A passage in the last March letter (31.3.1943) contained news of Augustin Jordan, who was still fighting with the Free French: "It was supposed to be a Christmas letter but I don't think he can have put enough stamps on it. I was glad to have it as I thought he must have been killed, as he has never missed writing at Xmas time, but he had been in hospital. He is still hoping to meet you somewhere in the Middle East. He gets no news from home now, the last was sent in May last year. They were just managing to get along then, living on the produce of the garden, river etc. It's lucky for them they are at Alivet* which has plenty of natural resources."

* His parents' home in occupied France.



At the beginning of April John was still at the R.E.M.E. depot. On 5th April he described a brief trip to Cairo: "I started off by doing some shopping but failed to get most of the things I wanted, amongst them a pair of riding breeches... I had supper with Mr. Greaves with a Brigadier Hutson, who is a big bird man out here and has been in Egypt a long time. I have an ambition to meet Russell Pasha one of these days*. His house is only a hundred yards from Mr. Greaves, who tells me that Lady Russell is a terror. Anyway, his name seems to come into every recent book about Egypt, and he still has a big say in things though he has officially retired... My other piece of news is that I got a letter from Col. Marnham O.C. Surgical Division, 6. Gen. Hosp. to advise me to put in an application for posting to a general hospital for grading to Col. Ogilvie, the Director of Surgery, M.E.F. He ends his letter with the hopeful phrase *'I think this application is likely to be approved.'* I sent it in yesterday and feel rather excited about it."

Less positive news soon followed and two days later (7.4.1943) he wrote to say: "I had an official communication this morning to say that I was not posted to the 6th. Gen. Hosp. any longer. I was not altogether surprised as I have been similarly disappointed by other R.A.M.C. Colonels. When this one told me to my face that he would see I went back there within two months, I thought there was a chance. The trouble is that the Assistant Director does the posting and does not care much about the hospital colonels' wishes. However, my application to the Director of Surgery has got as far as the A.D.M.S. at any rate, so perhaps I shall be sent to some other hospital."

"In the meantime I am well and fairly happy which is the main thing. I am hoping to get to Cairo tomorrow to try to get my Bird Notes typed... The louse scare is over, thank goodness, which gives me a little more breathing space. Also, my M.I. room, garden and the interior decoration are complete which is another thing out of mind but I am still in process of changing my staff. Today I have taken on two young apprentices of 20. They are keen and intelligent but only schoolboys. I really don't know whether they

will be able to run the sick parade when my present corporal goes."

John continued to enjoy going riding whenever he had the chance and having weekly trips into Cairo including regular visits to Mr Greaves. He bought and sent off 2 lbs. of icing sugar: "...which I hope will reach you before Christmas." He wrote on 16th April saying: "I found both Brigadier Hutson and Lt/Col. Stanford at Mr. Greaves' house, and they are both experts on birds. Actually, I won a prize at Rugby which was given annually for the best essay on birds by Col. Stanford. He is best known for his work on the birds of Burma. I rather envied him however as he is on his way home now."

"I have all your letters up to April 3rd. darling, so for once I have no complaint with the post. It is such a luxury having them so quickly, especially as it makes your gardening notes so much more interesting. I am now the proud possessor of a Bougainvillea plant in my garden... It is only a few leaves on a bare stick at present but I am hoping great things of it. The grass on my new lawn is just beginning to show, thank goodness. The Colonel has been very sceptical about it... Tell Harriet I like naughty girls. The trouble with her Mother was that I could never persuade her to be naughty, as least not for a long time."

Having been so short of money for many years, it was a topic never very far from John's mind. He was now managing to save some of his pay to put to one side for the future and had posted a cheque for £100 to Maida. As it had taken 3 months to get to her, he was relieved to hear that it had finally arrived safely: "You seem to wonder why I sent it to you instead of the bank. The reason is that I want you to have evidence that they have the money invested. I can't be sure of being able to keep their receipts safe here. I am sending you off another £100 today... Keep their letter saying they have bought the stuff as a receipt."

The next letter on 24th April reported that the grass in his little garden area was continuing to grow, the war news was good but the season for flies and mosquitoes was starting: "If only I could get my piano nothing would worry me much... I have had a letter from Major Fava telling me he has been made C.O. of a hospital in Khartoum, I think, in the Sudan. I pity him especially as his wife has only recently come to Egypt. I don't think he will be allowed to take her there. I sometimes feel thankful that you have been spared all the trouble that beset an officer's wife if she does manage to get to the Middle East."

Unfortunately, his ongoing wish to be allowed to

* Sir Thomas Wentworth Russell, who had been a senior police officer in the Egyptian service and was director of the Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau from 1929-1946⁵¹.

continue his surgical training was again unsuccessful. On 27th April: "Today has been an important though rather disappointing day for me. I was visited by the D.D.M.S.[†] of my area who is a Brigadier. My application to be posted to a hospital had evidently reached him on its way to the Director of Surgery. He told me to my horror that he had sent it back to the A.D.M.S. as more surgeons were not required. However, after he had got that out, we had quite a long talk about things. I told him I knew several friends who had become graded without degrees, and finally he has promised me to reconsider my application. He is new to the area but is a nice old man. I was rather honoured at his special visit as the Colonel and S.M.O.[‡] were all on tip toe to see him, but he would see no-one but me."

"Meanwhile work goes on much as usual though if anything it gets busier, so that I have not much energy left for other things. I had a most exhilarating ride on Sunday morning on Abu Sultan, who is now recovered from the injury to his leg. He is a most beautiful horse both to look at and to ride. There is as much difference in horses as in people... I had a cheerful letter from Mother a day or two ago. As usual, she *'feels it won't be long before she sees me'*. I am afraid her insight into the future has been remarkably incorrect in the past. All my love, darlingest. Your own John."



Maida's four surviving letters written in April were more cheerful than those in March. She was continuing to work part time at both the Welfare Centre and the Forces Canteen. On 2nd April she had been into Cambridge in the evening to see Chekhov's play 'The Seagull' with a friend, Peggy Otter, whose little girl Caroline used to play with Harriet: "We had to walk home as the buses pack up at 9.0 nowadays... We got back about 11.15. Mamma and Adda were sitting up for me, so I had a nice cup of Ovaltine before going to bed."

"This morning I went into the town on my bicycle and had very good hunting, including a sweetbread which will be nice for Harriet's lunch tomorrow. I

could get nothing for our lunch today but Spam which I didn't think she would eat, but au contraire, she even asked for a second helping. After lunch I pushed her up and down the orchard until she fell asleep. The daffodils are a dream just now and the plum blossom is out, so it looked lovely and so peaceful... I had another letter from your bank today acknowledging the cheque and saying they will buy you £100 Defence Bonds and keep the certificate for them in safe custody for you."

On 5th April she had received three of John's March letters, the most recent arriving in just nine days: "I can really hardly believe it can last. As you say, darling, it makes us feel so much nearer each other, which is all the more necessary as you say there seems less chance of leave than ever. However I somehow feel in my bones that you will be home at the end of this year or early next year, and I've never felt like that till lately, so let's just hope and pray my intuition is right."

She was continuing to keep herself busy: "If ever I do find myself sitting with nothing to do I feel quite peculiar and usually rush off to find some job or other. It's rather a bad thing really, a kind of restlessness which is due to the war, I think. Never mind, when you come home I shall soon learn to rest again... I gave Harrie your love and your message about learning her letters. She is beginning to try to learn them but mixes them all up with the funniest effects. Adda was going through them with her and she suddenly and unexpectedly came out with '*M for Mr. Wright*' (the station master), who no one had even mentioned."

The next letter (10.4.1943) was written from Leicester where she and Harriet were spending a weekend with Dorothy Williams. Her husband Robin (Maida's cousin) was now serving with the R.E.M.E. in North Africa: "Dorothy and I have been having great talks on clothes, and I am much enjoying her company; it is fun to see the new house, which as you can guess after staying at Trenton Lodge is comfortable and well furnished, and Dorothy seems to produce the same splendid meals in spite of rations."

They returned to Cambridge in mid-April to find that Tricka and Uncle Louis were staying. She had also received a Red-Cross postcard from Augustin with the bad news that he had been captured a month after writing his Christmas letter in December and was now in Oflag IV-C, Germany, a Prisoner-of-War camp for officers in Colditz Castle. He remained imprisoned there for the rest of the war: "He said he was captured between Gabès and Sfax on Jan. 28th

[†] Deputy Director Medical Services.

[‡] Senior Medical Officer.

and: ‘as an old desert rat I feel somewhat à l’étroit* in my new dwelling but remain all the same quite all right.’” Although he was a French national, he was captured while serving as a British officer with the S.A.S.[†] so was entitled to receive Red Cross parcels which Maida arranged to have sent.

Augustin’s capture was associated with the Allied assault on Tunisia, described above. At the time when Rommel was mounting his final defence at the Mareth line, a group of S.A.S. soldiers led by Augustin had been tasked with carrying out raids on the railway line between Sfax and Gabès. The only way to get there from Bir Soltan was through the Gabès Gap, a narrow strip of land which was then still in German and Italian hands. David Stirling, the founder and first commander of the S.A.S. was also captured and sent to Colditz at around the same time. Regarding Stirling, Rommel noted: ‘The British lost the very able and adaptable commander of the desert group which caused us more damage than any other British unit of equal size’⁴⁰.

This news made Maida feel thankful that John was not a Prisoner-of-War. She sent him a poem by John Buxton from the Sunday Times which she said she would love to hear him reading to her. This started:

*I listened in the night; you spoke to me
Softly, so very softly, one quiet word,
Still sleeping, and your gentle breath I heard
Moving with the rhythm of the distant sea.’*

In a later reply to this letter John wrote: “I loved the poem of John Buxton’s you sent me. He is a prisoner, isn’t he? I think he may be the Rupert Brooke of this war, though so far his work has appealed to the senses rather than the intellect.”



In May John remained hard at work at the R.E.M.E. depot, where he continued to be disappointed about not getting a hospital job (4.5.1943): “I am terribly busy at the moment as I have more troops than ever to look after, and almost all of them have to be vaccinated now. The worst of this job is that there is always something extra to do, and too many people above giving out thousands of orders all the time. There is a tendency to issue so many orders that it is

impossible to carry them out.” On his weekly trip into Cairo Mr. Greaves had encouraged him to return to Safaga during his next leave to determine which birds bred on Safaga Island. John had by then written up a paper on the birds of Safaga and this information would help to complete it. He was feeling optimistic about the war after hearing the good news of the capture of Tunis and Bizerte, as this was expected to allow Allied supply convoys into the Mediterranean.

On 10th May he wrote: “Last night I went to a local quartet concert for strings. All the performers were from the ranks, but they managed to draw a full house, although I was not impressed with their taste in pieces... which were hardly worth walking two miles to hear. Yesterday morning I had a really lovely ride on Abu Sultan though it was rather hot. I went south of the canal where there are miles of marshland covered with a sort of marram grass. Birds abounded and were full of spring expression. I cantered along by the bank of a canal and drank in the countryside. It brought back a recollection of the Norfolk Broads.”

A few days later (14.5.1943): “I have very little news except that I am in temporary disgrace with Major Bancroft as the horse I rode last Sunday lost a shoe and has been going a bit lame since. However I hope to live this down, especially as my new jodhpurs are ready and I have not tried them out yet. I went to Cairo on Wednesday and had dinner with Mr. Greaves as usual. He told me that he was away from his wife and daughters for two years during the last war. During a tea-party one of his daughters, who had not seen him until she was two years old, said: ‘but that was before Daddy joined our family’. I hope Harry won’t make similar faux pas!” In his next letter he mentioned that he was thinking of buying Abu Sultan as: “I can’t see any other pleasant means of getting exercise here. Also it would be a way of repaying all the free rides I have had in the last two months.”

Despite continuing to be busy at work his letter of 20th May described a fun day out: “I had a marvellous day yesterday which consisted in hitch-hiking (i.e. picking up army transport) to Ismailia, then down the Suez Canal to Suez, across to Cairo and back here. Rather more than 200 miles and it didn’t cost me a penny except for meals. I had one miniature catastrophe on the way though. I completed the last 20 miles to Suez on the back of a motor bike, and when I arrived I found I had made an enormous tear in the seat of my long trousers. I got into the best hotel where I spent a most anxious half hour in a room without my trousers wondering whether they would be restored to

* Cramped.

† Special Air Service.

me. I am glad to say all was well. The Suez Canal and the Canadian War Memorial are really impressive, and not nearly as dull as I had expected."

His cheerfulness continued into the beginning of June (1.6.43): "I feel it won't be long now before something definite happens, though we have no news so far of any stuff coming direct through the Med. I felt pleased this morning to see that the French ships in Alex are at last going to fight for us. I have sailed round them so often and it was so depressing to see them utterly idle. The surprising thing is that none of them were damaged in the numerous Alex air-raids."

A few days later on 4th June he had received some good news: "I have been posted to a General Hospital in Alexandria just as I was giving up all hope. I am really delighted at the prospect, though the usual uncertainties crop up. Will I be able to stay there more than a few weeks and will I get any surgical work to do? However, it is another chance and I am glad to have it. Another wonder is how long it will be before the posting takes effect... I am glad for lots of reasons. I shall be able to play the piano, learn languages, sail and play tennis if I want to, none of which I can do here."

"You will be sad to hear that the little grey Arab, Abu Sultan, which I have been riding, died suddenly the other day of heart failure. I felt rather guilty as I had ridden him so much, but the Major thinks it was due to his age. Fortunately I had not ridden him for three weeks when he became ill. I was lucky not to have bought him although this was due almost entirely to Major Bancroft insisting that he should be perfectly fit before I did buy him." This time the posting came through quite quickly and he wrote very cheerfully on 10th June saying that he would be off on Saturday for his new job and that the new address would be 8, General Hospital, M.E.F.: "I am terribly excited, as you can imagine."

CHAPTER 12

Three More Hospitals

1943



AT THE BEGINNING OF June Mamma wrote to John, replying to a letter that he had sent in February. She was feeling sad but pleased that Maida and Harriet were soon due to leave for a trip to visit his mother in Northumberland: "I feel sure the change will do them a great deal of good; Maida has worked so hard in the garden, and Harrie and I go down and watch her, and now we are revelling in lovely green peas and beans... the garden is a blaze of flowers. I think we are going to have a good crop of apples and we all long to have you here to pick them. We often say to Harrie *'If only we had Daddy's long arms, how easy it would be'* and then she beams and begins: *'Is he as high as the door?'* or *'Can he touch the ceiling?'*" and goes into shrieks of laughter."

"Has Maida told you that my brother who died in the U.S.A. left me and my sisters £2,000 each? It was very kind of him, and, with half one's income being taken in taxes, it will be a great help. I enjoy my cigarettes, my dear John, as much as ever, but I am quite glad Maida has not followed me in that at any rate... Little Ben is very well and such a faithful little friend, always waiting on the lawn for me if I go out for long."

No details of Harriet's third birthday on 9th June have survived, but Maida sent a letter on 23rd June written the day after she and Harriet reached Morwick Hall by train for a fortnight's holiday: "Harriet is now resting after walking with me through the wood down to the bathing pool; so I am taking the chance to write to you, darling, and begin telling you how happy we are and how lovely everything looks. We arrived quite punctually yesterday evening after a good journey... Your mother was at the station to meet us, looking very well and younger than ever in a pretty scarlet coat.

The first news she gave me was that your letter had already arrived, clever darling to post it here at just the right time... I shall have to write you lots of letters from here to try to tell you everything you would like to know. First, Harriet and I had a splendid welcome from everyone and feel really as if we belonged here. Your mother and Uncle Jim and Helen and Nannie are being so sweet to us, and little Sally is a pet. All send their love to you; you can imagine how we were talking about you last night, and wishing you could be here too."

"We are very comfy in the little room where I slept the first time I came but how much happier you and I are now. I remember how sweet you were then and how you had gathered snowdrops for my room. Now we have pansies and lupins and catmint in two charming posies. Harriet's little bed is pulled up by mine, and she went straight to sleep in it last night with Dick cuddled in her arms, and teddy bear beside her, produced by Nannie, and they all seem very pleased with Harrie."

"Morwick is just the same, darling, the garden



Morwick Hall and Gardens.

looks wonderful. I can't think how they manage it — a few more weeds, perhaps, but otherwise I have told George it looks just like it always did. The delphiniums are lovely, and the great trees standing guard over everything are waving now in the wind as I write, and sound like waves on the shore. It is a delicious fresh day; the river is very full and brown. Harriet and I danced through the wood hand in hand, she squealing with joy, and when we reached the edge of the water she played at throwing sticks into the current and is very thrilled with it all... There are lots of wagtails in the garden, and a sweet little flycatcher and we have seen a squirrel too. All my love, darling one, your own Maida."



JOHN WAS INDEED THINKING about Maida's forthcoming visit to see his mother (10.6.43). "It is lovely to think of you being at Morwick... I remember the snowstorm which we walked through together over Morwick Moor, and the great wind on the day we took the big Rover to Dunstanburgh. Still this time it will be quite different, and you will be able to enjoy the garden, which Mother tells me has not changed much... My favourite short walk is to the top of the rocks overlooking Wark Mill where one can watch the fish and the jackdaws — also the Jack rocks at the Mill and the pretty waterfall up the stream from the little bridge. Ask Mother. All my thoughts will be with you. Your own John."

On 14th June he was waiting for the relieving officer to arrive so that he could set off from the R.E.M.E. depot to his new post at No. 8 General Hospital: "I am very excited about it though by now I am naturally not expecting too much. I hear that two of the old staggers I used to know in the area have now gone to the Eighth Army, so perhaps I shall follow them before long. However I am glad to move as I feel I have done all I can for this place, and from now on it will get less busy... I am expecting to hear news about Kitty and Molly any time now. It is incredible how many babies have been born since I left... As I hope you will get this at Morwick, please thank Mother for the papers she is sending me."

He did indeed reach No. 8 General Hospital on 16th June. This was a large hospital with 800 beds: "I arrived here two evenings ago and have been hard at

work ever since. I am now in a lovely room on the first floor of a big house overlooking a green little garden. The hospital is about a mile away, which is the only snag in an otherwise perfect arrangement. I am going to sleep in the hospital 2 nights on duty to look after surgical cases then 4 off. I am working under Lt/Col. Debenham, who is a very good surgeon himself, and I think will help me if he can. In addition, I have a nice ward of about 50 beds to look after and am going to do the blood transfusions which are necessary. The cases here are almost all local accidents, though there are a few battle casualties left. There have been no air raids here this year though we still have black-out restrictions which are rather trying on hot nights."

The positive mood continued on 24th June: "I have more surgical work to do here than at any time since I came to Egypt. I have already removed an appendix myself and done a great many fractures. My only grouse is that I have so much to do that I have hardly been out of the hospital. I am afraid I still have little chance of becoming a graded specialist, as I heard today that another surgeon is coming to do the work which I am doing at present. However I shall probably be kept on as Blood Transfusion Officer, which is a more permanent role than just General Duty Officer. I shall probably go to Cairo soon for a fortnight to do a course at a hospital there."

When he next wrote on 29th June he had already started the course: "I am living in a big hospital here in comfort and am having quite an interesting time studying the theory and practice of blood transfusion. I am the only one doing the course at the moment, so I have things pretty well to myself." At the start of July he was still in Cairo (2.7.1943): "I have one piece of good news. The Colonel who is commanding the surgical division in the hospital where I am doing my course has suggested that some officers should be allowed to the U.K. for the purpose of taking their final fellowship. This sounds a good scheme as it is quite hopeless trying to get home to see one's wife. Almost any other excuse seems all right — financial worry with one's practice, or death of one's relatives, but wives in wartime apparently simply are not considered."

"I see Mr. Greaves almost every day at teatime, and also Mr. David Crookston from Safaga who is staying with him. He has invited me to stay with him at Safaga but I don't think I shall be able to get off... I met Major Taylor whom I have not seen for years. He came out with me and has been in Iraq for 2 years. He also has a wife at home, so I am not the only one. All my love, dearest. Your own John."

In his next letter of 6th July he was feeling rather glum, in part because Maida's letters had not been forwarded to him in Cairo while he was doing the course: "When I have time to think about the war, I get rather disheartened as another month has passed without anything much happening." The letters had still not arrived by 10th July but the war news was better: "I have just heard a rumour that we have landed in Sicily, which is exciting although I am afraid victories don't make home leave any easier to get. It is very hot at present, but living in such pleasant surroundings it does not trouble one too much... I have just finished Emil Ludwig's book on the Nile (lent by Mrs Crookston)... It is marvellous to think that the river which I can see from my window has come 4,000 miles from Lake Tanganyika... I am so longing to hear from you again and to know what you did at Morwick... Somehow I get the feeling of being not wanted when doing a course. However I shall be back to my job in one week, and then I hope I shall be able to settle down for a bit."

The following week (13.7.1943) he was sent instead to No. 6. General Hospital with a blood transfusion unit as part of his training course: "Today I have had a bit of practice taking a pint of blood from about a hundred men. One soon gets into the hang of it. I think I shall return to Cairo tomorrow as I am not really required here and two days will be sufficient practice. The big piece of news is that your letters have arrived... The news is so good that it is impossible not to have hopes again, and also Sir James Grigg* has admitted that six years overseas service is too harsh. Somehow I feel another year will be the very longest we shall have to wait now." The good news referred to was the large scale amphibious assault on Sicily by the Allied Forces, which had started on 10th July.

John's hopes of being able to settle into his job at No. 8 were dashed almost immediately, writing on 17th July: "I arrived back last night to learn I have to go to No. 22. tomorrow. I am sorry of course to leave but am pleased in a way that I have not been sent to a Medical Inspection Room again... I was frightfully excited to get lots of your mail forwarded to me this morning, just in the nick of time, and amongst it the beautiful photos I have been longing for... I was amused at Harriet's shock of hair worn in the Einstein style! She looks so well and strong and getting more shape about her now. I love your Morwick letters so much, especially the one in which you claim to have



Harriet and Maida in the garden, summer 1943.

been victimised by Uncle Jim's cocktail mixture! I really feel rather swept off my feet by all this moving but expect it will stop shortly and I shall have some peace again."

No. 22 General Hospital was at Qassassin†, situated about 20 miles west of Ismailia. By 21st July he was: "...once more comfortably installed in an E.P.I.P. tent‡ about twenty miles from where I was working at the Base Depot, but with a much pleasanter outlook, as I have a canal and a strip of green in the desert valley which stretches away from my door. Two Majors have also been put in my tent. The disadvantage of being in such a favoured position as far as the view goes is that one is the most exposed to thieves, as there is no obstacle between my tent and the desert. However, I have made provision for their advent." Thefts were clearly an ongoing concern as the Hospital Diary for July reported that two had taken place shortly before John's arrival. On 2nd July there was '*Theft by armed natives from Disinfector shed. Value of W.D.§ property stolen estimated at £35*'. This was followed on 7th July by '*Theft from Officer's compound. Personal property of Officers stolen. No W.D. property involved*'⁵².

John's letter continued: "I saw General Ogilvie, the consulting surgeon M.E.F., yesterday when he visited the hospital. He told me he was trying to get people with Primary F.R.C.S. sent home to take the Final. I hope it will come true, though naturally I have now become a sceptic where home leave is mentioned."

On 24th July he had received more news of Maida's trip to Morwick. He was delighted to hear that she had visited Canon Jones (his grandfather) who had been introduced to Harriet, his first great-

* The current British Secretary of State for War.

† Now known as El-Kasasin.

‡ European Privates Indian Pattern (military tent).

§ War Department.

grandchild: "I am quite enjoying my job here though I haven't been able to get any surgery yet. At any rate it is better than the Base Depot job. I believe I shall be able to use a piano which resides in the men's dining hall... The Colonel wants me to help with the games teams and be sports officer, so I look like having plenty of interests. I am orderly officer today, and have been fairly busy admitting patients, though this comes round only once a week."

He continued to reminisce about Morwick on 27th July: "I am thrilled to find you admiring so many of my boyhood loves — the fir tree by the tool shed, the foxglove walk, the weir at the mill and the little bridge over the brook down the wood which Harrie found so exciting. Harrie has seen all these delights at an earlier age than I did, as when I first explored Morwick in the summer of 1919 I was eight years old... Two previous acquaintances have recently been posted to the hospital as medical officers. If I am allowed to stay here, I think I shall be quite happy. However that is neither here nor there in the army."

The letter concluded: "It is nice to think we have encompassed the ruin of Mussolini: thank God he lived long enough to be overthrown and be proved a fool." On 25th July the Grand Council of the fascist Italian government had met to discuss their immediate future. A motion was passed which proposed transferring some of Mussolini's power to the king. After the vote King Vittorio Emanuele informed Mussolini that General Pietro Badoglio would become prime minister and that the war was all but lost for the Italians. Mussolini was then arrested and sent to prison, marking the end of his 17 years of dictatorship⁵³.

These events followed the Allied invasion of Sicily and throughout August John was kept very busy dealing with casualties who were being sent across to Egypt from the ongoing Italian campaign. The hospital diary reported that two convoys had arrived from Tripolitana and Sicily in August, carrying 189 and 139 casualties respectively, most of whom were classified as surgical⁵². On 1st August John wrote: "Today I have been very hard at work as I have just had about 60 battle casualties admitted to my ward. However most of them are past the danger stage and are on the road to recovery."

He was also becoming increasingly bitter about the long separation: "Since I have had your new photos I am quite reconciled to finding a thinner wife, as I can see she will be more beautiful than when I left. Darling, it makes me sad and angry to think what I am missing

all because of Hitler and Mussolini... I hope neither of them are allowed to die of old age although even by killing them there is a danger of making martyrs of them. I long to admire you, darling, and love you as you deserve instead of having to be content with pictures. Still, they are some compensation. Your own adoring John."

On 6th August he had a day off in Cairo and returned to find a letter from Maida telling him that she was feeling tired after catching flu. He replied with advice: "You must rest more... I have a rest almost every afternoon whether I feel tired or not. Overwork has a cumulative result, and very often does not show up until weeks afterwards. I am sure it is best to give in if you feel tired and lie down. I feel a thousand times better for my day off. I left here at tea-time yesterday and stopped the night with Mr. Greaves. I had a lovely sleep from 10.0 until 8.30 next morning, and not content with that went to sleep again this afternoon over a nice new bird book he lent me. So you see I am thoroughly rested and fit for another week's labours. I have brought back some seeds of Lupins, Alyssum, Poppies and Coreopsis which I am going to sow as soon as possible in the little patch of Nile mud which has been dumped in front of each hospital ward tent... I have had an Airgraph from my Mother telling me she enjoyed having you and Harriet at Morwick, which pleased me so much."

The following week he was still busy dealing with the casualties and was enjoying having access to a piano again. August 14th was one of the hottest days of the year: "To make matters more trying, one of the sisters on my ward was being married in the hospital church and we were asked to attend. That meant putting on long trousers and a jacket. However it was a nice service and a good reception afterwards in the sisters' mess... I see in our paper that if I am abroad for four years I shall be entitled to 4 weeks leave on getting home, so I hope I shall be home just in time for Christmas. Not that I think this is very likely."

Getting a date for his return to England remained much in his thoughts, referring to the topic again two days later: "There are now rumours about that 4½ years will soon be fixed as the period of foreign service, though this is not yet official. There are now two patients in the hospital who have been abroad 6 years, but most of that time in India. I have taken over a new ward today, which is rather exciting... It has exactly 100 beds: as only one bed is empty, I am having plenty to do. This morning I did an operation

for hammer toe which was quite fun. Tomorrow I am giving a lecture on anatomy to the R.A.M.C. other ranks. I have to give them 16 lectures in the course, but as my lecture comes only once a fortnight the end of the course is a depressing time ahead! We had a lovely eclipse of the moon last night. It was just arranged perfectly reaching its maximum at 10.30 and not a cloud in the sky. Well done the Almighty."

Following another trip to Cairo John remained busy (21.8.1943): "In fact I have hardly stopped working since I returned... I am getting more surgery now and did a list of eight cases this morning. This is chiefly because some of our temporary staff have left. Tonight I feel pleasantly tired but happy... I expect we will have another gap of a few weeks before the next push starts. Personally I am like you very doubtful whether it is possible to beat Germany this year, though people who remember the last war say the end came unexpectedly. However there was a big difference then in that we were already on Germany's doorstep after four years of war whereas now we are no nearer than Sicily. I feel I shall be happy if I can stay on here, as I have a better chance of getting graded than at this time last year at Safaga, or 2 years ago at Alex, and very much better than 3 years ago at Sollum. All my love darlingest. John."

The post was by now going via the Mediterranean and usually taking less than two weeks to arrive, putting them more closely in touch. On 28th August John was continuing to fret about returning home and now wanted to enlist Maida's help: "I hear the authorities are asking for names of those who arrived in Egypt before November 1939. If this is so I shall be next on the list, so am really feeling pretty hopeful of getting home within a year. However, if you like to write a letter to our M.P. (is it Pickthorn?) telling him what we have had to bear, so much the better. Most of those who have been abroad have only been separated from their families for 3 years or less."

When he next wrote at the end of the month (31.8.1943) he was, however, more cautious: "I dare not apply for leave at present as there is so much to do, and I am afraid I might lose my priority position if I did. However, we shall soon get a rest if the fighting does not start again very soon. I am glad to hear you are resting in the afternoons, darling, because I am sure you become too busy without me to make you sit on my knee... I gave my second lecture to the nursing orderlies tonight and rather enjoyed it, as it was about the physiology of the human body, and I was able to talk about things which I have hardly thought about

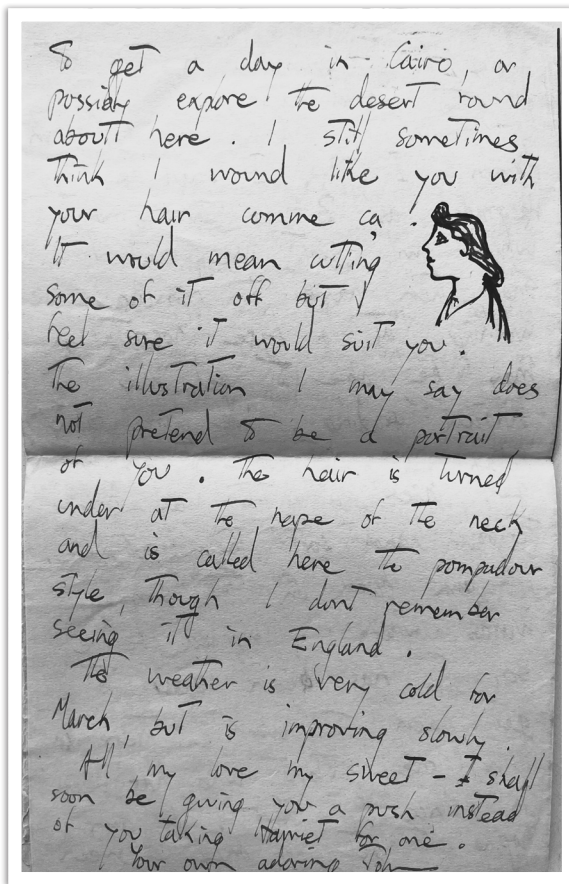
since leaving Cambridge. I rather think now I shall be coming back next summer."



ONLY TWO OF MAIDA'S letters from August survived, so she again used her diary to supplement her recollections. Life at Queen Edith's Way continued uneventfully. She was working at the Canteen more often, which she described as being hard work. Her latest sewing activity was to make new loose covers for Mamma's drawing room chairs and sofa. The fruit picking season had started with a lot of plums and the early apples. For entertainment she went to see 'Casablanca' at the cinema, which became her favourite film. A dry period of weather broke at the end of the month (28.8.43): "I set forth this morning in a perfect deluge to do the shopping, and then to have my hair done at 10.30; I only emerged just in time to catch the 12.15 bus. I returned in an even worse deluge, amply making up for the many weeks of drought, and the rain didn't stop until teatime... We later watched the swallows and martins beginning to gather together for their long journey; Harrie said *'Another day, perhaps three, and they will go to Daddy'*."

"The trees are already beginning to turn in small patches; it will be a very early winter I think, rather unluckily as they tell us coal will be scarcer than ever. Still we shall all be buoyed up by the thought that perhaps it will be the last winter of the war. I don't feel too sure of it all the same; things seem to have been dragging along slowly lately — though perhaps not to the people at the business end of our bomber trips. We heard them going out again in great numbers last night." Her trip to the hairdresser had been partly in response to suggestions from John earlier in the year, when we had sent both a sketch and some magazine cuttings to indicate what he would like: "To return to my hair, the girl cut a good deal off in front, and I feel rather queer. However it doesn't really look so very different, only brushed up in front instead of plastered down. She says I ought to wear curlers in bed!!! So if you get scratched when you come home, darling, you will have yourself to blame for urging me to change my style."

On 30th August she was delighted to receive two of John's letters, the most recent posted on 21st August,



Sketch sent by John recommending a 'Pompadour' style hairdo for Maida.

and a package containing a natural bath sponge, which was a lovely surprise. "Thank you a thousand times. Harriet and I put it to soak at once, and she kept rushing back and forth calling to everyone in turn 'Come and see it's flattening out!'" It is a very nice one, darling, only I wish it hadn't cost you so much. I shall count it as my birthday present."

"I am thrilled to hear how much surgery you are doing, and the wonderful news that you may be sent home definitely after 4½ years, although I daren't count on it too much; it is the biggest thrill I've had since you went. That would bring you home in the spring which would be heavenly, much better than arriving in the middle of a wartime winter from the point of view of material comfort. We have had Arthur and Gertrude Findlay here to tea today on their way to Stansted. They brought us some lovely peaches... and were very sweet to Harriet. She, I regret to say, was considerably more interested in the arrival of her wheelbarrow, which had been to Eaden Lilley's

to be repaired... She could hardly wait to finish her tea before the happy moment when, with a breathless 'Can—I—get—down—please?' she scrambled down and could rush off to wheel it down the orchard for a load of apples."

"I hadn't done much gardening for several weeks, being discouraged by the drought. The grass is still all brown, but the rain has been sufficient to bring up four rows of spinach and one of carrots, which I planted about three weeks ago. If they do well, they will be a help for the winter, when bought vegetables are likely to be scarce. I now have room for some more greens and hope to buy the plants this week... I dreamed last night that you were home again and cuddling me in your arms. Darling, when will it be more than a dream?... your own, own Maida."

Her diary entries for September recorded that the apple picking was demanding a good deal of time and energy. With help from Mamma and Adda she picked 70 lbs of dessert apples on the 10th and 200 lbs. of dessert and Bramley Seedling apples on the 25th. She had also added fire-watching to her outside activities, although she only recorded one air raid alert in the whole month.

Only one letter from that time has survived, written on 15th September when her Aunt Nonin had come to stay: "This morning we all went into Cambridge to show Nonin the shops and give her 'elevenses'... I took her to tea at the Clapham's yesterday. I asked Sir John's advice about writing to our M.P. about you, darling, and he thought it better not, and Colonel Luard, who is a friend of Mr. Pickthorn's, said the same*. As I rather feel myself they may be right I am doing nothing for the present, especially as in your very last letter you seemed to think fairly definitely you would be getting home not later than next summer. I do hope you won't think I've failed you, darling; but you didn't actually tell me to do it, so I thought you meant me probably to use my discretion, such as it is."

"Margie is due to arrive on Friday for the weekend and she leaves on Monday and Nonin on Tuesday. I am almost certainly going up with Nonin to London to help her change over to Paddington and will combine it with a call on Uncle Philip, and a meal, I hope, with Richenda Blaker... I have been wanting a day in town for some time, and it would be nice to combine it with doing Nonin a good turn; she is elderly to be travelling in these days of crowded trains etc. Fancy,

* Sir John Clapham was Professor of Economic History at Cambridge and Mr Pickthorn was their M.P.

she is over 75; she is wonderfully spry, much more so than Mamma really.”



BY THE BEGINNING OF September the Allies had defeated the Axis forces in Sicily and were ready to move on to mainland Italy. They were aided in this by the changes at the top of the Italian government. After General Badoglio took over from Mussolini on July 26th the new government entered into secret negotiations with the Allies and agreed that they would surrender. Under the terms of the armistice the Italians would be treated leniently if they aided the Allies in expelling the numerous German troops then present in Italy^{2,53}.

Montgomery's Eighth Army crossed the narrow straits separating Sicily from the mainland on 3rd September and landed near the tip of Calabria. The main invasion of the Italian mainland began at Salerno on 9th September, the day after the announcement of the armistice, mainly involving the American Fifth Army. Salerno was chosen as it was a port situated south-east of Naples which had suitable landing beaches for the invaders together with nearby airfields and major roads that could be used subsequently. A supporting operation involving British troops began on 8th September to capture the key port of Taranto.



Map 9. The three points of the Allied invasion of mainland Italy in September 1943

The German forces were, however, prepared for the Italian surrender and so were able to disarm many of their units and themselves occupy important defensive positions. Later in the month the Germans also rescued Mussolini from prison and installed him as leader of a Nazi puppet state in northern Italy.

While this was going on there was little change in Egypt and John was still being kept busy with newly arriving casualties. On 2nd September he was remembering back to September 1939: “I think we had the whole month together though it was a little spoilt by expecting to be called up any day.” On 7th September he was pleased that the temperature: “...is gradually cooling off now, especially at nights, so we are beginning to revive a bit after the drooping feeling one gets in August... Tomorrow Noel Coward is to visit the hospital. I expect I shall see him as I am Orderly Officer. I am still doing quite a lot of operating and took an appendix out on Sunday morning. However I believe we are having a graded specialist posted here soon, so the present happy state of affairs may not last very long... The news seems pretty good though it is more optimistic than it should be, I think. We still have a lot of ground to cover, all of which takes time.”

On 11th September he posted a birthday letter to Maida: “Every day now I feel more certain that I shall be able to tell you personally next year, but even this year is better than last as now I need only allow ten days for this to reach you... I consider myself very lucky at present as at the moment I am the only surgeon in the hospital. Of course this is only very temporary, but I naturally hope it will last as long as possible. On Thursday night I stayed with Mr. Mackintosh in Cairo... I very much appreciated his hospitality and returned here feeling refreshed. It was lovely to wake up in the morning to see green trees waving which were not date palms. Today is the first cool day we have had since June.”

In mid-September his hospital was continuing to receive a steady stream of casualties from the heavy fighting in Italy. As well as the demands of work they did, however, manage to fit in some recreational activities (17.9.1943): “I have just had a very amusing game of hockey between sides composed indiscriminately of sisters, officers and other ranks. As I am officially games officer, I had the difficult task of trying to please everyone in regard to a place on the field which they considered suitable for themselves. However the rabble gradually became arranged and we had a very good game.”

“Another surgeon has arrived whom I rather

like, a Major Bickford. We are also likely to get an Orthopaedic Specialist, but this will not affect me as I am not keen to become merely a bone setter, though this is an important side of a general surgeon's job. My hundred patients have now shrunk to 50, but I still seem to be kept pretty busy looking after them. I am now in the comfortable position of knowing them pretty well, and they give me more respect than at first... The nights are now pleasantly cool though the afternoons are still hot. Yesterday I saw the first European Swallow with its beautiful white breast and powerful energetic flight which makes the local Egyptian Swallow appear mangy and feeble by comparison."

"We are all feeling cheerful tonight because we feel the Fifth Army is now out of danger and we shall soon have Naples in our hands. I feel sure we shall start some new big attack within a month in some other country. Most people are thinking the German war will finish next summer, especially as the Russians continue to do well. It is exciting to think the Italian fleet now lies captive in Alex very much like the French fleet, which has only recently left. I hope perhaps I shall see them if I get some leave soon. What a year of achievement it has been."

The rest of September continued in much the same way. He was thinking of Maida on 22nd September, her birthday: "...and wondering whether I shall be home by my birthday... I am just starting a book of Winston Churchill's called 'The River War' which deals with Kitchener's campaign in the Sudan. He seems to have been the first to realise the importance of railways in fighting. On Thursday we are going to play a tennis match against No. 6 Hospital who have Col. Jones playing for them. I hope I shall be able to show him I have completely recovered from pneumonia. In fact, I think I am now getting a little bit fat, but I put that down to no smoking and sleeping in the afternoons. We would play more tennis but can only get six balls in 4 months which makes things difficult. I seem to have taken on a big job as games officer, but I quite enjoy it as it brings me into contact with other people."

On 23rd September John replied with clear irritation to Maida's letter of the 15th: "I was interested to get the news that Sir John Clapham and Colonel Luard both thought it better not to write about getting home. I wish you had asked them whether they had ever been separated from their wives for 4 years, and if not whether they were prepared to undergo this ordeal. I think we should bring the facts to the

notice of M.P.s as often as possible, as it is quite certain nothing will be done unless we do make a fuss. Also they can't plead shipping as an excuse now that the Mediterranean is open and the passage takes only two weeks. The chief reason that nothing is done is that it affects only the minority of people out here; the great majority have only been out since 1941."

"I should like you to write to our M.P. saying that in view of the improved shipping situation, and the opening up of the Mediterranean, you hope that immediate measures will be taken to arrange home leave for those who have been separated from their wives for 4 years and over. You might state that your husband has been abroad since Nov. 16th. 1939, and that you have a child over 3 years old who has never seen her father yet. I know we can both stick it, but why should we when so many people are living comfortably at home? Don't be put off by the stay-at-homes who naturally have everything to gain by keeping people like me working abroad as long as possible. If we don't stick up for ourselves no one else will. I was sorry to see in today's paper that Grigg* hadn't given way at all so far, and only made a vague promise to get people home after five years."

At the end of the month (29.9.1943) John returned to what was clearly an ongoing worry: "Our chief trouble here at the moment is thieves. Almost every night something is stolen from the tents by local natives. However so far I have all my things (touch wood) and have insured for loss by thieves up to £100. I also sleep with a loaded shot gun by my side but even the most active of us sleep deeply at times and can be caught napping. All my love, sweetheart. I am enclosing a rather bad photo of myself just to show you I am still capable of smiling occasionally."



RECEIPT OF JOHN'S EXPLICIT instructions prompted Maida to write at once to Mr. Pickthorn. On 9th October she was able to report back to John: "I had an answer from Mr. Pickthorn this afternoon. I am afraid I wasn't expecting an answer at all, such is my low opinion of human nature, so it was a pleasant surprise to get a very nice letter. I have foolishly stuck

* Sir James Grigg was the Secretary of State for war in the British coalition government.

it up inside an envelope I am sending you with one or two rather poor snaps; but the gist of it was that he fully sympathised with our troubles and thinks that an increasing number of people are coming to the opinion that something must be done about it. He ends up: *'I will put your husband's case before the Minister of War without mentioning names as an example of the kind of thing that needs his attention'*. So I hope something will come of it. I put all you told me in your letter and added that you were being prevented from doing your F.R.C.S. which you could do if you were stationed in this country, so I think I ought to have melted the hardest heart. I hope so, anyway."

"This afternoon I snatched an hour from apple-picking to visit Mrs. Harta in Addenbrooke's Hospital. She has been unlucky enough to break, or rather crack, her leg bone near the hip, and will be laid up for 3 months... She was very sweet and glad to see me; I shall go again next week. I enjoyed the hospital smell, which reminded me of the days when I used to come to fetch you, darling, and the first big hug I used to get when we got to your room."

October was the main apple picking season in the orchard at Queen Edith's Way. Their main crop was Bramleys which were mainly sold to Newnham College, who arranged the collection. The income was a welcome addition to the household finances as they received a cheque for £70. It did, however, entail a lot of effort, as the trees were old and large. "We have now 5 cwt. of apples in the house awaiting collection, having already sent over 10 cwt. There are about 4 cwt. more still on the trees*. We are all getting tired of them. Before the orchard was dry enough to start picking this morning I cut out Harriet's first little skirt, 12 inches long... She has been thoroughly enjoying the apple picking; while we work she plays about and climbs in the trees as good as gold. When I look down through the branches I can see her little face peeping up just as rosy and round as the apples themselves."

Picking was still ongoing on 13th October: "Each day after lunch for the past 4 days we have been dealing with apples for dear life. I think I told you what a muddle there has been over collecting them this time. However the end is at last in sight, and there are only about 2 cwt. more to pick, which I hope to do tomorrow afternoon; they are to be collected on Friday. No less than 7 cwt. went off today; they have been all over the house, as no cases were sent off by Newnham, and the carrier had no choice but to bump

them into sacks and onto the cart, which was sad as we always pride ourselves on sending them in such good condition. But he had waited about at Newnham for an hour and couldn't get hold of anyone who knew anything about anything."

"Luckily, he has proved to be a nice and resourceful man, so he brought along some sacks and boxes of his own, but it has been far more work for Adda and me, and really very exasperating. Still, it's nice to think of all the money they are worth, and I expect when they are finally cleared off we shan't have such evil thoughts of the people in the Newnham kitchens." Mamma had gone off for a short visit to friends and Harriet had helped with her packing: "She is such a little pet, and so sensible and helpful. For the last few days she has been having, as a teatime treat, chocolate to drink made with some chocolate powder you sent in a parcel a little time ago. Alas: it is nearly all gone now. She has enjoyed it so much, especially as it was from Daddy."

On 16th October Maida wrote: "This week has simply flown past, as I have been so busy all the time. I will give you an account of my doings since I wrote on Wednesday. On Thursday morning I was at the canteen, back for lunch, and immediately afterwards out into the orchard for a final apple picking, and we got 2½ cwt. not finishing till about 5.0 o'clock, very tired and dirty... I found that what might be called the mopping-up operations were the worst of all, as naturally it meant getting at all the apples which had proved awkward to reach in the original picking, and so had been passed over. I was very thankful when all was done."

"On Friday I was in Cambridge all morning shopping and having my hair washed, not before it needed it after being so much in the apple trees... Mamma arrived back about 4.45 looking really better for her little change and having had a very nice time; and the apple man came about 5.15... This morning I had to make another quick trip to Cambridge early, as the meat hadn't arrived when I went to the butcher's yesterday, but I was back at 11.0 and after a cup of tea went out to the garden to reorganise all our supplies of manure for the coming season."

"First, I cleared all the old rubbish out of the pit, making a fine mound of rich-looking black compost. Then I began filling it up again with the new rubbish and sprinkled it with ADCO. Then came the job of shifting a load of farmyard manure, which I have been lucky enough to get from the milkman, from near the garage down to the end of the garden. In

* One hundredweight (cwt) is about 51 kg.

THE TIME HAS COME

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this I was helped by all the family including Harriet with her little barrow, and we just managed to get it all nicely done before lunch. Then I took Harrie out; then called on Mrs. Harta in hospital and took her some books, went on to the opening meeting of the Cercle Britannique for this term, returned home at 6.0, bathed Harrie and gave her a hair wash, had dinner and here I am."

A few days later (19.10.1943) she wrote again saying she had been surprised to receive a second letter from Mr. Pickthorn's secretary, enclosing *'with Mr. Pickthorn's compliments'* a copy of the letter he had had from the War Minister. "While exuding sympathy, it made no definite promises, and finished with the familiar assurance that it is always present in their minds i.e. the hardship of those who have been abroad a long time; so I'm afraid it doesn't look as if the official wheels are going to turn much faster as yet... I have heard of two people lately who had just received wires to say their husbands were on the way home, but neither from Egypt. I can't even imagine what it must be like to have a really definite hope like that. Darling, if you do come unexpectedly, you will ring me up from the port so that I can meet you in London or somewhere, won't you? I would so love to have you all to myself at first, unless you would rather come straight home to see little Harriet at the first possible moment."

"I am reading such a charming book called 'Admiral's Wife'... It is about Mrs. Boscawen, the wife of one of Pitt's admirals, and is mainly composed of her letters written to him while he was at sea, from about 1744 onwards. She was so much in love and felt just like I do darling, and like myself too her one consolation was in her children. In some ways it was worse for her, as when he sailed for India on

one occasion, she couldn't hope even to hear he had arrived for 18 months. But she went on writing just the same, all about the small details of her life, and it sheds a most entertaining light on the eighteenth century and its problems, the remarkable thing being that they differed so little from ours; one letter complains that there is a leaking pipe in the kitchen and the plumber, or 'governor of the pipes' as she calls him, couldn't come till the next day... you can well imagine how much I find myself in sympathy with her across the two centuries which divide us."

"I have been to the Welfare this afternoon with Mrs. Luard. Most of the babies seemed to have gained poorly, or even lost weight; I suppose the colder weather is responsible. There seems to be a good deal of illness about, and most people can only look forward to the coming winter with any equanimity by assuring themselves that it is likely to be the last of the war."



THE START OF OCTOBER (1.10.1943) continued busy for John with more patients arriving, presumably from the continued fighting in Italy. The weather was unpleasant: "...blowing a sandstorm and very hot and thousands of flies about to make matters worse." Two days later: "...has been a ghastly hot day — almost the hottest of the year, I think, with a scorching breeze from the south. I seem to have been drinking pints of lemonade all day long." His letter of 6th October referred to the ongoing strikes in the British coal mining industry, displaying a lack of sympathy for the miners: "The coal strikes are certainly an unpleasant reminder of class warfare. It is a pity civilians cannot be subjected to the same discipline as those in the forces. The whole key to living in a civilised manner is discipline, and this can never be achieved by allowing people to do what they like. In fact, if I was asked to propound a slogan for post-war politics I should say *'Less freedom of action and more discipline'*. To get freedom of speech and freedom of the press we must have less economic freedom."

Problems in the mining industry had been ongoing for some time. The 1,900 mines were all in private ownership and their coal output was insufficient to meet the national need. In the autumn of 1943 the coal shortage was of the order of twenty to thirty million tons per annum. This would have needed 80,000

additional men to extract, but miners were also in short supply. Many of the younger ones had joined the armed forces, a job which was better paid than mining and actually perceived as being less dangerous. The conditions down the mines were generally poor, and the war effort had increased the number of shifts the men were required to work. The average pay was significantly below the national average manual wage and industrial relations were very poor. There was no easy way to resolve the situation, but the government was eventually forced to intervene in 1944 to increase their pay⁵⁴.

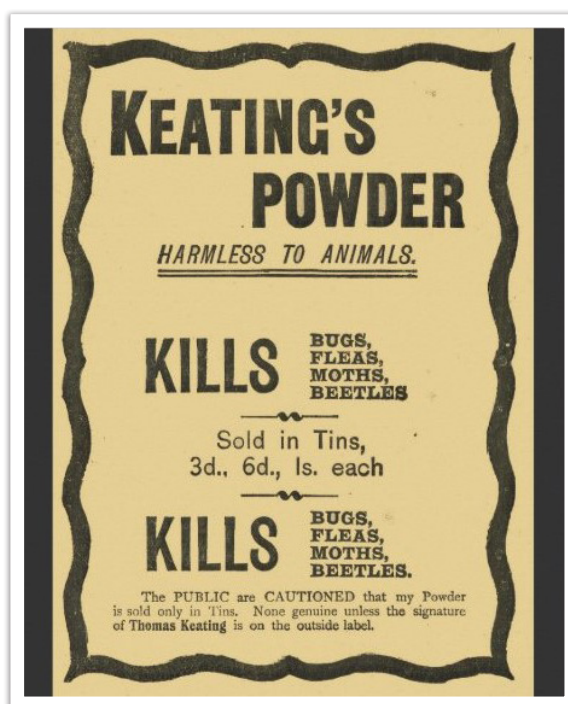
On 8th October John commented: "My own darlingest — It is nice to hear of you talking about cold weather. It is still very much the reverse here, though not so bad as last week. I don't think I should feel the cold of the English winter very much, as the Egyptian winter in the desert as lived in tents without heating seems just as cold. I have received an Airgraph from Margie. She has got a record number of words on it and seems to have enjoyed gossiping immensely. She says that Harriet is '*a most attractive person*' and, what is better news, '*is so like Maida*'."

He was shortly due for a fortnight's leave in Cairo and wrote again on 12th October: "I am going to try and send my civilian clothes home in case they get left behind here for good in the event of my moving. I am sorry to hear the Germans are starting air raids again. They don't seem to be beaten yet although the Russians are still advancing. I am afraid the German generals have now taken over from Hitler, and we shall find it more difficult to obtain the sweeping victories of the last year in future."

"We are very much afraid that Major Till, who was the surgical specialist here, may have been taken prisoner by the Germans in Cos*. It brings one back to earth to know that someone who was in the mess three weeks ago is either dead or a prisoner. He was a very good fellow... It was his first experience of active fighting." This letter hinted that he had some news about a likely forthcoming move, but he was not allowed to discuss the destination in letters home. Hearing the fate of Major Till made Maida concerned that John might be sent to either Greece or Italy.

John spent his last day before going on leave packing up all his belongings. "I am going to take my civvy clothes to Cairo tomorrow with the intention of sending them off to you via Cooks. The clothes are all in good condition as they leave me and I have put

* The Greek island.



Poster for Keating's Powder.

in some Keating's powder, or the army equivalent, so they should arrive all right... I have now managed to cut my luggage down to one trunk, two suitcases, one valise and one kit-bag. It sounds far too much, but I am sorry to say that your old oak trunk is full not of clothes but of little brick-bracks which I find very precious — such things as drawing pins and rubber bands and Keatings powder and hundreds of other little odds and ends that make life worth living."

On 18th October he was back in Cairo: "I am writing to you today starting at 7.45 a.m. I think it is the first letter I have ever written quite so early, but I feel so well and full of energy that I want to write and tell you how things are going. I have been on leave three days now and am having a really interesting time... I am staying in one of the hotel-pensions in the town where I have been before for one night... Yesterday I met a N.Z. Lieut. who was a patient of mine at Safaga. He seemed rather under the weather with being away from home for so long, but we went first to a piano concert and then had a good supper with some vin rosé."

"On my first evening here I went to a free piano concert by Solomon, who is really magnificent at the piano. He played the Waldstein Sonata of Beethoven's which I try to play myself. There are so many good things to go to every night here that it is impossible to

get bored provided you can find a friend to go with. I am having ten lessons in French at the Berlitz, really just for mental exercise. I have had one so far and was taught by a man who insisted on shouting at me, so I shouted back. I think the whole building could hear! However I was almost laughing most of the time at the silly questions and enjoyed it thoroughly."

This relaxed state of affairs did not last long as his next letter written on 23rd October was to tell Maida that he had just been posted again and was therefore missing out on the second week of leave. He had had to return hurriedly to 22 General Hospital and was now waiting to be transferred to his new address, which would be No. 10, C.C.S., M.E.F.: "I have not worked at a Casualty Clearing Station before so that will be of some interest. I am going to a place which I helped to capture with the 4th R.H.A., so I know all about it. It is on the coast and will be interesting from an ornithological point of view."

Casualty Clearing Stations were responsible for the evacuation and immediate treatment of battlefield casualties and were situated as closely as possible behind the front line. They were staffed by medical officers, orderlies and stretcher-bearers. Reference to the War Diary of No. 10 C.C.S. shows that it was at that time stationed in Tobruk and was in the process of packing up its equipment to bring back to Egypt⁵⁵. Based on John's comments they then ended up somewhere near Mersa Matruh but did not start to arrive there until 4th November. Meanwhile on 29th October John had got to Alexandria and was stuck there waiting for his onward transport to meet up with them. As he was staying in a 'fairly good hotel' this was some compensation for having missed the rest of his leave.

He was still in Alexandria the following week and had by then developed a bad cold, but: "...with so much rest and good food I should be able to get rid of it before the journey... I have met several old R.H.A. friends here — three to be exact, Major Lomas (used to be Capt.) Major Fletcher (used to be Lieut.) and Lieut. Plant (still Lieut.). The reason for this last apparently is that he has married an Egyptian woman with pots of money, a thing which seems to make one extremely unpopular, perhaps mostly from jealousy. At any rate I always liked him as he was so good at telling funny stories." On 5th November he commented: "I don't think I have ever spent so long in a hotel before continuously... You may be interested to hear that my cold has completely disappeared already without leaving me with a beastly cough as it usually

does. In fact that used to be the worst part of the cold for me. I hope it is due to giving up smoking. I am expecting to be here until next Thursday."

John went on to say that he had been able to visit Professor Oliver F.R.S., a distinguished botanist who had been Professor of Botany at the University of Cairo from 1929 – 1935. John had heard about him from Maida via Professor Fritsch, another botanist whose wife she knew: "He is a great old man, very full of himself, who lives at Burgh el Arab only about 40 miles from Alamein. He stayed there all the time during the fighting and can claim to be the nearest British civilian to the front line at that time a year ago. We talked mostly about climbing. He was a pioneer of climbing and winter sports in the Alps and told me how he had saved someone's life while climbing on Lliwedd near Snowdon. It was close to the place where I very nearly had an accident once. His family come from Woodburn in Northumberland (near Otterburn), and his house is decorated with many water colour paintings of Northumberland done by his father... I very much enjoyed having tea with him, and only pray that he didn't get my cold. All my love, darlingest. Not much longer now, I hope. Your own, John".

He finally arrived at his new unit on 11th November to find three of Maida's letters waiting for him: "We are right in the desert at the moment, but I can't tell you any more except that I was here in June 1941. We played bridge last night and I managed to make a little slam which we had bid. As it was doubled we had the satisfaction of raking in 10 piastres... Actually I don't often play, but the evening is very long here. We have our evening meal at 5.30 and it is then almost dark. After that we have to fill in the time until 10.0."

On 15th November he was remembering that the following day would be: "...the 4th anniversary of the cold morning I left you at Crookham. I remember it so well, darling, and wondered why you cried so much, but you were right after all. I never thought I should be away so long. Don't worry about it anymore, it will be all right... Don't send anything else off in view of my moving... I am very fit after what was virtually 3 week's holiday. I expect you will think me very fat: I weigh 13½ stone! All my love, darling. Your own husband John." This was to be the very last letter John wrote from Egypt. Although he had dropped strong hints that he might be on the way home, he was not allowed to tell Maida this. According to the War Diaries, No. 10. C.C.S embarked at Alexandria

on 17th November and joined a convoy which then returned to the UK via Sicily⁵⁵.



ON 21ST OCTOBER MAIDA had received John's letter of 12th October saying that he was going to dispatch his big trunk full of clothes. She still had no idea that he was coming home so wrote back saying: "It will be rather heartbreaking to have your luggage without you, but I agree with you that it's a good idea. I hadn't realised there was any likelihood of your moving. I do hope, darling, you won't be sent into the battle zone again. I just couldn't bear it; it was rather a shock to hear someone from your mess had been sent to Cos. Still I suppose it's no use having one's husband a soldier and expecting him not to do any active service, so if you do go away from the base again, darlings, don't keep the news from me just to stop me worrying."

Following a request from John: "I have visited two shops to enquire about tennis balls to find them both temporarily shut. Shops are so short-handed now that many of the smaller ones have to close down altogether if the staff want a holiday. But I am afraid my generous offer to send them didn't altogether reckon with hard facts, as I hear balls are practically unobtainable now... Harriet is beginning at a babies' dancing class tomorrow. I thought it would be good for her to see some more children, and it ought to be quite fun for her." Three more letters written in November did not reach John until after he got home. The envelopes are marked in red 'Left M.E.'*

On 5th November she had taken Harriet dancing again: "...she is improving a little and certainly feels her feet more in every sense of the word. Miss King thinks her *'very excitable'* but that she is settling down quite well. She certainly enjoys it so much that she can't keep still a minute... The room was terribly dusty today; they had to lie on their backs and roll over, and there was a chorus of groans from the Mammias as we saw each little pair of panties completely black behind! However we have all, I think, learned to take them in old and washable clothes... Darling sweet, all my love is with you. I am thinking of you so much and wondering how the new job is turning out. I am

* Middle East.



Envelope from the last letter Maida sent to Egypt, marked 'Left M.E.' (Middle East).

longing for your first letter about it."

Her next letter (13.11.1943) described making Harriet bibs out of an old pram cover while a friend had made one out of the old flag of their yacht: "So you see to what ingenuities we mothers are driven to nowadays." She was amused to hear that John had put on weight although she had got much thinner: "I expect the three weeks at Alex in the hotel did you good, darling. I am quite pleased you were marooned there for so long, as it will have made you feel quite at home in hotels. I used to feel we sometimes didn't get our money's worth out of them owing to our both being somewhat intimidated! Now you will escort me with the air of an oriental potentate to any hotel, no matter how many rooms it has!"

"I have been having tea with Mrs. Fritsch this afternoon. As usual, she did almost all the talking but I managed to report your visit to Prof. Oliver. She seemed rather surprised you had enjoyed it so much; I gathered he can be very stiff and rude. So evidently he must have had the good taste to like you... I am ashamed to say that on the actual anniversary of your going away I never noticed the date, just as well perhaps as it would have made me sad to have the long four years impressed on me. I can never forget that awful morning, darling; it was a good thing you were more optimistic than I was, sweetheart, it made it a bit easier even though I felt sure you were wrong... All my heart is yours for ever. Your own Maida."

No letters sent in December made it back to Cambridge, so Maida turned to her diary. At the start of the month they had one of Harriet's friends to stay as her mother was ill with flu. This was hard work

as she was very homesick. No letters were coming from John and Harriet was unwell. Her work at the army canteen was also very busy as men from the Eighth Army were being sent home to train for the planned invasion of Europe. On one occasion she was reprimanded in a menacing way by a British soldier for speaking kindly in Italian to one of a group of Italian prisoners who had somehow been allowed to come along. She responded tartly that her husband had been serving in the M.E.F. as a Medical Officer for four years and had treated Italian prisoners equally as well as Allied troops. This silenced him, but the atmosphere was tense and Maida was tired and upset for the rest of the day.

Then on Sunday December 12th her diary entry was written in capital letters: 'JOHN RETURNED 4.0 a.m.' He had landed at Greenock on the Clyde in Scotland on 9th December with the rest of the Unit from the Casualty Clearing Station but they were ordered not to communicate with their families until they had reached their destination. In the middle of the long train journey South someone said: '*Where is our destination anyway?*' and the reply was '*Cambridge*'. So entirely fortuitously John found himself on Cambridge station in the early hours of Sunday morning. The Colonel in charge tried to persuade him that it would be a shame to wake Maida up, but he persisted that she would be pleased to see him even at that time of night. As no transport was available, he rang home and then set off on foot carrying all his equipment to cover the two miles from the station to Queen Edith's Way. Maida wrote that she never forget how he looked when she let him in — he seemed to fill the entire doorway and was home again at last. They had been apart for just over four years and this was the most wonderful moment.

C H A P T E R 13

Back In England

1944

FOR WINSTON CHURCHILL, FRANKLIN D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin, the three key leaders of the Allied forces, it was crucial to the successful progress of the war that they had an agreed policy between them. They therefore met in person at the end of November 1943 at the Tehran Conference and it was there that the plans for the D-Day landings were formalised. The cross-channel invasion of France (Operation Overlord) would be launched in the summer of 1944. This would combine the land, air, and sea forces of the British and American armies in what was to become the largest amphibious invasion in military history. Meanwhile the Russians would keep up the pressure on the Germans along their Eastern front².

The Germans were expecting an invasion and they had therefore fortified the entire coast of Northern France, Belgium and Holland in preparation. This involved constructing the Atlantic Wall, a 2,400-mile line of obstacles including mines, underwater obstructions and tank ditches together with numerous concrete bunkers and pillboxes containing heavy artillery dug into the cliffs overlooking potential landing beaches^{56,57,58}. On the English side of the Channel, it was impossible to hide all signs of preparation but also crucial to success that the Allies did not reveal exactly where the landings would begin. As surprise was an essential element, they also agreed to develop a plan to mislead the Germans and take their attention away from Normandy. Over the following months they systematically constructed an invasion force consisting on paper of imaginary British and American armies complete with model tanks, dummy landing craft and false wireless signals. This indeed succeeded in convincing the Axis forces that the invasion would cross the Channel at its narrowest point in the Pas de Calais region. It was therefore here that Hitler concentrated the bulk of his panzer divisions.

By the start of 1944 the Americans were providing the predominant strength for the real invasion including army, navy and air forces. They were also sending vast dumps of food, fuel and ammunition together with trucks, tanks, and tens of thousands of troops over to the UK. In January 1944 General Dwight Eisenhower was therefore appointed as the Supreme Commander of the Allied invasion forces⁵⁸. General Montgomery was assigned under him to command the 21st Army Group, consisting of all the Allied ground forces participating in Operation Overlord. Montgomery therefore returned to Britain in January 1944 to review and develop the existing invasion plans. In the first half of 1944 preceding the invasion the American and British air forces also conducted a massive bombing campaign targeting railroad bridges and roadways in Northern France to hinder the Germans from relocating their reserves when the time came. John was a great admirer of General Montgomery, as he had witnessed at first-hand the success of his command in Egypt, so he was now confident of Monty's leadership in Europe.

Cambridge

JOHN HAD RETURNED TO England in December 1943 attached to No. 10. Casualty Clearing Station, which had been despatched to a new base in Cambridge. They were stationed in a house at No. 7 West Road and John was allowed to live at home and commute to work each day 'like an office job'. He remained with this unit for the first three months of 1944. As all the unit had previously been stationed for some time in the Middle East, they were all due for leave, varying in length from 2 to 4 weeks. Perhaps because he was already at home, John's own leave was delayed and he was left in charge of a small group while the majority dispersed on holiday. His C.O.

WAR DIARY
Dec. 1943. OR *Sheet 1.*
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.
(Erase heading not required.) *10 (No. 2) C.C.S.*
Reit. R.P. [Signature]

Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence
Summaries are contained in F.S. Regs., Vol. I.
Title pages will be prepared in manuscript.

Hour, Date, Place.	Summary of Events and Information.	Remarks and references to appendices.
0400. 9. XI. 43 GREENOCK	Barvy arrived here this morning.	P.R. [Signature]
12. XI. 43 CAMBRIDGE.	Main party arrived Cambridge early in the morning. Detachment under Major Aylett arrived here yesterday. Parallel preparations made to receive unit.	P.R. [Signature]
15. XI. 43. "	Almost the unit has gone on leave for periods of a fortnight, three weeks or four weeks. Capt. [Name] and a small party remaining.	P.R. [Signature]
29. XI. 43. "	C.O. returned from leave. About half the personnel of the unit also returned from leave today.	P.R. [Signature]

Extract from the War Diary, No.10. Clinical Clearing Station, September 1939 to December 1943. WO 177/637⁵⁵.

Major Aylett returned on 29th December and most of their equipment arrived on 7th January 1944. John then began the 4 weeks leave to which he was entitled on 8th January when most of the others were back^{55,59}.

During the first half of 1944 staff at the military hospitals were being trained as thoroughly as the fighting units to play their part in the forthcoming campaign. Montgomery recorded his views of the Army Medical Services in his Memoirs, written after the war had ended⁶⁰. *'The good general must not only win his battles; he must win them with a minimum of casualties and loss of life. I learnt during the 1939 - 45 war that four things contributed to the saving of life: (1) Blood transfusion; (2) Surgical teams operating well forward in the battle area, so a badly wounded man could be dealt with at once without having to be moved by road to a hospital; (3) Air evacuation direct to a Base hospital many hundreds of miles in rear, thus saving bumpy journeys by road or rail and (4) Nursing sisters working well forward in the battle area..... No male nursing orderly can nurse like a woman, though many think they can.'* No. 10 C.C.S. was therefore in Cambridge to receive training ahead of the planned invasion of France.

As there were no letters needed during this period, the narrative is based on Maida's rather sparse diary entries and her memories, so little remains to describe John's first few weeks back home. His initial meeting with Harriet must have come as a big shock to her as he had arrived home in the middle of the night with no prior warning that he was even on the way. On his first day back (13.12.1943) he borrowed Maida's

bicycle and set off to work, trying to remember to ride on the left-hand side of the road after his four years in Egypt. Maida took Harriet along to meet him for lunch at the University Arms and records being: "Very, very happy."

The following day brought an unexpected concern, as they received news that Uncle Philip had been reported as missing: "The telegram came for Dees and Thompsons, the family solicitors in Newcastle, and was a horrid shock. Uncle Philip had apparently travelled up to London from Putney to visit his bank and had disappeared. John seemed to think he might have been murdered for his money and thrown in the Thames! Nothing so dramatic, however. What had actually happened was that he had fallen off a moving bus and been taken unconscious to St. George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner. As this was kept ready for air-raid casualties, he was immediately transferred to the Atkinson Morley Hospital at Wimbledon for treatment for a head injury and had not been officially admitted to either hospital." After a worrying night the news of his whereabouts caught up with them on the following day. Fortunately, he was not seriously injured.

As most of the members of No.10 C.C.S. were initially away, the work over the Christmas period was not very onerous. This enabled John to take time off to spend with Maida after their long separation. On 17th December they went to London where he ordered her a new dress, bought her a blue housecoat and they visited Uncle Philip. The following day he was able

to come home at lunchtime and spent the afternoon starting to dig the garden. Harriet had caught a cold so was in bed for a few days. Maida reported writing a lot of letters and carrying on with ordinary chores such as housework and going into Cambridge to buy food. On 21st December she went to help at the Welfare and recorded her weight fully clad but without shoes as being 8 st 9 lb. She commented that John had asked her to weigh herself as he was upset to find her so thin.

They had various local friends in for drinks in the lead up to Christmas. On Christmas Eve John helped Maida carry the food and turkey home from Cambridge and Harriet was now well enough to get up for tea. On Christmas Day Maida went with Mamma to the early service at St John's College chapel. Harriet enjoyed opening her stocking in bed and then came down after breakfast for the rest of her presents. John had to spend most of the day with his unit, so they had their own Christmas lunch on Boxing Day. This was followed by an embarrassing tea party with Lady Clapham: "Lady Clapham had managed to make a Christmas cake with the meagre materials available and to my horror I saw John, straight from the flesh pots of Egypt, putting butter (almost unobtainable) on his slice. Every eye was on him, but he was completely oblivious!"

During his formal leave period in January they left Harriet with Mamma and Adda to enjoy two trips away. As an army officer John was entitled to free First Class travel on the trains, and they managed to pack a lot in. The weekend of January 8th to 10th was spent in London, meeting up with Dick and Hilary Halpin, John and Jean Arbuthnot and Margie Phillips (Maida's cousin). They also entertained George

and Richenda Blaker to dinner and dancing at the Lansdowne Club. On 11th January they continued on to Bristol to visit John's old Aunt Winnie, and then progressed to Plymouth to stay with his brother Denis, who was stationed there at the time.

This was the first occasion that John had met Kitty, Denis' wife, and it was fun to be all together. John and Maida then returned to London and treated themselves to three luxurious nights at the Savoy Hotel. John told Maida that once when he was lying flat on his face on the desert sand being bombarded by the enemy air force, he said to himself: *'If I ever get out of this alive, we'll have a night at the Savoy'*. Dorothy Williams came to lunch one day, and on the last day they had lunch with Robert and Nancy Bayne-Powell, before returning to Cambridge. By this time their money had run out and they had to borrow some from Robert to help pay the hotel bill. The following week they travelled to Northumberland to visit John's family at Morwick, bringing back an old doll's house which was later renovated for Harriet's next birthday present.

They then remained in Cambridge for a while, with John returning to work in February. The No. 10 C.C.S. War Diary recorded that the Unit had started their new training in January, consisting mainly in practice to pitch their tents, lectures for the nursing orderlies and gas drill⁵⁹. At the end of February they were sent to Madingley (a village just outside Cambridge) on a training drill which consisted of getting all the tents and equipment such as an X-ray unit and lighting set up in a field and then camping there for 4 days. Maida remembered that it was a very cold winter with snow. As the men were all acclimatised to the heat of Egypt this proved quite an ordeal.

On 9th March Maida was already pregnant again, so they made a visit to Dr. Budd to book his services for the birth of their next baby. On 11th March John had another period of leave and managed to resurrect Griselda (the car) from her long layoff in the garage. Maida noted that it was lovely to have her on the road again. On 13th March they drove to Marlow and stayed at the Compleat Angler, a large hotel next to the Thames which they had occasionally visited from Wycombe before the war. It was, however, too cold to enjoy the river, and Maida now described the hotel as pretentious, expensive and disappointing. It apparently became notorious in wartime as a place where 'officers stayed with other peoples' wives'.

This trip was again packed with visits to see old friends and acquaintances. The next day they had tea with Bob Staniland, a friend who was farming near



John with Harriet on her tricycle, taken on the Roman Road outside Cambridge.



John February 1944.



Map of England and Scotland showing locations where John was posted in 1944-45.

Reading. On 15th March they had lunch with Mrs. Ogilvie, the widowed mother of John's great friend at Rugby who had been killed in the R.A.F. earlier in the war. Her other son was also dead. It was a very sad meeting, but John was particularly anxious to visit, saying as they left: "I am proud to have known Glen." He felt the death of so many contemporaries very deeply. They drove home to Cambridge on 16th March, calling in on two more friends on the way, Joy Partridge and Mary Hughes (owner of the Tower Mill at Burnham Overy Staithe and one of Harriet's godmothers).

The following day, 17th March, John heard that he had been posted to the Military Hospital at Shaftesbury. This offered more surgical training with the hope of finally becoming a surgeon. This would enable him to be posted as a surgeon and also entitle him to reach a higher rank and receive more pay. Although sad at the thought of being parted again, he and Maida still had a week to enjoy together and knew that this time there would be the possibility of home leave from time to time. Griselda was therefore returned to the garage.

On 19th March John was sent to London for a short course on surgery. Maida went with him and they again packed in a lot of activities with visitors, a couple of dinners out, an exhibition of Contemporary French paintings and a concert. On the night of the 21st March they experienced their first air-raid together. Their hotel room was on the top floor and John thought that they ought to go down to a shelter but Maida was feeling sick, due to the combination of a rather nasty dinner the evening before and her pregnancy, so she flatly refused to move from the comfortable bed. The noise was deafening, mostly from anti-aircraft guns in Hyde Park, but fortunately no damage was done to the hotel. John duly set off for Shaftesbury on 25th March while Maida returned to Cambridge after what she described as a perfect week.

Shaftesbury

AS THEY WERE NOW apart again, the regular exchange of letters resumed, although now they arrived much more quickly and so formed a less disjointed

correspondence. They often contained lists of items or jobs that John wanted Maida to get or do together with plans for their fairly frequent meetings. John wrote the same day that he had arrived in Shaftesbury: "My own darlingest — I got here about 5.0 p.m. after a crowded journey... It is a hatted 600 bed hospital in beautiful surroundings. The only snag I have encountered so far is that I have been told that there are 35 Medical Officers here, which seems too many. On the other hand, I also hear there is a fair amount to do, so perhaps they balance out. The quarters seem to be very luxurious. I am sharing a bedroom with an old Captain named O.S. Thompson who only arrived yesterday. There is a radiator (boiling hot) in the bedroom and bathroom, showers and lavatory round the corner. I have already had a boiling hot bath. We had plenty of tea with chocolate biscuits on the table. The C.O. is a Colonel Williamson... I shall not meet him until tomorrow. I have not thought of any more things I need yet, darling. I am so happy with the thought of a perfect three months behind us... All my love, beloved, your own John."

Maida also wrote describing her own train journey home from London: "I so hated saying goodbye to you yesterday and felt very sad, but I soon cheered up, darling, as I know you would want, and had a good welcome home... Mamma was at the station to meet me. I found Harrie in the garden full of beans, though she was very disappointed that you weren't with me. She had been told, but I think she kept hoping you would turn up all the same. She had told Adda she didn't mind about me if only you came. She is a bit out of hand, and I have begun taking a firm line for which she seems to bear me no malice, so now that I have more energy for being a disciplinarian I hope to get her into good shape in a week or two."

"I can never tell you how happy you have made me in these months we have been together, my darling — but perhaps you need no telling. All my thoughts are with you and I am longing to know how you are getting on. I wonder if you will have enough thin pairs of socks. I could get you some more, or would you like me to send you some soap flakes, which you can get usually with service coupons? You would only need about a teaspoonful in about a pint of hot water and it wouldn't take five minutes... I'll always remember the happiness of our days and nights together and am already beginning to look forward to our next meeting, though I'm not a bit impatient for it as I know I'll have plenty to do and think about and so will you. Your own adoring little wife, Maida."

On 27th March John reported on his first working day: "I was assisting at operations from about 8.30 a.m. to 4.0 in the afternoon with an hour off for lunch and was allowed to do two operations myself. In addition to this I had my first real interview with the O.C. Surgical Division, Lt/Col Nicholls and the O.C. Hospital, Col. M.J. Williamson*. Col. Nicholls at first frightened me by threatening to put me on the medical side temporarily until there was more room on the surgical side. However, that was apparently all bluff to test my reactions, as when it came to the point he said he could do with me all right; he had already written his reports on three other officers who are at the moment on leave, and who are also trainee surgeons — at any rate I am to have my chance for three months, and stand or fall on my merits as Col. Williamson told me."

"The atmosphere of the place is very regular army, and almost everyone in the mess is an elderly major. However the messing is very good with plenty of food to eat, which is a pleasant surprise. The town of Shaftesbury is about two miles away and is clearly visible on a hill from the hospital. On the other side is another hill rather higher, which is called Melbury Beacon. Col. Nicholls suggested that I might bring my wife down for a weekend to enjoy the hilly scenery after I had told him you lived in Cambridge... Darling, please send me a fountain pen when you have time to buy one with a fine nib, as I have to write notes on very small lines. At present I am doing the paperwork on two wards of 24 beds. It is different from the M.E.F.[†] and takes a little getting used to. It is nice to be somewhere where there is no siren to get you up, but I can hear guns firing tonight."

On 29th March John wrote again to say that he was settling in well. The idea of getting Maida down to visit was growing on him. He was also feeling more contented as he finally thought that his career as a surgeon was: "on the right road again." The following day he was busy with out-patients in the morning and a practice run for receiving casualties in the afternoon: "This is certainly a very busy hospital though there are practically no emergencies. I have been told today that I have to attend a course on penicillin at Woolwich on April 21st. (a Friday). It is all over in one day, but I might ask for 48 hours leave at the same time, which would allow us Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights... I am feeling very well and happy. It is so long

* O.C., Officer in Charge.

† Middle Eastern Force.

since I have done a full day's medical work, as opposed to C.C.S. work." Shaftesbury Hospital was a place of world-leading medical innovation and the first ever non-trial use of penicillin in the UK took place there at this time. Penicillin was the first mass-produced antibiotic available and it soon proved to be much more effective and safer in fighting bacteria than the sulphonamide drugs had been, so revolutionising the treatment of infections for the remainder of the war⁶¹.

On 31st March John commented on the ongoing war: "What a terrible loss of aeroplanes over Germany last night. I take my hat off to the R.A.F." This referred to a bombing raid on the German city of Nuremberg, an important economic and infrastructural hub. Unfortunately, the cloud cover which had been forecast that night did not materialise and the planes were clearly visible to the Germans in the moonlight. It turned into what has been described as the blackest night in R.A.F. Bomber Command history: out of the 795 Allied aircraft despatched on this mission, 95 were lost⁶¹.

Meanwhile Maida wrote back (1.4.1944) saying: "I am just as thrilled as you are that you are back at surgery again, and I love hearing about all you are doing." Adda was shortly due to go on her fortnight's annual holiday to spend Easter with her cousins at Worksop: "Harriet and I went to her dancing lesson yesterday afternoon. She is due for four more which I have already paid for, and after that I will stop them for the summer as she really prefers being in the garden. After tea... the telephone rang, and whoever do you think it was? Gervase Markham! He returned to England in November after being to Tunis with his gunners, then back to Alexandria and then to Sicily; on reaching Messina and firing a few rounds across into Italy they were told they were coming home."

"Darlingest, to think we might meet on April 21st. Even if you don't get 48 hours leave, we might manage to have the two nights together in London. Adda will be back by then, so I could easily get away... I'm certain that by the end of three more weeks I shall be pining for you, sweetheart. It already seems far longer than a week since I said goodbye." She had had a letter from Bob Staniland inviting her to take Harriet to stay at his farm for a week in June: "I have no doubt of Harrie's enjoying it, and I'm sure I shall too. She was overcome with emotion when I told her and covered her face with her hands. The thought of a farm AND a river is enough to thrill her, and she hopes there may be swans on the latter."

Maida also described an episode relating to the

ongoing difficulties with food rationing: "While in the butcher's, I was revolted by an enormous bullock's head being carried in just past me, the horrid looking tongue nearly poking down my neck. After the first revulsion had passed, I suddenly had the brilliant inspiration of buying the said tongue. Leaving my place in the queue, I dashed to the back of the shop and did a rapid deal with the manager, as a result of which I became the possessor of the coveted (and unrationed) object for 7 shillings. It is now in pickle, and will just about be ready for you to enjoy if you do come home on the 21st."

The following day (2.4.1944) she wrote again discussing plans for the possible meeting in London later in the month. She was also feeling unwell with the pregnancy: "I have been virtuously taking my pills twice a day. Harrie usually gets them out for me, very much the doctor's daughter, her hands looking just like yours, darling, as she firmly undoes the bottle and counts out the dose... I have slept better the last night or two."

John's letter from 4th April told Maida that he had been looking around Shaftesbury for possible places for her to stay when she came for a visit. There was also more discussion about getting soap coupons to wash his socks and whether the beans that he had planted in the garden at Queen Edith's Way had come up yet. The hospital work was also going well: "This morning I have had the honour of helping the Southern Command Consultant Surgeon, Brigadier Charles Donald, do an operation for hernia on one of my patients. He was in the Royal Flying Corps in the last war and has just returned from being consultant to the Eighth Army. I am glad he is here as I think he will be more sympathetic to those of us who have been abroad a long time." Both his ward sisters had also previously been in the Middle East, and they were all getting on fairly well so far.

By the 9th April there had been a change of plan. The long weekend in London was no longer possible as the course on penicillin had been postponed, but they were still intending to have one night at the Savoy. Maida was then going to go to Shaftesbury later in May with John writing to say: "I have taken the plunge and engaged a double room at the Royal Hotel, Shaftesbury, for 17th May for a week... It is a little out of the town on the Salisbury road and stands back in its own grounds with beech trees on each side of the drive. A lady showed us some of the rooms. They have no double beds, but the furniture is fairly new, and they all have basins with running water..."

The charge is £6.6.0 each, all meals included, which seems cheap compared with London... Darling, I don't know how I ever managed to do without you for four years! Four weeks seems an awful long time now."

The next day John wrote again reprimanding Maida for doing too many jobs herself over the Easter weekend while Adda had been away on holiday. After his long stay in Egypt he was enjoying being back in the English countryside in spring: "I heard the first cuckoo this morning. It almost made me jump as I have not heard one since 1939. I saw a swallow on Saturday and everything seems to be sprouting like wild fire."

On 11th April he apologised for missing the post as he had had a very busy day: "I was assisting Major Beal all morning, and then Major Foster this afternoon until 3.0 o'clock when Brigadier Hugh Cairns, the army neurosurgeon consultant, gave us a lecture on penicillin treatment of pneumococcal meningitis. I then had to examine my new patients and get ready for a list tomorrow. On top of this I suddenly found I was Orderly Officer today." The plans had also changed again. He had now arranged to bring Maida back to Shaftesbury for the weekend immediately after their night at the Savoy.

The following day he was pleased to have received Maida's latest letter: "It is a lovely reviver to be able to read what you have been doing... I have had another busy and interesting day —operating all morning and looking at new cases this afternoon and evening. It is really a perfect job though I miss you a lot. However I think it is really better to live in if possible as you are more likely to get the work if you are on the spot." On 13th April he wrote again saying: "I have been turned into a chartered accountant today and have had to audit the accounts for the last quarter of the Officers' Mess, Sergeants' Mess and Regimental Institute*. The only thing of interest I discovered is that the mess is getting Angostura Bitters from Fortnum and Masons, but perhaps this is a longstanding order."

Most of Maida's letters from April are missing. As Adda had been away she was extra busy during this period doing the housework and cooking. In the middle of the month she commented: "I really marvel at the way Adda gets through all she does. The pastry I made yesterday is proving useful in providing puddings without any fresh cooking." She had just resigned from her work at the canteen due to her advancing pregnancy. The vegetables were coming up in the garden and she was again longing for the next

opportunity to meet up.

On 17th April she wrote saying: "Our troubles are nearly at an end, as Adda returns after tea tomorrow. I don't know why I say 'troubles' as I have really enjoyed it in many ways, the chief pleasure being the feeling that I am rehearsing for the day when we have a house of our own; but it will be nice to have her back again. As I told you I'll be arriving in London before lunch and will leave my case at the Savoy, returning there between 3.0 and 4.0. I'll wait for you in our room. Sweetheart, I just live to see you."

John's letters were also full of excitement and anticipation of their forthcoming weekend together. He was very busy at the hospital, which made the days pass quickly. His letter of 14th April was made difficult owing to a lack of paper: "I have finished my writing pad and am unable to get a new one here, so have pinched some paper from one of the wards. Unfortunately, it seems to behave like blotting paper but at any rate is better than none." The following day: "I saw an obituary notice in the Times of Peter Maclean the other day. I once stayed with his family at Ross in Herefordshire. He was rather the same type as Bob Staniland. He was killed leading his men in action in Italy as a Captain of the Grenadier Guards. Fine fellow: I am afraid I get very fed up with some of these home birds I meet here. They have absolutely no conception of what they owe to our fighting men."

On 16th April: "Today has been such a happy day for me with a hard morning's work... a sleep this afternoon, and a lovely walk after tea up Melbury Hill, where I hope I shall take you next week, darling. It is a lovely chalk down with skylarks singing and whinchats flitting about. We couldn't see very far today but I believe on a fine day you can see the Isle of Wight... tell Mamma I heard a Willow Wren singing this morning for the first time." He was continuing to enjoy his first spring in England since 1939. His good mood continued the following day, with operations from 8.30 to 4.00 followed by a game of bridge. He had also received a letter from Mr. Greaves: "Ornithology is apparently flourishing in Egypt as the Minister of State has joined amongst others. I am a bit disappointed that I have not heard from Kinnear whether I am elected to the B.O.U.†" He had been sent an invitation to apply from Mr Kinnear on his return to England in December.

From 20th to 24th April Maida visited him in Shaftesbury. John was able to live out of the hospital

* A shop where items such as Regimental ties could be bought.

† British Ornithologist's Union.



Postcard showing Melbury Hill.

for the weekend and they stayed at the Royal Hotel as planned. This was chiefly occupied by elderly refugees who had left London to escape the bombing, using it as what was known in war time as a 'funk-hole'. The weather was glorious. Maida was taken to the Mess for drinks and introduced to the other medical officers. They also climbed Melbury Beacon, to the horror of the old ladies in the hotel, who had observed that Maida was expecting a baby and did not think that she should go for such long walks.

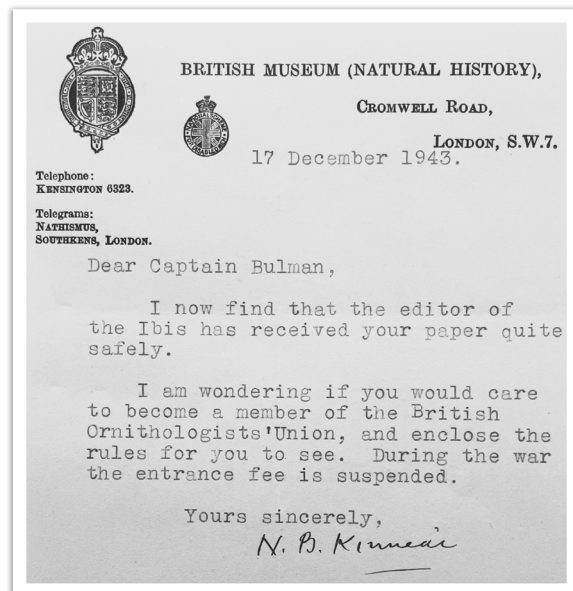
She returned to Cambridge by train on the Monday after a perfect weekend and wrote immediately: "Harrie was rather shy at first, but gave me lots of big cuddles at bedtime, and is I think very pleased to see me back. She helped me unpack and also to decant the sugar, which Mamma was delighted to see, but she says you must eat more of it yourself in future, darling." Due to the rationing, sugar was very precious and had been saved from John's individual share in the Mess: "Mamma I found rather depressed as Adda had been informing her that the cousins at Worksop have been trying to persuade her to leave us and live there in two rooms and do daily work. Mamma seemed to have visions of her going off at once, but I told her I was sure she intended no such thing and cheered her up as much as I could. She seems very glad to have me back."

"I am forwarding these Egyptian bird reviews which arrived this afternoon... I take a poorish view of Mr. Greaves having still further embroidered on your notes by his added comments at the end, which I don't remember seeing in your typescript. However it is very nice to see your name in print, and also he references to your earlier work in McLagan's article. It would be nice now if you could do a bit of writing in England, but I suppose at present you have no time or opportunity for serious birding." These comments

referred to an article which John had written entitled "Bird Notes from the Daedalus Lighthouse". These were based on some recordings made by a Mr Beale, who was the lighthouse keeper on a reef in the Red Sea and had observed the birds he saw during the spring migration of 1936. Mr Greaves had passed them on to John while he was based in Safaga, and these had come out in a Bulletin of the Egyptian Zoological Society of Egypt. In addition, he wrote another article entitled "Notes on the Birds of Safaga" relating to his own observations. The latter he had submitted to the *Ibis*, hoping that it would be published in that journal.

John also wrote on 24th April, the day Maida had left: "We have had two German airmen admitted here today who were involved in last night's raid; apparently bombs were dropped only two miles from Shaftesbury but no damage done as far as I can make out." He discovered later that the aeroplanes he and Maida had heard going over had bombed Bristol and Christchurch.

On 26th April John thanked Maida for forwarding the two ornithology Bulletins from Egypt: "I was quite pleased with my article as Mr. Greaves' notes, which are mostly off the point, were put quite separate. The truth of the matter is that he is rather jealous of me for making something of notes he has been too lazy to do anything with for years. However, I like him too much to quarrel over it... I have also had a recent letter from Mackintosh in which he says of my article *I think it*



Letter from Mr Kinnear relating to the article submitted to the *Ibis* and inviting John to join the British Ornithologist's Union.

looks very well indeed'. I feel sure after what Mr. Kinnear said that my notes will be printed in the 'Ibis' sooner or later. I must concentrate at present on getting graded but will think of writing something when that is decided."

The next day he had seen in the papers that he would be due for an extra shilling a day family allowance for their second child, which would commence three months before its birth: "This means we shall get £18 a year for its keep. I wonder what it actually does cost?" Work had been busy, with plenty of surgery: "We started yesterday morning with a long session of hernias; Pearce and I did five in the morning. I did some ward work in the afternoon, and then at supper time Major Beal asked me to help with some emergency cases. Two soldiers had been hit by a mortar at a battle school. One had a very bad compound fracture of his femur and at one time we thought he would die in the theatre. However I gave him three pints of blood and three pints of the dried plasma that Hugh Gilson showed us, and today his condition is not too bad. After these two we had a strangulated hernia and abscess which kept us going until midnight." This use of blood plasma was very new. When John had been stationed in Cambridge he and Maida had met an old prep school friend Hugh Gilson who was now working in a physiology laboratory at Cambridge University. Hugh had proudly invited them to visit a huge refrigerated room containing a large amount of stored plasma that he had prepared.

The letters for the first fortnight of May were not very cheerful. It was becoming clear that the invasion of Europe was not far ahead, and many expected that it would start before the end of the month. In John's hospital personnel were being moved around and he was expecting to be transferred to Scotland. John and Maida were hoping to meet in London on 18th May for the course on penicillin, which had been delayed from April, but they did not dare count on this in case it was again cancelled. Maida also started the month with an attack of what she called influenza, whereas John referred to it as a cold.

On 1st May John wrote saying that: "All operations have been cancelled this week, and my ward is to be turned into a medical ward. Colonel Nicholls is as annoyed as the rest of the trainees and has written a letter to higher authority saying that he cannot now provide training for everyone. I don't know what will happen but there seems a possibility that some of us may be transferred elsewhere... If the course is

definitely on, we will spend Thursday night together and you can go to get your hair done on Friday morning. Arrangements for the future are impossible in the army. Do you think the Charing Cross Hotel would be any cheaper than the Mount Royal?"

As anticipated, the army plans had already changed by the following day: "Things are looking up again, as we are not evacuating our people after all and should have a nice operation list on Friday. I spent the morning watching Major Foster and Col. Nicholls do several interesting operations and came into the mess at 12.30 to find your letter waiting for me, sweetheart. I certainly never thought I should be home last spring... It is almost frightening to think where a year more might take me, but at any rate we must make full use of our present opportunity. The last four months have been a marvellous time for me, darling — far more heavenly than anything I had hoped for. You have been such an angel from our very first night. I feel sure your cold will be getting better now, but if it isn't you must promise me to rest longer and eat more."

On 3rd May: "I feel very happy tonight as all is well with my surgery for the present. I have been moved to the ward which Capt. Pearce was previously looking after, and he has been moved to the orthopaedic department; we are a depleted mess. However I very much prefer that as I am at the moment the senior trainee." The next day he repeated how difficult it was to make firm plans: "...with the invasion looming nearer."

On 4th May Maida's infection was finally clearing: "...but I know you'll be sorry to hear that poor little Harriet has caught my germ and has been in bed all day with a bad sore throat. When she came to my bed this morning I thought she couldn't be well as she seemed so quiet and listless, and then she complained that the back of her mouth hurt." She had a temperature of 102°F but Maida found comfort in being able to share her medical worries with John now that he was back in England. A few days later on 9th May she was looking forward to the next meeting: "It is exciting to think you are planning to spend next Thursday night at the Savoy after all. I shall enjoy it immensely if it comes off — how I hope nothing will stop it. Anyhow nothing short of a disaster will stop me coming to Shaftesbury on the Friday. I will set out, invasion or no invasion."

Although Harriet was now very much better, Maida wrote again on 10th May saying that: "Mamma and Adda now have bad colds and are in the depths of

gloom; the atmosphere is more than sepulchral, and I am very unpopular for bringing the germ into the house. I suppose now it must have been a kind of flu to be so catching... I began the morning by playing Ludo with Harrie until it was warm enough for her to go out. She beat me hollow, which pleased her very much — no cheating either. With any luck I shall be with you this time tomorrow week.”

C H A P T E R 14

D-Day

1944

Corfe Mullen and Shaftesbury

ON 11TH MAY MAIDA received unexpected news by telephone from the hospital saying that John had been moved. As his latest letter had contained no hint that such a move was likely: "I am simply dying to know what it is all about. I suppose I can't possibly hear till tomorrow afternoon. I have been thinking about you so much all day, precious one — I am so agitated lest our week together may be spoilt. It would be the most terrible disappointment, as I've never longed to be with you more, but I know it's no use worrying... I've such a good bit of news for you, darling. You have been elected to the British Ornithologist's Union. A letter came for you this afternoon and I just had to peep inside. I won't redirect it till I am certain of your new address. I am so thrilled, darling, and do congratulate you so much. It's so specially nice that you were invited to stand instead of having to tout round for votes yourself. I'm sure you'll be very pleased."

"Mamma has been in bed all day; tonight her temperature is 99.6°F so it's not too bad, lower than this morning. I expect it will be normal tomorrow. She is fairly cheerful and Adda has perked up too, so things are brighter than when I wrote yesterday. Harrie and I went round to the Otters after tea. Peggy rang to say they had a young owl to show us, which they had found fallen from the nest and are trying to rear... They have a job keeping it fed. What it really likes is a mouse every hour. Today Guy discovered that a rat was being killed in the laboratory, so he brought that home. What a banquet! It was to have it for supper... Your parcel of sweets arrived for Harrie, who was so overcome she could hardly answer the postman. She was thrilled with your card and managed to read 'Harriet' and 'Daddy'. The toffee is delicious."

John's next letter came from 'The Knott, Corfe Mullen', a lovely country house, now being used

as a convalescent hospital, to which he had been transferred without warning: "There are 45 beds and the place seems alive with volunteer women from the neighbourhood, heaven help me. At first I thought it was going to be goodbye to our holiday, but the Registrar more or less undertook to get me back to Shaftesbury by next Thursday, so I am treating it as a holiday. I think it may be quite fun as I shall be in complete control and the food seems excellent."

On 12th May Maida wrote again with some relief: "I have had your two Wednesday letters today, and you will have gathered from my earlier rather panic-stricken letters how glad I was to hear that you are in what appears to be a nice safe place, and really only for a week. Harrie and I did some gardening together before lunch and again after tea... we managed to plant a whole bed of French beans, and a row of spinach and lettuce. She also did a little tree climbing for the first time this year, and we got her swing out... She started writing to thank you for the sweets but has only got as far as '*Darling Daddy*' so I won't send it till she has done a bit more."

John's letters for the next week from Corfe Mullen were all stamped by the Censor as the hospital was in the area of southern England where the Allied troops were massing for the Invasion. They were both eagerly hoping that nothing would happen to stop them meeting in London and then return together to Shaftesbury. Fortunately, it all turned out as planned. Maida reached the Savoy Hotel on Thursday afternoon and John joined her in the evening. It was, however, now his turn to be ill with a sore throat and high fever, so he went straight to bed. To test the famous efficiency of the Savoy service, they rang the bell in the middle of the night to order a hot whisky and lemon. A waiter appeared as if by magic and the toddy was produced without the batting of an eyelid. John was able to attend the course on penicillin at Woolwich on

Friday and they then travelled to Shaftesbury and had a very happy week together.

Maida returned to Cambridge on 26th May. She wrote confirming her safe arrival and saying that she had received a great welcome from the whole family: "Mamma was rather worried as she had had a letter from Dorothy Williams asking her to invite Aunt Ah here *'for a month or two'* if you please as her (Dorothy's) nerves won't stand any more. Mamma, as you can imagine, was mad, and I have promised to write and say it is quite out of the question, partly because there's no room and partly because Adda would give notice. I am not in the least worried or upset about it as it is quite clear what to say, especially as we did our duty by her about two years ago, when we had six weeks of her. Mamma thinks Tricka ought to have her as they have two empty rooms, but I think she would be better in digs in Leicester or Bangor and shall say so."

She had also received a letter from Bob Staniland about the arrangements for their forthcoming holiday with him and one from Hilary Halpin, another old friend: "No wonder I got no answer in March; their house had been badly bombed in a raid, and the water, gas and electric light all went to glory. However all seems well now." The next day Maida wrote again with an update on John's old doll's house, which they were intending to renovate for Harriet's fourth birthday present: "While I was away Mr. Haynes, the air-raid warden, came to see about the doll's house, and he has taken it off to do his best with it. He and Adda seem to have planned it all to their satisfaction, though I'm afraid the character of the house will be changed... He evidently fancies himself as a creative artist. However, I am sure it will look beautifully clean and new. Harrie won't mind if it's villa-ish, in fact she may prefer it."

"He said it was almost impossible to get paint and quite impossible to get wallpaper. Luckily Adda was able to produce plenty of the latter, so he will be able to do the inside too... I must get the furniture out tomorrow evening and see what there is. I also want to make Harrie a blouse which she needs for going away, and I must go to church as it's Whitsunday, so it looks like being a busy day. I am feeling very well and energetic, darling, after my lovely holiday. I miss you terribly, but all my happy memories keep me going... The news is grand from Italy and I hope in a day or two we shall hear that a good number of Italians are cut off. We didn't need telling that the air offensive against Northern Europe has been bigger than ever today, as there doesn't seem to have been a moment

without the sound of aircraft in the sky, including many big bomber formations."

Since the Allies had invaded mainland Italy in September 1943, they had been slowly battling their way northwards. The Germans had a heavily fortified region called the Gustav Line, spanning Italy from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic Sea, which the Allies had to break through to reach Rome. They had achieved this on 11th May, immediately followed by the fourth and final battle for Monte Cassino, an historic hill-top abbey occupying an important strategic defensive position. The Germans finally retreated from the Gustav Line on 25th May and the abbey ruins were overrun by victorious Allied troops⁶³.

Back in England, 29th May was a Bank Holiday and, as the day had been very hot, Maida had spent most of it in the garden. Harrie: "...didn't seem to find the heat too trying in the day but tonight she can't get to sleep and is still chattering. I think it is partly because she hasn't got Dick* and can't settle down without him. I washed his face and extremities today and he looks quite rejuvenated but hasn't quite dried yet, so I have had to promise to put him in her cot before I go to bed... I have just been telephoning invitations to her birthday party."

The following day Maida was thinking about their travel plans by train to visit Bob Staniland at Westbury Farm, Purley-on-Thames, near Reading. Dick's renovation was also continuing: "At the moment Dick is being given new features by Mamma, as his came out in the wash! However, he looks very clean and smart, and his suit has been adorned with a gay check rosette... I foolishly promised Harrie she should help pack, and it was a bit distracting having her capering round full of suggestions!"

John's letters from the end of May were very short and rushed. He had returned to Shaftesbury and been very busy on the surgical ward, writing on 28th May: "I seem to be on duty all the time at the moment. However that is better than the opposite extreme. I am too busy to think but feel certain I shall be able to get leave before the end of June." He was not enjoying acting as the chief clerk on the surgical side but was thinking ahead until after the war, writing on 31st May: "Yes, darling, it is lovely to look forward to the future in a home of our own... It is funny that we have never really seriously discussed what sort of home we do want, though perhaps it is just as well. The only thing I really care about is that you should be there to look after me."

* Her toy rabbit.

Maida replied to these comments on 2nd June: "No, darlingest, I don't think we ever have talked much about our future house, except to agree about central heating! Like you, I shan't mind what it's like so long as we are together; it seems rather foolish to evolve ideas about it when it will probably all be decided by circumstances. I know we shall be happy wherever we are, precious one, once we are together, but I entirely agree with you about not trying to get out of your duty as long as you are needed... In fact, I can't think of a single thing that we argue about and we used to argue such a lot before we were married. And yet I don't feel that either of us has relinquished any convictions in a kind of spirit of sacrifice. We seem to have just become part of one another, which must be just what a perfect marriage should be."

At the start of June the war news was still positive and John wrote: "I am feeling cheered up this evening by the news that Valmontone and Velletri have fallen to us, so I expect we shall get Rome in a few days." In fact, it was captured on 4th June⁶³. He continued: "It is marvellous to think we are entering a period of activity again after a rather wearying six months of waiting. I feel quite confident about beating the Jerries though the more one thinks about the Japs in China, the more impossible it seems ever to sort them out again, though we may destroy the Japanese fleet... It seems we shall have to get used to the idea of the Japs eventually becoming a world power as the Russians have done... I feel that this month may bring any sort of surprise, so that any plans even a fortnight ahead are hopeless. However, I do not feel at all hopeless myself darling, thanks to all your love and care which mean so much to me."

His next letter on 4th June continued to ponder the future return to home life: "The ward kitchens here have contraptions called 'hot plates'. I have been very taken with the idea of having one in our dining room one day." He had also been reading a book on bringing up children, some of which he quoted, going on: "To read it has made me realise how much I am missing being away from Harry for so long, but there seems no way of avoiding it just at present. I really felt I had made friends with her during the last month I was with you in Cambridge, and that she had become reconciled to me taking up some of your time in return for having another grown-up to take an interest in her."

Westbury Farm

MEANWHILE MAIDA AND HARRIET duly

set off on 31st May for their visit to Bob Staniland. The approaching invasion and the usual crowded conditions of wartime trains were making travel difficult, but they nevertheless arrived safely. She wrote to John: "If I write this quickly Bob can post it on the way to a Home Guard exercise which he has to go to this evening. We had a very quick journey, as we left Cambridge at 9.0, arrived in London 10.30, crossed over by Underground (Harrie being thrilled with the moving staircase), found a train for Reading just about to leave Paddington, and got to Reading at 12.30. We had to stand most of the way but it was well worth it to get here so quickly."

"As I knew they weren't expecting us till the afternoon we had lunch in Reading and then rang up Bob, and in about 20 minutes Joan fetched us in the car." Bob was running a delightfully old-fashioned farm next to the Thames, with just the help of his cousin Joan as housekeeper and another lady called Margaret Inge, who was working there as part of the Women's Land Army. She was the niece of the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. The land girls were employed to help boost Britain's food production at a time when so many of the male farm workers had been recruited into the armed services.

"Harrie is thrilled with the farm and of course wanted to see everything, so while Joan was doing her housework in the afternoon we explored on our own and walked down to the river. Bob was busy in the field with a tractor which needed repairing... She saw the cows milked at about 5.0 p.m. and watched them all go out again and fed some chickens. They have high tea about 6.0, so I gave her hers about quarter to 6.0 and then bundled her into bed, where she is now most comfortably asleep, clasping Dick and looking a perfect angel... It is a lovely fresh evening and everywhere looks so pretty; this is a sweet old house. All my love. P.S. You would enjoy seeing Bob's Home Guard uniform, darling. It has reached the same state as his farm clothes! But he is a dear and makes me feel quite at home with no fuss, which is so nice."

Her letters of 1st and 2nd June described Harriet's pleasure at being on a working farm, including hay-making and gathering the eggs and feeding the chickens all by herself: "Life is very easy-going here, but fairly primitive; Harrie had a bath the first night, but I haven't had one, nor has anyone else as far as I know since we arrived!... I had a nice letter from Mamma today — although she says she misses us very much, she sounds in quite good form, and has been amused by the arrival of a large toad in the garden."



Modern view of the Thames at Mapledurham Lock, close to Bob Staniland's wartime farm.

As Adda didn't like it she put it over the fence into the Boston's garden, but it was back within the hour."

"Everyone laughed at Harrie at lunch when she refused to eat any lettuce *'because it is so soporific'*!! Do you remember the word coming in *'The Flopsy Bunnies'*? She seems to be a general favourite and is being a very good girl... Bob seems in only moderate form and is very quiet. I see far more of the two girls. However this suits me very well, as I am being pleasantly lazy physically and mentally. He is a very kind host and very sweet to Harrie. *'Camilla'** is rather less lively than last week but keeps reminding me of her presence which I enjoy. It is heavenly to be the mother of your children, darling. All my love, your own Maida."

On 3rd June: "Harrie and I have had another happy day, though she again woke up soon after 6.0., informing me that it was *'simply blazing light'*... This morning she and I spent in walking across the fields to Mapledurham Lock about a mile downstream, and back along the towpath, resting in the middle sitting on the side of the lock watching the boats go through which thrilled her... Joan is out for the afternoon and Margaret is away for the weekend. Both girls seemed heartily glad to get away from the farm for a bit, and while they are out Bob is quite his old cheery self. I suppose it's inevitable that they should all have got thoroughly on each other's nerves by this stage of the war."

"I certainly felt from the moment of my arrival that they were all feeling a bit gloomy and frustrated like characters in a Russian play! ... Of course, the life of a land-girl would drive me crazy in a week. Even as a visitor, although I am enjoying it all, especially as

Harrie is so happy and I love sharing her enjoyment, I feel that Wednesday will be about the limit for me. After that I should start getting straws in the hair literally and figuratively. I don't feel that any of these three are really fond of the land, poor Margaret least of all, as before the war she was studying music of all things — what a contrast!"

Maida was still with Bob on 6th June when the Allied Invasion of Europe finally began. Unfortunately, her letter written on this momentous day did not survive, although she retained a memory of the sky being full of an immense number of bombers going over quite low towards France. Her next letter was written after their return to Cambridge on 7th June. Poor Bob heard shortly afterwards the sad news that his brother Jack had been killed in the Normandy landings.

John wrote two letters on 5th June. In the first he said: "We have all been cheered up by the news of the fall of Rome. I have just heard rather an unkind description of the U.S. troops — *'overdressed, oversexed, overpaid and over here'*. I could not resist a laugh although as you know I have a great respect for them." He also commented that they had all been shivering in a cold north wind. This same bad weather had been responsible for delaying D-day by 24 hours. This he referred to in a second letter written that evening: "It is marvellous that the invasion has started. I am beginning to feel better already. I have no news of the surgery course at Hammersmith Hospital, or of any possibility of leave, but don't worry, darling, we will manage to meet somehow before the end of the month."

D-Day

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the Normandy Landings, and only a very brief summary is provided here. The date agreed for the invasion was 5th June but foul weather over the English Channel forced Eisenhower to postpone the attack for 24 hours, a delay which was particularly hard for the nerves of the troops waiting to embark. A brief window of clearer weather was forecast on 6th June and the first Allied airborne troops were dropped behind enemy lines just after midnight. Their job was to blow up bridges and to sabotage the railways to hinder the enemy from bringing reinforcements up to the invasion beaches. Meanwhile the largest amphibious landing force ever assembled set off across the channel, with the stormy seas causing severe sea sickness amongst the troops. Their destination was the long, sloping beaches of

* The name they were using to refer to the new baby during Maida's ongoing pregnancy.

Normandy, where the landing zone had been divided into five zones. British and Canadian troops landed at beaches code-named Juno, Gold, and Sword while the Americans landed at Omaha and Utah. They were supported by an intense naval bombardment.

The troops had to disembark from their landing boats into the surf, weighed down by their kit, and some drowned before they even made it to the shore. At Omaha Beach the German forces were positioned on steep cliffs overlooking the shoreline and their machine-gun fire was lethal to many of the 35,000 American troops coming ashore. They succeeded, however, to get up the cliffs and took the beach by midday, by which time over 4,700 had been killed, or wounded or were missing. By nightfall the Allies had used over 5,000 ships and landing craft to land over 150,000 troops and 50,000 vehicles on the Normandy coast, forming a bridgehead for the liberation of Europe and marking a major turning point in the war^{58,64,65}.

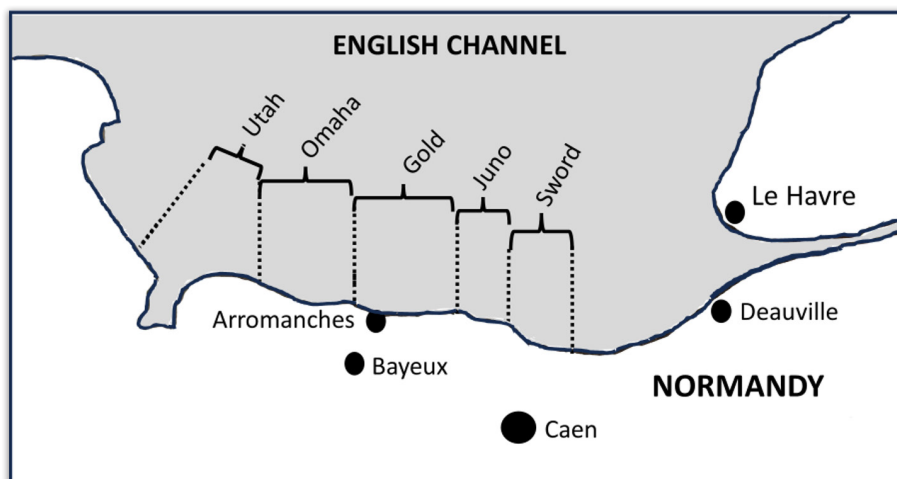
It was not easy going and the subsequent Battle of Normandy was a hard-fought campaign as the Germans tried to annihilate the invading Allied forces^{64,65}. The landscape consisted of small fields surrounded by thick hedges and narrow sunken lanes. This provided extensive cover and favoured the defenders, leading to high casualties in the Allied troops, especially among the infantry. The Germans were, however, also having to deal with Soviet troops approaching them from the East and on 22nd June the Soviets launched a massive offensive in eastern Belorussia. By 26th June the Allies in Normandy had managed to capture the important French port of Cherbourg and the Germans were on the retreat.

Despite the ongoing invasion John continued to

try to plan his next meeting with Maida, writing on 7th June: "It is quite likely that I may try and get off for a day or two, darling, to see you in London as you suggest. I am afraid I may be recalled to my unit any time now and then packed off to France, where I am really quite keen to go, though I do hope for a leave with you first... I have been thinking of you so much, however all our energies must go on the invasion at present. The news is good so far."

Later the same day he wrote again: "If all goes well, I will get off from mid-day Saturday. I think I will try the Mount Royal Hotel and expect we shall be able to get in, as there must be few visitors at the moment... I am fairly sleepy myself because I have just come in from a long talk with Capt. Feather. He has been recommended a grading but has not got a job yet. I must say he rather depressed me as he says he was hanging on six months here before the Colonel recommended him, and also that only two have been graded who have not got their Fellowship since he came here. However I feel there is still a chance and Col. Nicholls was quite nice to me today. I have lots to tell you which I cannot say by letter."

The reason for this secrecy was explained in his following letter on 9th June: "Darlingest darling — I have got everything fixed up except the hotel. I am leaving here at 12.35 on Saturday and get to Waterloo at 4.0 and return on Sunday evening... The reason I was feeling so fuzzled yesterday is that I have been shut up in one ward for 10 days looking after patients who knew all the invasion secrets. We were shut in behind barbed wire and in fact were prisoners as no-one was allowed out even for exercise. I can see no harm in telling you now as I see it has been mentioned in the paper today. When I was suddenly let out at mid-day



Map 10. Normandy coast showing the beaches where the Allies landed on 6th June 1944.

yesterday the relief was so great that I couldn't think straight but wanted to tell you then that I had been promised a day off. Darling, I am so excited about it."

The trip to London sadly had to be cancelled at the last minute as explained in John's next letter of 11th June, which came from Coldeast Emergency Hospital, Salisbury Green, Southampton: "My own darling pet — I am afraid you must have had a trying time last Friday what with my letters and wires. However I know you will understand the position. I was absolutely furious at the time as I had been promised the day off by the Colonel. However to have done anything else would have inevitably meant losing my grading. When I heard on Friday morning that the Mount Royal Hotel was full, I phoned the Savoy, got through in about two minutes and had the whole thing fixed up including a reservation for dinner. I then sent you the wire and felt very pleased with myself."

"I was just finishing my lunch at 1.30 when Col. Nicholls told me to pack my things for the night and be ready to start away in an ambulance at 2.15. It was no use saying anything as he knew perfectly well that I wanted to go away for the weekend... I came here as a member of a surgical team comprising Major Foster, Major Thompson (anaesthetist) and myself. We arrived in time for tea and the casualties arrived about supper time. Since then we have not had time for anything else. We worked all night on Friday and I got no rest until the afternoon of Saturday. Some more arrived Saturday evening and we were busy until midnight. Today we have finished for the time being at supper. My job has been mostly resuscitation i.e. blood transfusion and sending them to the theatre, which I enjoyed doing. Today Major Foster has let me do two cases in the theatre."

"I forgot to tell you that Col. Nicholls summoned me on Friday morning and told me he had to write a report on me. He asked me about my past experience and then said he would think about it. In a way I think he sent me off here for a test, as so far this is my first war surgery at Shaftesbury. I could hardly talk with rage and disappointment when I first realised I would have to cancel our meeting, but I think it is what you would have really wanted me to do. Since the bad cases arrived mostly wounded on the first day, Tuesday, I have been too busy to think much. We are expecting to return to Shaftesbury any day now, though we have no definite orders."

"I have put in for the surgical course on June 19th but Col. Nicholls seemed rather doubtful if they would agree to it; however he promised to forward the

application last Friday so I may know soon. Anyway, darling, I have had a lot of experience here which may help me, and I feel I am doing my utmost to help the invasion. We must put that first at the moment. I don't expect your letters will reach me here, but I expect to be back in Shaftesbury any day and will not worry, darling. I will be with you as soon as ever I can, until then all my love. Your own big John."

Shaftesbury

JOHN REMAINED AT COLDEAST for a week having a very busy time dealing with the casualties sent back from Normandy. After this he returned to Shaftesbury and his work slackened off. To their mutual surprise and delight, he was allowed to do the surgical course at Hammersmith, and Maida joined him in London from June 18th – 21st. This was lucky as ordinary leave had been stopped during the invasion. He was sad that he could not come to Cambridge to see Harriet but he was not allowed to go so far from his base.

Maida noted that they heard buzz bombs for the first time while in London, one of which fell very close to their hotel with a terrific crash. These were the V1 winged flying bombs that Hitler had been developing. They were powered by a jet engine that made a distinctive sound when in flight. The engine would then stop suddenly, causing the bomb to descend sharply and explode on impact, leaving a large crater⁶⁶. They were in many ways more frightening to the civilian population than the bombs dropped from aeroplanes during the Blitz, as they were much harder to detect and intercept.

John next wrote on 24th June: "The result of my three months report is that Col. Nicholls has recommended me to go as a trainee surgeon to a base hospital in France for more active practice before grading. He told me he had a high opinion of my capabilities and that Major Foster had spoken highly of my work at Coldeast. I think it is the very best thing that could happen, as it is experience that I want, darling, and we must be prepared to rough it a bit in order to succeed. Also, I have a hankering to go to France, and I know you will be patient and brave about it after the perfect times we have had together recently... Capt. Campbell is back again. He went across the Channel three times in a tank landing craft and returned with casualties. His wife has given birth to a daughter and he is hoping for compassionate

leave. Darling, I am feeling so happy.”

Unfortunately, he now had very little work on at Shaftesbury and by the following day was feeling: “...rather miserable without you and having nothing to do. Also I think being disappointed at not having been recommended for grading. I suppose I am slightly better off than 3 months ago, although if they delay very much longer the war will be over. However, that would suit me very well as there would then be a chance of getting out of the army to take the F.R.C.S. exam in November. Col. Nicholls recommended me to take the fellowship, so it looks as though I shall have a shot at it in November if it is possible.”

“I have done quite a lot of reading, and then went out for a walk after tea. I think I heard a Willow tit... I also found what can only be described as a ‘nest’ of caterpillars. It was placed on top of a hedge about the size of my fist, composed of an outer shell of cocoon silk and containing about a hundred caterpillars, mostly blackish but with a few of a fox red colour. It was on a hawthorn bush which didn’t seem badly eaten. I have never seen anything like it. It doesn’t look as if I will have much to do until I am posted, as I have no ward to look after. Still, it will do me good to do some reading.”

On 26th June: “I am beginning to settle down again though I may be moved at any moment. It is impossible to feel depressed with so much good news from every direction. I think a phrase from Ogilvie’s book on War Surgery best describes my condition — ‘*Gloomy Optimism*’, which incidentally he used as the correct attitude of the surgeon to mine-wounds of the feet. Anyway it made me laugh, so perhaps I am not really so gloomy.” By the next day, however: “I have had rather a dull day with nothing to do but read. I heard indirectly that my hospital is unlikely to move for another two months... I must just buckle down to being a student for the present. I feel I am learning a lot though the day does go slowly.”

Only one of Maida’s letters in answer to all this has survived (29.6.1944): “It is rather tedious for you having so little work to do and seems pretty ridiculous when one would have thought every doctor would be needed to work full pitch at present... I hope you will hear something definite about your posting before long. I hope you won’t go to France yet, darling, although I know you’re keen to go. I was looking at a big war map at Mrs. Howland’s today, and the bit of Normandy we have captured looks so tiny and vulnerable to air attack compared with all the rest of occupied Europe; it made me realise how much there

is still to do, and how much hard fighting is still ahead. I would rather you were right out of danger. I know it’s silly to be in a funk about you now when I haven’t been all along, but I just can’t help it, darling. I love you so much more than ever. Still I will be brave and not mope if you do go off abroad again, sweetheart, as I know you would want... All my love precious one. Your own, own Maida.”

Meanwhile John’s despondency continued, writing on 28th June: “I am also still a bit disappointed about not being graded, as however complimentary Col. Nicholls may have been, it would have been more complimentary still to have graded me completely. It seems to be chiefly bad luck that the invasion should have interfered with our training. However I am to be given one more chance, and then if they don’t grade me in another three months, I shall really have to give up any hope of doing surgery. After all, there is lots to be said for being a general practitioner with a settled life and a house of our own... you know I shall be quite happy looking after my family whatever I am doing.”

His grumbling continued the next day: “I am finding it very difficult to throw off a spirit of frustration at not being graded. I think the reason is that I have not impressed the Col. sufficiently and yet, if one does tell them all about one’s past, they dislike you for showing off. I think it must be a family failing, as my father had the same difficulty, and a much less experienced man became lecturer in mining at the Durham University Armstrong College, which was the job he really wanted. I don’t want to make you think I am discontented, dearest, but I like telling you my troubles as it may help me to do better in the future... One thing I am certain of is that I have not failed because of my work but just because Col. Nicholls does not like me personally. I know you will say this is wrong and perhaps I am. It is healthier to think so at any rate.”

This was, however, followed by news of a nice letter from Bob Staniland, one from Uncle Philip about Aunt Winnie’s affairs and one from Mr. Greaves. There were also plans for a visit to Mrs. Perry at the Royal Hotel in Shaftesbury. She was the old lady they had met during their earlier stay there who had lent him some books which he now needed to return. He went on: “Darlingest, I am already feeling brighter after having written down all my feelings — I have a rotten habit of feeling sorry for myself at times.” And he ended: “You have almost cured me of blaming others for my own shortcomings.” By the following day, 30th June, his mood had improved: “I am feeling

fine today and have quite recovered my equilibrium, chiefly I think because I have been given a ward to look after this morning, and a small but interesting operation to do.”

His next two letters written on 2nd and 3rd July reported that he was happy looking after his new ward and had indeed been to see Mrs. Perry. She kindly hired a car and took him out to tea at a café in Shaftesbury. The personnel of the Mess in the hospital were also changing, bringing him more to do: “I look like having an extremely busy time the next few days with the surgical division entirely to myself and Capt. Ward. Today has been extremely busy and interesting with several operations to watch; this morning I assisted Major Charnley*. Tomorrow Major Foster has a very long list and I am orderly officer as well, and on Wednesday Major Beal will be operating. Life has become quite rosy again.”

Cambridge

MAIDA WAS COMFORTED TO hear that John's mood had improved with more work to do, writing back on 3rd July: “Sweetheart, it was lovely to find you so much more cheerful in your second letter than in the first. All the same, darling, I wouldn't have been without the one in which you told me your troubles, and I love to think it makes you feel better to tell me about them... It has been pouring with rain here almost all day... I have managed to achieve a good deal, as I have practically finished Camilla's pram-suit and Harrie's dressing-gown and shall complete both before bedtime. I am specially glad to have got the dressing-gown done, as Alison is coming to lunch tomorrow and I want to show it her. As you know, it is made of her party cloak worn, I should think, at the age of about 13. It has made a lovely dressing-gown, and Harrie is very pleased with it; I think she has even got over her first disappointment that it wasn't red.”

Maida also reported that her pregnancy was progressing. As Dr. Budd had himself been in hospital, she went to see Dr. Connellan, an elderly doctor who had earlier acted as Dr Budd's locum while he was away in the army. She was, however, hoping that Dr. Budd would be well enough to deliver the baby when the time came. She wrote on 4th July: “I have just returned from seeing Dr. Connellan, who examined

me and found everything all right. I am feeling fine anyway and have a feeling in my bones, darling, that everything is going to be much easier this time. I am quite looking forward to it.”

“Your darling Sunday letter arrived this afternoon. I had already heard from Mrs. Perry telling me about your tea-party. It was sweet of her to write, especially as she told me how well you were looking. I couldn't help being amused that she took you to the café! I suppose she didn't want to share my handsome husband with the other old ladies. Thank you for the clothing coupons, darling. They may come in useful especially if Camilla turns out to be Charles after all as he will need rather different clothes from Harrie's cast-offs. They look a marvellous lot: I'm sure many girls would willingly knock me on the head to get them, so I'll keep them very safe.”

“I had a postcard from Augustin this morning, saying he had been so glad to hear you were home again, and regretting that he had missed meeting you in Egypt. He adds: *‘Je n'ai pas besoin de vous dire que le jour qui mettra fin a notre residence ici sera salué avec enthousiasme,’*[†] which I can well believe.” As he was still a prisoner of war in Colditz Maida's letter continued: “I wonder how much up-to-date news they get in the prison camps. If they hear even a little now they must be feeling much encouraged... I was able to post your letter last night as the rain had just stopped, and much enjoyed the little walk before going to bed. Everything smelt so delicious; it is so rare here to get the rain-soaked smell which makes me think of Wales.”

Maida's next letter of 5th July enclosed one from John's mother asking for his latest address. His mother was feeling over-worked and impoverished, and dreaded being unable to afford to continue living at Morwick Hall, which was rented from the Duke of Northumberland. The family had been there for over 20 years, first with John's father and now with Uncle Jim, her second husband. Given Maida and John's own lack of money and the fact that they were starting to worry about where they would be able to live after the war ended, Maida was not very sympathetic: “I had the enclosed letter from your mother this evening. I took her at her word and answered on a postcard, pretending I thought she wanted your address urgently, but really, to be quite honest, because I couldn't bring myself to concoct the effusion of sympathy which I felt she would expect if I

* A famous orthopaedic surgeon who later developed the hip replacement operation.

† ‘I have no need to tell you that the day which ends our residence here will be greeted with enthusiasm’.

wrote a letter. It was a very cordial postcard, darling. I hope you don't think me naughty forfunking a display of emotion which I don't feel."

"I was in the town this morning having my hair done and shopping. I was lucky enough to get 1 lb. of delicious ripe tomatoes, a great prize. Many envious eyes were fixed on my basket as I brought them home... While at the chemist I took the opportunity of sounding out Mr Haig the manager, who always knows all the medical gossip of the town, about Dr Budd, and he said he has never been the same since Dunkirk. However, he felt sure he would be back at work in August and September, anyway in good time for Camilla, which reassured me."

"I had a nice surprise this evening in the shape of a telephone call from Shirley Guiton, who is in Cambridge till Sunday. She is going to come to tea on Friday, and I shall much enjoy seeing her. I find her habit of dropping, as it were, from the skies rather refreshing! She explained that the reason she didn't establish contact with us in London after ringing up to find our address was that she got poisoned by too many dried eggs and swelled up all over. I'm not surprised as the recent ones we have had aren't nearly as good as the first ones were, and they always make me feel a bit sick now. I shall give them up altogether after this news."

Shaftesbury

JOHN MEANWHILE WAS CONTINUING his work at Shaftesbury while still awaiting news of his next move. On 6th July he wrote: "I have been very busy and happy all day with ward work and out-patients and am also duty surgeon. Tomorrow I may get some proper surgery to do as Major Foster is leaving and Major Beal has a septic finger. Anyway I am looking forward to it on the off chance. I am glad to hear Augustin is still alive and is in fairly good heart. He has certainly done his bit. If I do have to move in a hurry, I shall send home my tennis things and also some books. In fact, I am debating whether it would not be wiser to send off everything now while I have plenty of time to pack them. On the other hand, I might be here for several weeks longer." He had earlier sent Maida his new battledress to take to his Cambridge tailor to be altered to his proper measurements: "I am looking forward to getting my new battledress, as I am becoming increasingly conscious of the shabbiness of my present one, though it is still without any holes."

CHAPTER 15

York and Oxford

1944

FOLLOWING THE D-DAY LANDINGS on 6th June the Allied troops were initially hemmed in by the defence forces into a small bridgehead area along the Normandy coast. Although the German troops were stretched quite thinly, the surrounding countryside of thick hedges and narrow lanes was easier to defend than to attack. British divisions that had been landed on the eastern flank of the front bore the brunt of the determined German resistance. By the start of July the Germans were, however, heavily outnumbered in both tanks and infantry^{57,65}.

John was expecting that he would at some point be returned to active service and sent to join the action in France. When news of his next posting did come through in early July it was, however, in the opposite direction: "I am shortly to be moved back to my unit, which is at Naburn near York... We may not be booked for France in the immediate future, in which case York is about as near to Cambridge as Shaftesbury is." In the following letter: "I am wondering whether my new battledress will arrive in time. I should like to look smart on arrival in my new unit. I am all packed up and ready to move so will be really quite glad when the moment comes." He told Maida that he had managed to get hold of a copy of Col. Nicholl's report concerning his work at Shaftesbury: "I have quite got over my disappointment about not being graded and think that Col. Nicholls really has done his best to help me." This was not, in fact, true as he clearly was very upset.

York

THE DEPARTURE DATE FOR John's next posting was on 10th July and as a bonus he was able to spend a night in Cambridge on his way from Shaftesbury to York. The following morning he took Maida and Harriet punting on the Backs before continuing on his

way in the afternoon. Maida returned from seeing him off at the station and wrote that evening: "My own darlingest darling — I have felt terribly desolate since I said goodbye to you, it has been the worst heartbreak I think since you first went to Egypt... I couldn't have stayed on the station any longer; I knew I couldn't keep smiling any more. Harrie and I got home safely, and afterwards she went out in the garden by herself... I think she felt very sad at seeing you go, and when I was putting her to bed she said '*I do love being with Daddy*'. I am so very, very glad, sweetheart, that you have managed to have this tiny glimpse of each other. It went so much too quickly, but I know this morning on the river will always be a happy memory for her."

Maida continued by offering advice and encouragement regarding his career: "When I came in, I found your letter with Col. Nicholls' report. It isn't really as sensible as I should have expected from him, as he speaks so highly of you that one would have thought he must have thought you ready for grading. I think he genuinely thinks you would benefit more by a little extra teaching... but he should have made it clear that the chief reason you didn't get adequate experience at Shaftesbury was that there weren't enough patients to go round the trainees... I hope you manage to let the new C.O. know this, darling, though unless he actually asks I would wait a bit, in case he thinks you are disgruntled. No doubt it will eventually come easily into a conversation, especially if you are abroad when you will probably be on more familiar terms than in England."

"After all, Col. Nicholls was living out, and obviously couldn't have got to know as much about you as if he had been in the mess; also I feel rather embittered that he should say specifically that you needed supervision when, as you told me, he never let you do an operation for him to watch. It would probably be less easy to complain of this without

seeming rather self-righteous, but perhaps you might manage to get it across, if ever the new Colonel helps you in this way, by saying you appreciate that sort of tuition. Perhaps I'm all wrong, you know best, darling, but these are just a few ideas that have come into my head this evening while thinking about the report and what you said last night, my sweet."

"Considering how little he has seen of your work on account of the invasion it is very complimentary; I know I'd have been pleased if I'd ever had such a good testimonial, and I think you can be sure that he really considers you have it in you to be a surgeon. It is much better than I expected from listening to you, but I could see you were tired last night and I expect that made you take a rather gloomy view. You looked so well and cheerful when you went off; I felt so terribly proud of my handsome husband. Darling, I feel so much better already, no more tears are falling now, nor will; I am quite brave again and will just go on looking forward to the next time you come home. I long for your first letter."

This letter was written from No. 114 British Military Hospital, Naburn, York on 12th July. It was quite a large hospital with around 250 military staff who had themselves arrived in Naburn earlier in July to take over from No. 108 General Hospital, which had been posted elsewhere. John was listed as being appointed as a trainee surgeon: "Here I am duly installed in one of the servant's bedrooms at the top of an old country house. At the moment I have the room to myself but expect I may soon be sharing it... I am really feeling quite weary (though only pleasantly so) as I have walked a good two miles to the hospital and back again today. I finally arrived last night almost at midnight after three changes at Ely, Peterborough and Grantham. Fortunately, the driver who had been ordered to meet me had waited and by great good luck he actually recognised me as the officer he was looking for before I had reached the barrier."

"The O.C. Surgical Division, Lt/Col. Dawson, is away at present, and Major Nicholson, who has been in the M.E.F., is acting chief. He comes from Liverpool and has been very pleasant... he gave me a ward which is mostly septic with about 20 cases in it. I don't know yet how things stand quite — as far as I can see, we shall be here some time... There are two graded surgeons here besides Major Nicholson, so I may not get much to do. However, darling, you told me not to worry and I am not... It is rather an exciting place right on the bank of the Ouse, which is almost as big as the Thames. I saw a Redstart and a

Spotted Flycatcher on my way to work this morning, and there is a sewage farm close to, where there may be some interesting birds. Also there are some sailing boats on the river, I believe, which sounds exciting. Colonel Rowlette remembered seeing me at Safaga of all places."

By 14th July he was settling in: "I had a few small ops to do yesterday and Major Nicholson gave the anaesthetics so he could see how I was getting on. Everything went well and I think I made a favourable impression. I have managed to get a bike now and also a khaki beret, so feel I am already equipped for life here. Lieut. Springford went sailing with me, which I enjoyed." The following day his new uniform arrived: "The battledress seems to fit remarkably well considering they could not fit me with it on. I shall not be able to wear it until I can get some pips etc. on it, which will be next week. I have three very interesting cases in my ward, which are keeping me fairly busy at the moment and am hoping to get some more operation cases next week."

He had just received the news via Maida that Stephen Hoare, an old Cambridge friend, had been killed in action: "I am afraid the newspaper cutting confirmed our suspicions that the Stephen Hoare was indeed the one I knew at Trinity... I shall always remember him with affection as for some considerable time he was my best friend." He had also received a letter from Mrs. Crookston, who had been his civilian patient at Safaga in 1942 following a car crash: "I will send you on Mrs. Crookston's letter when I have had time to digest it. She is an example of a woman with plenty of money who is not happy."

Meanwhile a letter from Maida had updated him on the situation at Queen Edith's Way. The household there was becoming increasingly fraught as both Mamma and Adda were suffering from war-weariness and neither was in good health. Mamma was in the early stages of dementia which affected her behaviour and led to frequent disagreements with Adda. Adda had been part of the household since joining the family in 1911 as Maida's nurse but she was now physically tired and threatening to leave in the autumn to live permanently with her cousins in Worksop.

John wrote on 17th July: "I was so interested to hear all about Adda again. The chief thing at present is to keep her at all costs, and as you say Mamma should be led gently to an appreciation of the fact that circumstances have changed. Also, I suggest Adda should be made to rest more. I am sorry to note that this pain occurred shortly after my visit as it did last

time. Could we send our washing to a laundry to save her that?"

Cambridge

AFTER THIS THERE WAS no special news in John's letters until he was unexpectedly allowed to come home on 27th July for 24 hours leave to celebrate their wedding anniversary. Although he and Maida had now been married for six years, this was the first time since 1939 that they were able to celebrate this together. They again took Harriet punting on the Cam, but John had to return to York in the evening.

Most of Maida's letters from this period are missing, but there are two written on 22nd and 23rd July which comment on the war news: "All the rumours coming out of Germany are rather tantalising, in fact I find all the war news rather a strain now, as I am so aching for the end of the war and it seems so near and yet so far. I expect the German army will go on fighting hard for quite a bit yet. I can't help feeling sorry for the man who threw the bomb at Hitler; there can be few things more irritating than to work oneself up to the point of trying to murder someone and then miss. All the same, I think it's a good thing the army haven't been successful; my feeling is that they are really tougher nuts than the Nazis, and the fewer successes they have the less likely they are to dominate the German people in the future. The Nazis are doomed anyway, and we don't want the Prussian militarists set up as heroes in their stead."

This letter referred to a failed assassination attempt on Hitler on 20th July⁶⁷. The plotters were mainly senior army officers who wanted to end the war. Claus von Stauffenberg, the leader of the conspiracy, took a briefcase filled with explosive into a conference room, placing it under the table. Unfortunately, someone inadvertently moved the briefcase further away from Hitler. When the bomb detonated it killed three people and injured the others in the room, but Hitler himself sustained only minor injuries. The plotters did not immediately realise that the attempt had been unsuccessful so followed it up with an attempted coup d'état, using some of the army units under their command to take over control of several cities including Berlin. The Nazi regime, however, quickly resumed control. Von Stauffenberg was shot by firing squad the following day and nearly 5,000 others thought to be part of the conspiracy were later rounded up and executed.

At this time the Allies were fighting their way towards Germany from both Italy and Normandy. On 23rd July Maida commented: "I liked to hear our forces have captured Pisa, including the railway station. I hope the station buffet, where I bought my poisoned ham sandwich in 1931, got what it deserved in the way of destruction. I have always borne a grudge against that place! The next place up the coast, I think, is Viareggio where I acquired the most painful sunburn I have ever had in my life, so I don't mind what happens to it either. I hope however that Florence will escape; it looks as if we may be able to by-pass it. It must be fearfully hot and dusty fighting in these parts at this time of year: it was really almost unbearable when I was there in the middle of the day, even doing nothing."

In France the U.S. forces mounted an attack on the German line between Saint-Lô and the channel coast on 25th July, preceded by a massive aerial bombardment. Over the following four days the line buckled as the German divisions were decimated and the Allies achieved the desired breakout from their bridgehead. On 1st August the U.S. First Army led by General Bradley was split in half, generating the U.S. Third Army, led by General Patton, which set off rapidly through the newly created gap in the defences^{57,65}.

John and Maida's next letters were written after their wedding anniversary meeting. John got back to Naburn at 2.0 o'clock the following morning after a long but fairly comfortable journey: "Darlingest, I shall always remember our 6th anniversary. It was all so perfect. Give my love to little Harriet. Your own adoring John." Maida's letter of 28th July was equally enthusiastic: "My own adored darling — It seems incredible that I was still with you only a little before this time last night; it is a different world without you and I have missed you very much."

The same day John reported that he had started to fulfil a good resolution to read his Pathology textbook that week: "I have already read more than 50 pages this evening, including one interesting description of a stone found in the bladder of Napoleon III... I had rather a nice letter from Mother this morning. She sends her loving wishes to both of us, and says she remembers our wedding day so well. Poor Grandfather is unwell and she thinks he is dying. They have got a trained nurse to help look after him and Marjorie, who is also none too well I gather... She has made £50 out of selling her fruit which I think is very good

going, though it won't quite pay for George*, and for once she doesn't moan about her finances, which has pleased me as I don't want her to leave Morwick." John's grandfather Canon Jones did indeed die later that year, aged 92.

Surprisingly, John then got another short leave and returned to Cambridge after only four days away. As before, they spent the day with Harriet on the river. He had to return to York on 3rd August and Maida wrote that evening: "The house feels so empty without you... we have been so happy that you have given me all the strength I need for carrying on, even if you don't manage to get back again before going to France, sweetheart." She wrote again the following day telling John that she had just bought herself a French novel called 'Le Silence de la Mer' with some money that he had given her as a present: "It was published by the Underground Press and smuggled out to England in 1942 and is the story of a German officer billeted in a French household. It is considered a masterpiece and certainly as far as I have got it is superbly written... I am thrilled with it and have inscribed it as being a present from you. Thank you, sweetheart, I've been wanting it so badly."

Maida had recently heard the heart-breaking news that John Roberts had been killed in action in Italy. He was the father of the little girl, Sophia, who had stayed with them at Queen Edith's Way in December 1943 just before John came home on leave. In her letter of 5th August Maida told John that she and Harriet were shortly going to tea with Morla, his widow. The advance in Northern France was, however, going well: "It was exciting to hear the phrase about the Americans being on the road to Paris. All the same I hope Paris will escape a siege."

On 10th August Maida estimated that the baby was now due in 9 weeks. She went on: "Rather a gloom has been cast over the household today by the arrival of letters from Nonin and Molly, both fishing for invitations to stay. Adda offers a kind of passive resistance to visitors of any kind and Mamma doesn't like to ask them after refusing to have Aunt Ah. Personally, I would rather offend all comers than have Adda pack up at this juncture, so it seems quite clear and we are all agreed — but Mamma doesn't like the job of saying 'No' — so we all talk and talk to very little purpose. How I wish this wanderlust hadn't got hold of all my relations at once... The news continues splendid; here the aircraft are going over continually,

noisier than ever. I wonder if peace really will come before Camilla's arrival." Maida commented later that it was sad to read how optimistic they were at this stage of the war when in fact it dragged on for over another year.

York

BACK IN NABURN JOHN was having a peaceful week. The hospital was being emptied of patients so he had little to do but to get on with his reading and enjoy the summer weather. He complained about some of his fellow officers who seemed to be up half the night: "It reminds me of the time when I first arrived in Egypt when several newly joined officers became ill with drink and had to be dismissed from the service."

The following day, 5th August, he was sharing some of Maida's optimism regarding the war: "The news is splendid and some of the mess are getting quite worried that we shan't reach France before the armistice. However, I think we shall, as there is still some way to go." He also mentioned that he had to accompany a patient to York Airfield from where he was being flown to Devon in a small biplane: "He is quite an interesting case as he has a cancer of the thyroid gland and has been operated upon by Mr. Joll at the Cancer Hospital... Poor chap, he was only 24 and was going home to die. It makes human existence seem very unfair. It reminds me of A. E. Housman's lines: —

*As I gird on for fighting,
My sword upon my thigh,
I think of old misfortunes
Of better men than I.*

"I am getting a fair amount of reading done, but I find it takes a great deal out of me even to read 50 pages a day of concentrated facts. I am afraid my letters have been rather dull as a result, but I am sure you will understand the reason." John had also been talking to Major Nicholson about his future in surgery, writing home on 8th August: "The conclusion is that I should not make any move at present to get shifted but make use of the present lull to do my reading. One thing I am beginning to realise I cannot do without is an hour or so by myself every day. If I spend all day with other people, I begin to feel lethargic and bad-tempered."

He was allowed another surprise visit home for the weekend of August 12th to 14th. Maida was thrilled to see him but commented that every time he came home she feared it would be the last leave before

* The gardener.

another period of overseas service. She was, however, remaining optimistic that the war was going well, writing on 15th August: "I am so excited by the news of our landing in the South of France that I feel sure the whole war will be over before very long. I expect it will develop into a march up the Rhone valley, not far from the places I know, so I shall be following the news of it with great interest."

She had heard from John that he had been on a guided tour of York Minster and commented: "I am afraid I am rather naughty about conducted tours and usually rush to the farthest end of the building if I see one approaching with the result that I don't learn much. The only time I can remember going round an English church with a guide was when Mamma took me to see Westminster Abbey at the age of about 9; being the youngest of the party I got specially favoured and was put to sit in the Coronation Chair." They had also been discussing godparents for the latest baby. They wanted to ask Augustin Jordan but then discovered that this was not possible as he was a Catholic.

John's return to York in mid-August proved very short-lived as No. 114 British General Hospital, complete with all its Medical Officers, was moved from Naburn to Oxford, where they arrived by special train on 18th August. John and Maida were both delighted that the new posting was so close to Cambridge, and that he had not yet been sent abroad. At around this time they heard that Uncle Philip, still living in London, had had his window blown in by a bomb, although fortunately he was uninjured.



Harriet with John, August 1944.

Oxford

THERE WAS RELATIVELY LITTLE mention of the war in their letters of autumn 1944, although this was clearly still in full progress. On August 25th, after four years of German occupation, the American forces liberated Paris with the help of the French resistance led by General de Gaulle. Meanwhile, on the Eastern Front, the Soviet advance reached the River Prut on 23rd August. This formed part of the Romanian frontier, a country then led by Antonescu, a dictator who had taken power in 1940 and was supporting Hitler. The arrival of the Soviet army led to a successful coup, Antonescu was overthrown and the new government immediately concluded an armistice with the Soviet Union and switched sides. This in turn compelled Bulgaria to surrender on 8th September and ultimately led to the German evacuation of Greece, Albania, and southern Yugoslavia in October 1944⁶⁸.

Hitler's attempted assassination had affected his trust in his army officers, and this had a direct influence on their ability to mount a rational defence of France^{57,65}. Hitler refused to let them make tactical withdrawals when required, so many of the German forces were eventually trapped and destroyed following the Allied breakout from the Normandy bridgehead. There were, however, also problems amongst the Allies. Although their forces were now well equipped, there were ongoing differences of opinion between the British and American High Command over both command and strategy. At this stage of the war the Allies had two main choices. The first was a fast drive on the northern flank to advance along the French and Belgian coasts, clearing out the Axis forces as far as Antwerp. They would then cross the Rhine to reach the Ruhr valley, which was the German industrial heartland. The second choice was a steady advance of both the British in the north and Americans in the south over a front several hundred miles wide, keeping both armies more or less in line. Both Montgomery and Patton favoured the former, with a concentration of forces achieving a 'single thrust' into Germany, but they each saw themselves as being the leader on the ground.

Eisenhower was, however, in overall command and he chose the second alternative. This led to a slowing down of the Allied advance, and almost certainly delayed the end of hostilities. The Germans were still holding the Channel ports and had been ordered to stay put until they were obliterated. The lack of sufficient ports, especially Antwerp, constituted a formidable handicap to the Allies, who could not keep

their forces in the field sufficiently well supplied^{57,65}.

John meanwhile wrote home on 18th August following his arrival in Oxford, where the hospital was to have 200 beds in the converted University Examination Schools: "What a pity it could not have been Cambridge but that was too much to hope. We had a very good journey down today though we had to get up at 5.0 in the morning to give the mess staff a chance to have everything packed up by 7.0... It seems we may be here some little time so I am hoping I shall see you again soon my dearest. At the moment I am writing this in an attic room of Brasenose College, which I am sharing with Padre Logan." The next day he was able to go sight-seeing again, this time around Oxford with Colonel Dawson: "We spent most of the time in Christchurch, where I once spent a night with Laurie Lang." He had been friends with Laurie since prep school. They had lived quite near each other in Northumberland and John had been an usher at Laurie's wedding. He was another friend who had sadly been killed in the R.A.F.

On 20th August he wrote again saying: "You will be surprised to hear that I went to church at Christchurch Cathedral this morning for the first time since Harriet was born... I did it partly to show my support for justice, truth and the rights of the individual even though he be a sinner, and also and more especially my darling to pray to the Almighty to look after you... I have been getting in with Colonel Dawson the last two days; he shows some sign of appreciating my efforts though I do find it exhausting. It means drinking about two pints of beer twice daily before lunch and supper and long walks and sight-seeing tours in between. He is never still a minute and says very little. However, I shall continue to do this for the present as it won't be long before he has to write my report. We are supposed to be taking over the patients tomorrow."

An unexpected bonus following the move to Oxford was that John was able to come home for another 24 hours leave from August 21st to 22nd. He described his return from this in his letter the following day: "Darlingest, this is a great day to remember — Paris has fallen! ... I had rather a long journey last night which involved a two-hour wait at Bletchley... Finally we got away at 10.45 and reached Oxford before midnight. It was pitch dark and I luckily was able to follow another man with a flash lamp most of the way to Brasenose College. I should have had difficulty in finding my way otherwise. Today I have been fairly busy and did one operation this morning with Col. Dawson assisting...

Unfortunately this evening I have received orders to go to an E.M.S.* hospital to look after some patients while the M.O. is on holiday." This turned out to be a brief stint as a locum in a civilian hospital.

Maida wrote to him immediately after his departure on 22nd August: "Harrie and I returned safely after seeing you off with not nearly such heavy hearts as usual as we hope to see you again very soon... On the way home we were able to catch sight of the siren on the waterworks building, so that achieved one of her chief ambitions for the last week or so! When I got in, I found your Sunday letter... I don't feel I told you enough, darling, how happy it has made me to think you have been to church again, and your letter makes me want to tell you all over again... As you know I never go to sleep at night without praying that God will bless and keep you, and it has comforted me so much through all our separation to feel that by so doing, though our physical selves were so far apart, my spirit was better able to meet yours in some strange Sphere which I feel must exist and be immortal... You see it did work the same way for you, darling, because I knew you were with me the morning Harrie was born, and I am certain that whenever you pray for me I shall have extra strength to meet life's difficulties and extra power to appreciate its joys. Of these your love is the greatest I shall ever know."

For the next couple of days Maida was laid low with a short but sharp attack of gastroenteritis, which she attributed to some sandwiches eaten at a tea-party. John was worried when he heard and sent her a prescription and treatment instructions. He also commented that his transfer to the E.M.S. hospital was rather unfortunate as Col. Dawson had not been consulted: "However, I can hardly be blamed for that." He was glad that General de Gaulle had survived an assassination attempt in Paris, saying: "I doubt if there is anyone who could step into his shoes."

By 20th August John had heard that Harriet too had now become ill: "My own darlingest — I have just returned to my room after speaking to you on the telephone. I am glad you sent me the wire as I know you were worried about Harriet. However, I feel sure she will get over it all right though it is a beastly nuisance. I wouldn't be surprised if it is distributed in the milk, or does she have all her milk re-boiled after delivery? Anyway it would be worth taking special precautions until the epidemic is over."

He had been doing more sight-seeing in Oxford,

* *Emergency Medical Services.*

this time with Padre Logan. He also reported an unexpected air-raid alert: "The air-raid siren has just gone for the first time since I have been here. It almost sounds unreal. I suppose it is one of the flying bombs that has overshot its mark. It will be a good thing when we manage to knock them out completely." The flying bombs were still proving a terrible menace in the South of England, although the Allied bombers had had great success in destroying their bases at Peenemünde in Germany and in Northern France. This had postponed Germany's ability to launch a really devastating attack with them, but many of their launching sites were still unharmed. Fortunately for the Allies, the German High Command had to withdraw more and more of the troops who were guarding these bases to fight the Allied invasion forces in Normandy.

Shortly after this John was granted a full one week's leave from 8-13th September, during which there was a gap in the letters. When he returned to Oxford he was once again extremely busy, writing on 14th September: "There are lots of new faces about today and the unit is in a state of chaos. Lieut. Springford has been posted to the Far East, Major Nicholson alas has also been posted. An Irish Captain Pond, a pathologist, has arrived having just completed his disembarkation after five years in Ceylon. He is naturally anxious not to go to the Far East. Capt. Boucher has returned to his unit and we have another graded surgeon in his place lent to us, quite a reasonable fellow who was a prisoner in Germany for 3 years and has only just been graded. I have been given two wards to look after and look like having plenty of work to do as the hospital is rapidly filling up. I have been busy all day with out-patients this morning and ward patients this afternoon. Col. Dawson seems to be in a reasonable state of mind where I am concerned. I am looking forward very much to the next few weeks. Both the operation cases I did before I left are doing well."

Two days later he was indeed being kept busy: "I don't see any possibility of getting any reading done at present so I am now only keeping the idea of trying for the F.R.C.S. in November in the background." He had just heard from Maida that Adda was definitely planning to leave very soon: "I can't think how I can have got this far without mentioning Adda, who seems to be the chief news at the moment... I must say I am rather surprised to hear of her decision, and I am sure she will be missed. However I hope that by then domestics will be easier to get and Mamma will be able to get her own way more."

On 17th September John spent most of the day writing up medical notes but was pleased that he was being allowed to do two interesting operations the following day: "The first will be a first for me i.e. the repair of a hernia that has recurred a second time. These were kept at Shaftesbury for the Majors, so I am very pleased to get the opportunity to do one. The chief reason that I am allowed to do this is that the patient is an Italian. The original operation was done in Italy... This evening I went to the service at St. Mary's the Virgin where the collection was in aid of the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund, and we were asked to remember the victory of the R.A.F. in the battle for Britain four years ago. I heard Gen. Montgomery's broadcast after the news which must have been bad news for the Germans. His faith in Christianity is a tremendous example to the army."

Work at the hospital continued to offer more opportunities for doing surgery which, as ever, John enjoyed very much, saying: "Life is just marvellous at present." On 19th September: "I have had another rather hectic day writing notes for a new wardful of patients (16) all of whom arrived yesterday. However I had time to watch Col. Dawson do one interesting operation... I discovered that one of my British patients had been a patient in a Paris Hospital while Paris was in German hands. He is an anti-tank gunner in the 7th Armoured Division (my own division) and was taken prisoner after being wounded. I have another poor fellow who was shot accidentally through the stomach and spine by a pal of his while they were looking at a German revolver they had picked up. He is almost certainly dying and is paralysed from the waist downwards. I am feeling rather weary but very happy to have so much work to do." This suggests that the hospital was receiving wounded soldiers being sent back from France.

Later in the month work was not quite so rushed but there were still constant changes in personnel. John wished Maida a happy birthday for 22nd September but was unable to go home again to celebrate: "Today (21st) has been another eventful day with the advent of Captain Lambert and the news that Capt. Jacobson is leaving on Sunday. The net result will be no change for me, which is what I want. I quite like Capt. Lambert who is a Canadian with 6 years service in the army and who has been separated from his wife for nearly 5 years as she is in Canada. I took him punting on the river after tea and we discussed Shaftesbury. I was interested to hear that Col. Nicholls had gone to the Far East as a Brigadier, and Pearce had also

gone overseas on a hospital ship, so perhaps I haven't done so badly." He had been pleased to receive a letter from his brother Philip who was experiencing heavy fighting with the army in Italy but had also taken the opportunity to visit Rome and see the frescoes.

Cambridge

APART FROM THE ONGOING worry about Adda deciding to leave, there was not much of interest going on in Cambridge. Maida wrote back on 16th September in reply to some of John's news: "I can't help being amused at Lieut. Springford being sent to the Far East. I hope the same thing will happen to all who refused to be winkled out of civilian life until, as I imagine they fondly hoped, there would be little for them to do but march triumphantly into Berlin. I'm sorry Major Nicholson has left you, though, as he sounded nice." On 18th September she was: "...writing on the drawing-room couch because Mamma is busy in the dining room, but writing on my knee is rather difficult I find, as my tummy now sticks out so far; luckily that obstacle will have been removed before the winter evenings when I always write to you on my knee by the fire. Harrie keeps asking why you won't be coming home for my birthday; she seems to think it most unreasonable, though I tell her you must do some work after such a long leave."

The government had just announced an end to the blackout, so it was no longer illegal to show lights at night. Maida's previous letter had begun: "I hope when I go to post this letter to see the first lights for 5 years." This did not, however, happen as she now reported: "I went to post last night expecting as I told you to see a kind of Piccadilly Circus of illuminations — but not an extra glimmer was to be seen anywhere. I gather from the papers that this was quite general, most people feeling as we did that we didn't want to make any change till the war is actually over; so the 'popular demand' referred to in the News Letter and other papers must have been largely imaginary."

A few days later on 21st September "It has been a horrid foggy day, and I didn't go out till after tea when I took Harrie for a walk after a writing lesson at which she wrote out a nice alphabet in capitals and another in her first attempt at small letters. I had told her you thought she was wasting too much time playing Ludo. She quite enjoyed doing it and exerted terrific concentration... She is in splendid form these days...

Her hair is so lovely and is admired by friend and stranger alike. She talks about you such a lot, darling, and I know she will be thrilled when you come home again... We are much amused by the poor Bostons* who are in despair. The wretched Teddy has been called up for work in the mines of all things. They are outraged and are trying to pull wires to get him off. This news all comes from Mamma; I haven't seen them luckily as I refuse to shed any crocodile tears over him, and yet wouldn't like to hurt their feelings, so am hoping to be able to avoid comment on the subject."

The end of September was relatively quiet for both of them, with Maida mainly sewing and doing a little easy gardening. She did, however, report more air raids: "We had two alerts last night, in fact we have only had one night without since the black-out restrictions were lifted last Sunday. If it goes before bedtime I usually watch out of the nursery window. We seem to be about ten miles from the present 'bomb-alley' as I have seen two or three flashes right away to the East, followed by a distant bump. I hope they will stop soon, as really they are rather nerve-racking at this stage of the war and I don't want to have another baby born to the strains of the siren. I'm afraid this bad weather will hinder our operations in Holland, it must be simply awful at Arnhem. How thankful I am you aren't there, darling." She also reported getting ready for the arrival of the new baby: "Harrie and I finished re-arranging the nursery drawers so all the baby's things are now at hand and in their right place."

This letter referred to a plan hatched by Montgomery codenamed Market Garden. This was to strike across Holland to achieve a crossing point over the Lower Rhine at Arnhem^{57,69}. Montgomery desperately wanted to reach the Ruhr before winter set in, with the hope of getting to Berlin and ending the war by the end of 1944. This plan was approved by Eisenhower but, unusually for Montgomery, it had not been properly thought through. A disastrous airborne assault on Arnhem began on 17th September. This met with much fiercer resistance than had been anticipated and the First Airborne Division was unable to secure the crucial bridge and was withdrawn from the north side of the Rhine, suffering an estimated 8,000 casualties.

Oxford

JOHN WAS ABLE TO have 24 hours leave at home

* *Their neighbours in Queen Edith's Way.*

on 28th to 29th September. The plans for starting demobilisation had now been announced, although it was to be a long time before his army days were finally over. On his return to Oxford he went to an evening service with a sermon on the unusual subject of Angels. He wrote on 1st October describing the difficulties of travel at this stage of the war: "...in my railway compartment on the Cambridge to Bletchley line were two R.A.F. men from aerodromes near Cambridge. One of them apparently took 24 hours off every week and went all the way to Birmingham. To do this he took his bike with him, changed at Bletchley for Rugby, and cycled 30 miles from there to Birmingham. He professed to have covered this distance in 2 hr. 10 min. However, he did the 30 miles by train on his return journey. It made me feel quite lucky to be in such a relatively accessible place as Oxford."

On 5th October he wrote again saying: "I spent yesterday afternoon cleaning my windows. I could only do half but it has made such a difference. It makes the room in Brasenose twice as nice to live in... Thank you for your little map of the Brunswick† and the telephone number. I am getting so very excited, my precious, but perhaps I may come and see you next week before the event." Maida noted that John's hatred of dirty windows was later manifested during the family stays in the windmill at Burnham Overy Staithe, whose windows he often cleaned during their annual summer holidays.

Cambridge

MAIDA WROTE BACK ON 3rd October: "I was amused to hear you had listened to a sermon on Angels, which certainly do not get much attention paid to them nowadays... It is all too rare for professing Christians to know what they are supposed to believe in the way of doctrine, and I think the so-called practical sermons are largely unnecessary, as anyone with a modicum of conscience and common sense should be able to think out for himself how to apply Christianity to everyday life. In fact, they may do more harm than good, by encouraging people to think they have achieved virtue merely by listening to such a sermon, after which they are too lazy to do any thinking for themselves."

She was pleased to report that there had been a move back to London by many of those who had

come to Cambridge to escape the blitz: "It was quite a treat to go food-hunting today with all the evacuees gone; I wouldn't have believed it would have made such a difference. I was able to get some nice pork pies, sausages and even a cake with no trouble at all... We went for a little walk after tea, where we left sacks for the potatoes that Mr. Hall is going to get us. Ben fell into the lily pond, but managed to hang on with his front paws, so only got his trousers wet before I hauled him out. I don't know which was the most alarmed, he or the goldfish. The eyes of both nearly popped out of their heads. Harriet was thrilled, and Mrs. Hall had what I should think was her heartiest laugh in weeks, poor thing."

"I met Mrs. Lee of Cranmer Road in the town too. She told me her brother Henry, after at last reaching the active fighting in Italy after a long and boring sojourn in North Africa, has been blown up by a mine, poor fellow, in his Bren carrier and had both legs badly broken. She said the same thing happened to her other brother and he had half his seat blown off, which she seemed to think a great joke... I was in a queue for the cake at the time and I can't imagine what the other people must have thought of our conversation." Her pregnancy was progressing: "I think Camilla must be on the move. I am getting the oddest shape but am feeling very well."

In her next letter she mentioned that she was wearing John's dressing gown: "...it's lovely to have something large enough to meet over my fat tummy; it keeps me so cosy while I do my hair and other bed-time activities." Dr Budd was back in action as she had hoped and gave her a satisfactory examination on 6th October. She also had another sad meeting with her friend Morla Roberts whose husband had been killed four months earlier: "She has been having letters from her parents in America which have upset her rather, as they evidently expect her to return home with the children and just begin her old life again as if her marriage and life in England had never happened. She says it will be so difficult to make them understand that she wants to stay in England without hurting their feelings."

On 8th October she had started to get herself organised for the nursing home, including selecting a supply of books: "I think I shall begin getting a suitcase ready tomorrow with the nappies etc. I shan't want to bother with it when my tummy has begun to ache." The next day she wrote: "Darlingest, it means so much to me as I wait for the baby to know your love and thoughts and prayers are with me all the time. It

† The nursing home.

makes just all the difference to know you won't be far away this time."

Oxford

JOHN, MEANWHILE, WAS ALSO looking forward to the baby's birth. His update from Oxford on 6th October mentioned that he now had to share his room with Lieut. Powell: "He is an elderly Irishman who has just been called up from his practice. He is a bachelor and frequently gets drunk, so I am not at all wanting his company, but he has just been pushed in without anyone consulting me... I have been trying to work out when I might ask for a day off next week, and think I might come on Tuesday evening, though that will depend on Lt. Dalliwell being agreeable to looking after my ward. The only thing against coming is that it would be difficult to ask for another day off again within a week if Camilla did arrive. What do you think darling?"

The following day was busy. "I have had a very hectic 24 hours starting last night at tea-time when two badly damaged airmen arrived, and I was surgeon on duty. One of them had to have his leg amputated below the knee, which was quite a big job as he was a large muscular man. I spent rather a worried night imagining every now and then all the terrible things that might happen. However he is quite chirpy today and all should be well now... Darling it is so exciting to think that Camilla may arrive any time now though I am not really expecting her quite yet... I shall be thinking of you and praying for you every night until it is over."

He did indeed come home for an overnight visit on 10th October and spent most of the time picking apples with Harriet. On his return to Oxford he was again extremely busy in the wards and operating theatre, and only had time for short letters, although he wrote every day, saying on 15th October: "I have been thinking of you so much today and longing to have an end of the anxiety of waiting... I have been so very, very busy in the wards darling. On Friday night we had a considerable party to send off Colonel Rowlette who made a very good parting speech. Lieut. Powell, who shares my room, is still sleeping it off."

CHAPTER 16

Moves and Promotion 1944-1945

Cambridge and Oxford

IN MID-OCTOBER MAIDA WAS continuing to make preparations for the arrival of the new baby, writing on 12th October: "We have been having a busy time getting the cot ready, also the Moses basket... I can't really believe the cot will soon be needed! At present I look at it as something as unreal as a piece of stage scenery." The following day: "So far there is absolutely no sign of Camilla arriving of her own volition: I am going to post this on my way to Dr. Budd this afternoon. It is a glorious day luckily, so it will be quite nice to be out although by now I find even a little walk rather tiring. I shall have to go on into the town as Matthews have made a muddle over the groceries which Mamma ordered this morning in spite of my having written all instructions out in such a way that one would not have thought it possible to go wrong. Harrie is in very good form. She helped me pack my suitcase this morning, so I am now ready to start any time."

Maida wrote again on 14th October, following up on a telephone call to John to update him on her progress: "As I told you last night, Dr. Budd is going to have me in on Sunday if nothing has happened before... After seeing him I took a bus on into the town. As I felt much more active than I expected, I potted around and did quite a lot of small odd jobs... I met Mrs. Eagleston who asked when the baby was expected. I said '*Today*' at which she looked aghast and said '*Don't have it now, I shouldn't know what to do*', which I can well believe. I finally sauntered down Petty Cury thinking I had about 5 minutes to wait for a bus, but on rounding the corner saw one just about to leave; as you can imagine, this was too much for me to resist, and I did a very creditable sprint along St. Andrew's St. and made one last triumphant leap

which landed me on the platform as the bus was moving off. I had hopes that that this effort might inspire the baby to get cracking too but no such luck."

Two days later she was still at home as Dr Budd had changed his mind: "I really would like to manage it without an induction; I am beginning to feel like Jemima Puddleduck who was never allowed to hatch her own eggs." John meanwhile was still being kept busy at work and trying not to worry. Maida had promised to send him a wire as soon as the baby was born and he was hoping to be allowed to visit once this had happened. He addressed his letter of 15th October to the Nursing Home, which was a nice surprise for Maida when she arrived there the following evening. She then settled down to wait, keeping herself occupied with reading, knitting and chatting to the nurses: the same sister had been there in 1940 on her previous visit.

On the evening of 17th October John rang up the nursing home with exciting news but was not put through as they told him that Maida was settling down for the night, so he wrote instead: "Darling, I am so happy tonight because Col. Dawson has told me definitely that he is now ready to recommend that I should be graded. I have to make out a list of the 48 operations I have done here and then he is going to send in a report. I feel so excited about life darling, with so many nice things happening for a change... I have had a very good day with an acute appendix to remove after tea. Col. Dawson watched and assisted me a little. I am feeling a little tired this evening but also so happy. I wonder whether I shall be moved and where?...Darlingest, I am longing to hear that our baby has arrived and that you are all right. I shall then feel the happiest man in the world. I can't bear to think of you suffering darling. Perhaps the worst will be over by the time this reaches you."

It was indeed over, as a baby boy was born at

4.20 on the afternoon of 18th October. Although John and Maida had been referring to the unborn baby as Camilla, they had decided long before that a boy would be named Charles. John was able to join them the following afternoon, looking very happy, and clasping a huge bunch of flowers. It had been a momentous 24 hours for the family. He was able to spend the following morning in Cambridge, where he registered Charles' birth and brought Harriet and Mamma for a brief visit to the nursing home before returning to Oxford.

Maida wrote on 21st October: "Though your little visit was short it was just perfect, and it is nice to think how many odd jobs you achieved. I am sure Mamma could never have managed the registration. I know you think I exaggerate her muddle-headedness, darling, but really the poor lamb can't manage things as she did. She still can't find her way to and from the Nursing Home without asking all the time, and when she came this morning, she couldn't remember in the least who she had written or telephoned to or who not, so I hope no-one's feelings have been hurt; all the same it was lovely to see her, and she is so happy about little Charles. She didn't bring Harriet today... I expect the poor little girl feels a bit left out of things. It was sweet of you darling to tell me what a welcome she gave you when you got back yesterday; it makes me so happy that you and she are such friends. You are such a perfect Daddy for her."

"I have lots of milk today, in fact almost more than I want as our plump Charles evidently doesn't feel the necessity for making much effort, and it is the greatest job to induce him to keep awake to the end of his feeds. While he is sucking, he does so with great heartiness, but all of a sudden his head will droop and he just lets go of everything in complete abandonment to sleep... Mamma had such a nice little note from Uncle Philip, thanking her for her card and asking her how I was." Uncle Philip then sent Maida a cheque for Charles to start his own bank account, as he had done for Harriet. He was indeed a very kind and generous uncle.

It was fortunate that Charles' birth had been accomplished safely, as it was shortly followed by considerable problems at home. Maida wrote to John on 24th October while still at the Brunswick, starting with the good news: "Charles and I are still in splendid form. Last night at 10.0 he was fuller of beans than he has ever been... He is such fun when he wakens up. He has achieved one or two smiles, by mistake I think, but it was lovely to see them." The bad news was that Adda had definitely decided to move to her cousins

at Worksop and was going to stay with them for two nights from 30th October to 1st November to make the final arrangements. Maida was therefore hoping that John would be able to come home again to help Mamma and Harriet, as in his absence she was trying to organise everything from the Nursing Home.

Her letter continued: "Mamma came down this morning after all. I think it is rather too much for her to bring Harriet, but I did love having her too when they came yesterday. I was expecting Adda but probably she was too busy... I got Mamma to write down a few dates and times ahead of the weekend and Adda's time away, so now I hope she can make plans with Adda without getting muddled. It will be wonderful if you can come on Monday night, darlingest, though I know I mustn't count on it at all. I spent quite a long time planning a menu which you and Mamma can manage with a minimum of trouble, and without her having to go out shopping. It will involve liberal use of the tin-opener... If there is no shopping to do we can manage very well even if you don't succeed in getting over... I hope Adda will be pleased to find she can definitely plan to go. Mamma said she was in a bad temper, but I expect she is tired. She is being so good over doing Charles' washing and mine and sending it back the very next day, which must mean a lot of extra work, as the nurses like to keep us most unnecessarily clean."

The next day Maida described various letters and presents that continued to arrive. She had now had her stitches out and Charles was doing well: "Adda brought Harrie down to see me this morning, and they were going on to try to get some oranges which are apparently on sale in the town this week. Harrie is much interested in all the workings of the Nursing Home and in anything I tell her about the daily routine. When I said to Adda that I am washed all over twice a day, Harrie put in *'And in bed, mind you!'*"

Still at the nursing home on 27th October, Maida reported having a disturbed night: "One of the patients was apparently seized with acute labour pains on the landing and stayed there about 5 minutes shrieking with agony, poor girl, to the accompaniment of frenzied *'Hushes'* from the nurses who were trying to get her back to her room. The next thing was the sound of equipment being bundled along to her room from the theatre, which was already occupied by another patient who had a surgical induction and might also have been expected to start off but luckily didn't. Then the Doctor arrived and soon afterwards left again, all just under my window — all this mixed with the sound of several of the babies squawking in

the nursery below, and teeming rain and wind outside: it was a real inferno. Once it all subsided, however, I soon went to sleep again.” The following day on 28th October she was able to return home to Queen Edith’s Way, writing: “We are all thrilled with Charles including Ben.”

Following his return to Oxford on 20th October, John was initially tired out by all the excitement, travelling and hospital work. He had a lot of notes to write up and his ward sister was in a bad temper. Fortunately, there was then a gap in the operation list, giving him a couple of quieter days to recuperate. By the end of the month, however, and in typical army fashion all plans were once more uncertain. He had to abandon his intended return home and rang up Queen Edith’s Way on 30th October hoping to speak to Maida, but Mamma refused to get her out of bed to come downstairs to the phone.

Maida wrote back following the telephone call: “Mamma has just been talking to you on the telephone. She couldn’t hear very well, so I hope you’ll be writing as well, as I can’t make out from her if you are expecting to be moved with the Unit. I am terribly disappointed you can’t come, darling, I know you’ll be feeling just as miserable about it. I wonder when I can hope to see you again. I felt a little tired about an hour ago but, now that I am back in bed and have had some supper, I feel better.”

“Mamma is really managing wonderfully well, but it takes her all her time to do the cooking and washing up, taking Harrie and Ben out and so on. So I had to get up this morning in my dressing gown to bath Charles and then I washed the nappies. Then I came back to bed till lunchtime, got out at 1.30 to feed Charles, as it is so much easier sitting in a chair, came back for the afternoon, and then migrated to the nursery for tea which we all had together by the fire... Dr. Budd didn’t want me to move out of bed except to go the bathroom, but I just couldn’t do that. He absolutely forbade me to dress or go downstairs... I am feeling very well, darling, and quite up to doing what I did today, so I hope there was no harm in it. Little Harrie has been so good and helpful, and Charles very good too. He is so sweet. Harrie had him to sit on her knee today for the first time. They looked so adorable.”

“Adda went off at 8.13 this morning; she is supposed to return on Wednesday afternoon. I can’t think of anything more in the way of news for today, darling. I can’t really think of anything at all except how disappointed I am. This horrible war — when

will it end? I sometimes feel as if it would drag on for months and months, and the occupation of Germany for years. All my love, darlingest, your very own, own Maida. P.S. Tuesday. Quite cheered up by this morning, hope you have too.”

John had indeed followed up his phone call with a letter: “I was rather wanting to speak to you because we are closing the hospital and everyone is getting a fortnight’s leave, so I shall soon have to decide when to take it. I am not altogether feeling it is hopeless as Col. Dawson said something about me going back to Shaftesbury this evening. Everything has been in a whirl today as we have been getting rid of the patients, which is always a melancholy proceeding. I was furious at not being able to come today but I sensed that something was in the air, and I am very glad I did not ask as I am sure it would have been very badly received by the Colonel... If I put off my leave for a fortnight I may lose it altogether. I must keep in with the Col. at present. All my love precious one. John.” His agitation was probably caused by knowing that most of the staff would be moving with the hospital to an overseas posting, which he was hoping to avoid. There had been a check to the Allied advance in Northern Europe and that, together with the continuing fighting in the Far East, was putting great pressure on the army medical services at this time.

Maida wrote again later that day: “It is 5.0 p.m. and I am sitting by the nursery fire with a few minutes to spare before Charles has his tea. Harriet has gone to tea with Mrs. Luard who very kindly fetched her at 4.0, and Mamma and I had ours in the nursery where it is nice and warm. The machinery of the house is still working though somewhat creakily. I am afraid poor Mamma will be very tired by the time Adda returns though we are a very happy and harmonious party without her; all the same I shall be glad when she returns, though she usually comes back from her holidays in a very bad temper. I feel horribly lazy not being able to do more to help, but I feel I’d better not depart too far from Dr. Budd’s instructions.”

Maida commented that all this work, including having to wash at least a dozen nappies a day, was very wearing for her and she found it hard to forgive Adda for going off at this difficult moment. Adda herself was, however, also getting very tired and was finding it difficult to be patient with Mamma’s increasing confusion. Food rationing continued and they had no modern conveniences such as a refrigerator, freezer or vacuum cleaner to help with the cooking and

housework. Adda had been part of the household as Maida's Nanny since she was five months old, so it was not easy to adjust to being without her. Although she returned briefly at the start of November, she had now finalised her plans to leave for good at the end of the month.

John meanwhile was feeling equally disappointed but did not dare to do anything to annoy the authorities until he had finally been made a graded surgeon. This had now definitely been recommended but was not yet confirmed. He wrote on 31st October: "It has now been decided that I shall be coming on leave about Nov. 14th unless I am posted away before then. I daren't ask for any favours from the Colonel as it may mean several years abroad if I get on the wrong side of them. However, at the moment I have a feeling that all will be well. In any case I am too busy to worry much. The only thing that worries me is the thought of you and Mamma being all alone with no one to help except our little Harriet."

"I have been writing notes most of the day and will be glad when the feeling of tension and excitement in the unit subsides a little. The first lot will be off tomorrow and then my ward will be the only one working. Dalliwell is back and Major Campbell is going off. Darling, I am terribly disappointed at not being able to come and help you, but I know you will understand that my future hangs in the balance at the moment and a little extra work now may save us a longer separation later. I am longing for you so much, precious one I and want to see Charles again as soon as possible. Your own John for always."

He continued to be very busy getting the patients moved out of the Examination Schools and he also had extra work treating accident cases, seeing outpatients and examining ex British prisoners of war who had been repatriated. He was pleased to hear when Adda was back. Further potentially good news followed on 4th November. "My most important piece of news is that I am definitely not going abroad with the hospital. This will mean that I shall not get my embarkation leave on Nov. 17th and may be posted elsewhere any day now. However, if I remain in England I shall be due for leave at the beginning of December, so all may be well yet... I was glad to hear you have written to Charles' prospective godparents. However it is quite impossible to fix anything at the moment. With any luck I shall know where I am to go next week. I do hope I shan't be posted out of reach of Cambridge." John did then manage to fit in a surprise 24 hours leave on 6th November which cheered up both Maida and

Mamma. While there, he bought them a second-hand gas cooker to make their life a bit easier, as cooking up to that point had relied on a coal-fired stove.

John was determined that they needed to find a replacement for Adda as soon as possible and simply could not believe that this was an almost impossible task at that stage of the war. They had discussed this during his most recent visit and the theme now kept recurring in the letters that followed. Maida still had a lot to cope with and wrote to him on 11th November saying: "I have had a very busy day again. I called at three Registry Offices*. One wouldn't even take our name down, having no hope of supplying anyone. The other two took down particulars but had no-one available at present." She was hoping that he would be able to come home again the following week: "Mamma is looking forward to seeing you too. She is gradually cheering up, I think. She says she feels very depressed, but she says it less often, and certainly looks better. Yesterday I really felt worried about her, her eyes had such great black rings round them, but she really does look more herself tonight."

After returning to Oxford John wrote: "My name has appeared in part II orders as posted to 'Home Detachment', so that is one anxiety less. I expect I shall settle down to do some reading this week and shall so long to hear how you are all getting on. I know I shall be blamed by the neighbours for Adda's departure and will feel much better about it if she could be replaced." He continued to write every day as usual, but had no special news, and was lucky enough to be able to make another flying visit to Cambridge on 13th to 14th November.

Shaftesbury

On his return to Oxford John was delighted to find that he had been posted back to Shaftesbury and was to leave the next day. He looked forward to being warmer there: "It is really perishing here and no fires at all in Brasenose." He was still operating on 15th November, his last morning in Oxford: "I took another appendix out this morning, quite a bad one. Last night I saw a most interesting case of a dislocated 'hamate', a small bone in the wrist. It has only been described eight times in medical literature. I managed to reduce it successfully which was quite an achievement." He described himself as: "...very well, though feeling a little bewildered."

* *Employment Offices.*

He then had a long, tedious train journey to Shaftesbury accompanied by three of the nursing sisters from Oxford who had also been posted there. It poured with rain all day and they had four changes, arriving eventually at 3.30: "...to find everyone preparing for a mess party and every bed occupied." However, he was able to sleep in the Orderly Officer's room, and quite enjoyed the dance and particularly the warmth of the hospital. He found a new O.C. Division whom he liked and some old acquaintances and was given the Officer's Ward to look after. He wrote again on the following day saying that he had walked up Melbury Beacon and was looking forward to receiving news from home.

Maida was of course delighted to hear of his posting, writing on 16th November: "Darling, the relief of knowing you wouldn't be going overseas was so great that when I was going to bed I just cried with happiness. I don't think I had realised quite how much I was dreading that you might have to go again. Now that biggest nightmare has gone, all other worries seem to have faded into insignificance with it. Nothing will be too hard to bear if I can look forward to your coming home from time to time, though I don't expect you'll manage it quite as often as from Oxford."

The worries did, however, recur all too soon as she wrote again two days later, sounding exasperated: "I am rather worried to find that you evidently expect us to find a maid before your next leave. I am afraid there's very little chance of finding one so quickly. I wish I could make you realise that the shortage of domestics is really acute and has very little to do with wages. Believe me, I am doing everything possible to find one, darling, but I can't create one out of thin air."

"Meanwhile I am feeling very well, and don't view the prospect of carrying on alone for a bit with any horror, if only you and Mamma keep cheerful about it, and just accept it as one of the trials of total war. As I tell her, worrying only makes everything more depressing and doesn't help anyone... One individual did come to apply yesterday, but she was obviously quite batty. I took her name and address, but I hope we can do better than that. The application for fuel produced a licence to get an extra ½ ton of coal. Last year we got a ton, but then we hadn't the gas-cooker. I am quite pleased they are letting us have any at all." Maida also reported separate visits from three old friends and a few more letters and presents had arrived for Charles, which all gave her pleasure.

One of Adda's last helpful acts before leaving was to clean up the second-hand gas cooker. Maida wrote

on 22nd November: "Poor dear, it was good of her to do it, especially as to smarten it up they had evidently painted it with some black stuff which came off like ink, but couldn't be left on as it made a most filthy smell and smoke when the grill was lit. I used it tonight to make Welsh Rarebit for supper. One of the portions turned turtle on the way out from under the grill, which made Adda laugh so much that all the black looks and pregnant silences of the last weeks were forgotten and, as Mamma shared in the joke when she came down, we are all on excellent terms again, which is very satisfactory. Adda has begun packing today. I think she feels a bit melancholy now it has come to packing up."

Maida was also beginning to think about arranging the christening at St. Benet's Church, where they had been married and Harriet was christened, although no date had yet been fixed. She had rung up Father Denis, the current vicar of St Benet's to find that the church was now being looked after by Franciscans: "He was so nice and said he was so pleased to hear Charles was safely born. I thought it very friendly of him, as he has never met us." It was agreed that another of the Friars, Father Lothian, would take the service.

On 24th November they had had another stream of visitors at Queen Edith's Way: "...not only did the entire Otter family come to tea, but afterwards Miss Waring and Mrs. Hall and Mollie all turned up to see Charles, who held quite a reception in the nursery as he was going to bed. He thoroughly enjoyed being the centre of so much attention and slept better than usual after all the excitement. Mamma and I felt quite exhausted afterwards and our jaws ached with all the talking, but we both agreed it made a very pleasant change to see so many people; it really did Mamma a lot of good... In my account of yesterday's activities I forgot to mention that I had been wakened at 3.0 a.m. by Charles and 6.0 a.m. by Harriet, and at 6.45 I had a date with Adda in the kitchen to have a lesson in cleaning the flues. So it really was a hectic day. I am still sewing hard in the intervals between other occupations." She also mentioned that Cambridge had now run out of toilet paper, so they were having to use the Radio Times instead.

Only one more of Maida's letters from December 1944 has survived: "I woke up this morning with a bit of poetry running, for no reason, through my mind... Wishing to complete and trace it, I hunted in the dictionary of quotations. I could not find it but came across this passage from 'Two Gentlemen of Verona' which I did not know and think you would like as

much as I did, darling, as it describes so charmingly what I feel when you are far away from me... Not being able to improve on Shakespeare, I will make this my farewell for tonight."

'What light is light if Sylvia be not seen?

What joy is joy if Sylvia be not by?

Unless it be to think that she is by

And feed upon the shadow of perfection.

Except I be by Sylvia in the night

There is no music in the nightingale,

Unless I look on Sylvia in the day

There is no day for me to look upon:

She is my essence, and I leave to be

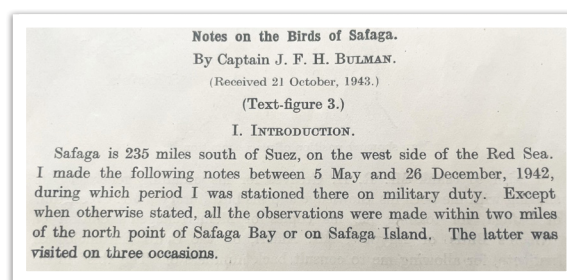
If I be not by her fair influence

Fostered, illumined, cherished, kept alive.'

John meanwhile continued writing from Shaftesbury. On 20th November he suggested that the christening should be held on 16th December, and was pleased to hear that Alison Clay, Charles' prospective godmother, had been to visit. He also promised Maida that he would stop worrying her about the lack of domestic help. He had done his first operation since his return to Shaftesbury but did not get on with the current theatre sister so: "...working in the theatre is a constant fight."

The following day he reported receiving a letter from his mother which included the news that: "Denis has been posted to the Battleship Anson, which should be safe enough now that we have air superiority. He expects to go East for two years and Kitty is going to her mother's. I have had a fairly busy day doing paperwork mostly... We have three poor chaps who have been nearly blinded by explosions, some accidental and some by booby traps. One poor fellow is completely blind and his fiancée is here, such a pretty Irish girl. It is really most tragic as he is not much hurt otherwise. Another lieutenant has lost his left eye and can just read with difficulty with his other eye. He has a wife and child and was up at Cambridge before the war for one year. He will be discharged from the army and asks me what I recommend him to do."

On 24th November John had received a letter from Maida containing a copy of the 'Ibis': "I am very pleased with the printing of my article and so far have noticed only one mistake." This was entitled *'Notes on the Birds of Safaga'* and listed the birds he had seen while stationed in Safaga in 1942. It included the autumn migration along the Red Sea coast and gave the first confirmed sightings in Egypt of two herons that he



Start of John's article on the Birds of Safaga published in the *Ibis*.⁷⁰

had shot and skinned, *Ardea goliath* (Goliath heron) and *Butorides striatus* (Striated heron)⁷⁰. Despite this good news, he was becoming increasingly disgruntled that he had still not been graded: "I am getting rather tired of being on my best behaviour all the time as the delay seems so protracted. I am beginning to wonder if it will be put off again as I am not doing any operating at present and Col. Mackey might easily say he hadn't seen enough of my work."

John was now hoping to come home for the leave to which he was entitled on 9th December, meaning that Maida could go ahead with arranging the christening. He wrote on 29th November saying: "It is in a way sad that Adda will have left when this letter reaches you, but it is another step forward I feel." The following day he was already going back on his promise not to worry about the lack of domestic help. He had an ulterior motive for this as he was hoping that Maida would come to live with him in Shaftesbury but knew that she could not leave Mamma on her own: "I was so thrilled to get your letter this evening telling me that you may have got a suitable domestic to replace Adda. If you like her, you must offer her 10/- a week more than she expects. If she has not come back, write to her and make her that offer. I will pay for it. Also if I can get settled here in the New Year, I shall want you to come to Shaftesbury, so you can say you do not expect to be in Q.E.W. for long."

At the start of December he wrote again: "I have an important piece of news today which is that Capt. MacPherson is leaving tomorrow and I am taking on his job, which will mean getting several wards to look after and some good operating... I think about you so much and feel so very homesick sometimes. However, the change of job and more operating will keep me going next week." He had been to tea again with Mrs. Perry at the Royal Hotel and found her more infirm but as friendly as ever: "She had been into the town by taxi to buy some cakes for my tea, the dear old thing."

* A journal published by the British Ornithologists' Union.

This time John's leave happened as planned and he came home for a fortnight in mid-December during which Charles was duly christened at St. Benet's. Two godparents, Alison Clay and Robert Bayne-Powell were present, although his other godfather Bob Staniland could not join them. Mamma was unfortunately rude to Father Lothian at the tea-party following the service. As she had previously always had excellent manners and been a good hostess this came as a shock to Maida and was probably a symptom of the dementia from which she was now suffering.

Returning to the war, by December virtually all of France, most of Belgium, and part of the southern Netherlands had been liberated by the Allies but their failure at Arnhem meant that all hope of ending the war in 1944 had to be abandoned. There was no way to avoid a winter campaign in what proved to be one of the coldest winters on record. Charles' christening on 16th December happened to coincide with the start of what became known as the Battle of the Bulge. This was a last-ditch attempt by the Germans to try to split the Allied forces on their Western Front, re-capture the Belgian port of Antwerp and force the Allies to agree a favourable peace treaty^{57,71}.

News came through that the Germans had launched a counterattack through the Ardennes forest against positions held by the US First Army in what was then the weakest part of the Allied line. This caught the Allies completely by surprise as they did not think that the German forces had much fight left in them. The region was densely wooded and hilly with narrow lanes made treacherous by the winter snow and ice. The idea was Hitler's, although most of his officers were not supportive. Over the first two days Panzer divisions punched a gap in the U.S. defences and advanced towards the strategically important small town of Bastogne. Troops of the 101st Airborne Division just managed to beat them to it but were then surrounded.

The German advance continued until 24th December when a break in the appalling wintry weather enabled the Allies to mount air attacks against the German forces and supply lines. General Patton's U.S. Third Army arrived from the south on 26th December, ending the siege on Bastogne. The troops on both sides experienced much suffering from the intense cold. By 1st January 1945 the Germans were in retreat but the battle continued for another month until the beginning of February. By then the German armed forces were severely depleted and these remained largely unreplaced. There were also



Charles.

significant losses among the Allied troops and their planned advance into Germany was delayed.

Meanwhile John had returned to Shaftesbury after his leave. Uncle Philip had sent a message earlier in the month asking to see him and saying that he could now hardly see and was not at all well. John therefore called in on his way back and wrote on 19th December: "I had a very successful visit to Uncle Philip... I thought his hearing was better than last time but he is weaker physically. He does not go out of the house at all now and can only just manage the stairs by himself. He was full of questions which caught me napping, such as the exact amount of Philip's and Denis' pay, and how much Canon Jones left in his Will. He showed me a list of his securities and gave me two of his post-war credits. He does not expect to see the end of the war himself, I think."

"I got back to the hospital about 12.30. Today is a beautiful day and I am feeling fine. Col. Mackey told me this morning that he sent in a recommendation for my grading before I went on leave and hopes it will come through soon. He was very pleasant and has put me back on Officer's Ward for the time being. I discussed again the question of your coming and he is still in favour of it as he thinks I may still have to go abroad later."

He was kept busy in the lead up to Christmas, writing on 21st December: "I look like getting quite a lot to do before the New Year as two graded surgeons have left today temporarily, and two trainees (Lieut. Thomas and Major Sparrow) are on leave. I am now working on two wards with Major Beal as well as helping Col. Mackey with his officer patients. Col. Mackey is expecting to send me as a graded surgeon to Tidworth for 10 days on the 1st January, to relieve Capt. Griffin while he is on leave. This I am rather looking forward to, though I don't believe there is a great deal to do there."

John had also heard from Maida that she had now managed to engage a replacement housekeeper. She was called Mrs. Maddigan but she had not yet started as she was currently unwell. John was still hoping that Maida could move to Shaftesbury with the children in early January and was beginning to look for somewhere for them to live. Although: "If you do come down here it must be on the understanding that it may be only temporary, but I hope you will feel even that is worthwhile if I can find a nice place."

On 23rd December: "I have the most unexpected honour today of being made temporary registrar of the hospital until Major Heighway comes back next Thursday." This was an administrative job involving a lot of paperwork. "In some ways I was sorry to be taken off the wards, but I now have the advantage of working with Col. Williamson. I broached him this morning on the subject of staying on here. He was in a particularly good humour and I felt he would do his best for me. He told me it would be useless for me to apply for a posting to take the F.R.C.S. in May but advised me to consider taking the exam all the same. He also says he has no influence on the postings from here."

John's suggestion for Maida to move to Shaftesbury put her in a very difficult position. On the one hand she was longing to get away from Cambridge to be with him. On the other, she was dreading the practical difficulties of moving the two children down to Dorset into rented accommodation and was also worrying about leaving Mamma. Christmas at Queen Edith's Way was very quiet: Mrs Maddigan had not yet appeared, Harriet had a cold and Mamma's erratic behaviour was getting on Maida's nerves.

John, in contrast, had an enjoyable Christmas at the hospital with carol singing round the wards on Christmas Eve and the usual parties. On 27th December he was continuing working as the registrar. This did not really suit him, so he was looking

forward to returning to the wards. His letter was full of hope of finding rooms in Shaftesbury in: "...a dear little thatched house" owned by a Miss English. He also discussed the possibility of getting the car out, though: "...the way I feel about things tonight is that it is not worth having the car to add to our worries at present." He had been to see Mrs. Perry again, who "...produced a most delicious cake."

On 29th December John seemed totally oblivious to the amount of effort it would require Maida to move with the children: "I have just had definite news that I am going to Tidworth tomorrow, Saturday. I am hoping to be able to fix up our house on the way and then ring you up when I arrive to let you know what my address is and the result of my interview with Miss English. Darling, I don't want you to bring too much stuff down here as your visit may be very brief. Capt. Griffin, who was graded about six weeks ago, has been posted to a hospital ship today, so I shall be next on the list for posting and might be off by the end of January. I want you to realise that it may only be very temporary and if I did go I would rather you went back to Cambridge. It would be best to look on the move as a holiday more than a permanent affair. I am sure it would be worthwhile though, even if it is only for a few weeks, and both Col. Mackey and Col. Williamson's wife thought I should. Darling, I am already longing for you so much. Perhaps you may be here in another fortnight."

Tidworth and Bovington

John duly arrived at the Military Families Hospital at Tidworth in Wiltshire on 30th December. This was in a military camp occupied by both British and American forces. He had been told that the posting there as a graded surgeon would be for only 10 days to relieve someone going on leave. He had called on Miss English before he left Shaftesbury and was almost certain that Maida could come to join him on 15th January. The year for him finished on a high, as reported in his letter of 31st December: "My own darlingest — News of my grading as a surgeon has just come through. Isn't that a nice present for New Year's Eve? I feel that 1944 has been easily the best I have spent in the army, and I am hoping that 1945 will be the last. Mr. Churchill is reported in today's papers as saying that the Germans will be finished in 1945, so I feel that is a certainty now."

"Another good piece of news is that I am being

relieved here by Capt. Jacobson, so perhaps I may be back in Shaftesbury almost as soon as this reaches you. I think this is really the best thing, as there will not be much to do here and no one to teach me anything. My New Year's resolution is now to work for the Fellowship. This afternoon has been bright and sunny and I went out for a walk to Tidworth Park where the O.T.C.* used to be. I think I was here in August 1926, nearly 20 years ago, which makes me feel a tremendous age! There are American soldiers everywhere... Tonight we are going to a New Year's dance organised by the Americans we are living with... This morning I had two eggs fried with bacon on one plate and so did everyone else in the mess, and basins of sugar and cream on the tables to help yourself to. I am not now surprised that most American Officers are slightly plump."

"Darling, I am just longing to hear that Mrs. M. has arrived as that is now the only thing that is likely to stop you coming to Shaftesbury. My grading dates from 9th December, just a year after we steamed into the Clyde. It is lovely to remember all the happy times we have had together, and now with Charles' safe arrival everything seems perfect. It is a fortnight tomorrow since I left you. I shall be tempted to come to see you next weekend if I am at Shaftesbury but can make no plans until I get back. I must do some reading now. Precious one, all my love is with you. Your own big John."

He wrote again the following day, after what he described as a moderately good New Year's Eve celebration: "I started at about 6.30 in the mess drinking gins at 3/- each and at about 7.30 an American one-star General arrived, which was the signal that we should eat. However, I was surprised to find that it was a glorified buffet supper which consisted of cold ham, minced salmon, Russian salad and a redcurrant jelly which was washed down with coffee. Afterwards we danced until ten in a not very convivial atmosphere... Most of the American doctors are a little bit sorry for themselves, and one of them who has been in England since 1941 was extremely depressed about being separated from his wife and family for so long. I found it easy to sympathise but rather an uninteresting and thankless task."

"I drank my first 'coke' (which is coca-cola in full). It seemed very like lemonade though coloured rather like beer and tasting rather like I imagine the bark of a tree would taste. The dance did not finish at ten,

but I was called to the hospital to treat a Canadian airman with a broken leg... I finally got to bed at about 1.30 a.m. Today I have had a few odd jobs to do and have now been told that Capt. Jacobson is not coming here to relieve me, so the news cancels out... Tomorrow I am going to Bulford to see surgical out-patients. Darling, I am just longing to get a letter from you tomorrow."

A letter from Maida also written on New Year's Day duly arrived, but nearly all her other January letters are missing. She wanted to get Griselda going again to drive to Shaftesbury, rather than having to transport both the children and their possessions singlehanded on an overcrowded train. John wrote back in reply (2.1.1945): "I have just had your New Year's Day letter with the cheery news that Mrs. Maddigan has arrived and your plea for a car. I think the car is more pleasant but also more risky but let us get it out, darling, if you would like it. I should think it would be best to license it for three months and insure only for third party. I don't think that will come to much more than the 1st. class return train fare of the whole family. Unfortunately, I have also heard that Miss English cannot take us on Jan. 15th, which is a big blow as she had almost promised me she would. However, I am sure I can find somewhere even though it may not be by the 15th. I have been working very hard all day today at a place called Bulford 6 miles away. About 40 patients wanted to see a surgical specialist, which was me. I felt so happy and self-important."

On the 4th January John was still at Tidworth but: "I am going over to Shaftesbury this afternoon to make further enquiries about lodgings. I have one further hope, though it is well out of Shaftesbury. I can hardly bring myself to believe that Miss English has failed. However, if we have the car it will not be much trouble to move again if necessary. Mrs. M. will probably not show her true colours for a few weeks. On no account let Mamma try to reduce her wage. If necessary, we will pay for her — after all I am now worth 4/6 a day extra, which is £82 a year, so we can afford it. Darling I may be with you in another week and, even if I am not back at Shaftesbury, I can probably get the weekend off from here."

On 10th January, despite the recent good news about the grading, all the moving around and general uncertainty was clearly getting him down. He wrote: "When I do get depressed, which is not very often, I take one of your photos and put it on the table in front of me. At present I like the one I took in the summer when you were sitting in a deck chair in the garden

* *Officer's Training Camp.*

with little Charlot well hidden... If only we could settle down together for even 6 months everything would be fine."

This was followed a week later (17.1.1945) with news of yet another change of plan: "I am writing this at Shaftesbury but am going to Bovington near Weymouth this afternoon. I gather it may only be for a fortnight and then I shall be going on to Moreton Hampstead. It was rather sad to read your Monday letter which reached me yesterday, so full of hope that you were coming here next Monday. It will be just as well to keep the car ready in case we have the chance, though it might be better to get Moss to keep the accumulator until we need it. I think Bovington is rather a better job than Tidworth and may be good experience, though I am a bit tired of all this moving to and fro. However, it is lovely to think that I am really a graded surgeon now, which gives me a much better position than the ordinary General Duties Officer."

On 18th January he wrote from Bovington Military Hospital saying: "I am now hoping that I may be left at Moreton Hampstead until midsummer. It is annoying that our plans have had to be changed but if we had not made plans quite likely I would not have been moved." He had found no suitable accommodation for the family in Shaftesbury but now said: "Don't worry and get ready to leave in February."

Life at Queen Edith's Way was again proving very difficult. Not only were John's plans for Maida to move to Shaftesbury constantly changing but Mrs. Maddigan unfortunately turned out to be an alcoholic. Although she began quite well, giving Maida a little rest, she had already gone by the end of January, with Maida saying that she was an unpleasant person to have in the house and that they were glad when she left. Meanwhile, with true army unpredictability, John was posted to Scotland. It was therefore very fortunate that Maida had not relocated to Dorset with the children.

Scotland

The weather that winter was very cold with much snow and ice. John managed a weekend at home on his way North and next wrote from Edinburgh on 25th January while working in Edinburgh Castle, part of which was being used as a hospital. He expected to be moved shortly to the Military Hospital, Drymen, near Loch Lomond, and now hoped that the family would be able to join him there instead: "My own

darlingest — I have just moved into the Queen Hotel which is at the top of Queen Street. I have had rather a cold welcome and have been shown into a big first floor room with a double bed in it. What irony! I am now beginning to thaw in front of an electric radiator, which is supplied by a shilling in the slot meter. I have a wash basin in the room with a hot and cold tap, but it seems to me to be the sort of hotel which keeps the water just too cool to have a bath in order to stop people running off all the hot water."

The following day he wrote again, having received a letter from Maida (now missing) saying that she was having more problems with Mamma: "If you would like to get away at once, you could probably go to Morwick which is a bit nearer, but today I was told that Major Talbot was coming on the 29th so I might get off to Drymen on the 31st. I should think it would be worth waiting until I get there, when you might be able to move up fairly soon after. I have had a rather hectic day with outpatients and one operation to do this evening."

"The weather is still cold and the pavements covered with frozen snow, but I managed to sleep fairly well, and had a hot bath and a 'toby' so am now thinking more of the hotel. Darlingest, I like you to tell me all your troubles and I try and tell you mine, so don't think I shall be worried by it. Actually, I am feeling rather cheerful tonight at the definite prospect of getting settled at Drymen. It is really the best prospect I have had since the war began! ... I hope I may have time to have a look round tomorrow." He managed to visit an exhibition of water colour paintings at the bottom of Castle Hill but was feeling sorry for the local birds suffering in the very cold weather: "I saw a little hedge sparrow this morning hopping about in the snow and too weak to fly."

Maida wrote a cheerful letter on 27th January as she was now looking forward to joining John in Scotland. It is unclear who was to look after Mamma, who was now said to be 'in excellent form'. She had arranged to have some of their possessions put into storage. The removal men had packed everything up watched by Harriet, who reported that they had used masses of paper to wrap them in. Toilet paper was still hard to come, so Maida commented: "A good many bits of the said paper remained flying about, so I collected them thankfully for toilet paper, Mrs M having purloined our spare roll — the only thing we have missed since her departure."

"I took Harrie and Charles out for a very short walk; the sun had come out and was making the frost

sparkle. I had promised Harrie yesterday to take her to a wonderful slide the secondary school girls have made by the bus-stop: rather a dangerous place, and I wonder how many intending passengers have arrived at the bus door in a sitting position... I was fully expecting to go down myself — it was like glass.” She enclosed a picture Harriet had drawn for him entitled ‘Trees in Snow’.

The next day (28.1.1945) Maida overslept as her alarm clock failed to go off: “I was roused today by angry squawks from Charlot and then heard Mamma on the move; it was 8.45! I rushed down and lit the fire in my dressing gown, and didn’t dress till I had finished Charlot, and in the end, thanks to Mamma doing about three times as much as usual, we caught up the missing 1½ hours by lunch time. Poor Mamma is rather tired tonight. I, of course, am feeling more spry than usual. But it has been another happy day for us all with no friction.”

“The intense cold continues... I survived last night thanks to wearing your pyjama jacket over my own... I took the children out for a short walk this afternoon. Harrie thoroughly enjoys the snow, and brought back a snowball, which she is keeping in the house to see what happens to it. In a truly scientific spirit she refuses to believe it will melt until she sees it happen! However I persuaded her to keep it in a basin instead of a cardboard box which was her own suggestion... We weighed Charlot last week on the kitchen scales with two flat-irons and the rest in proper weights... We couldn’t get a very accurate weight, but it was definitely a little over 13 lbs. so he is continuing to grow steadily. I am wondering whether to start mixed feeding soon.”

John duly moved on to Drymen Military Hospital at Loch Lomond on 1st February and began at once to make enquiries about lodgings for both of them in the hospital but with no success. He had been allocated a comfortable room in Buchanan Castle, home of the Duke of Montrose. He enclosed a newspaper cutting about the weather: *‘A snow block delayed the 3.50 p.m. Inverness to Glasgow express for hours north of Aviemore. Passengers invaded the ‘railbars’ in search of food when the train reached Aviemore. It reached Glasgow 15 hours late.’* He reported that Drymen had very severe frost on 27th January and claimed to have been the coldest spot in Britain. Despite the weather, his initial impressions were favourable: “I think this job will suit me if only they will leave me here.”



John enjoying time with Maida, Charles and Harriet while on embarkation leave, February 1945.

Crookham

This was a vain hope as, within a fortnight, he had been posted to the European theatre of war, preceded by some embarkation leave in Cambridge. From there he set off for the R.A.M.C. Depot at Crookham, from where he had originally started out for Egypt in 1939. He visited his bank on his way through London and wrote from there on 26th February: “My own darlingest — This is my first letter to you after parting, written at Lloyd’s Bank where I have just had an interview with the manager. He recommends I should authorize you to draw cheques on my account, in case of need. I have filled in the required form and now you must sign it on the line under your name... Darling you were so clever to get me off in such good order and no tears. The news is so good I am sure it will not be long.”

Maida wrote back on 27th February. Following the latest change of plan they had now decided to look for a house or flat of their own in Cambridge. There was, however, an acute housing shortage as so many properties had been damaged and people displaced by the bombing. She had filled in the bank form as requested, saying: “I hope it won’t be necessary for

me to draw on your account, darling, but it is nice to feel I won't be stuck if you are away and I do run short. I went to the town this morning... I had rather a depressing time going the round of house agents, none of whom could offer any hope of a house or flat. However, I am also asking literally everyone I know, so something may turn up one day."

"I met Dr. Budd, which was rather nice as he is always so kind and sympathetic. I told him all our troubles; he says Charles can begin mixed feeding any time now." The house hunt continued the following day (28.2.1945): "I am asking everyone I meet about houses and am hoping that by thus casting my bread upon the waters I shall find it after many days! ... Things are fairly harmonious on the domestic front... We have no drawing room fire, but it is quite warm enough to be in there without one." Having no fire probably meant that there was a shortage of coal.

John wrote again on 26th February following his arrival at Crookham, where he had already met several old acquaintances: "We seem to have a fairly full programme tomorrow with various kinds of inspection and inoculations in the afternoon. I am just due for most of them as I had them last March when I was looking after the Reception Station in Grange Road." The next day: "I am now feeling rather sore in the arms after three inoculations for typhoid, tetanus and typhus respectively. However I have nothing particular to do and shall go to bed as soon as I have finished this letter. Please give Harrie a cuddle from me for the kisses on the letter, which I feel sure she made."

February 28th was a quiet day. John had been exchanging news with Guy Baines, an old friend from his time at St. Thomas's. "He thinks they will rebuild St. Thomas's on its present site after the war with 1,200 beds. Apparently, many of the M.O.s in the Arnhem show were from St. Thomas's and one of them has since died of wounds in Germany. St. Thomas's has certainly shown up well in all branches of the R.A.M.C."

On 1st March he reported: "I am feeling very much better today, though my left arm is still pretty sore. This afternoon I had a nice outing by myself and found a pleasant walk through a pine wood. I found signs of crossbills in the shape of eaten cones but could not find any of the birds themselves." This was repeated the following day with another walk: "I went with Major Shepherd and found he was quite interested in birds and animals. He also knew the way about as he was here last summer. We walked a long way

along the disused canal. The banks were overgrown with hazel and willow, which were resplendent with catkins. At one spot we stopped overlooking a marshy bit of swamp, and I said: '*This looks just the place for a marsh or willow tit*' and sure enough a pair appeared almost immediately."

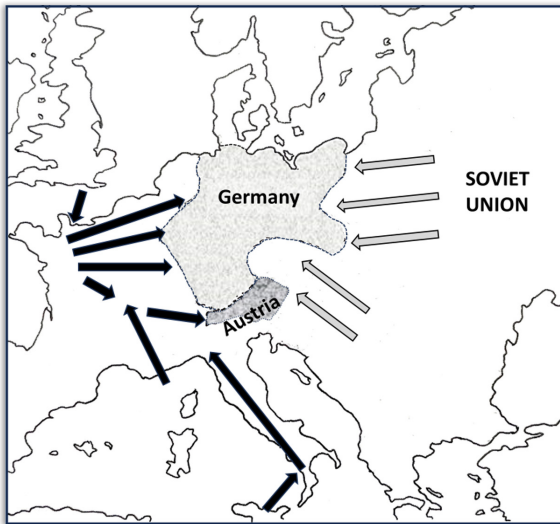
"The canal itself was full of toads swimming in the water and spawning. I don't think I have ever seen toads spawn before; it is produced in a tape with the eggs suspended in it as a row of black dots. I have never seen so many and could have picked out a hundred toads in half an hour. Also they made very little effort to swim away, and seemed unconscious of danger, possibly because they were mating. Coming back we admired the elm trees in full flower and there was so little wind that the scent of the flowers could be plainly smelt under the trees. I have never noticed this before. It is a sweet smell almost like honey though they don't appear to attract the bees like the lime trees do... It was so nice to know everything was going well at Q.E.W. I had to put the call through from an outside box which was a bit of a business, but it was well worth it, darling, to hear your voice and know that all is well. It will be nice to get a pile of your letters when we arrive."

CHAPTER 17

Across The Rhine

1945

BY MARCH 1945 NAZI Germany was hemmed in by advancing armies. For the Allies approaching from the west the Rhine was the final geographical barrier barring their way into the German industrial heartland. Their previous attempt to cross it at Arnhem in September 1944 had proved a costly disaster but now they needed to try again^{2,57}.



Map 12. Routes by which Allied troops (black) and Soviet troops (grey) advanced to surround Germany.



JOHN LEFT ENGLAND AND returned to active service at the beginning of March, so Maida's first letter was to send him birthday wishes for 5th March: "I am writing on Sunday afternoon to the accompaniment

of the B.B.C. memorial concert for Sir Henry Wood, and the orchestra is just playing the Egmont overture, which makes me long to have you listening with me... If I remember rightly this is the 13th anniversary of our first meeting. I think it was the day before your 21st birthday that Robert brought you to tea with me. We little thought then what a fateful day it was for us, darling." She told him that the children were giving her comfort now that he was abroad again. Following the swift departure of Mrs Maddigan in January, she had managed to find a new maid called Emily, who had moved to Cambridge to escape the buzz bombs now targeting London. She was elderly but pleasant.

The following day Maida rang up a Colonel Digby to enquire about the future availability of houses in Cambridge which had been requisitioned by the army: "Alas, he told me that it is '*quite hopeless*' to get one of them booked in advance: according to him they will be required by the Army for some time yet, and then handed over to the Ministry of Health. He says he gets about six enquiries a day about them and is beginning to wonder if he is a soldier or a house agent... I don't think I told you that January's clerk told me he knew a man who advertised a house to let in the paper and had 375 answers by the first post. So you can see, darling, what a job it is going to be to find anywhere. However, I will go on trying and meanwhile make the most of things here. We have had bomb alerts the last two nights... Emily is rather nervous, however I hope she will remain for the present."

On 6th March Maida had not yet heard from John after his departure so she did not know where he had gone and was feeling miserable. Mamma had been in bed all day for no particular reason and was very grumpy and Emily was finding her hard to deal with: "...but she is being very patient under great provocation... Also, the accounts she continues to receive from her friends of the rockets which fall so

frequently on Blackheath make her quite keen to stay in Cambridge, and I don't think it has occurred to her to look for another situation in the town."



JOHN'S FIRST LETTER FROM the continent was dated 4th March. He had landed at Ostend in Belgium and was now part of the British Liberation Army (B.L.A.). The next day he was sent to No. 9 General Hospital B.L.A. which was then in Antwerp: "I have been looking at the British Sunday papers this morning and the news seems good. Most people seem to think I shall be demobilised within a year of the Germans being beaten, so that is the main thing to pray for now." When he got out of the train in Antwerp the station appeared completely deserted as it was being attacked by buzz bombs at the time and everyone was in the air-raid shelters.

"I have reached my unit at last and have met my new Colonel, who ordered me a cup of tea and had a friendly chat when I arrived. I find the O.C. Medical Div. was on the ship on which I returned from the Middle East. I have not so far met the C.C. Surgical Div. but have heard of him. Both the O.C. Divs. and the O.C. himself were in the M.E.F. so that will be in my favour... They seem to be short of staff at present and did not know I was a surgeon until I arrived. I have already had two rather minor road accidents to deal with."

"When I was waiting for tea this afternoon I switched on the wireless and listened to a service from King's College Chapel. It seemed to bring you so close to me, darling, and we could hear just the same noisy aeroplanes going over. I have now met Capt. Bishop the radiologist who has lost his left arm at the shoulder and has an M.C. and Africa Star." John also commented on the local fashion: "I like the hats around here. There are two types; the commonest have a wide protruding brim extending upwards and forwards from the forehead rather like a halo. At the back and sides they are small and neat. The second type are like a gent's top hat which has been slightly crumpled. I would like you in either and thought of buying one but was deterred by parting remarks on not spending too much money!"

The next day, 7th March: "I had quite a long talk with Lt/Col. Kellar this morning, chiefly about the

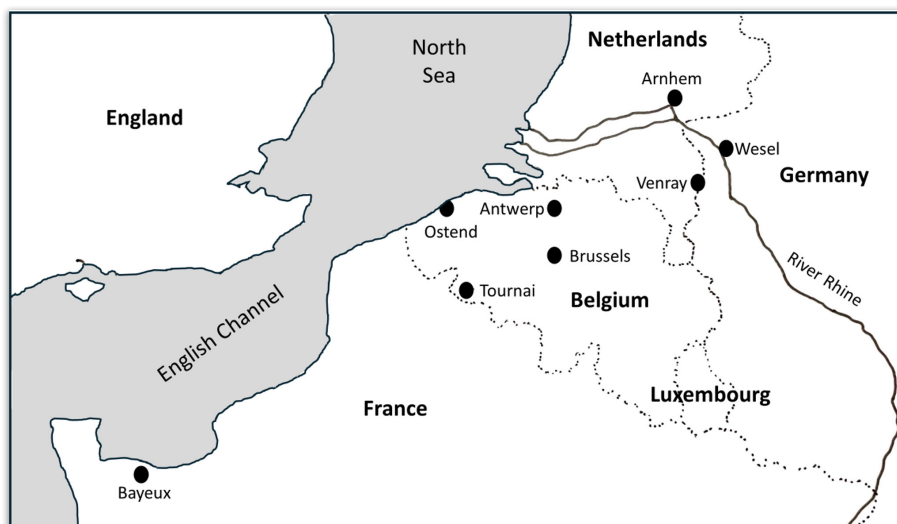
Western Desert. He has been in the desert very much longer than I was and mostly with 7th Armoured Division as a surgeon attached to a Field Ambulance. He will have a great deal to teach me, I am sure. I have now been moved into a room by myself and shall be sleeping on my camp bed and using my own sheets and blankets. I am glad to say that for once I have brought exactly the right things... The news of the capture of Cologne is splendid and I see the papers are discussing a crossing of the Rhine further North. It is nice to think the end may come at any time. I am already thinking of all the things we shall do on my next leave... I don't seem to have had half long enough with you on any of my leaves to tell you all the things I want to tell you."

The following day John reported: "I saw a magpie out of my window this morning when I was dressing and heard a wren and a chaffinch," which made him feel at home. He had also enjoyed attending a party the night before, which had helped him to get to know his new colleagues. On 9th March he was temporarily attached to a field ambulance and they were told to expect to receive casualties: "...at any time now.... We are all pleased with the news of the Rhine crossing, though this does not immediately affect us here." This comment referred to the U.S. First Army crossing of the Lower Rhine at Remagen on 7th March.

On 10th March: "I have had two cases to operate on today which were quite interesting. One was an officer in the French Mercantile Marine who was stabbed in the thigh by a friend who was having an argument with him. The night before we had a Canadian soldier who was shot through the stomach by an American who was having an argument, so it seems safer not to argue in this place... I shall be going back to No. 9 on Monday... I am writing this in my bedroom and have just heard the cry of a curlew flying over on spring migration, rather exciting to think that spring is so near again."

He wrote again on 12th March: "Yesterday afternoon the Colonel of the Field Ambulance took me and the Dental Officer out in his car to the town where you gave me a friend's address. We went to a concert where they played Dvorak's New World Symphony and a nice piece by Smetana called La Molday. We had a half bottle of vin-rouge each, which was the best I have tasted since the war began." The reference to a friend's address was John's way of telling Maida that he had been to Brussels without upsetting the letter censors. Mamma had corresponded for many years with a lady from Brussels who had got to

Map 13. Europe showing places where John was posted in 1945. British troops tried to cross the Rhine unsuccessfully at Arnhem in September 1944 but subsequently made a successful crossing at Wesel six months later in March 1945.



know the Roberts family while she had been a refugee in Wales during the first World War. John tried to find her house the following day, but a local shopkeeper told him that she had died about 5 years earlier.

While John had been with the field ambulance No. 9 Hospital had started relocating itself to Venray in Holland, about 40 miles to the west of the Rhine and close to where the British were planning to make their own first crossing into Germany. It was based in part of a disused and half-ruined Dutch hospital where conditions were extremely primitive. Their War Diary noted that it was not until the end of March that electric lighting was available in most blocks⁷² and John mentioned later that there was no running water until 2nd April.

On 14th March he wrote saying: "I am back at the hospital and there are now several more officers with us than before. It has been a most beautiful spring-like day and the country was looking pretty as we came along. There has been some hold-up with the mail and no-one has had any letters here for two days, but we are expecting some tomorrow so I hope I shall be one of the lucky ones. Last night we played Monopoly and drank whisky at a sort of farewell party at the other mess. Their O.C. was only 45 and had been in the Spanish republican war and in Finland previous to joining the British Army in the M.E.F. where he got an M.C. and a bar. He had been taken prisoner by the Germans at Arnhem but escaped and swam back across the Rhine. I think he deserved to be a Lt. Col."

Two days later he was continuing to meet old friends from Egypt. As they so far had few patients arriving, he was managing to do some work towards

his F.R.C.S. examination: "I am reading my Hamilton Bailey on 'Physical Signs' at present. I should like you to send on the 'Emergency Surgery' when it comes." As usual, he was taking an interest in the local bird population: "I have been trying to trace a bird which makes a super greenfinch noise outside my window. Unfortunately, as soon as I go outside it disappears... I am longing to be with you so much, sweetheart, but console myself with the thought that many of the officers have been here since July without leave. Also, next time I come home I really do believe it will be for good. It will be a marvellous feeling to think I shall be able to spend year after year with you darling, whatever our fortunes may be."

On 17th March Maida's daily letters sent since John left England had finally started to arrive after a two-week delay. He had more bird news in his reply: "I traced down the bird I told you about yesterday making a loud and rather irritating noise and could hardly believe my eyes when I found it proceeded from a Chaffinch. I have been deceived by them before but thought I knew all their notes now. In the early mornings here I hear a Missel Thrush and Blackbirds singing but have not seen a single Robin and only one Song Thrush."

The following day he noted: "Today Charles is five months old and I have put out the only photo I have of him (with you and Harriet) on my table. I am so much longing to get news of him though I feel sure he is all right. I am Orderly Officer today and quite enjoyed doing the sick parade this morning. After that I went to the morning service at 9.30 which was taken by the Presbyterian Padre, a Welshman called Padre

Lewis. He was fortunately a good singer. We had no music but an enthusiastic congregation. I think I shall have to go again this evening so as not to offend the C. of E. Padre, who looks the part all right but is rather silent and difficult to talk to... I treated a little local girl this afternoon who had been knocked down by a lorry. She was quite sweet, about Harriet's size, and her name was Maria, but I could not get her to smile, poor mite... All my love, darling, and give Harriet and Charlot kisses from me. Your own John."



MEANWHILE IN CAMBRIDGE MAIDA'S difficulties with Mamma were continuing. On 7th March she wrote: "Mamma got up to lunch today after being in bed all yesterday but returned at 3.0 saying she felt queer. She absolutely refuses to send for Dr. Budd or go to see him. I don't know what to do... There doesn't seem much wrong with her really, and as Emily is fairly cheerful and things are more or less harmonious in that direction, I am going to let things be for the present." She was continuing to visit house-agents: "Everyone seems to agree that the only way to get anything is by fairly regular pestering... I have a feeling in my bones that eventually something will turn up and, if not, then perhaps it means that Fate has chosen another place than Cambridge for us to live."

The next day: "Your first precious note from 'over there' arrived this morning, sooner than I had dared to hope. It was good to know you had crossed safely." Two days later she reported another trying day: "The worst of it is, one never knows when a storm will blow up over some triviality, and I'm afraid I'm getting just as bad as Mamma for going off the handle; however I keep on trying to be patient, and when things are peaceful as they are tonight I feel quite happy... I tried to tackle the garden today and did two hours work digging weeds out of the veg patch but found it rather tiring."

"Don't buy me a hat, please, darling, it's sweet of you to think of it, but really I would rather buy my own hats... I am quite certain that the best way to look smart is to have a few good clothes very carefully chosen to fit in with each other, and keep them well valeted... Don't think me ungrateful about the hat, I know you'll understand, and I don't feel guilty because

I know quite well you would never allow me to buy your hats!"

On 11th March Maida sent John some photos of Charles and reported that the cloud which she had been under since he left had suddenly lifted: "It actually happened while I was listening to a service on the wireless this morning, which is why I call it a miracle. I had been feeling so horrid since you went, so flat and unreceptive... I began listening in a bad temper because I wanted to go to St. Benet's and hadn't been able to finish my odd jobs in time. Everything seemed to cheer up suddenly; there were my two favourite hymns, 'God be in my Head' and 'I Vow to Thee, My Country', a lovely lesson from St. John and a sermon really addressed to the Forces by an ex-Chaplain General, which ended '*Your sacrificial service can never be in vain*'. It seemed to make me realise suddenly how little I had to grumble about and how much to be thankful for in a way which really meant something to me... I can't expect that this mood will remain with me all the time till you come home, darling — no doubt I shall inflict more grumbles on you from time to time — but I am sure it will help me to remember how happy I have been today."

On 14th March the weather was good and she was again able to do some gardening, including clipping the Lonicera hedge: "Mamma said she thought it needed a foot taking off, which I did, but it looks rather melancholy now; nearly all the green part was in the said foot, and we are wondering if the pruning was too drastic; however Mamma said philosophically '*Well, anyhow you can't put it back*', so we hope all will be well. She has been in much better form all day and so energetic that she gardened all morning, went to the town this afternoon and took Ben out after tea, so as you can gather, darling, the general atmosphere is much more cheerful. Emily also perks up when we are all out in the garden as she can get on with her work undisturbed, so the lovely weather suits us all. Harrie of course revels in it and little Charles basks in the sun in his pram. He certainly looks the picture of health."

"I am hoping every day to hear that we have crossed the Rhine in strength, though it will mean heavy casualties I'm afraid. Still, I feel sure it will be the knock-out." A few days later there was more gardening news: "There are such a lot of lovely flowers out just now — daffodils, violets, forget-me-nots, primroses of all colours and hyacinths... It's wonderful to think you really feel the next time you come home it may be for good; I do wish I could find a house for you to come to. I think I'll put an

advertisement in the paper at the weekend.”

There was an expectation that something major was imminent and the following week she wrote: “I listen eagerly for news that our big offensive has begun as I feel sure it will mark the beginning of the last big battle. I can’t tell you how much I long for the war to be over so that you can come home to me, beloved.” Next day she provided an update on Charles: “I hope the snaps of Charlot arrived safely... Today has been rather a red-letter day for him, as he went out for the first time sitting up in his pram and much enjoyed the better view of the passing scene; also, when playing on his rug he twice rolled over from front to back quite by himself, and it wasn’t just an accident as I saw him trying.”

“Harrie was very anxious to hear more about the little girl you treated. Did you make her better at once, she wondered, or did she have to stay in hospital? Darlingest, you say such lovely things in your letter about our trials in the past and all the happiness of this last year. When I look at Charlot I think it is no wonder he has such a happy little face having been born out of such a perfect reunion. I shall always love him specially for being a kind of souvenir of your home-coming, as I love little Harrie for having been such a companion and consolation to me all the time you were away. My little bit of you, I used to call her, do you remember? They are both such treasures.”



JOHN WROTE CHEERFULLY ON 19th March: “Yesterday was a great day with the arrival of more than a dozen letters and this afternoon your letter of 16th and, a great surprise, Hamilton Bailey’s ‘Emergency Surgery’. It has arrived at a good time as I have finished his other book and am likely to have a few days more of leisure.” He had also enjoyed receiving birthday letters from his mother. As he had by then moved away from the big cities of Antwerp and Brussels, his shopping opportunities had passed: “I shall have no chance of buying you anything at present, sweetheart, so a hat is out of the question now. Still, I may buy you one later on as I am sure the fashions are much in advance of London. I think I have changed my mind about my clothes. I would like to wear anything you chose, darling just to please you.”

By 20th March he was beginning to settle down in Venray: “It started well by my hearing a Chiff-chaff singing in the garden for the first time this year. I have been in three different countries since I left England and none of them as good as England in the bits I have seen.” Two days later he had heard that two friends from his time at St Thomas’ hospital were also in the area and both were now Majors, whereas he remained a Captain. This was mainly because he had enlisted before he had had time to take his F.R.C.S. examination and, despite all the experience he had gained while serving, the army had made him wait four years before grading him as a surgeon: “It makes me feel rather a failure when I find all my contemporaries have done better than I have, but perhaps I shall catch them up now that I have got my feet on the ladder. Still, I know I can be happy now with you and can earn a fair living. Darling, I am feeling very well and moderately content, but will be glad when we get busy again.”

His wish to be busy was soon fulfilled as the next day was 23rd March when British troops led by General Dempsey crossed the Rhine near Wesel together with two U.S. Ninth Army divisions, shortly followed by two airborne divisions. This was the largest amphibious and airborne operation mounted since D-Day and started the last great battle of the European war⁵⁷. Churchill himself came to watch on 24th March and two days later General Dempsey’s senior intelligence officer was able to announce: *‘This is the collapse. The German line is broken. The enemy no longer has a coherent system of defence between the Rhine and the Elbe. It is difficult to see what there is to stop us now’*⁵⁷.

It was the casualties from this battle that John now had to deal with. During the following fortnight his letters were generally short as the flow of work was unremitting. They contained an incongruous mixture of war news and details of the associated surgery that he was doing interspersed with the goings on of the birds in the garden, the weather and his thoughts of home. Starting on 23rd March: “I am beginning to get some work to do today and expect the time will now go more quickly. The beautiful weather continues and seems almost too good to be true... I am not sleeping on the camp bed now but have quite a comfy little wooden bedstead which feels like being in a box.”

By the next letter it was: “Just a tiny note to let you know that I am thinking of you although we are up to the eyes in work. We are all very excited over the news, which seems good. I got your Tuesday letter yesterday which was such a sweet one, darling, and the post is

being very kind and regular, touch wood... The Missel thrush I told you about building the nest outside my window is sitting on her nest this morning, so I think she has taken about 4 days over it. The nest is only 20 yards from my window high up in a sycamore tree so I can see it pretty well... I did a tracheotomy yesterday, which is an interesting operation and gave me much pleasure. The soldier I did it on had had a good deal of his mouth blown away and could not breathe very well. Must stop now: I am thinking of you and longing for you all the time my precious. Give Harriet and Charles a big kiss from me. Your own big John."

On 26th March: "I am very happy now as I am getting 8 hours a day operating and many interesting cases. Also the news is marvellous with the American Third Army over the Rhine as well and the Remagen bridgehead extending. It is really impossible not to be cheerful except that it is depressing to see so many good men wounded. I think the British have got the toughest part of the line. I enclose a cutting from an American magazine which shows rather a nice pair of pyjamas, I thought. I don't suppose anything like that can be bought in England. What do you think of them? I must go to the wards now darling."

The next day: "Another busy day with 10 operations to do yesterday. I am very well and happy and thoroughly enjoying myself. The news seems good, and perhaps the war will be over before the end of April, which is a very thrilling thought. I was so interested to hear that Charles has begun to roll himself over — clever boy. Also to hear he is beginning mixed feeds. The little girl I was treating was able to go home, tell Harriet, and I have not seen her again since."

"I had two interesting operations to do yesterday besides the other routine clean-ups; one was a cystostomy i.e. a drainage of the bladder through the abdominal wall in a man who was paralysed and could not pass his water, and the second was an amputation of a forearm. My Missel thrush is not sitting on her nest this morning though I heard them about early. Perhaps she is only laying an egg every other day. It is dull but mild today and the buds are sprouting at a tremendous rate. Some of the cherry blossom is in bloom now. It will probably be bad for the fruit as we are bound to have some April frosts. All my love, precious one. I think of you so much."

Two days later: "This morning we have a nice blue sky to cheer us up. I was woken by the blackbirds singing as hard as they could go. Yesterday I was very busy again and we expect to continue so for a day

or two, though with resistance crumbling the worst should be over now. I do the wards from 8.0 to 4.0 in the afternoon, then work in the theatre from 4.0 until midnight. It seems to suit me very well... Darling, it is lovely to get such a happy letter from you and all the answers to my questions. I don't seem to have much new news this morning but am so happy to think that the war is nearly over. I didn't have anything particularly interesting in the operating list except possibly a burst abdomen. I think the war will be over in April now and am rather hoping we may get to Berlin before the Russians."

The next day: "We are still working flat out and I am enjoying myself. I had to amputate both legs of a German prisoner through the knees yesterday to save him dying of gas gangrene. We really have very few deaths and it is nice to feel one can help the right chaps. It seems funny that when you wrote your letter on the 24th, which reached me yesterday evening, you did not know that we had crossed the Rhine, and yet by the time it reached me we are 60 miles over in parts... I am feeling fine, darling and not at all too tired so far — my wrists are getting a little sore from all the washing of my hands but I put on lanoline every night, just like you used to do. I must go round the wards now darling. All my love. Your own John."



MAIDA WAS CONTINUING TO write from Cambridge, initially unaware of the great events unfolding on the German border. On 23rd March the weather in England was also glorious and she took Harriet on a trip into Cambridge: "We went to the town this morning and after doing the shopping we walked down through Trinity to the Backs and home through St. John's, all of which she much enjoyed. We peeped into the Hall at Trinity and into the kitchens at John's, where we saw the cook wearing the high white hat, which thrilled her. This afternoon I washed my own hair and really, although it doesn't look especially nice, it is no worse than if I had paid 7/6 to have it done at Sayle's."

The next day: "It's been another lovely day and we saw a lot of gliders going S.E. at 6.30 a.m. and are wondering if our army is in action yet." On Palm Sunday, 25th March, she went to church at St. Benet's for early service. Later in the day: "I took Harrie for a

long walk over the top of the chalkpits; we looked for wildflowers and collected 13 different varieties and as regards birds saw plovers, larks, yellow-hammers and the usual chaffinches etc. also some young lambs, so it was quite an instructive outing and we both much enjoyed it."

"How thrilling to hear that we are across the Rhine at last. The gliders I saw at 6.30 yesterday morning were on their way there, as I guessed. I expect it will mean lots of work for you, darlingest. I won't expect long letters if you are busy, as you must rest all you can, sweetheart, between your spells of hard work." In this letter she enclosed a poem from the Sunday Times, written by a young man called Murrough Loftus, whom they had met at a tea-party. She later commented that it made a fitting requiem for those who fell in the Battle of the Rhine Crossing.

The Moment

*Not only in their memories, the few
But cherished things each soldier makes his own,
The photographs and letters that become
For fighting men the England that they knew —
Not only in their dreams do soldiers find,
In midst of war, renewal and release,
But he shall be surprised with sudden peace
And happiness unguessed who leaves behind
All sentience of self and fearless goes
To meet the moment when, with none nearby
To comfort or befriend, he sees shine forth
Triumphant from the eyes of those who die
Imperishable life, a faith that knows
Death's unimportance and the spirit's worth.*

She was, however, continuing to have a difficult time at home. On 26th March: "My very own darlingest — Your two letters of 21st and 22nd arrived today, the only bright spot in an otherwise dismal day. Mamma very bad tempered, Harriet inclined to squawk and even Charlot not in quite such good form as usual. The news continues marvellous, but I feel very downcast to think you may have to wait 6 months for leave, and another depressing thing was that I rang up the Daily News and found there were no answers to my advertisement for a house. This was only what I had expected really, but it would have been so lovely if something had turned up."

"I expect I shall feel better soon but tonight I feel very dreary and am longing for you so much, my darling. Your second letter sounded a bit depressed too. I can well imagine you must have been bored with no work to do, but I expect you have plenty now and I hope you are feeling happy again. I can so well

understand too that you would be a bit annoyed to find your various hospital contemporaries already Majors, but I do hope, sweetheart, that you won't let them think you feel at all inferior or ill-used. I can't see you have the least reason to be now that you have been made a graded surgeon without the Fellowship and perhaps they aren't so happy as you are in other ways."

"I had such a nice letter from your mother this morning which I'll send on when I've answered it. She asks us all there in the summer. I would love to take the children there but apart from the journey, which would be rather a job single-handed, I don't want to miss the chance of a house, so I don't know what to do. I will ask her to let me leave it open for the present, I'm sure she'll understand."

The next day she was feeling more cheerful again: "It has been a heavenly day after yesterday's rain and I took both the children out this afternoon... I was so pleased with the picture of the bedroom you cut out for me. I am keeping it and any others you may find, as a collection of them would be useful in planning our house, darling. It's so lovely that we can begin to look forward to it now, and that you are as interested as I am in planning our 'interieur'."

"I had a nice letter from Adda this morning. I had sent her the snap shots to see. I could see she is getting rather fed up with Worksop already and is now thinking of going near her sister in London. Don't think me crazy, darling, but in spite of all we've said I'm not sure if she were willing to come back for a bit it mightn't be a good thing? If only I didn't have to worry about Mamma for the first months after you come home while we are house-hunting and perhaps settling in it would be such a help. At one time I thought it would be so awful for Mamma to have to go through all the upheaval of her leaving a second time, but I don't know really that that is such a possibility now. Anyway, she very likely won't want to come; but Mamma is going to ask her here for two months or so in the summer to help with the fruit picking. Darling, I do hope you won't think me a fool to be thinking on these lines... The news is grand and I would love to be with you near enough to the Front to feel part of this great and historic battle. All we can do here is to watch the bombers going out and wish them 'Happy Landings'. All my love and thoughts are with you. Your very own, own Maida."

On 28th March she wrote saying how proud she was to hear about John's busy workload and contrasting his record with that of another friend, who had tried to avoid military service: "Are you in

a hospital, private house, huts or what? Do permit yourself a few tiny indiscretions. I don't even know what country you are in but guess Holland. Surely it would be all right to tell me that much. However, don't if it makes you feel guilty. Today has been a very happy day... This afternoon Harrie and I again went out on bike and trike to the beechwood and got two immense bundles of sticks. We returned looking like Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane. Charles has been in good form all day and having been left on the nursery floor alone for about five minutes was discovered to have propelled himself on his back for quite a foot."

The next day was Good Friday, and Maida was pleased that the postman still came: "It is splendid to hear that you are so well and happy, darling, and enjoying your work so much. I am looking forward to hearing the news tonight as it is all so exciting now and every day really does bring the end of the war so much nearer. I wonder if you are over-optimistic in thinking that it may be over by the end of next month." She went on to describe attending a three-hour service at St. Benet's and the details of Charles' feeding regime, as he had now started to take solid foods: "Darling, I think about you so much and long for you every day and every night. The garden and orchard are lovely, especially the plum blossom and the Boston's cherry blossom, and underneath our window the beautiful viburnum with its lily-scented flowers... The elm trees have changed from crimson to soft green, and everything looks and smells so fresh and lovely."

In contrast Saturday was "...a long and trying day." In the morning she took Harriet into Cambridge for what she hoped would be a quick shopping trip: "...but alas found the town a perfect inferno, one milling mass of people pushing and shoving in all directions. Matthews was packed and so was the butchers, and we had endless waits at every counter with poor Harrie getting very weary... While at Matthews, Mr Apthorpe (one of the assistants) leant over the counter and informed me in conspiratorial tones that he knew of a house between Shelford and Trumpington which might be to let as the tenant had just died. So I spent the afternoon on a wild goose chase after it on my bicycle. I didn't expect it would be any good but didn't like to feel I hadn't done my best about it, especially as I thought it very kind of him to think about it when he was so busy. It turned out to be already re-let and was in any case an awful little house and very awkward to get at, so it wouldn't have done. It was hard work cycling in a high wind and it proved to be much further than I thought... I felt

rather depressed when I came in although I tried to 'count my mercies'."

"I intend to go to bed early and get everything done so that I can go to sleep the moment Charles is fed, as tomorrow will be another long day with Easter Communion first, but I wouldn't miss it for anything, though it is blowing a gale tonight and will very likely be pouring in the morning. I expect I shall feel quite spry again by then... Harrie much appreciated your letter, darling. Little Charles is so sweet and cheerful. Mamma is devoted to him now and he is a great joy to her. I am so glad as at first she seemed to take so little interest in him, but I knew it was only because she couldn't, as it were, assimilate him then."



IN HOLLAND, JOHN WAS still hard at work dealing with the casualties sent back from Germany. On Good Friday: "I had an extra heavy day yesterday and hope we shall get a breather this weekend. There is no sign of any slackening off yet. Major Fairbank moved off yesterday which has left us with only five instead of six surgeons. However, as you can imagine I am delighted to have the experience. Yesterday morning I heard a Dunnock singing for the first time since I left England, and the Missel thrush is now sitting on her eggs though not continuously, and I don't think she has a full clutch yet. I must start work again now my precious. Don't do too much and rest if you feel tired."

By Easter Saturday the relentless workload was catching up with him: "Things are showing signs of slackening off now and we shall hope to get some more rest. I was so sleepy this morning that I missed the post and am writing this in the afternoon before tea... It looks as if we shall cut Germany in two and possibly they may hang on a bit in the north, though without the Ruhr and Silesia I should not think they could last long. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday. I hope I shall get to Communion in the morning. Unless some more patients come in tonight it does not look as if we should be busy until 12.0 o'clock tonight, as we have been for the last week, so perhaps I shall get a long night in bed for a change."

"I don't seem to be able to think of anything to say today, darlingest, but that is because I am feeling so sleepy. Otherwise I am very well and happy... Sunday — Still very busy with more convoys. All my

love darlingest, Your own John. Do what you think best about Adda.” This last comment was in response to Maida’s suggestion in her letter of 27th March that they try to persuade Adda to return to Cambridge.

He next wrote on 2nd April. “Darlingest darling — I did not write yesterday because I had a bad and worrying day. When I got up I had a pain across my lower ribs which I thought was just stiffness. I went to Communion at 8.30 and then did a morning’s work. By the end of the morning I was getting worried about the pain which now settled in the old place on my left side. I went to bed after lunch feeling very depressed about things. However by teatime it was better and I just managed to carry on until midnight. Today I am glad to say it has almost gone, and I have not got to work today after 7.00 p.m. so I feel sure all will be well. The amount of work is now rapidly falling off so I shall get a breather I expect... Today has been a nice blowy and damp April day with everything sprouting up at great speed and a few primulas now to be seen in the hospital grounds. There are still piles of rubbish everywhere though, as this place was badly damaged in the fighting and we have only just got running water today. The news is fine.”

The following day: “I am quite myself again today and am enjoying life again. I went to bed early last night fortunately as I was called by Col. Kellar at 1.0 o’clock in the morning to go and examine 50 new patients who had just arrived. However, I had finished them by 3.0 and do not feel tired today. I was in the theatre operating from 2.0 p.m. to 7.30, which is just a nice stretch. I am now writing after the news which says we have entered Osnabruck and almost cut off the Germans in Holland. I was looking at a Daily Telegraph today in which the political correspondent was forecasting that there would be no official end to the war until the Japs were beaten. I hope this will not be so. In fact, I can hardly believe it after all that has been arranged about demobbing. I can tell you that I have visited Germany since I came to B.L.A. but only on a visit so your guess is right.”

“We have done 600 operations since the offensive began, which means about 100 each, and there is still a great deal to do ... Darling, I have been away from you for five weeks now which is the longest since returning from M.E.F. I am rather hoping that I may get leave in three months so that I have almost done half my spell away... I discovered yesterday that there is a sort of aviary at the back of the hospital which houses a peacock and several beautiful pheasants. Do you remember admiring the ones at Whipnade?

Perhaps we shall be able to visit them this year. I must go to bed now.”

On 4th April: “My own darlingest — I am feeling so pleased with life today because I have done two new operations this afternoon which I believe will be successful, that is suturing a bladder which had been perforated. It is not a very common injury. Both of them were prisoners... I had a real long night in bed last night and feel quite normal again today. We expect to have been almost left behind by the end of the month. Our only trouble now is that we can’t get baths here. In fact I have not washed except my feet and neck since I left Antwerp. I am very glad I brought my basin, which I use every morning. The water comes from a well with an old type of pump and has to be carried upstairs by the batman. I must go to bed now darlingest. I hope I shall soon be able to write you longer letters but am feeling rather mentally void at the moment.”

The next day: “We are still kept fairly busy although we keep on expecting to get a rest. I did eight more operations today between two and eight and expect I shall have plenty to do again tomorrow. We have had a lot of rain the last few days but this has not really affected us as we have not had any time to go out except for the short walk I had with the Padre two days ago. I am surgeon on duty tonight but don’t expect I shall be busy as new patients have mostly had their operations now, or at any rate are not in need of urgent attention.”

“I had your nice letter written on Easter Sunday today. I am still feeling rather mentally empty when it comes to writing a letter but love hearing all about the family. I actually had time to darn a hole in my sock this morning so that shows you that I am not now so busy as I have been. I feel I am getting to know my colleagues better though I have not done much talking. After operating one feels more like just sitting in a chair and doing nothing... I shall laugh if we or the Americans get to Berlin first: though the Russians are a good deal nearer. All my love precious one. Your own John.”

On 6th April the relentless workload had finally started to slow down: “Today is the first day I have not operated since the last show began. I am really quite glad to have a break though it has been a most valuable experience for me. Your Easter Monday letter reached me today. I did not think you sounded as depressed as I should have been after doing all you did on Saturday, especially going in search of a house and finding it already taken. Still, as you know now

sweetheart, I do like you to tell me if you are feeling depressed. As a matter of fact, now that the work has stopped, I am feeling just a bit high and dry myself with no-one I know well in the mess.”

“This afternoon I saw and heard a bird I think must be a Black Redstart. It was on top of a roof so I could not make it out very clearly. Its song was very simple and sounded like twee-tee-ti-ti-ti... I have not seen any Swallows or Willow-wrens yet but am expecting them daily. When on my walk this afternoon, I was asked by the theatre sister to get some eggs in exchange for soap. I was surprised to find I could only get five eggs in return for two tablets of soap, and one egg is worth 10 cigarettes! The farm I went to treated me very politely and asked me to go in when I went to the back door. I entered and was surprised to find myself in a room with six cattle lying in stalls on one side of me and the kitchen on the other, all under the same roof. Today has been a red-letter day in that I have had my first hot bath. When I rubbed myself with my towel I found the dirt peeling off me. However I don't seem any the worse for it... All my love, precious darling. Your own, own John.”



MAIDA'S LETTERS FROM THE first days of April are missing, but they evidently gave the news that Emily, the latest maid, had been taken to a nursing home with phlebitis in her legs so she was again having to run the household on her own. On 5th April: “We have managed our first day without Emily very well. It is so much easier than it was in the winter. I had to give the kitchen floor a good scrub today, it was so filthy I couldn't bear to look at it. I shouldn't think she had done it since she came: I suppose her bad legs made it difficult for her to do the floors, so one mustn't be too critical, but it's nice to see it looking clean again.”

On 7th April she was responding to John's report of 2nd April of having experienced a pain in his chest, which was fortunately short lived: “All the same, darling, I do think you must make yourself resist the temptation to go on till you drop if another big rush of work comes along, as it easily may before the Germans are really finished off. You still seem to be having an awful lot to do, and I shan't be happy till I have you safely home again. Is it really only about six weeks since you left? It seems like six months...

I went to see Emily last night and found her very comfortable but rather lonely, so I think she was glad to see me. Mamma is now wondering if she will be fit for work again. I am saying as little as possible and hoping things will sort themselves out. Adda has never answered Mamma's letter. I am almost too sleepy to write... I had a nice letter from Madame Jordan today saying how glad they would be if the chance of war brought you anywhere near Alivet; what a pity you are so far away. I expect they are as thrilled by the news as we are here.”

The next day Mamma had been very sympathetic about John's pain: “She has just said if you want to take me for a little holiday when you come home she will get Adda here and they will look after the children between them. I think that would work very well for about a week and then we could take the children to Morwick for about a month before really starting any new plans. I think about you so much, my sweetheart, and am grateful to you many times a day for the things you have given me to help with the housework, such as the gas-cooker and gas-poker — not to mention my lovely cosy dressing gown which is so warm round little Charles while he has his feeds.”

Other news was that Harriet had started attending a playgroup. “She had enjoyed herself very much again. The chief occupation today had been to make a picture with little shapes of coloured paper, which they had to gum on to a white piece; you can imagine how much Harriet revelled in the gum!... She had also eaten all the large tea she took with her, about twice as much as she eats at home! Little Charles definitely has three teeth now. He is so sweet and full of beans. He tried to pretend he couldn't sleep at bedtime for toothache, and made me sit with him for a bit, but it was all nonsense as he was full of smiles as long as I was there. He is beginning to use his wits to some purpose now. I long for you to see him again.”



JOHN CONTINUED TO ENJOY a few quieter days in Venray, writing on 7th April: “I have been with the unit more than a month now which is quite a pleasant experience after all the postings I have endured since Christmas. I hope very much that I shall remain here now.” The next day: “This afternoon I studied back numbers of the Lancet and afterwards went for a walk

with Padre Lewis. One has to be careful where one goes as there are lots of mines still about but mostly marked with white tapes or posts. However, some of the lanes have been marked by the Sappers and we keep to them. I saw a cock stonechat and my first swallow. I expect this letter will reach you before you see one at Cambridge.”

“Darling, I got your letter this afternoon and was very sorry to hear that Emily was ill. Phlebitis sometimes takes a long time. It will be interesting to see if Adda does come back. I am rather afraid she will not give you enough to eat, though perhaps she will be less over-bearing than previously. I see in the papers that there has not been any air activity over Southern England for the last eight days. Perhaps this will mean that refugees will be returning soon to London and there may be a few more spare houses... I am invited to Padre Lewis’ room at 10.0 tonight to consume a freshly boiled egg; it reminds me of study days at Rugby... We are getting a lot of freed French prisoners here i.e. French soldiers who have been prisoners since 1940 and who have been ill or injured. I find it difficult to talk to them about their illnesses. What is the French for pus? I wanted to ask one whether there was any pus coming from his ear.”

As was becoming usual in the army, John’s hopes of being able to remain in the same place were short lived. The next day, 9th April: “I was told this afternoon that I am to be posted to No. 96 General Hospital. At first I was rather annoyed and disappointed to be moved so soon, but on thinking things over I think it may be for the best. At any rate, I feel certain that it is not in any way a reflection on my work here as I have never had any differences with Lt. / Col. Kellar. It is I believe a base hospital. However so far I don’t know where it is exactly or when I shall be going.”

He had been pleased to hear the first willow wrens singing. The end of the letter was an account of the satisfactory state of his finances: “I also received my income tax assessment form and find I paid only £42 in income tax last year. I get £140 personal allowance and £100 free of tax for the children. Finally, the first £140 only has to pay 6/6 in the pound instead of 10/- so I don’t do too badly. March has been a very cheap month for me. My mess bill was only £3 and I get paid field allowance here, which comes to about £5 a month.”

The following day there was little work to do so he was able to stroll around the grounds and do some reading: “We have just heard on the news that the Americans have entered Hanover and Vienna is

practically in our hands, so things seem to be going ahead all right. There does not seem to be any sign of an armistice just at present though.” On 12th April: “Yesterday and today have been busy for me as I was surgeon on duty yesterday and am Orderly Medical Officer today... Last night we gave a party to the Sisters and had quite a merry time, though as I was on duty I was not quite as merry as some.”

“This morning I did my first ‘cold’ operation i.e. non-accident or battle casualty as it was for varicose veins ... I got up to hear the 8.0 o’clock news this morning and was well rewarded to hear the Ninth Army were only 70 miles from Berlin and this afternoon they are reported to have crossed the Elbe. Marvellous, isn’t it? ... It was nice of Mamma to suggest that she and Adda would look after the children for a few days when I get home. It would be marvellous if I could get out of the army by August as might happen if V-day happens this month.”

His next letter of 13th April commented: “I was deeply shocked to hear of President Roosevelt’s death on the 8.0 o’clock news this morning. I do pray that this won’t upset Anglo-American co-operation, though one can hardly expect anyone else to be as helpful and generous to us as F. D. R.” President Roosevelt’s health had been declining for several years. He had collapsed and died of a cerebral haemorrhage on 12th April and Vice President Harry Truman then took over. John continued: “I am going to listen to the Adrian Boult concert at 9.30 tonight in his memory. I have had a fairly restful day and had a nice little walk this afternoon. I was lucky to see a linnet with his beautiful red breast towards me. It is a red that is quite different from all others as it tones so beautifully with brown. A robin’s red breast does not quite tone with brown and has to have a little bit of grey where they join. I am quite enjoying life although, as there are no general duties officers here, I have to act rather as the bottle-washer — rather exasperating for one of my exalted standing. Still all the rest are Majors so there is nothing for it but to say: *Yes Sir*’. At any rate I am not being overworked and am doing some reading again.”

On 14th April he still did not have details of his next posting. However, in Venray: “...our numbers seem to diminish daily. We have now got rid of almost all our serious cases and are simply looking after the local sick... Having little to do now, I am longing for you very much indeed and building lots of castles in the air.” This included thinking about where they were going to live: “Re housing, I can’t see any objection to a three years lease darling, as we could always sub-

let it if necessary, and I think perhaps it would be better for work if I worked in London and came to Cambridge for weekends while trying the fellowship, though I know you would rather be with me. Still I am not quite certain about this yet. What I am sure of is the same old rows will start again if I come to Q.E.W. for any length of time. However, as you say we can't hope for leave really until September so there is still plenty of time."



THREE OF JOHN'S LETTERS arrived at Queen Edith's Way on 11th April saying that his work was slowing down so he had been able to go for a walk and had seen his first swallow of the year. In reply Maida noted that the swallows had also recently reached Cambridge. Good news arrived the following day: "My own darlingest of darlings, the high spot of today's news on the home front is that Adda is coming back! I forget if I told you that she answered Mamma's letter a few days ago saying that, though she would be very glad to come any time to help temporarily, she didn't feel like settling down here again. This is just what I expected. However, by this afternoon's post came another letter saying that after all she would like to come, as she felt she would be happiest *'amongst you all'* — so evidently even the villainous tribe of Bulmans have gained glamour by absence!"

"Of course Mamma is thrilled to bits, and so is Harrie, and I am very glad too as I really think it is the only solution. I shall have to toe the line again and do as I am told. However, I can bear that knowing it won't be for so very much longer, with luck! It will all be fine and dandy at first; whether Mamma will continue to regard her as an angel from Heaven for very long remains to be seen. Anyway it will be grand to have her back in almost every way, and I think very likely she and Mamma will both be more likely to settle down together happily now."

"I feel pleased to think that I've managed to bring Charles successfully to the mature age of nearly six months all on my own. I always felt I hardly owned Harrie as a baby. It will be lovely to have more time for Harrie now. Poor mite, I've had to neglect her sadly this last week. I wonder if you will have moved by the time this reaches you, darling... I went to see Emily and found her in rather poor shape; she is hoping to go

back to London as soon as she can travel. All my love, precious one. Your own Maida."

As April progressed the weather warmed up and the apple blossom came out: "...smelling so delicious and full of bees and singing birds." Maida was starting to think about the end of the war: "I wonder how long it will really be before you are demobilised; now that the Russians are attacking too, the end of all except guerrilla resistance cannot be far away, and I see in the paper today that there has been a rehearsal in London of the Victory procession." The Soviet forces had captured Vienna on 13th April and they launched their final offensive to encircle Berlin on 16th April.

The exciting news from home on 17th April was that Adda had indeed returned: "I met her at the station. She looks and is just the same. She began at once taking charge of the children. I know that she just can't help doing that and bossing me around, so long as she makes Mamma comfortable and happy that is all I care about, and I can stand anything knowing it is only for a short time now. Besides it's grand to think of having more leisure for sewing and reading and perhaps going out a little — also I couldn't have made time to do any house hunting if we had been alone, though as you know I am letting that lapse rather until people really do go back to London, and the housing question becomes easier. I hope you agree with this, darling. I am quite determined to find some other base than this as soon as you come home — if anything turns up I will take it, of course."

"Adda seems to have been kept short of food at Worksop. But the real troubles were the rigours of the northern climate and being ordered about by the married daughter! We can't make out if she is glad to be back or not; she shows no emotions of any kind, and I already feel as if she had never been away... Darling, I agree with you it will be better not to have another baby until we are more or less settled... If possible, I would rather not go to a nursing home so that you can really be there all the time. I am hoping a third baby will be so easy that I shan't squawk a lot to make you unhappy."

The pleasure in Adda's return continued on 18th April: "It is good to see Mamma so cheerful again and Adda herself seems so happy to be back, so I really think the tiresomeness of both was due largely to war-weariness. Now they have had a good rest from each other, I hope very much that they will settle down together again for many years to come. Adda is thrilled with little Charlot and is, of course, as devoted as ever to Harriet. It will be a great comfort to me when you

come home, darlingest, to be able to go off with you straight away without any anxiety about Mamma, and I know you will share this feeling. You have always been so sweet about her through everything — much more patient and sympathetic than I was I'm afraid."

"The house has resounded all day to the sound of scrubbing. I can see the cleansing of the Augean stable will go on for many days yet... Little Charles has had a very happy day to celebrate being six months old. He asks me to say that he weighs 16 lbs 7 oz, and has four dear little teeth clearly showing. He also had his soup thickened with potato to mark the big day and his first taste of spinach, which he quite liked. We had tea in the garden and he lay on his pram mattress beside us and thoroughly enjoyed himself."

With Adda back Maida was able to catch up on her sleep and return to her sewing, making herself a new dress from some material which John had sent: "I also cycled with Harrie to the beechwood this morning. The air was full of the scent of May blossom and lilac, and we much enjoyed ourselves. As we started along Wort's Causeway we saw we were approaching several lorries and a crane piling up stacks of some objects we couldn't quite make out at the side of the road. They turned out to be 500 lb. bombs, hundreds of them, just piled up there in the blazing sun. I can tell you we went past gingerly but at a good speed!" The next day she was able to report that: "Mamma is looking much better and I think has now almost blotted out the last six months from her memory."

Although John had shortly before sounded pleased at his own finances, this was not the case for Maida: "Darling, I wrote to ask you if I could possibly have £10. I have several bills to pay and such a very small balance at present; I hope after that I can manage. I don't want to start drawing on your London account if possible, as I think it would be confusing for both of us unless in an emergency." The next day she described working in the vegetable garden, with food rationing remaining very much in force: "The robin has a very greedy family of at least two large youngsters which he has brought into the garden today. They keep him perpetually on the run to fill their gaping and vociferous beaks. They share with Ben the privilege of finishing off Charlot's half-chewed rusks, but as he gets to manage them better he leaves less and less *pro bono publico*."

She then turned to the war: "Mussolini's squalid end does not in any way heighten my respect for his countrymen, which was never more than very slight. What is happening, or has happened to Hitler, I

wonder? The war may be over by now for all I know; I've been meaning to turn on the wireless for the news all day but always forget at the right time." This comment was in response to the news that Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci had been shot by Italian partisans in northern Italy on 28th April as they attempted to flee into Switzerland⁷³. Maida's wondering as to what had happened to Hitler turned out to be timely. On 30th April the Soviet forces encircled Berlin and on the same day Hitler poisoned his mistress, Eva Braun, and then shot himself⁷⁴.



ON 16TH APRIL JOHN had heard from Maida that Adda had indeed decided to come back to Queen Edith's Way: "That will solve your immediate problems, and most likely she will be able to do the work until the winter when perhaps we shall be fixed up by ourselves. Everything is going on fine here. I did two small operations this morning and have enough odd jobs to keep me going." The next day: "I went out after tea with a Capt. Palmer whom I found to be interested in birds. We went for a little walk and sat down to listen outside a thicket. We were soon rewarded by hearing a nightingale singing for about ten minutes. It then stopped as suddenly as it had begun and only willow wrens and chaff-chaffs could be heard... I wish I could see the orchard at Q.E.W. as I missed it last year as well. However we have plenty of blossom round about here... I have no news of moving but expect it will come about fairly soon now. It is possible that the hospital I am going to may come home soon or at any rate before this one."

On 18th April: "I finished the day by treating a case of phosphorus burns. He was a sergeant who was removing explosives from a dump when a fire grenade went off. When we examined him in the dark his chest glowed like a luminous watch. However, when we had treated him and applied Copper Sulphate solution all the phosphorescence had disappeared." Two days later: "The news has reached me today that I am to go to 96 General Hospital so you can write to me there from now... I have very good reports of the O.C. Surgical Division, who is a Welshman from Swansea. I expect I shall go by train and may have to spend a night on the way as they still go very slowly... Darling, I am longing for you so much now that everything

looks so beautiful, nearly a third of my six months is now over, thank goodness.”

No. 9 General Hospital, his current posting, was then moved on from Venray into Germany and sent to form part of the medical team dealing with the liberation of the concentration camp at Belsen. This was a truly horrific experience as there were thousands of dead bodies lying unburied together with around 60,000 starving and very sick people who were packed together without food, water or basic sanitation⁷⁵. John’s move to a different hospital located in the opposite direction therefore spared him from the distress of witnessing this.

CHAPTER 18

Tournai
1945

AFTER A BRIEF GAP in correspondence while he was travelling, John's next letter sent on 26th April came from No. 96 General Hospital. This was then in Tournai, a French speaking city in western Belgium. He had therefore moved backwards along the path taken earlier by the Allied advance. The hospital was situated near the castle, an imposing 12th century building protected by a moat. With John's usual interest in natural history, his letter mentioned that the

moat contained an immense number of frogs.

As with his previous hospital in Venray, the War Diaries for No.96 indicate that its buildings were not in a good state of repair⁷⁶. This one had been set up in what had previously been a school. According to Colonel Handy, the Commanding Officer, the hospital had been officially declared open on 1st March at which time the hot water system and drains were not working, and there was insufficient fuel available for the heating system. The floor in the room originally chosen for the operating theatre was unsuitable so this was moved to a Nissen hut. Clearly irritated, he described the team of Royal Engineers who were

Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F.S. Regs., Vol. 1. Monthly War Diaries will be enclosed in A.P. C.2118. If this is not available, and for Intelligence Summaries, the cover will be prepared in manuscript.

Army Form C. 2118.

WAR DIARY
OF
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY

Unit... 96. (BR) GENERAL HOSPITAL.
Commanding Officer Colonel L. HANDY.....

Month and Year... MARCH 1945.
(Delete heading not required).

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
Field.	1. March.		Hospital to be officially declared open, but still R.E.s. have not got hot water system working and an ambulance train scheduled to come here, had to be diverted. A temporary operating theatre is prepared in a ward. The central heat is not satisfactory owing to lack of suitable fuel. A.D.S.T. promises to supply suitable anthracite to-morrow. <i>Handwritten: none</i>	
	2.	"	A.D.M.S. visits hospital. 7 A.T.S. cooks arrive to be employed in personnel messes. Warned that ambulance train will arrive on 4. March. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	
	3.	"	Visit by A.T.S. Officer Commander, who is satisfied with arrangements for A.T.S. here. First patient admitted, suffering from diphtheria. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	
	4.	"	Visit by Garrison Engineer, when it was proved to him the unsatisfactory state of cement floor intended for operating theatre. Tiles will have to be laid. Convoy of 298 patients arrived at 2200 hours by ambulance train from Holland. Most of the wounded were only 2 days old. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	
	5.	"	Patients in hospital 283. <i>Handwritten: 22</i> 18 P.O.W. patients transferred to special hospital. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	
	6.	"	Visit by D.M.S., General Phillips to see how the hospital is shaping. Also by Consultants, Brigadiers Porritt and Bulmer and by Brigadier Pulton, D.D.M.S., I. of C. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	
	7.	"	Troubles with hot water system and drains. R.E.s. take a leisurely interest in this work. 845 beds are now equipped. <i>Handwritten: 22</i>	

W.L. 80694 1059 1, 22/1/00 0144 W. H. & S. 81/0074

WAR DIARIES
No. 96
TO ADDRESS
C.O. and S.W.O.

Extract from the War Diary of No. 96. General Hospital. September 1942 to September 1945. Document WO 177/1370⁷⁶.

supposed to be fixing these issues as *'taking a leisurely interest in this work'*. Three weeks later on 24th March he wrote that: *'R.E.s still working on site but appear to make little progress'* and on 3rd April *'R.E.s sent off somewhere else. Still not enough hot water'*. The medical supplies from the Red Cross were also insufficient. They had nevertheless started taking in wounded troops coming back from the front on 4th March and had managed to equip 815 beds by 7th March, on their way to making 1,200 beds available.

On 9th March Colonel Handy described the system he had established for dealing as efficiently as possible with the arrival of ambulance trains from Holland. These came via Malines, a station about 75 miles from Tournai, on the other side of Brussels. *'A Medical Officer is sent by car to meet the ambulance train at Malines about midday. He takes a clerk and... goes through the train while it is coming down, allots each patient to a ward and writes it on his card. This allows the patients to be straight out of the ambulance car on arrival at the hospital and taken to the wards without a moment's delay in Reception Room. This convoy of 130 walking and 140 stretcher cases was cleared from the train, transported 1 mile and unloaded and dispersed into the wards and put to bed in one and three quarter hours. Only 7 ambulance cars were available and if we had had three more it could have been done in 1½ hours. Lorries were used for the walking cases. A large number of stretcher bearers are necessary, but they are made available by the very willing help given by numbers of civilian volunteers from the Belgian Red Cross'*⁷⁶.

A few days later on 15th March Col. Handy noted that he was unhappy with the way that the Quartermasters were handling the evacuation of some patients to the UK via Brussels and Ostend: *'There have been cases where the patients are issued with fresh kit on leaving hospital and sell it after having lost the list of kit that was given them to take with them. The obvious thing is, as has always been done by this hospital, to send these lists not by the man concerned but by the N.C.O i/c of party and for the kit to be checked off at Con Depot; the man having signed for it and a duplicate kept at hospital. If he is not in possession he can be charged with 'losing by neglect' and punished.'*

Further administrative complications occurred in April. They were expecting to receive 150 women from the Auxillary Territorial Service to replace men by helping with the nursing but there was insufficient suitable accommodation available for them. They had also received a number of prisoners amongst the incoming patients. *'Garrison tried to place responsibility for guarding Ps.O.W. in hospital on the O.C hospital after a guard has been supplied. This idea is strongly contested on the grounds that a guard is an armed force, and no medical officer ever*

commands an armed force; and surely anyone who takes on the responsibility for commanding must command the guard.' These issues were later resolved by requisitioning another house for the nurses and by using Belgian soldiers to guard the P.O.W.s. There were also liberated Allied P.O.W.s there, a number of whom were suffering from severe dysentery and were reported as being: *'in a very bad state'*. Later it was noted that: *'Some of these in very emaciated condition after being in concentration camps in Germany for several years'*.

As John did not arrive at the hospital until 26th April some of the building problems had by then been resolved. It turned out to be an exciting time as the war in Europe was finally ending. Colonel Handy reported on 5th May that: *'News received that all huns opposing 21 Army Group had capitulated to Field Marshall Montgomery. Patients all very happy with singing and shouting but extremely well behaved'*. This was followed on the 7th May with *'News received of the complete surrender of huns in Europe. Celebration arranged for tomorrow for both patients and staff'*. The following day: *'Concert and dance arranged for patients and staff and all passed off happily and cheerfully without untoward incident'*⁷⁶.

John's letters from early May which included the build up to V-E Day* have been lost but on 10th May, after he had been in Tournai for about two weeks, he wrote: "My own darlingest — I have had a busy day today operating all morning and doing odd jobs this afternoon... Yesterday after tea I was detailed to take a party of men to represent the British Army at the local village procession. We got there about 5.0 and marched through the streets in very hot weather for about an hour. Our detachment got many claps and I was given a bunch of lupins and a paper union jack by a woman who ran out of the crowd. We stopped once to present a wreath of flowers to a man who had been a spy agent during the German occupation. We finished up at the War Memorial of the last war where wreaths were laid, and the Burgomaster made a speech."

"After the ceremony we were invited into the nearest café, where we had drinks all round... Tonight the Officers' Mess is having a special celebration dinner with free drink... The last few days have skipped by and I could do with a bit of a rest after all our celebrating. I see in the papers that the Basic Petrol ration will be re-started on June 1st. Will you want to make use of this, darlingest? It is nice to think that all the normal things will start being made again now, so that when I do get home, perhaps in three

* Victory in Europe.

months time, things will be far on the way to normal.”

The next day: “We are all feeling the effect of last night’s dinner. We really had a very good evening, much better than I expected considering that for most people it was the third night running of celebrations. We started off with hors d’oeuvres, then soup, then pork and chicken roasted, then tinned fruit and ice cream, after which we had some very good speeches to the accompaniment of Benedictine and Cointreau. The shortest speech was made by the Catering Officer who was requested to reply to a speech complimenting him on the food. He got up and said: *‘We all know what Anthony said when he lifted the flap of Cleopatra’s tent — I haven’t come here to talk’*, and then sat down.”

“There is yet another party for hospital privates tonight, but I doubt if any of us will feel strong enough to attend. I have an operating list to do tomorrow in any case so will probably go to bed early. The latest news is that we will probably be staying in this spot for some time. I am quite glad though many hoped we should move. I have plenty to do for the present though we are expecting to get less busy.” Planning for further celebrations continued on 12th May: “After supper tonight the mess committee are going to the Sisters’ Mess to arrange a joint dance to be held in about a week’s time. We cannot be said to stagnate here, as there is always something afoot as at Shaftesbury.” The prediction of getting less busy was supported by the hospital diary which reported that the numbers of patients fell from 912 on 5th May to only 215 by the end of June, with fewer arriving and some being transferred away to either the UK or to other hospitals in the area⁷⁶.



ON 1ST MAY MAIDA replied to John’s first letter written on his arrival in Tournai in which he had proposed buying himself some linen sheets. This she strongly discouraged as being too extravagant: “The price of things is going up so much here, and even the rates have increased, also the cost of coal, which is said to be sure to increase the cost of machine-made things still further. I am really quite alarmed at the amount that it will cost us to set up house and am determined to be as economical as possible.” She also responded to his description of the frogs in the castle moat at Tournai. This had reminded both of them that on her

first visit to the Chateau d’Alivet in 1932 the Jordan family had demonstrated how to catch frogs to eat, an experience she described as ‘barbarous’.

The next day brought exciting news, as a written agreement formalizing the surrender of the German forces in Italy became effective⁷⁷. Maida commented: “I meant to listen to the news headlines and then write to you, and then feed Charles and go to bed. However the news, with the announcement of the surrender in Italy was so exciting today that I just had to listen to it all... Harrie was amusing Charles earlier today with a Union Jack, one of three bought I think in 1918 and since used to hail the Coronation, which we unearthed today to have in readiness for V-E Day.”

She continued: “Unfortunately poor Adda isn’t feeling well and is going to see the doctor tomorrow. She is complaining of a pain, which she thinks is indigestion in the lower abdomen as far as I can make out. She did too much hard work when she first came back, but nothing would stop her. She has been very cheerful over it and I can see is very anxious not to be thought an invalid; it’s a tiny bit worrying, as I rather wonder if she will ever really be able to manage the work, especially in the winter, but I’m not going to meet troubles half-way. It is fearfully exciting to think the war may end any day now. Every bulletin is exciting and I listen several times a day.”

The following day Maida was not in a good mood. She felt too tired to take the children to Morwick in June, too plain to have a photograph taken with Charles (as John had requested) and depressed about the lack of houses to rent. She had even stopped dressmaking as: “...it is too cold to try anything on.” By 5th May, however, she was more energetic again, although Adda had been in bed all day: “The news of the surrender of all the N.W. German armies is simply wonderful, darling. Surely that means you will simply have to wind up your hospital and then perhaps you will come home. Some of the papers seem to think doctors will be kept out there to deal with civilian cases, but I should think most of them would be medical cases anyway. It is nearly time for the news, and I’m longing to know if there is anything fresh, perhaps the surrender of the Germans in the Channel ‘pockets’, which must be feeling more like rat-traps than pockets now. Darlingest, I was thinking about you and longing for you so much this afternoon and feeling so happy to think all the fighting is over in your part of the war; thank God you have come safely through the long years since 1939, my beloved, and we can look forward to being together soon.”

On 6th May the good news continued: "I still can't properly realise that the war is as good as over. I keep forgetting and then suddenly remembering how marvellous it is that there is no more fighting in all Europe for us, except for a few odd bits which I expect will surrender this weekend or tomorrow. No more sirens, no more black-out, above all no more of the fear that always lurked in the back of my mind that you might be sent into the danger zone again, my darling. It seems too good to be true, in fact most people seem hardly more able to believe it than I am... I can imagine how thrilled you must all have been to read General Montgomery's message and the account of his interview with the German generals. I wonder what they thought of their conqueror. I long for you so much, but it is wonderful to think how much nearer our meeting must surely be after the events of last week."

On 7th May General Eisenhower accepted Germany's unconditional surrender at Reims in France and Maida wrote: "We have had the wireless on nearly all day, expecting to hear Mr. Churchill's voice officially announcing the end of the war in Europe. So far he hasn't made his appearance, but it really does seem that all is over and I expect tomorrow will be the great day. Harriet is longing to put out the flags and was so thrilled when I told her that now the war was won we would soon have Daddy home... I shan't be able to celebrate properly until you come back... I know how happy you will be feeling, and I feel so happy too, and so proud of you for your war record, my own precious one. Goodnight now, so many kisses are waiting for you. Your own adoring Maida."

At midnight on 8th May the war in Europe was finally officially over: "My own beloved darling — I am writing to you in the afternoon of Victory Day before listening to Mr. Churchill's broadcast; I shan't be able to write tonight as Constance Markham has invited me to go down to her rooms on Parker's Piece to watch the celebrations which are to take place there. I can't make up my mind whether I really want to go, but I think I would feel sorry afterwards if I hadn't. Mamma and I took Harrie into the town this morning. She was thrilled with all the decorations but Mamma and I got rather footsore... Charles is thrilled by our three flags which are attached outside our window over his pram. He has been crowing at them almost all day."



AFTER THIS, LIFE SETTLED down again. Both Maida and John were thankful that the war in Europe was over, but there was now the questions of where to live and, in John's case, where to work. Having a future career as a surgeon still depended on obtaining the elusive F.R.C.S. as his intention to take the examination in 1939 had become impossible after he enlisted. On 13th May his mind had turned to the demobilisation process. Most members of the armed forces were to be released according to their 'age-and-service number', calculated from their age and the months they had served in uniform. A small number of 'key men' whose occupational skills were vital to postwar reconstruction would be released ahead of the schedule.

John commented: "It is nice to see in the papers that arrangements are already made for the release of Groups 1 and 2 by mid-August, and up to Group 25 by the end of the year. Of course, this does not officially apply to doctors, but I expect our demob will follow much the same timing. I saw an official paper yesterday about getting medical jobs after demob, and it seems that I shall qualify for a post at £550 year. I don't know whether I should take the Fellowship first or not. Anyway, it is something to look forward to, and makes the change over to civilian duties seem less formidable... Today I feel like quoting John Buxton:

*'The glad days are here again
The bright days of sun
And fast as the river
The spring days run.
Oh may I be with you, my love,
Before the summer's done.'*

A new O.C. Surgical Division, Col. Orr, arrived in Tournai on 17th May. John wrote a few days later saying: "I am feeling ever so proud of myself tonight as I did my first kidney operation quite successfully this morning and removed a stone about the size of a walnut. Col. Orr was very nice about it and assisted me, though allowing me to do it all myself. Many more medical officers are leaving us now and I am feeling very pleased with myself for being graded. Most of the ungraded Captains are going on duty to battalions and various other jobs. I think I shall get on quite well with Col. Orr, and we will share what surgery remains, which is not very much... Did I tell you that I have identified several Icterine Warblers

round about? They are pretty yellowish warblers with a most beautiful song, rather like a thrush played double time.”

A new topic to discuss was the forthcoming General Election. For most of World War II, from 10th May 1940 to 23rd May 1945, the country had been governed by a wartime coalition led by Winston Churchill which included both Conservative and Labour ministers, supplemented by the service chiefs representing the armed forces. Following the final defeat of Germany the Labour Party withdrew from the coalition and so parliament was dissolved⁷⁸. The University of Cambridge was at that time a constituency that could elect two Parliamentary seats. These were currently both held by Conservatives MPs, John Withers and Kenneth Pickthorn. On 23rd May John was keen to ensure that he was still able to vote, despite being abroad: “I filled in some form for you to vote for me by proxy, but I don’t know about the University vote. Would you ask Mr. Pickthorn if it is possible for me to vote for him by post from the B.L.A.? You might also make enquiries about the proxy voting and put me down for a Conservative if you get the chance.”

The next day he told Maida that: “I am still feeling a trifle bewildered by all the comings and goings of personnel, but we shall settle down again in a day or two. You may be amused to hear that I have fallen out with all the women M.O.s who work as a trade union because I refused to help any of them do surgery. They are a very conceited lot and only in the army 3 months!” On 26th May: “My appendix and kidney cases are both doing well, so I am feeling quite pleased with life. We have had a further reshuffle of staff, and I am now working with a surgeon named Duncan, a Scotsman from Aberdeen. He is easier to get on with than the conceited woman M.O. I had before, but these changes are always trying until you get used to them... I quite agree with you getting the car on the road again. That will be some compensation for not having a home of our own, and I do not feel the expense will be wasted.”

The next day he was remembering back to the First World War of 1914-1918: “I have had a great 24 hours since yesterday. First, I went to the house of the Burgomaster with five other officers from the mess. When we got there we found quite a big party of local civilians and a gramophone for dance records. I very much enjoyed the party though I felt exhausted by the continuous effort to speak French. Finally I got to bed about 2.0. Today I did quite a lot of work before

attending Chapel at 11.0. After lunch I went with a party from the hospital on a trip to visit Ypres and Hill 60 and the Menin Gate. It is nice to see how nature heals the scars of war more or less completely in 30 years. There are now no signs of destruction there as it appears to have escaped during this war (except for one or two pieces knocked off the Menin Gate, but quite trivial). 160,000 men of the allied armies were killed near Ypres, which makes one almost sick to think of. The Menin gate is covered with the names of those who were killed and whose bodies were never found, and there are thousands and thousands of them.”

“In some ways I think this war has been more human than the last. Hill 60 is quite insignificant to look at but is famous for the mining activities of the sappers who were specially drafted from Monmouth and Northumberland. Part of the front-line trench has been preserved and also part of the tunnelling. They say the front-line trenches were only 25 yards from the German line! Nothing like that in this war, thank God. We went a longish way to reach Ypres and I was impressed by the redness of some of the Belgium rooves, also that all the married Belgian ladies appear to dress entirely in black to walk out on a Sunday and look pretty smart in it.”

On 28th May he reported that work in the operating theatre had temporarily almost ceased: “However we are expecting to get three hundred more cases sometime soon from a hospital which is closing down. They are mostly second-hand cases but better than nothing.” These patients duly arrived and he examined them on 30th May, together with another newly arrived surgical specialist called Sharpe: “He is a nice man who fought in the last war also and has an M.C.... Curiously he finished up this war on 8th May in the same Belgian village as he was in on 11th Nov 1918 and that was only 10 miles from here... I think it is fairly definite that this hospital will go to Germany in the end though not for a few weeks yet. Meanwhile I will be pleasantly busy here.”



ON 9TH MAY MAIDA gave an account of a Thanksgiving service that she had attended in King’s College Chapel as part of the V-E celebrations in Cambridge: “I only arrived just in time and sat at the back of the ante-chapel, but the music sounds almost

lovelier from there and the view of the chapel is very much finer: the vaulting looked so beautiful that even before the service began the sheer loveliness and peacefulness of it stirred me to a greater realisation of the joy of victory than all the other announcements and celebrations have done.”

“I remembered, darling, how we went to King’s together on All Saint’s Day 1939 just before you left, you looking so handsome in your new uniform that I felt terribly proud of you but at the same time so sad and anxious for what the war years might bring. So in no other place could I so appropriately have given thanks, as I did with all my heart, for your safe return, my sweetheart, and I thought how blessed we have been in having none of our relations and only comparatively few of our friends even injured by the war in spite of all the dangers many of them have been in. Now darling, we can begin really to look forward to our life together with a family as something which may soon be a reality and I long and long to know when demobilisation is going to start. Little Charlot said ‘Mum-mum’ today for the first time: it was of course entirely accidental, but he is making new sounds all the time now.”

Her next letter written on 10th May began and ended in French, in response to a missing letter from John in which he had been practicing the language as he had started taking French lessons. Maida’s reply thanked him for his effort and went on: “I am already dreaming of the journeys which we will soon be able to make together in France.” On 30th May she reported back on John’s request to sort out his university vote: “Apparently, the quickest way will be for you to vote yourself by air mail. You must ask for Army Form B2639, which is already addressed and quite clear, and will be brought back when completed by bomber! So now, darling, your vote for all available Conservative candidates will be secured.”

The next day Harriet had enjoyed watching a visit from the chimney sweep, followed by Adda cleaning up after him: “Thank goodness once this week is over all her ambitions in the cleaning line will be satisfied. Not that I mind particularly but I think she is doing rather too much.” At the beginning of June Harriet had received a parcel from John: “She is keeping it for her birthday; she said *‘I’ll put it on the tallboy like I did my Christmas presents, so there it is waiting for next Saturday’*.”

“Harrie and I went to the town this morning for the meat and also to get the car licence and my driving licence. It is rather exciting to have it ready for the road again.” This was followed by some calculations

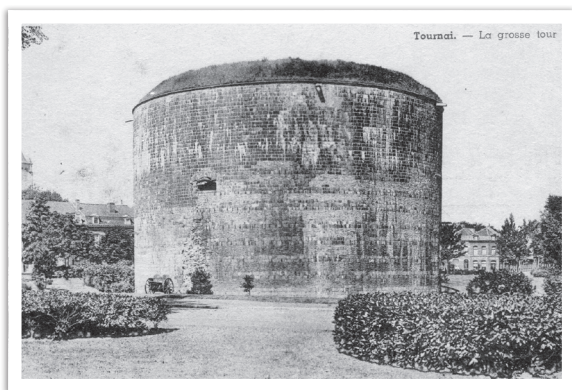
of what limited journeys would be possible with the existing petrol ration as she was hoping to be able to visit Rob and Dorothy in Leicester. On 3rd June she was planning for John’s next return on leave: “Precious darling, I was longing for you so much this morning and thinking when we have our next little honeymoon we won’t entertain anyone unless you want to, but just enjoy each other and do what we feel like at the time without having to keep to a timetable of engagements... It is so marvellous to be able to look forward to it this time, as after all it can’t be more than about 3 months away now, whereas when you were in Egypt there seemed no reason why our interminable separation should ever end. I’d almost stopped looking forward when you suddenly arrived — so I had none of the exquisite pleasure of anticipation which this time I am enjoying to the full.”

She had by then confirmed her plans to take Harriet to visit John’s mother in Northumberland on 14th June, leaving Charles behind with Adda and Mamma. She commented: “I can’t bear the thought of leaving him, but I feel it will be such a treat for Harrie.” She also reported that Emily, the previous maid, was being discharged from hospital the following day and was going to call round to collect her luggage.



FOLLOWING THE END TO the fighting in Europe, much attention in the army was now centred on demobilisation and the timing of return to civilian life. There was a constant coming and going of personnel in the hospital, which was unsettling, but John continued to be kept pleasantly busy with a mixture of work and social activities. On 1st June he wrote: “I am feeling very happy today partly because it is the beginning of a new month, and partly because we had a very good party last night at Lille. We were invited to a dance with the 23rd Scottish Hospital. It was the first time I had actually been in France since I came over this time and Lille looks very poor and its inhabitants rather miserable. However we had a very good dance.”

The next day he commented on some postcards he had enclosed: “The round tower was built by Henry VIII of England who captured Tournai in 1513 when he was only 20 years old. It is interesting to think that the Cathedral was much the same when he saw it as it



Postcard sent by John showing the Round Tower at Tournai.

is now." He was pleased that a hernia operation he had performed went well.

His next letter reported more surgery: "Two officers came in during the night from a Jeep accident, one with a broken leg and the other with a dislocated hip and a broken upper jaw. In addition to these, I had an emergency appendix abscess to open. The weather has also got much warmer and this evening I am feeling pleasantly tired... I have now been with No. 96 longer than I was with No. 9, touch wood! The only thing I don't like about the place is the female M.O.s who are always making use of their sex to get more than they should."

"I don't think there will be much chance of a try for the F.R.C.S. in November, but I haven't quite given up hope yet... Your love keeps me from feeling depressed for long, as I know how happy you will make me again when I do get home." The next day: "I am still very busy and have an appendix to do in a few minutes, so I am hurrying this up a bit. I do hope Harriet has a nice day on her birthday. I am sending her off a card today, which I hope will arrive on the 9th. All my love precious one. I shall soon be home now. Your own adoring John."

On 5th May: "Great excitement was caused today by a rumour that the period necessary for qualifying for leave in the B.L.A. has been reduced to 3 months. I do not know whether it is true or not but even if it is I don't think I would get back until August, as everyone else in the unit has to go first." Following up on the discussion of how best to use the limited petrol allowance he concluded: "I think you should have sufficient petrol to get over to Leicester as there were three or four gallons left in the tank when I left. But please go slowly, darling. I shall be rather worried to think of you driving after so little practice for 5 years

and there will be many other out-of-practice drivers about too. You must promise me to go slowly... I am very happy and rather excited at the thought that perhaps I shall get home before September after all."

The following day was the first anniversary of D-day: "It is nice to reflect that the whole thing was finished in less than a year from the time we landed, which is a good deal better than many people expected. I have had a very busy day with six cases in the theatre this morning, three of which were quite difficult. My two bad appendix cases are going all right, and my kidney case is getting up and about. I really feel I have had a good deal of experience here, and now have sufficient self-confidence to do the common things without having my hand held."

This was followed by more optimism regarding demobilisation: "The great news today is that two members of the mess who are in Group 1 have been told definitely that they will be returning home on the 17th and that R.A.M.C. staff, from here at any rate, are being demobbed at exactly the same time as everyone else. This is better than I expected and has put everyone concerned into a good humour. Meanwhile I have been very busy writing up the notes from the German prisoners of war who are going back to Germany next week. This will also make things easier as there is a constant argument as to whether they are being treated too well or not well enough."

On 8th June he reported that another surgical specialist called Major Williamson had arrived unexpectedly: "I think I shall get on with him all right... and he will be a better surgeon than Major Sharpe. He is only Group 29 for demob because he has only been in the army for 3 years, so perhaps he will settle down here for a bit. Today has been a perfect summer day and the frogs are croaking double time and enjoying the heat. I have been fairly busy with paperwork again but have quite a nice operation list for tomorrow. All my cases are doing well: the kidney case is walking about and cured of his pain, and the two bad appendices are out of danger. I am feeling quite happy but rather weary... It was sweet of you to say that we will have our next honeymoon all to ourselves darling. That would be perfect. We always seemed to be so busy last year with courses and friends and work... All my love sweet one. Your own John."



ON 5TH JUNE MAIDA wrote to report that the postcards of Tournai had arrived. John had also enclosed a letter from the British Medical Association claiming that all ex-service doctors would be treated fairly. She commented: "It's nice to feel that a real effort will be made this time to help and you seem to have a good chance of one of the jobs at £550 p.a. plus £100 'in lieu'." The following week she was getting ready to go to Northumberland with Harriet to visit John's mother and had shortened her grey jersey suit skirt, which John had said was too long: "I expect you will like it better now. Tomorrow I shall be able to have a lazy day except for packing. I shall hate leaving little Charlot for 10 days; he is developing so fast just now. But he loves Mamma and Adda and will be perfectly happy."

Her next letter was sent from Morwick on 18th June and was again in French: she complimented John on his own progress with the language. His sister Helen with her little daughter Sally were also there at the same time: "Your pretty card made Harriet very happy. We spent most of the morning climbing trees in the park, and I hauled the red engine with Harrie and Heather's huge Teddy Bear as passengers — quite a tiring activity but one that she enjoys a lot... This afternoon your mother is going to take us to the beach. We hope the mines have been cleared! The weather is not very nice, but if we wait for good weather we could easily reach the end of our visit without having seen the sea."

The next day she was able to report: "We had a splendid afternoon on the beach yesterday and Harrie

was thrilled with her first experience of the seaside. As there was still a coolish breeze she and Sally didn't get right into the sea but paddled along the edge and in the little pools. We were at a place called Killiecrankie. Harrie was a little nervous of going even as deep as her knees, but today is even hotter and Helen and I are intending to put on bathing suits too and take them right in if they will venture to go! They really prefer digging in the sand and Harrie gathered a lot of shells which she has been washing and playing with this morning and has now packed up to take home."

"I am writing in a deck chair outside the dining room window and am actually wearing a cotton frock and no stockings and feel really warm; it is heavenly; the sky is cloudless blue, and the treetops are just rustling in a gentle breeze... The herbaceous border is looking rather sad, all weeds, but there are some gorgeous big poppies which your mother has in vases in the house; they are such lovely colours." By 21st June, however, Maida was starting to miss Charles and the enforced leisure of being at Morwick did not entirely suit her: "The time goes much quicker at Cambridge as there is more for me to do, and I have less time to think how long I still have to wait before I see you. I wonder if you will be getting any information soon as to how the plans for resettlement of doctors are working."

"Your mother and Helen and I went to Sir William Beveridge's meeting in Amble last night. We were interested to see him, but it was a very small and apathetic audience and we were rather bored, and wished we had stayed here." Beveridge was the man responsible for the 'Beveridge Report' outlining the basis for the new National Health Service which the Labour party were intending to set up if they won the General Election. Before that happened patients were generally required to pay for their health care, although free treatment was sometimes available from charitable hospitals.

The letter continued: "Yesterday afternoon Harrie and I had a long walk over Morwick Moor and back along the river. I was telling her that it was the first Morwick walk you ever took me on, that time in the winter, darling, and how we were overtaken by a snowstorm in the middle of the field and you sheltered me under your macintosh... She was so sweet on the river path as whenever it got very narrow she insisted on holding my hand so that I shouldn't fall down. She takes great care of me and has no opinion of my capacity for looking after myself... We have seen two red squirrels near the river but none near the house so far. We have also seen the kingfisher several times."



Sally and Harriet on the beach at Killiecrankie in June 1945.



JOHN'S NEXT LETTER SENT on 9th June was addressed to Morwick: "Today has been a lovely day for Harriet's birthday though quite cool and fresh. I have been working hard all day with a full list of operations this morning and an emergency case this afternoon. I am feeling tired but happy this evening and am looking forward to a night's rest. We had news today that we shall go to Germany soon somewhere near Hamburg, but we don't know where or when exactly yet. My room companion Capt. Maddison is going on compassionate leave for 11 days tomorrow so I shall be left with a room to myself for a fortnight... This will be a short note tonight sweetheart because I am very weary but it brings you all my thoughts, my perfect love, and thoughts of future happy times together."

The following day he did indeed have some time off, attending the morning service and taking Major Williamson on a tour of Tournai in the afternoon to visit the Cathedral and Henry VIII's tower: "I am getting on quite well with him as he is also a Christian and a Scout. I have had a letter from you today telling of the first outing of Griselda. Darling, you must send me the bill or, better still, write a cheque on my account for the licence and insurance. Did you take them out for a full year? It will probably be the cheapest I suppose. It is exciting to think you will be able to meet me at the station now even if I do arrive at night after the buses have stopped."

The next letter had more on the election: "Cambridge University appear to be having a galaxy of talent as members of Parliament; I think Priestley, Hill (the radio doctor) and Pickthorn. In a way I should like to have Priestley in Parliament as he would get the sitting-on he needs to make him a good man. Both he and Hill are bigger men than Pickthorn, though I do support the Conservatives. I have written for ballot papers but you can vote for me by proxy as well in case my papers don't arrive." These candidates were J.B. Priestly, the novelist and playwright and Professor Archibald Hill FRS, a well-known physiologist who had earlier in his career shared the 1922 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. They were both standing as independent candidates whereas Mr Pickthorn was one of the current Conservative M.P.s.

On 12th June John was less busy: "I now have only 40 patients to look after, but even that is quite a lot compared with the usual 20-30 at Shaftesbury..."

I have just had my French lesson from Mons. Pieters and am making some progress I think." His next letter was therefore in French. In it he mentioned that they now had four surgeons but no more wounded were arriving. Two days later he had been up to the top of the Mont St. Aubert, a local hill, with Major Sharpe and Major Smith: "We had a nice walk and a cup of real coffee from the Belgian Congo in a little café on top. The café was run by a nice woman who was expecting her son back from prison in Germany this evening. She explained to us that he was a '*réfracteur*', which apparently means someone whom the Germans ordered to go to work in Germany and got out of it by hiding. He was caught only a month before the Americans arrived here, so he has only been away for nine months." The following evening John borrowed a bicycle and visited Fontenoy with Major Williamson: "We cycled about 12 miles altogether and I am now feeling distinctly weary."

On 16th June they were excited to know that their officers classed as Group 1 were to be demobilised and leave for home the following week. The next day more patients arrived from a neighbouring hospital that was closing down: "...and there will be others moving before we do, so I think we may be here another month. We had quite a good party last night in the mess... I shall be glad when this next week is over as more changes are in the air and the sooner they are over the better."

In his next letter he was pleased to hear from Maida that everything was going well with her trip to Morwick: "I had another pleasant surprise when I received a statement of our account at Lloyd's and found that I have a balance of £160! Also rather a dry letter from Denis which I enclose... I am proud that he is the 2nd. Gunnery Officer on our largest battleship." Two days later he reported that he was again busy with more cases but happy in spite of the rapidly changing personnel, saying: "I may be out by Christmas yet!"

On 21st June the officers and sisters had been out to another party: "It was a charming house and a very old-established family. The Town Mayor managed to bring along a good military jazz band and we had quite a good evening. We did not get back until 2.0 o'clock this morning which explains partly why I am feeling rather weary now. Darling, I did so enjoy getting your nice letter in French in reply to mine. I am still very slow and bad at the idiom but am improving slightly. I had quite a lot of practice last night as none of my partners spoke any English."

The next day he was again busy with new



patients coming in while those leaving required a lot of paperwork: "I was so glad to hear from you today that Harrie had been down to the beach. Personally, I don't think it is ever hot enough to make bathing pleasant at Warkworth, but it is lovely to be on the sands and explore right along to Alnmouth one way and Amble the other." On 23rd June: "I had a busy morning today with another list of operations. It was hot and the staff were slow but we finished without any mishaps at a quarter to one and I am coming to feel that the staff are beginning to trust me, which will make my work more pleasant. Darling, I am so pleased to hear that you have had a really hot day on the sands. You have had a bathe before I have, but we are having a swimming bath opened in the hospital next week. The hospital was a school in peacetime and has quite a nice open-air pool if it can be kept moderately clean. I saw some most disgusting-looking slime being cleared from its floor today. Tonight the sergeants' mess are giving a dance and I expect I shall look in later though I am feeling rather weary. I hardly seem to have stopped working this week but expect to be less busy next. It has been another beautiful day which makes the time go faster I think, as we can sit out in the garden when not busy. There is a beautiful rose bush with the brightest red flowers in front. I should so love to put one in your hair, my sweet. It would go so well with black. All my love my precious one. Your own John."

The hospital diary stated that No. 96 was now starting to pack up⁷⁶ but, rather than go with them, John had yet another totally unexpected relocation to report on 23rd June, received at very short notice: "I have just heard that I am going to Normandy either tonight or tomorrow... I shall quite look forward to it as long as it does not last too long. The address is No.34 F.D.S., B.L.A.* I think you will be quite safe to write to me there straight away as I shall be there by Tuesday, I expect... I shall be near Bayeux and will be able to see the beaches at Arromanches, where all the fighting was this time last year. I should like you to send me a summer khaki shirt with the detachable cloth pips on the shoulders, darling, as we are allowed to wear a shirt only now, and today is quite stuffy... also a pair of khaki shorts and my mosquito net if I still have it... I shall have lots to tell you next time."

MAIDA'S LETTERS ABOUT THEIR return from Morwick are missing, and her next one was written on 29th June in answer to the one from John telling of his imminent move to Normandy. Ironically, this arrived before a slightly earlier letter saying how happy he was at Tournai: "It is typical of all the moving about you have done in the army. I hope you won't feel very much in a rut when you come to settle down in one place for months or even years at a time, darling, but I expect I'll be able to console you somehow if you do. I am hoping I may hear from you tomorrow from Normandy. As I write there is a bullfinch on the dead delphiniums quite close to the drawing room window. I saw him when I went up to my room just now and he was shaking the heads of seed ferociously and looking so sweet, though his plumage has lost some of its spring brightness... This afternoon I went into the town and posted your parcel. I took the car as I wanted to get the full allowance of petrol put in before the June coupons become invalid, so now the tank is quite full and I got a quart of oil as well."

"The children are very well and full of beans... Charles can now roll over in his pram and cot and raise himself right off his tummy on hands and feet. I shall have to begin strapping him into his pram. He is so adorable and smiling always. Harrie has a craze for building with bricks at present and makes really wonderful erections. Now that my cold is better I hope to do a real good lot of sewing before you come home. I would like to get your civilian clothes out of store again and look through them, but there is so little room to put them. Do you think they will be all right? Once we can get rid of all your uniform there will be plenty of room; will you be able to sell any of your khaki things do you think?"

The next day she described Charles' current daily routine and bedtime: "Adda could hear him having a long conversation with Harrie after I had come down from putting them to bed; they are so devoted to each other, they are sweet to watch, and I long for you to see them, darlingest." There was also more on the election: "A University voting paper arrived for you today which I am sending you in case you didn't get the army form. I have put Pickthorn as first choice and Charles Hill (rather doubtfully) 2nd. I think he sounds rather conceited. However, I am all for a good sprinkling of doctors in the House."

* No 34 Field Dressing Station, British Liberation Army.

CHAPTER 19

Normandy
1945

ON 27TH JUNE JOHN continued to follow the Allied invasion route in reverse and had joined his latest unit, No. 34 Field Dressing Station, British Liberation Army, at Bayeux in France. This was very close to where the D-Day landings had taken place just over a year before. The unit itself had moved to Bayeux from Caen four months earlier and, although it was still classified as an F.D.S., it had then been converted into a British hospital of 100 beds with an additional 200 beds for prisoners of war. There were only about six doctors on the staff, of whom John was to be the designated surgical specialist⁷⁹.

He wrote home following a slow but entertaining journey: "I left No. 96 on the evening of 24th at midnight and had a very uncomfortable night in the train sitting on my case in the corridor of a 3rd class compartment with Canadian soldiers sleeping full length on the floor on both sides. We did not reach Paris until about 10.00 o'clock on Monday morning. I rang up the unit here and found that I could stay 24 hours in Paris. I was put up at the Bedford Hotel which was very comfortable. After a sleep in the afternoon, I went to the Officers Club, which is in the old Rothschild house in the Rue St. Honoré."

"I was lucky to meet an R.A.F. Flight-lieutenant and in the evening he accompanied me to the Folies Bergère, which I had always wanted to see. It was a very good show and not nearly so lewd as I had expected... On Tuesday morning I went by Metro to the Eiffel Tower and was taken up to the 2nd Etage where we had a marvellous view of the Seine and most of Paris. On the way back I visited the Sainte-Chapelle in the Palais de Justice. One would not guess that it dated from the thirteenth century, although

the proportions are perfect inside. It seemed to me to be the parent of King's College Chapel, though the stained glass was still missing."

"I started from the Gare Montparnasse at 3.45 p.m. and got to Caen at 10 p.m... Today has been mostly spent taking over from Major Squires who is off for demob tomorrow. This afternoon we were able to get down to the sea for a most marvellous bathe in sight of Arromanches at a place called Comines. This unit will be only here for a month and there is little to do (only 20 surgical patients at present), but I shall have quite a good holiday here, I think... We are living in Nissen huts and have bucket latrines, but it is really quite comfortable in the summer... I am thinking of you very much, and it is now only one whole month to wait."

The next day Major Squires duly left, leaving John in sole charge of the surgical side of the hospital: "In some ways this is rather like being at Safaga, as we have the same number of patients and the same isolation. The nearest British hospital is No. 96, which is over 300 miles away. We are commanded by a Major Cochran, a quiet Scotch territorial who is due to be demobbed next month. The chief difference is that we have a tremendous number of medical officers here, most of whom seem to be absent on some pretext or other, and there is certainly very little to keep them busy. I find I have about the same number of patients as when I left 96 (i.e. about 40), but here I have a General Duty Officer to do the writing for me. His name is Capt. Scougal and he was at St. John's, Cambridge and Guy's. He has been qualified about two years and is keen to become a surgical trainee. I have managed to collect a couple of cases to do tomorrow in the theatre but expect to have less and less to do until we finally shut up shop at the end of July."

On 29th June: "I had two quite interesting ops which kept me busy and this afternoon I managed



A British soldier carries a little girl through the devastation of Caen. Taken by Captain E.G. Malindine, N.o 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit. This work created by the United Kingdom Government is in the public domain⁸⁰.

to persuade Capt. Scougal to cycle with me to Arramanches, where the artificial harbour was made last July. It is 9 kilometres away and the road is bad, but we went slowly and got there and back without mishap. It is a huge harbour quite a mile across and made mostly by concrete barges sunk in rows. There are about twenty old ships sunk in a row to help make a breakwater. As you can imagine the beach, which was once beautiful sand, is now covered with every kind of wreckage from the landings. I enclose an interesting letter from Philip* with an account of all his wanderings since he left England. He must have been away over two years now. I am very glad he has been made a Major again as that may encourage him to remain in the army... He seems to have seen a great deal of active fighting."

The following day the hospital staff entertained themselves with a cricket match: "I am now feeling very proud of myself because I hit a six for the first time in my life and also made my highest score (33). The area commander, a Colonel McAlister, was playing for us and the whole thing was good fun. This place reminds me more and more of Safaga, though I look like being a lot less busy here because there are more officers to do the work... I have started reading through my Hamilton Bailey books again. I am

enclosing one or two views of Bayeux which is a pretty little town completely undamaged. The tapestries are coming back in July."

On 3rd July John replied to an earlier comment from Maida: "I don't think I shall have much difficulty in settling in one place after the war. I do not now move about for preference but because I can't help it. This last move was shorter notice than any of my previous ones." The next day he did some more sight-seeing: "This afternoon I managed to get a lift to Caen, which is 17 miles from Bayeux. The main church of St. Etienne is undamaged and is the burial place of William the Conqueror... The church itself is excessively plain even by Norman standards but has twin spires at the West end on the same plan as Bayeux... We also visited another Norman church, St Giles, where Queen Matilda, William's wife, is buried. It seems curious that they should be both in the same town and yet not in the same church. Caen itself is completely demolished in parts."

"I was very interested in Charles' menu which you sent. I think it possible that he is not now getting enough fat which might cause the patches of roughness on his skin. You could try him with more butter and condensed milk. I am glad to hear that Peggy is having another baby. I feel we have started the ball rolling for the second round! However, I feel quite sure we don't want any more until we are settled in our own house

* John's brother.

and I can be with you all the time. All my love, your own John.”

The city of Caen had the misfortune to play a central role in the immediate aftermath of the D-Day landings. Montgomery had planned to capture it on day one, before the enemy's reserves had time to reinforce the three Panzer divisions that were already stationed nearby. The newly landed Allied troops failed, however, to meet this objective. The Germans continued to hold on but Caen was in the centre of the Allies' planned line of advance. It was therefore subjected to an intense Allied bombardment and on one day 6,000 tons of bombs were dropped on it. Caen was finally liberated on 19th July, six weeks after the initial landings, by which time much of it had been destroyed and around 3,000 of its civilian inhabitants had been killed⁵⁷.

Later in the week John was occupied with paperwork, writing on 7th July: “I had to compile a quarterly report on the surgery done in the hospital. I then spent a very hot afternoon trying to get the answers to innumerable questions which they wanted answered, such as how many cases were treated with penicillin. After tea the Roman Catholic padre took me for a tour round Bayeux cathedral, and also into the Bishop's palace and introduced me to the Bishop, who is a nice old man wearing purple silk socks and boots like snow boots. We got back to the mess in time to start a dinner party for the farewell of our C.O. We were just going into dinner when an acute appendix case arrived which rather spoilt my meal but which I duly removed... I feel thoroughly settled in now but what with the change of C.O. and officers going on leave, the mess seems to be in a continual state of flux.”

On 9th July: “I walked down to the War Graves Registration Unit after tea today and asked if they could let me know where Bob Staniland's brother Jack was buried. He is quite close to Caen and I am hoping perhaps I shall be able to visit his grave one day. I also asked about Stephen Hoare, but they were unable to tell me about him. Is there anyone else we know who was killed near here? ... Our new C.O. took over officially today; he is quite pleasant.”

The next day he reported: “I am developing into a jack-of-all-trades here. My latest job is to take X-ray pictures as the radiographer has been posted elsewhere. I don't particularly relish the job but it seems the only thing to do at the moment, and the experience may be useful. I am doing the surgery as well. The anaesthetist has gone on leave but that does not worry me as Capt. Scougall, my General Duty

Officer, is quite a good anaesthetist. We were held up this morning for some time because there is not enough coal to sterilise the instruments. However, I expect things will be in working order again by tomorrow. The Watson-Jones books arrived safely this morning and I have already made use of them for looking up the treatment of a rather rare fracture of the scapula which came in last night... I went out for a short walk after tea and discovered a nice little stream running through the fields only half a mile from the hospital... I am fairly busy at the moment and so the time is going fast, but I shan't know definitely about leave until next month.”

Two days later (11.7.1945) John had been shopping: “I have managed to get two nice sheets from the officer's shop brand new and double size for 170 French francs, which I feel is pretty good value. I treated one case of fractured mandible this morning with the help of the dental officer, which was interesting. This afternoon I walked down to the little stream close by and had a very pleasant bathe — several parts were out of my depth. It was lovely to lie sun-bathing on the short grass and listen to the rippling of the water. I saw some very deep blue dragonflies... also a big falcon, probably a peregrine, came sailing overhead, which caused a commotion among the swallows and martins. It was lovely to be alone with no-one but the cows in the field. It is a year today since I first went to Naburn, which was in some ways like this with the same uncertainty about moving.”

On 12th July: “I have had quite a successful day today. One of my hernias this morning turned out to be a very difficult one and took me two hours to finish, but I enjoyed doing it and feel that I have made a good job of it. I am suffering the usual constant change of staff that is typical of the army. My temporary anaesthetist is now going away, so I shall have a temporary, temporary anaesthetist for the weekend. I was busy all afternoon with out-patients and X-rays and finally stopped work about 6.0 p.m. and walked down to a perfect little dip in my little stream. We are beginning to like the new C.O. better now and he is very keen on helping as best he can.”

The following day was the hottest day of the year: “I was busy in the theatre all morning with an appendix and some minor ops. This afternoon I spent sun-bathing near the stream and had a dip before tea. Since tea-time I have been reading the *Lancet* and the papers. Just before dinner I heard Weingartner playing ‘Les Adieux’ Beethoven sonata, part of which I have on a gramophone record.”



MAIDA MEANWHILE WAS LONGING to make plans for John's leave, although as usual this was a hopeless task. She wrote on 10th July saying that Mamma was going to stay with a friend for a few days at the end of July and that Adda was due to go on her week's holiday at about the same time: She therefore suggested: "I suppose you could never possibly try to get home yourself on July 26th? It would be marvellous if we could have the house to ourselves with Adda and the children over the weekend and then go away together the following week. Do try, darling, it would be so perfect. I am sure if you have a nice C.O. it could be arranged. You might even make Aunt Winnie the excuse to have your leave a little early on compassionate grounds. Things are none too easy here at present, and I know that, although Mamma says she is looking forward to seeing you, there will be difficulties when you do come. I am afraid we must expect that. She is much better than in the winter, but her temper is still very undependable, and I get weary of it all at times, though on the whole these three months have been pleasanter than I ever expected. Adda's return has made all the difference."

On 13th July Aunt Nonin was staying, which had meant rearranging the bedrooms and Maida having to share with the children. She went shopping into Cambridge in the morning and managed to get enough food to last for several days: "This afternoon I chatted to Nonin and did a little sewing and since then we have all been in the garden, swinging Charlot and picking a few Rivers Early plums... It is wonderful to think how soon you may be with me now; the time is going very quickly. Nonin is getting on very well with the children, and Mamma is much more lively since she arrived and likes hearing all the news of old acquaintances in Caernarvonshire."

The following day Maida took Nonin for a drive: "...as there are so few forms of entertainment she enjoys. Anything involving hearing is spoilt by her deafness. So we all (including Charlot) crammed into Griselda and I took them along the Roman road and back by way of Babraham; the sun was shining and the harvest just at its best so the country looked lovely with the different shades of gold and green in the fields and the distance deep blue... Since putting the children to bed I have done some watering and picked 2½ lbs of peas for tomorrow."

"Darlingest, I do so wish you could get posted to a unit that is coming home. Is there no way of wangling it? I'm sure very few people can have been abroad as much as you... I do so long to have you in England again. Anyway, it will be marvellous to have you home for your 10 days in August and the time is flying by... Your own adoring Maida".



ON 14TH JULY JOHN replied to Maida's letter concerning his leave arrangements. The date was Bastille Day, a national holiday commemorating the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris in 1789 and marking the start of the French Revolution: "My own darlingest — your letter today (of 10.7.45) has set me thinking furiously. It certainly would be grand to be home when Mamma is away for a few days — on the other hand, I can't see how they can manage without a surgeon here and, as they are closing down some time in the first fortnight of August, they will not want to send anyone here specially for so short a period. I should like to be a Major before being demobbed and I should normally be due for promotion in December, a year after my grading. I don't want to spoil my chances of this by making too much of a nuisance of myself."

"I suppose there is no chance of finding someone who would lend or let us a house while they are away in August? I should think the most likely time for me to get off would be about the third week of August, though this is only guesswork. I had a busy morning in the wards and doing X-rays and this afternoon the Padre took me in his car to the cemetery where Jack Staniland is buried. The cemetery is a big one just at the spot where there was very severe fighting a year ago. I have written to Bob to tell him about it. He has other men of his regiment buried on either side of him and I felt so proud and thankful for all these men who gave their lives that we might be free... The villages are decked with French flags but there was not much sign of celebration this afternoon. Perhaps they are reserving their energies for this evening. Darlingest darling, I know you will understand me if I don't get back on the 26th even if you think I am too conscientious. Still, I will go on thinking about it and see if there is any chance of doing so without giving compassionate reasons."

John wrote again on 15th July: "There are so few officers here at the moment that I am Orderly Officer every five days. However it is very little trouble and I have not yet had to get up at night (touch wood)... We all turned up for a C. of E. service in our hut this morning, but found that the padre had changed his time in sympathy with the British clocks, whereas we officially remain on double summertime... I got my 1939-1945 Star ribbon yesterday and have sewn it on my battle dress in front of the Africa Star. I still have the France and Germany ribbon to put on, but it is not yet available to issue." The following day was a happy day: "...with quite a busy morning's work, an afternoon walk with Capt. Campbell and some more work after tea with a bathe before supper... There is still a good deal of newly cut hay about and it smells very sweet and pleasant... I am pleased to hear Nonin is so sprightly, she runs Uncle Philip a close second, I should say."

On 17th July he reported that: "...the touching wood did not work because I was up this morning from 2.30 to 4.30 seeing a case of burns. He was a naval diver from Arromanches engaged in salvaging some of the ships there. He is the only member of the Royal Navy in the hospital and is only 18 years old. I enjoyed fixing him up." He reported receiving a nice letter from his friend Mr. Greaves advising him not to be too orthodox in his approach to surgery and commented: "Personally, I admire people who study and understand the orthodox approach to a subject before branching out into fresh ideas. Still I like him for being so candid."

The following day he mentioned that he would receive 10 gallons of petrol in addition to the basic ration when he came home, so they should have plenty available now that Griselda was back in use. On 19th July there had been several more interesting cases to deal with including a fracture of the elbow. He also commented on a couple of his fellow medical officers who were trying to avoid active service in the Far East, where the war was still in progress. He regarded them as scroungers, saying: "Two of our Officers have left today temporarily to go to Brussels for a medical board. They are both rated B non-tropical and so have escaped going to Burma. I think they are both quite as fit as I am, and they have only been in the army about 18 months. I shall laugh if they are put into A category."

His letter sent on 22nd July was a special one to commemorate their forthcoming seventh wedding anniversary on the 27th, saying: "Our marriage has

been sorely tried and I feel we must be stronger for it, but I hate the Germans for coming between us all these years... I shall be thinking of you especially much on Friday darling, and wishing I could be with you especially as Mamma will be away. Give Charles and Harriet kisses from their Daddy. Your own adoring John."

Two days later he was worrying about two German prisoners whose diagnoses were uncertain: "Eventually we decided not to operate but may have to change our minds tomorrow. However, it is really more interesting than worrying, as no one minds very much what happens to them and I may learn a lot from it. One was an accident case who came in before I arrived here and has been having abdominal pain ever since. He is now much worse, but the question is whether his lungs are the cause or his abdomen as he has a certain amount wrong with both and no cough. However, time will show and force us to make some decision."

On 25th July he had heard back from his friend Bob Staniland: "He seems in quite good form and perhaps we could pay him a visit on our way to Bristol. What do you think?... After tea I lay by the stream and listened to the ripples of the water which are so beautifully soothing. While I was day-dreaming a kingfisher came and perched on a twig at the other side of the pool. He didn't seem to see me and after a minute dived in and caught a fish. Now after supper I am feeling very much revived and alive. Tomorrow will be an exciting day with the election results, though I expect it will be disappointing for the Conservatives. All my love precious. Your own John."

Although the 1945 general election had been held on 5th July, the announcement of the results had been delayed so that the overseas votes from the service personnel still based abroad could be collected and counted. Labour won a landslide victory, polling 47.7% of the popular vote, gaining 239 seats and obtaining a large Parliamentary majority. Attlee therefore replaced Churchill as the prime minister and promptly began implementing the party's promised post-war reforms, including the introduction of the National Health Service⁷⁸.

On the same day that this was announced, John reported feeling pleased with himself as his diagnosis had proved correct: "I have just operated on one of my difficult cases and it turned out to be exactly as I had predicted. He was a young German who was admitted with great distension of the abdomen. When I first saw him I said he had tuberculosis peritonitis, but some of

the others thought his bowel was obstructed. So I have won quite a major victory in the local medical circles. It is a good thing I have had that to cheer me up as the election results are disagreeable to me, and it has been raining most of the day with heavy thunder showers. In addition, I have not had a letter from you and no papers... I shall be thinking of you all day tomorrow.”



JOHN'S LETTER OF 14TH July reached Maida on the 20th, when she wrote back: “I wasn't really expecting you would be able to get here for the 26th so I am not disappointed... Mamma is ever so much better than she was, and is looking forward to seeing you; this week she has been really quite her old self again, and I think we shall find we get the greatest possible enjoyment out of your leave, darling, if we spend part of it here with the children and part of it away in a hotel. I don't think we could borrow or rent a house for such a short time. If we did, I should be doing housework and looking after the children all the time.”

“Adda is very much more co-operative than before, and will do all she can, I know, to make your leave happy, darling. As at the present arranged, she is herself having a week's holiday beginning on July 30th so she should be in specially good form... I was hoping to have a long time to write to you tonight, darling, but unfortunately Robin, after months of silence, has just been telephoning a long wail that if they can't get rid of Aunt Ah his home will be broken up. We rather expected this might happen if they heard Nonin had been here. However, I made it quite clear we would not have her here, nor did I wish Mamma to be worried — though needless to say she is worrying again. I would cheerfully wring all their necks. We ended by asking them over for the day in the hope that might do them all good — but I also said, echoing you, darling, — if you pay enough you will find rooms for her.”

“I have told Mamma she is not to worry. It is so nice to have her so much better that I shall be mad if she gets upset by them. She has been so sweet helping me with the sewing. Darling, I am just counting the days now till you are likely to come home. I am feeling fine, and the babies are so well and amusing. All my love, precious darling. I'm so glad you saw Jack Staniland's grave: it was sweet of you; I know how glad

Bob will be... Your own adoring Maida.”

Later that week Maida was also thinking of their anniversary and wrote back on 27th July: “My own precious darling — it is 8.30 and our wedding anniversary is nearly over... My special treat today has been three letters from you, the one you wrote me for today and the ones on either side of it. It has been a very happy day for me... The babies have been so specially good and sweet, and Adda so kind and cheerful. I gave Harrie and Charlot the kisses you sent them... When I returned from going to the town this morning there was just time to take the two of them and Ben for a walk before lunch. Adda had them both in the garden waiting to greet me when I came in, which was a nice welcome after the boring shopping.”

“This afternoon I spent reading the election results and the Times articles on the labour victory, and then there was a nice Beethoven quintet for piano and wind to listen to while I sewed... After tea it was too cold to take the children to play in the garden so I played them the gramophone which we all enjoyed, especially ‘Dan, Dan the yodelling man’ which made Charlot roar with laughter and bounce up and down holding on to the bars of his pen. He can now pull himself up to stand and is very pleased when he manages it.”

“Mamma returns tomorrow. I am sure she will have enjoyed her time with Gertrude, they have always been fond of each other, and we used to stay with them nearly every summer at one time, when I was at school. I remember I was very thrilled the first time I was old enough to stay down for dinner... I keep thinking about the election and wondering whatever will happen now. Will they start nationalizing the mines etc. I wonder? They can do just what they like with such a big majority. Mrs Noble, our nice paper-woman, thinks it is a good thing for them to have a chance to show what they can do, which seems the most philosophical view to take. I shall be interested to hear the new Ministers. Bevin is said to be going to the Foreign Office, which will be a change; they will have to get a special heavy-weight chair for him!... Darling sweet, I am just living for all the lovely talks we shall have soon and your heavenly kisses. Pray Heaven, our eighth and subsequent anniversaries we really shall have together.”

On 29th July three more letters from John arrived including those relating to the diagnosis and treatment of the German prisoner. Maida replied saying: “Adda didn't start her holidays today after all as she woke up with such bad rheumatism in her arm and feeling rotten — so she went to the doctor and got a bottle of

stuff to rub on and some pills, and she is feeling much better tonight after a quiet day, and is probably going tomorrow. I took the car to Moss this morning and in the end they didn't replace the metal part, but put a new clip on the rubber pipe from the radiator and scraped the corrosion off the metal... Mr Moss said Griselda would fetch £200 today! New Austin 100s cost £400 with purchase tax. I feel we are very lucky to have her to carry on with for the present."

The rest of the letter put forward alternative plans for John's leave, concluding: "If you will trust me with the arrangements, I will try to book rooms in accordance with Plan I or II when you let me know when you expect to come. Or if you think it best to wait till you've actually arrived, I expect we could fix up by telephone. But I believe the hotels are very full everywhere, and we could always cancel any arrangements I had made if we wanted."

The next day (30.7.1945) she was busy with odd jobs, washing and food shopping in town: "I did my ironing this afternoon and had a nice bath before tea, making the most of the hot water which we only have very rarely now, as we are saving coal hard for the winter... I happened to see some mackintoshes in Sayles this morning, and bought myself one for £2 6s 3d, rather a lot but it is very thick and looks quite nice — anyway there was no choice, and I had to have one, since mine is so old and dirty. Tomorrow is the last day of July, darling, and then August will be here at last with all its hopes of having you with me soon."

On 31st July John had sent a card for Harriet and Maida was able to report: "She really did try to read it this time and managed several of the small words. When she came to the bit about the punting, she was so thrilled that she hung her head and became speechless in the funny little way she has. She is simply longing to see you... Adda went off this morning; she seemed to be feeling better... How thankful I am she has only gone for a week this time. Mamma couldn't eat the bacon I cooked for supper, which was rather a bad beginning, but lunch was all right and she said afterwards how nice it had been. I shall do as little cooking as possible as I don't want to get tired before you come home."



JOHN CONTINUED TO WRITE daily during the last week in July, although without having much

news. He also was looking forward to his leave: "As far as I can gather, I shall probably get to Victoria by the Dieppe-Newhaven route by about 5.0 p.m. and so might catch the 5.46 train from Liverpool St.. However it is still at least three weeks off so we mustn't make too many detailed arrangements as I might be posted... I got my Lancet today and read in it that so far there is no news of demobbing any doctors beyond Group 2. However, everyone is making such a noise about it that I expect something definite will be announced soon." He also mentioned that he had to do a post-mortem examination on a German prisoner who had hung himself.

On 28th July he reported: "In the last Lancet I see the Central War Emergency Committee have recommended that doctors should be released in their proper groups by calling up specialists at home. I am afraid pressure will be put on the government by the home brigade not to do this on the plea that they are indispensable and that we won't be able to take their places for at least three months after being demobbed. However, there is still some hope though rather faint." Maida had written in one of her now missing letters to say that Charles had fallen out of his pram, which news alarmed John: "I understand now the advantage of having the low-down models you see on this side of the Channel. It seems a long way for the little fellow to fall — a great deal more than his height."

On 30th July he was very pleased to receive a letter from Maida enclosing another from Uncle Philip: "I was wondering about him as it is a very long time since I heard about him. We must visit him when we get to London... I was staggered by the election result, as you appear to have been, but the amazing thing is that when the result became known the only ones to express any regret were myself and Capt. Scougall. All the rest of the M.O.s, who beforehand one supposed to be Conservative, turned out to be supporters of Labour."

"I am very glad to hear of Gervase Markham's wedding invitation. I think you might accept provisionally as I should like to go and shall quite likely be at home at that time. It is marvellous to think it is less than a month ahead. The chief item of news today is that Capt. Scougall is leaving us tomorrow for No. 110 Gen Hospital, which is in England. This sounds good but is a preliminary step to the Far East. This evening we have been quite active — starting by removing an appendix and continuing with a game of cricket until 8.30."

On 2nd August he had some potentially good news

to report regarding his leave: "There is a vacancy for 25th August but there are three of us competing for it, Capt. Denton, Campbell and myself, all of whom came over on the same ship, worse luck. We are thinking of drawing lots and perhaps I shall know definitely before long. The 25th would be ideal, though I must not count on it yet. Please thank Mamma for sending her love and tell her there are lots of goldfinches here although I have not had time to do any real birding. I am afraid I have not been keeping up my French here because I find after being on duty continuously, I want to relax when there is nothing doing. All I can claim is that I know a little bit more than I did... Your own John. Darling, I have just heard from the C.O. that my leave is fixed for 25th! Only 3 weeks!! J.F.H.B."



MAIDA WAS CONTINUING TO be busy at the start of August while Adda was away on holiday. On 2nd August she had had a bad night with the children: "Charlot woke shrieking, I suppose with toothache, at 2.15, and simply refused to settle down in his cot again, so in despair I took him to my bed: by this time he had woken Harriet who insisted on coming too, and I had the pair of them wriggling like eels, one each side, and it wasn't till after 3.0 that we all went to sleep... After tea we all, including Ben, hopped into the car and went along to the brook where Harriet and I paddled, and even little Charlot dabbled his toes in the water. Both children were simply thrilled, and Mamma and I so enjoyed watching their happy faces... I am dreaming all the time about when you come home."

On 4th August she wrote: "I will accept the invitation to Gervase's wedding: it would be fun to go together, darling, so I do hope you will be here then. We have had a very happy day: the children have been so sweet and good, and Mamma is in splendid form. She is now almost as devoted to Charles as to Harriet... I also cooked a double amount for today and tomorrow, as I want to go to St. Benet's in the morning, so we can have a cold lunch. In fact, I shall hardly have anything more to cook, except vegetables and such un-messy things as eggs until Adda returns which is a pleasant prospect, as cooking is rather warm work in this weather. How I bless you for the little gas cooker, darling, it is so handy and I haven't

lit the Triplex once, nor do I intend to. It is nice to be saving coal too."

The splendid news that John's leave had been confirmed reached Maida on 7th August: "How perfectly marvellous, darling. Harrie and I have counted the days several times already, and they seem miraculously few after waiting so long... I won't attempt to make any plans until I hear more details from you, though it looks as if our thought of starting for Bristol on the second day won't combine with going to Gervase's wedding. We could however go to the Zoo perhaps with Harrie on the Monday; the wedding on Wednesday; Bristol on Thursday and London on Friday and Saturday, returning here on Sunday... Anything will be heaven so long as we are together."

"Today has been a horrid cold, wet day and I worked so hard cleaning the bedroom this morning that I've been tired and cross with the poor babies ever since. I shall be thankful when Adda comes back tomorrow so that I can look after them better again. At present they must feel very neglected as I always seem to be doing cooking or housework. All the same it has been quite fun... and the week has simply flown by. I hope the next 18 days will go as quickly."

The next day she wrote again: "It was lovely to have your letter this morning and find you are making all the arrangements... it is nice to feel I can just be lazy and leave you to fix everything... Adda returned this evening, looking very well and cheerful after thoroughly enjoying her holiday. We all went to the station to meet her including Charlot and Ben, who both become quite excited when they see the car... It is rather sad you will have to go back to the Continent after your leave, darling: I did have a faint hope you might be posted to England again."



JOHN'S REMAINING AUGUST LETTERS were full of plans for his leave, which as usual kept having to change. He wrote on 3rd August: "I would like to send some Chanel scent to Mother at the same time as telling her that we could not go to stay during the leave. It is now almost a year since I was there, but there is no object in going until I am in England for good... I did three good operations this morning and have got the confidence of the staff, which always takes about a month. I am wondering and rather hoping that I shall

move to the 106 General Hospital at Antwerp after my leave. It is better to be with a Colonel who can give you some help afterwards. This place is too much of a backwater like Safaga.”

On 5th August he gave an update of his P.O.W. patient with tuberculosis peritonitis: “He certainly seems much better now and the fluid has not come back.” The next day was August Bank holiday, but John reported that he was Orderly Officer and rather bored: “Fortunately, I am not missing much as the others did not think it worthwhile going to the beach... I expect by the time I go on leave things will be a lot less busy as about two thirds of the British troops are leaving this month. Darlingest, only two more whole weeks — isn’t it marvellous! I think I am lucky to get away so soon as it will be 6 months to a day since our last leave.”

By 8th August he was down to 15 patients in his surgical ward with a similar number of German patients in the prisoner-of-war compound. The following day: “I was not expecting to be busy but two accident cases came in this morning and I had to operate on one of them this afternoon... I had rather an unpleasantness with the theatre sister, who refused to allow me to use the large theatre, but I had my own back at tea-time when I discovered that she had been posted. I am very pleased with this as she was a most unsociable creature whose one idea of society was a love affair with the anaesthetist. I quite liked him, but he is also posted. As a result I am cancelling the two operations I had intended to do tomorrow... I have now got my leave schedule. I leave here at daybreak on the 25th and get to Paris at mid-day. I don’t leave Paris until 6.55 on Sunday morning and travel via Dieppe and Newhaven to reach Victoria at 6.34 p.m. Actually it will probably be a good bit late. I should like you to send me a list of the trains out of London on Sunday evening.”



ON 9TH AUGUST MAIDA reported that it was a pouring wet night, and they were sitting round the dining room fire with the curtains drawn as if it were midwinter. She had been busy with an orgy of letter-writing. One was to an acquaintance called Theodora: “I am interested that she has produced three children as she was in such despair at one time about ever starting a family that, as I believe I told you at the

time, she contemplated trying artificial insemination, which shocked me to the core! I met Mrs. Canney this morning. She was very cordial but told me that her wretched son is now surgical registrar at Guy’s. I think you’ll have to get out by foul means if you can’t get out by fair, or all the good jobs will have gone.”

Four letters from John had arrived on 14th August: “Darling, it was most exciting to get your leave schedule. I do hope there won’t be any last-minute alterations, as I have taken a bold step and, without the authority of my Lord and Master, have this evening arranged by telephone to meet you and spend Sunday night at the Rembrandt Hotel... I do hope you’ll approve, darlingest. I had visions of you spending half Sunday night in a slow train between Liverpool St. and Cambridge. I shall come up on Sunday afternoon and will be at the station from 5.30 onwards: if you are delayed, well, it just can’t be helped. Anyway, I shall be on the spot for last minute information, and if you are very, very late I shall go to the hotel and to bed and you can join me when you do get in. Then I thought we could come on to Cambridge in time for lunch on Monday — darling, I feel sure you’ll be pleased, it will be so lovely to have our first night really together.”



THE LETTERS SAY SURPRISINGLY little about the momentous events happening in Japan at this time. The end of the war in the Far East was finally precipitated by the Americans dropping the world’s first atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6th August followed by another on Nagasaki on 9th August. These were estimated to have killed between 129,000 and 226,000 people, most of whom were civilians. This action remains controversial as the Japanese were essentially already beaten. President Truman, however, wished to force a quick surrender to avoid further American lives being lost⁸¹.

The bombs had the desired effect but only received a brief mention from John on 10th August when he wrote: “We have just heard on the wireless of the terms the Japs have offered the Allies for peace. Even if we do not accept them, it seems pretty certain that the war will be over in a month or two. I am beginning to think I may be home for Christmas after all... We hear the news while still in bed at 8.0 a.m. as there is a very loud loud-speaker which is stuck up outside the men’s quarters and is easily audible even

here... I have not had a busy day except for taking a good many X-rays. That is one thing I have learnt to do here, though I believe a new radiographer is arriving soon."

On 11th August he was not very busy due to the declining number of patients: "Today has been a lovely day with sunshine all day long after a misty early morning. I had one operation to do this afternoon but got down to the sea after tea for a bathe. We went to Arromanches where the tide was right out and the water rather muddy though warm. At our usual bathing place the Sappers were blowing up a mine so we gave it a wide berth. Darling it is marvellous to think I shall be on my way home in two weeks' time (touch wood)."

The following day he went to a service in the morning and then played cricket in the afternoon: "I enjoyed the service as we have not had one for nearly a month, and we had quite a good sermon. The United Board Minister who comes here has an exceptionally good singing voice, so there is no difficulty about the hymns even though we have not got a piano. The garrison is starting to move this week and we expect work will drop still further." On 12th August he reported that things remained quiet: "We have had another Sister posted away which leaves us with four, quite enough really but as one is always on night duty and two are usually on leave there never seen to be many of them. We could very well do with fewer medical officers as well."

Two days later (14.8.1945) he was busier again: "First this morning I had an operation list which took me all morning. Then an appendix to do this afternoon, and just as we were finishing that another appendix turned up which we did after tea. Then I had a quick bath and now am feeling fine after a good supper, and we are soon going to the weekly cinema show... I may be going to Deauville for a change tomorrow morning as Capt. Campbell has to go on business. The Jap war looks on the point of ending — though the final phase always takes longer than expected as did V.E. day. I rather hope it comes this week as it will help the time to go faster and give us something to celebrate... Your own John."

The Japanese Emperor Hirohito did indeed announce their surrender on 15th August. The document was officially signed on 2nd September 1945 aboard the American battleship USS Missouri⁸². President Harry Truman named this V-J Day*. The

morning of 15th August therefore brought the news that the whole war was at last finally over. In response, John wrote: "Unfortunately, I am not feeling at all like celebrating as after a heavy day yesterday I was up in the night for a couple of hours to stitch up a scalp and have been on a long motor run this morning to Deauville, which was pleasant but tiring. This evening I am feeling happy but in need of some sleep. I have had two of your letters today darling in one of which you say you have heard the Japs have surrendered. As I only heard this morning at breakfast, it, makes the arrival of your letter seem very fast."



MAIDA WAS OF COURSE also pleased with news of the surrender: "...but really I am beyond registering any further emotions; the only things that means anything to me now are first to have you home on leave and second to have you home for good. I had to go into the town very quickly on my bicycle to get some food as the shops will be shut tomorrow. It was a milling mass of people, the majority like myself food-hunting, the rest just gooping around. I was very glad to get back. I am feeling rather tired and Mamma is in one of her bad moods today, so we aren't in particularly holiday mood here... I am quite looking forward to hearing the King's speech tonight, and also an account of what was said in Parliament about the new government's projects. It seems all the more exasperating that Mr. Churchill is out of office since victory has come so unexpectedly soon after the elections. It casts quite a cloud over any celebrations, I think."

On 16th August she wrote again sounding more enthusiastic and saying that the previous day had finished on a cheerful note: "I heard fireworks popping off at about 9.45, so I woke Harrie up to see them thinking it might make her remember Victory Night. She was very pleased, and I wrapped her in your dressing-gown over her own, and we all stood at Adda's bedroom window and admired the searchlights and fireworks, which were rather few and far between, but gave Harrie quite a thrill."

"This morning I cycled down to a Thanksgiving Communion Service at 10.0 and then came back and took the children along to the brook... This afternoon I went to have my feet done so that I can dance all the

* *Victory over Japan Day.*



John leaving Dieppe on a cross channel steamer, 25 August 1945.

more merrily with you, darlingest... I am gradually beginning to realise what a wonderful mercy it is to have victory at last, and how blessed I am in having you safe and sound after these six long years of war, and the sweet babies so fit and well in spite of war-time restrictions. It is so fatally easy to think of minor inconveniences instead of being thankful for one's great happiness on occasions like this. But I have longed to have you with me all the time, darling; if we had been together Victory Day would have meant so much more. Never mind, we haven't long to wait, now — only 10 more days, how heavenly."

On 18th August there was further discussion as to their itinerary when John got back. He needed to visit Bristol to see Aunt Winnie but their first-choice hotel on the way was booked up: "I didn't know what to do instead and after looking at the map and careful thought, I decided that Bath would be the best, as it is a pleasant-looking place and very handy for Bristol." She wrote one final letter the following day: "I think I must write you a tiny line in the hope it will reach you in time just to tell you once again how much I am longing to see you and to wish you 'bon voyage', my sweet. I can't tell you how excited I am... A week tonight, with luck, we shall be together again. Your own longing little Maida."



JOHN RECEIVED EXCELLENT NEWS on 16th August: "The news today is that my Group 18 is being demobbed before the 21st October, which seems very near. Of course, the doctors have not been told anything about demobbing but there is just a chance that we will be, and I might be able to have a try at the F.R.C.S. in November. Anyway, it has put fresh life into me for reading... I think Denis must have known about the Atomic Bomb before he left, which enabled him to make such an optimistic forecast. One of our officers, Capt. Renton, has retired to hospital with a sore throat so I am Orderly Officer every other day now with the Medical Specialist, Capt. Scott, taking the alternate days. The only thing I object to is having to stay in so much. ... I heard this morning that the A.D.M.S. had promised to send a surgeon here to take my place while on leave so everything seems fine. It will be marvellous if I have to come back only for 6 weeks after the leave instead of 6 months."

The next day: "I am feeling very pleased with myself this evening because I have just bought some really delicious peaches in Bayeux for only 30 francs a kilo, that is more than a dozen. They are the most delicious things I have tasted for ages, though a good deal smaller than the ones we get in England. I had a letter from Peggy today... I had guessed right that she

would be at Morwick. She says Raymond is expecting to be out by Christmas, so he has evidently successfully avoided going abroad, God knows how!"

The following day 18th August he described as a real soaker: "It was raining when we got up and is still raining hard without a stop all day. I was fairly busy this morning discharging six patients, which has emptied my ward down to 10 patients. I am glad to say all are doing well. I have done two new operations today. One was for the removal of a foreign body from an elbow joint, and the other was inserting a screw into a bad fracture of the leg to keep the bone in place. I have been reading the 'Ibis' this afternoon and see that Ian Molteno was killed in the Black Watch in the fighting for the Rhine. I met him at Ismailia when I was in Egypt and we went birding together. I liked him immensely. It is tragic that he leaves a wife and two daughters."

John went to a Thanksgiving Service in Bayeux on 19th August attended by almost the whole garrison: "We had another very good sermon by the padre who came here last Sunday. Last night I went down to the dance at the Officer's Club. There is one every Saturday night but I have not been before because I have either been too busy or on duty. It is not a particularly bright spot, but I had a drink and enjoyed the change. I am hoping we shall hear this week about demob plans for doctors. The general demobilisation may now reach Group 28 by Christmas so I am told, so I am beginning to think it almost certain that I shall be home by Christmas."

The following day he had received Maida's letter saying she had booked a room in the Rembrandt hotel in London for his first night back: "You are clever to know what I would like my sweetheart. Everything is marvellous, less than a week now and the time flying by at a good rate. I was up last night to see about a motor accident with six casualties; fortunately none of them were serious but it took me two hours to get them fixed up. I have a couple of operations to do tomorrow and a job to do in the evening, so it should go fast again. I am getting more excited every day."

Work was again helping to pass the time on his last few days. On 21st August: "I have been fairly busy with an appendix last night, two operations today and another accident case just arrived in to sew up. After tea I had to go over to Caen to examine a French civilian who had been injured by a British lorry. The French doctor, Gaillard, who came with me was a nice man of about my own age... The people of Caen cannot help treating us with a certain amount of bitterness

for what we did to their town, especially as they say the Germans had departed before the bombs arrived. Even Dr. Gaillard complained to me rather plaintively that his old house and all his books had been burnt, as if we were to blame for it. One doesn't have this feeling in Bayeux which is almost untouched."

John's last letter home before his leave was written on 22nd August: "It is rather exciting to think that I may reach you quicker than this letter, but even if I don't, I should only be 24 hours behind. First then, just in case my letter two days ago has gone astray, I should be at the Rembrandt by 4.0 o'clock. If I am not there by then I shall expect you to meet me on the platform at Victoria at 6.34. I have one op to do tomorrow and then a free day on Friday. All love sweetheart. Your own John."

CHAPTER 20

The Final Stages 1945

ALTHOUGH THERE HAD BEEN so much eager anticipation before John's leave in August 1945, Maida wrote years later that she could remember very little about it and there were, of course, no letters. As promised, they took Harriet to London Zoo. They also went to the wedding of Gervase and Barbara Markham in Suffolk on a glorious summer day, a couple with whom they were to remain lifelong friends. Gervase became Canon of Carlisle Cathedral and gave the address at John's funeral forty years later. They also presumably made the planned trips to Bristol to see Aunt Winnie and to Putney to visit Uncle Philip.

They also had several days in London, staying at the Savoy Hotel for the last time. They had happy memories of its luxurious atmosphere although its prices had now gone far beyond their means. While there, John visited Dr. Bonham-Carter, who was working at the Ministry of Health advising doctors on post-demobilisation work. As a result of this he decided to try for the F.R.C.S. in November and hoped that he would have more time to do the necessary background

reading in preparation for the examination during his remaining time in the army, as the number of patients steadily decreased.

At some point they also attended the funeral of Maida's Aunt Billy, her father's sister. Maida's father Charles Hunter had first married while he was working in India in the 1890s. His wife then switched her affections to someone else, so Charles left India and later met and married Mamma. Maida noted that at Aunt Billy's funeral she encountered a lady called Mrs Joan Davis, who was the granddaughter from this earlier marriage. Although Maida and Joan got on well on the day, they soon lost touch and never met again.



JOHN LEFT CAMBRIDGE ON 5th September to return to Normandy and wrote the following evening: "I think the children are marvellous and you have made me very, very happy." European trains were still very slow and crowded following the extensive war damage to the railways, so he had only just reached Paris. He stayed there overnight before catching an onward train to Caen early the following morning, arriving back at Bayeux on 7th September: "I have had a rather depressing homecoming as I find there is no news of demobbing Group 18 and Capt. Scott, who is Group 16, has not been told definitely when he is to go."

"There is a big falling off in the number of cases, and I am told I have only five left. Still, that in a way is a good thing as it will give me more time to work. Some of the unit are moving in about a fortnight's time but I expect I shall remain here... I have found



Harriet in the llama cart with Maida standing behind during their visit to London Zoo.

my room in good order exactly as I left it except that some kind person has given me a wardrobe. I was travelling in a civilian train this morning and did not dare attempt any extensive conversation. One has the feeling of not being altogether popular with the Normandy people, though they are extremely polite.” Regarding his leave he wrote: “It was just another lovely honeymoon. I must now get down to some hard work. All my love precious one. Your own John.”

The following day he was annoyed to find that everything related to his wards and staff at the hospital had been changed around in his absence. A further irritation was that the army had stopped his higher rate of specialist’s pay as there was now little work for a surgeon to do. However September 9th brought better news: “My own darling — Sweet music in your ears. I have received notice that I will be demobbed before October 21st! That means that in six weeks’ time I shall be coming home and then we need never be parted again.”

“I want you to start trying in earnest to get a house in London straight away. I have been thinking over what Dr. Bonham-Carter said, and he did say in his letter that I could do the course at Guys at the same time as my job, so I take that to mean that the job will be in London. Today has passed quite pleasantly. After tea the sun came out, and I went down to the stream for a bathe which was deliciously refreshing and lay on the grass in the sun afterwards at peace with the world. I shall go to 106 General Hospital before demob but may stay here until next month.”

The next day he had received a letter from Maida. This is now missing but it was presumably saying that she needed some more money. He replied: “All my worldly goods are yours my pet, so take what money you need, you are so much more economical than most wives. My reading is progressing well so far.” On 11th September he reported having done an interesting operation: “...which consisted in passing a catheter up the right ureter through a tube passed into the bladder. As you can imagine it is not easy to do and I failed to do the last one I tried. I am therefore feeling quite pleased with myself this evening after accomplishing it successfully.”

The next day the weather was better: “Today has been pleasant and sunny for a change and I have had a lovely bathe in the sea this afternoon. This evening we are expecting a visit from the A.D.M.S. who is staying with us for two nights. I may have some news for you tomorrow as he will have to decide whether a surgeon is really necessary here. If he asks me, I shall

say I consider it quite unjustified which may lead to my moving to Antwerp. In the meantime, I am raking up a few odd cases to do, two tomorrow and three for Friday which isn’t too bad. None of them are so urgent that they could not be moved to Ostend for attention.”

Two days later his opinion on this had changed: “The A.D.M.S. has been round and has decided that a surgeon will remain here. I am really quite pleased to hear this as I could do with another fortnight of quiet reading, though I should very much object in any other circumstances. He has also promised to get us some specialist pay, which will be quite welcome, as last month I reckon has cost me £75 counting my Life Insurance and F.R.C.S. fees. After tea I went over to Caen to examine another patient for compensation. I met rather a nice Dr. LeRasle this time. About six close relations of his had been killed in the bombing but he seemed to take it all philosophically. I have three operations to do tomorrow but have to start late on in the morning because my anaesthetist is acting as prosecuting counsel at a Court Martial! I call that the limit. Yesterday I wrote a strong letter to the editor of the Daily Mail saying how strongly I objected to soldiers at home being demobbed before the same groups in the Far East. However, I did not send it as I do not want to get into trouble at this stage of the proceedings. It is marvellous to think I may be back again in a month now. We must have somewhere of our own to live, darling.”

On 14th September John reported: “The A.D.M.S. has gone and also Capt. Renton is on leave, so we are again reduced in numbers... I have no objection to your paying for Harrie’s school out of our joint account darling. I expect the bank will pull a long face over it, but they have only a fortnight to wait now until they get a cheque for £60 which will even things up. Today has been windy and stormy with some rain. I am beginning to think that this place has a rainfall like Wales.” His days were now generally passing quietly with a fair amount of medical work interspersed with reading for the F.R.C.S. and a little sport and bathing.



ONLY ONE LETTER FROM Maida survived from the week immediately following John’s departure, written on 9th September: “I went to St. Benet’s this

morning and heard a very good sermon from Father Denis on the subject of not worrying. The text was from today's Gospel '*Take no thought for the morrow etc.*', with another passage from Paul: '*Be careful for nothing but in everything with prayer and supplication and thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God; and the peace of God shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*'. I had been reading the Gospel passage last night and thought it was a very good lesson for me as I have been inclined lately to worry in a mild way about the future, so it was nice to have a sermon on it. I told Father Denis afterwards he should preach it to all those about to be demobilised and their wives. He thanked me for appreciating it and said it had really been inspired by what he considered people's unnecessary fuss nowadays about food."

"I took Harrie out for a walk on Long Road this afternoon. We did some botanising, collecting chestnuts, acorns and other fruits off trees and also their leaves, and when we came in we mixed them up and she had to get the right leaves with their fruits and see if she remembered their names. Afterwards she converted her tableful of specimens into a greengrocer's shop, and we all had to play at buying salads, so it was a great success... Darling, I've been thinking so much about our happy time together on our little holiday; it was all so heavenly. I love you more and more, my darling, and my one longing now is to make you really happy and comfortable in our own home. I am having a great campaign at present to make Charlot sit still and behave nicely at meals so that he won't disturb his Daddy. He has been very full of beans today and had a prolonged crawl after tea all over the drawing-room, hall and kitchen, with crows of delight. All my love, my own most precious darling. Your adoring little Maida."

A week later on 16th September she wrote: "Another Sunday is nearly over, and another week will soon be beginning, one week nearer your coming home. I am getting so excited, sweetheart. I was thinking today about your clothes, which I shall fetch from Finbows in about ten days time now, so that if any need cleaning or repairing they can be done ready for you. I was wondering, if you get the chance of choosing when you are demobbed, whether a navy-blue suit (if at all decently cut) wouldn't be the most useful thing you could have... also a black felt hat would be nice for London. But as I allow you very little say in my wardrobe, I can hardly expect you to pay much attention to my suggestions."

"Mamma was talking about our plans tonight in

a most cheerful way, I'm glad to say, and had several practical suggestions about possible furnishing. It will make me very happy if she takes the whole thing in this spirit as she will then really get a lot of enjoyment out of hearing what we are getting for our home, and her advice will be worth having on many points. I expect she will have ups and downs over it, but anyway tonight's conversation was most encouraging. Charles was actually seen standing alone for a moment today not holding on to anything. He has been in very good form all day and he and Harrie shared a very deep bath tonight and much enjoyed it."

"I saw Mrs. Pickthorn after church this morning and took the opportunity of telling her how pleased we were that her husband retained his seat in Parliament. She seemed very pleased. She asked for you, darling, and was glad to hear you are due to get out of the army so soon. I thought it was nice of her to be so interested. The apples are practically ready for picking now, and Mamma is going to ring Mrs. McVie up in the morning to ask her to send the packing-cases along next week. She rang the other day having just got back for the term to say she was hoping to have as many as we can spare."



ON 20TH SEPTEMBER JOHN replied to some of this news: "It is nice to know that Mamma is entering into the spirit of our problems... It is great news to hear that Charles is standing up before his first birthday and that his rash is almost gone. I wish I was at home to help you pick the apples — be very careful not to strain yourself, darling. It is such a temptation just to stretch a bit further than you can manage to get a big one and be sure the steps are firm before you climb them."

The next day he was able to say that he would be home for good in less than a month: "I have a confession to make, which is that I have not yet written to Dr. Bonham-Carter because I have been wondering whether it would after all be better to get one of the jobs advertised in the Lancet, which would be whole-time jobs. It would be just as well to have six months with not too much to do first perhaps. I am getting on quite well with my reading now, darling, though there is a tremendous amount to learn." September 22nd was Maida's birthday: "My own little darling —

I have been thinking about you so much today and wondering whether my parcel arrived at the right time. It has been a happy day for me as I have had two letters from you including the good news that Aunt Billy has left Harriet a nice ring."

The next day (23.9.1945) brought the prospect of more change. He heard that he was remaining in Bayeux but with a new address: H.Q. 49 Group, Pioneer Corps, British Army of the Rhine (B.A.O.R.). Most of the rest of the unit were being sent to de Haan, a coastal town in Belgium near Ostend: "We are rather being reshuffled at the moment as half the unit leave tomorrow... I am afraid that I shall go one or two days without letters from you, as I did not let you know the change of address soon enough. I have been thinking over plans today and have decided not to bother with house hunting until I have got my exam over and know whereabouts we shall want to be. I went down to the club last night with the others to the Saturday night beano and was talking to an officer who lives in Wimbledon. He recommended it as a pleasant and convenient neighbourhood. I have now written to Bonham-Carter and given the Q.E.W. address, so you can open any reply en route if you like."

John did, however, receive another letter from Maida (now lost) describing how Miss Waring, their neighbour and friend from Queen Edith's Way, had told Maida that a cousin of hers had died in London leaving her as executrix. She would therefore be having to dispose of his flat and she had kindly offered it to them. This news caused John to change his mind as he wrote back on 24th September: "My clever darling — I did get a letter from you after all today and I am glad I did as it contains the exciting news about getting somewhere to live. It would be indescribably perfect if we could get somewhere to go to before I get home as I should feel so much more settled and contented, though of course I am not counting on it."

"I agree with you that the flat would be just within our means for a short time as I shall get £50 a month for 4 months and don't mind spending all of it (that is army pay irrespective of what the job may bring in). We are a very small band here today after the main body left at 4 a.m. this morning. Fortunately, we are not getting much work as there is a good deal of reorganisation going on. The remaining men are shifting their billets so as to bring them all nearer the hospital. Scott and I are the only remaining officers today as Williams, who is also staying, has gone to Paris, and the Padre and Dental Officer are out. Scott is also going for demob in a week's time but we are

expecting Campbell back by then.

On 25th September he sent some instructions to Maida for what would essentially be the first time in their married life that they had been properly living on their own together: "When we have a house, darling, I want you to give me a petit déjeuner for breakfast, i.e. only coffee, toast and marmalade. That is all I am having here now and I feel fine on it and don't put on too much weight. I also think I prefer to have meat only once a day at midday and have only a light meal in the evening. I am sure it is unnecessary to have the three conventional big meals a day unless you are taking a lot of exercise."

On 26th September he had been moved to a different lodging: "I still have no surgery to do and am getting on well with my reading, as I have only about 15 patients left. I am glad, my sweetheart, that you got my birthday letter on the right day, which I gather you spent picking apples... I only have three weeks more now; I don't think I shall be back until Charles' birthday. I am as excited about it as the day I left Alexandria for England in 1943. That voyage took three weeks so I can feel I have really started for home already. I walked down to Bayeux after tea today to find out if the tapestry was on view yet. However, they seem to dilly-dallying over it and told me it would be another week before it was hung up. I am glad you are going to see the flat of Miss Waring's cousin. Do take it if it proves at all suitable as I expect we could move from there at short notice if we wanted to... Sweetheart darling, I am terribly excited to think we may have an abode of our own any day now."

The following day was mainly spent doing more reading in preparation for the F.R.C.S. exam in November: "This afternoon I packed up two parcels containing clothes and big boots so that I shall be able to travel as light as possible. I am leaving my helmet and water bottle and all that sort of junk with the quartermaster. I am rather frightened of the weight which my books will make, but don't want to send any of them away at present."

On 28th September he had received a letter from a friend which had mentioned the option of hiring a house: "The premium idea sounds quite a good one - pay £300 down and then £150 a year. This in a way would be better than spending a monstrous rate like £265 a year. Still I shall leave it all to you as you know pretty well what I feel about things, darling. I am getting more excited every day and it is nice to say only a fortnight more in the army. I shall probably stay here another week and then go to Antwerp but

will let you know in tomorrow's letter if possible so that you can change the address. I have been out for a bike ride which was very pleasant. The small lanes round about are ideal for cycling along slowly, and I found the remains of an enormous aerodrome at Sully which must have been ripped out of the countryside in double quick time. It just cuts across hedges and roads and everything in its path. Still no patients, so I am really leading a life like a varsity reading party which is all to the good."

John's letter of 29th September brought more excitement: "My own beloved — My news today is that my release date on this side of the Channel is 14th October so I hope I shall be at Q.E.W. on 16th October. This is even better than I expected. I shall be leaving here a week on Monday, so address your next letter to No. 106, Br. Gen. Hosp., B.A.O.R... I don't think we shall be going to the Club today as we are so short of transport; the only vehicles now remaining are an ambulance and a three-tonner... Only a fortnight more now darling. I am afraid it is going to be the slowest in all our six years."

On 30th September he had heard back from Dr. Bonham-Carter: "I don't think I can be sure of getting a £550 p.a. job. It might be £350 plus £100 for lodging. However, I shall have to leave that to the powers that be. I don't know whether you read the letter, but it was to ask whether I should prefer a job at a voluntary hospital or a good County Hospital. I am going to say that I should prefer a voluntary, as I should be likely to get in with better consultants there and learn more, which is the important thing for the next year or so."

On 1st October the letter from Maida had included some photos taken during his leave: "The one I like best is the one of you standing on the other side of the llama! But I think the one of Charles chewing is rather sweet for family circles, though I think I shall have to take one of him with his hair brushed and if possible cut for general circulation. I don't want my son to look sloppy and untidy... I shall be starting for Antwerp a week today I hope... I have done a fair amount of work today though I had to take the afternoon off to write a surgical report for the past quarter. It was rather disheartening to have to record such a process of decay. I started with 150 surgical beds and now have 25! However, nothing can dishearten me much at the moment."



BACK IN CAMBRIDGE MAIDA was having a rather stressful time during John's last few weeks in France. She had been to London at the start of October to stay with Miss Waring in her late cousin's flat, which had the grand address of Hyde Park Mansions, London W.1. Unfortunately it proved unsuitable, as it was on an upper floor of a large block of flats with French windows opening onto a balcony with a low balustrade. She had visions of Charles, who was already showing signs of becoming a keen climber, getting over this and landing in the road far below. She was, however, very grateful for the kind offer and managed to disguise her feelings, asking Miss Waring if she could let them decide once John had seen it.

She had also been to see No. 38 Eaton Terrace that was opposite some friends. This was a charming little London house near Sloane Square with a basement and three floors above. It had, however, been empty for a long time except for being used as an Air-raid Warden's Post, and was indescribably dirty and bomb-damaged. Also it had no garden, with only a tiny yard at the back. The whole street was part of the Duke of Westminster's Grosvenor estate and Maida had to ring up his Agent to try to persuade him to let them have it. When she said that she was enquiring on behalf of her husband the agent replied: "*How do I know that your husband isn't a man of straw?*", an expression describing someone with insufficient money to back up an offer. To this she replied tartly: "*If that is your way of describing a man who has been serving his country abroad for nearly six years, it wouldn't be mine*", following which he became more civil.

On her return to Cambridge she was feeling tired and worried by the responsibility of finding somewhere to live and was also suffering from both toothache and a cold. She wrote her last surviving letter to John with an update on 5th October. "Darlingest darling... I didn't write at all when I was away, I just couldn't, everything was such a whirl, and even now nothing is settled, but I have seen the flat and have till next week before giving an answer, and have also seen the house, though unofficially. At first I thought I wasn't going to be able to get in at all, as the builder who was working at bomb-repairs there till last Tuesday had sent the keys back to the owner, who should have returned them to the agents but they hadn't arrived."

"Without the keys they refused to show me the

house or even discuss possible terms; in the end they said they wouldn't offer it to anyone else till we had seen it, and I am hoping to hear next week that they have the keys, and will then go to town again. Meanwhile the builder, who turned out to be a perfect angel, helped me to climb in and took me all over it (but naturally I haven't told the agents this!). I would very much prefer the house and very much hope we can take it. It will need redecorating throughout, but so would the flat, and probably we would get in about two months or less."

"I hope to get really settled next week, darling. The full account of all my doings and adventures in London would be too long to write now, as I am up to the neck in plans of all kinds and am now going to sort out all the relevant information, addresses etc. that I have been collecting on odd bits of paper for the last three days. The furnishing question is worse than I thought. We shall just have to camp out in bits of either the flat or house and pick up furniture as we go along. But everyone has been very kind and helpful, even the most unexpected people. I shall have so much to tell you, darling. It is wonderful to come home and find you will really be home about Wednesday week. I just can't believe it! All my love, my own perfect darling. I am just thrilled to bits. Your own adoring Maida. P.S. Bring your camp bed home, in fact I wouldn't mind you bringing two if you can get a second one cheap."



STILL IN FRANCE, JOHN had been on a trip to Cherbourg which he described on 2nd October: "The Carentan Peninsula is quite a pretty spot with lots of trees and small hills. The towns we went through, Isigny-sur-Mer, Carentan, St. Mère Eglise and Valognes are all very badly damaged, but the country districts don't seem to have suffered much. Really the war passed them in one month though it was pretty intense while it lasted. We came back by St. Laurent where the Americans landed which was interesting to see. I got back to find your letter waiting for me... I am wondering what day this week you will be in London... I am not surprised to hear you are feeling rather exhausted, but please rest in the afternoons for the next week. You should be able to sit back a bit now with the thought of so many things accomplished. It is lovely to think of the future so don't let us worry too much."

October 3rd was described as hair-raising: "...as I have done two operations and the anaesthetist has had trouble with both of them. However, both are alive and well so the damage was chiefly to our nerves. I am sending off two more parcels today which I hope will reach you before I do. I am hoping to get back a fortnight today. I shall be very glad to leave this place which is now a dying concern... The Dental Officer is leaving for good tomorrow which further depletes our company, and most of the others are going on leave, so it is rather like a sinking ship."

On 4th October he was looking forward to hearing how Maida's visit to London had gone... He also needed to get himself ready to take the F.R.C.S. examination in November. On return home: "My rough scheme will be to work hard for one week on arrival and then take a few days complete rest before the exam... Working for the exam is making the time go very much quicker." The following day he did three operations and then went to Caen, where he was finally able to obtain some perfume to send to his mother. The next day he made another trip with the Padre: "We motored from Caen to Falaise, about 15 miles, with all the villages and trees destroyed on the way. Falaise is terribly badly damaged, but a statue of William the Conqueror remains which claims he was born there in 1027... We came back through Aunay and Villiers-Bocage and Tilly, all of which are flat as a pancake. I really think the local people show very little animosity when one considers how completely their towns are destroyed, and Caen and Falaise in particular must have been very beautiful. Bayeux seems to be the only town round about which has escaped."

The next day: "I am in a state of suspended animation today as I think your letter about the house must have gone to Antwerp and I won't reach there until Wednesday. However, I am filling in time by reading and have absolutely nothing else to do. I am beginning to feel a little stale and am looking forward to my journey as a break... It has been a lovely day but very cold at night-time, and I am very thankful I have not got to pass the winter in these huts. Darling, there will be hundreds of things to think of when we do meet."

On 8th October: "I now have news that I am leaving here for Antwerp tomorrow. The uncertainty of the last few days has been rather a worry, but now I feel like a recaptured prisoner who is to be set free. I shall go through Paris and hope to get on the night train to Brussels which would get me to Antwerp on



Ticket No. 1 issued to John on his visit to see the Bayeux tapestry. Postcard of the Bayeux tapestry showing the Normans crossing the channel.

Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F.S. Regs., Vol. I. Moughly War Diaries will be enclosed in A.F. C.419. If this is not available, and for Intelligence Summaries, the cover will be prepared in manuscript.

WAR DIARY
or
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY
(Delete heading not required).

Unit 34 (Br) FIELD DRESSING STATION
Commanding Officer [Signature]

Month and Year OCTOBER 1945

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
De Haan, Ostend	1 - 3		Unit accommodated at De Haan, Ostend with 14 (Br) Con. Depot.	RAB
	4		Capt. J Scott (RAMC) proceeded on Class "A" release.	RAB
	5		1 OR (RASC) attached for temporary duty at Bayeux from 218 Amb. Car. Coy.	RAB
	6		5 PW Patients evacuated from Bayeux to 105 (Br) General Hospital.	RAB
	7		1 OR (RAMC) S.O.S. on admission to hospital.	RAB
	8		Sister Z Burton Fowley (QADNS/R) proceeded on privilege leave.	RAB
			1 OR (RASC) ceased to be attached at Bayeux on return to parent unit 218 Amb. Car Co.	
	9		3 ORs (RAMC) despatched on Class "A" release	RAB
			Capt. J Bulman (RAMC) returned to parent unit 106 (Br) Gen. Hospital from Bayeux for Class "A" release.	
			Lieut. H.H. Duckett (RAMC) proceeded on privilege leave	
	10		Capt. F.H. Renton (RAMC) detached on temporary duty to 35 R.H.U.	RAB
			1 OR (RASC) T.O.S. on discharge from hospital	

2 5/44 G.H.Q.P.P. 105M

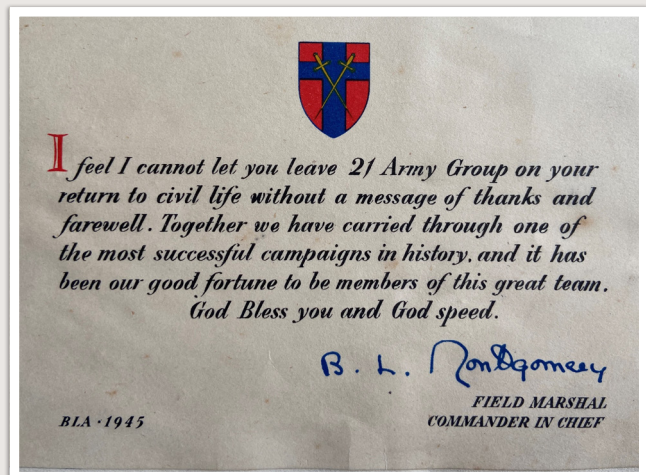
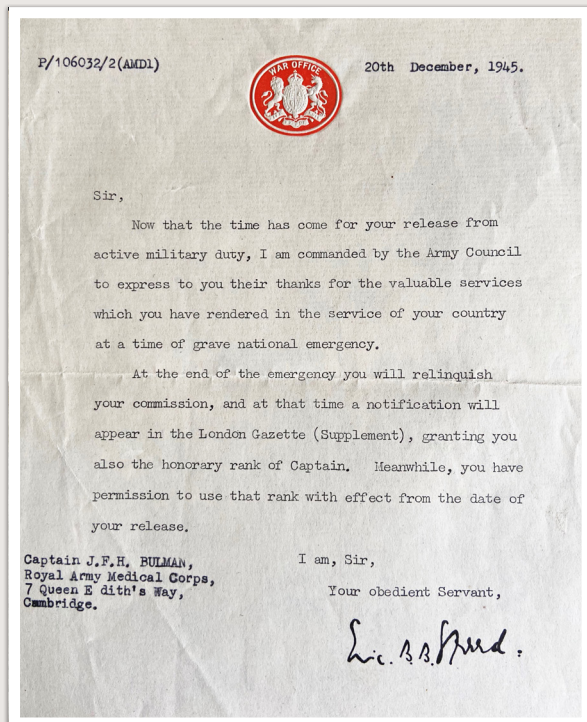
No. 14 NOV 1945
G.H.Q. 2nd EDITION

Extract from the War Diary, No. 34 Field Dressing Station. June 1943 to April 1946. WO 177/920⁷⁹. This mentions John's forthcoming release from the army.

Wednesday. I am especially keen to get there as I know I shall have lots of news from you waiting for me... This morning I went down to Bayeux to get some money and luckily found that the tapestry was on view for the first time since the war began. I was actually sold the first ticket. It is a most exciting piece of art, most expressive and interesting. I had not before realised that according to the tapestry Edward the

Confessor sent Harold over to ask William to succeed him as King, though I can't see what was wrong in Harold succeeding Edward."

"The impression one gets from the tapestry is that the Normans won because they had far more horses than the British, though both sides had archers on foot. It is amusing to see the horses in the quite small boats crossing the Channel. William himself is chiefly



Letter from the War Office thanking John for his war service and Certificate from Field Marshall Montgomery thanking John for his service with the British Liberation Army in 1945.

remarkable for the striped football stockings with huge garters which he seemed to fancy. Darling, I am just longing to be with you. I did like the black pleated skirt you put on to see me off. You looked so sweet when I said goodbye to you on Cambridge station. I wonder whether we shall meet again on the same platform. It would be nice if you put your best silk stockings on, whatever the danger, as this is really a very special occasion. All my love, your own John."

His next letter came from Paris: "I left Bayeux at 10.15 this morning and got here at 4.0 after a good journey. I have had a bath and a meal and am going to catch the 10.30 train to Brussels tonight. I am very excited at the thought of getting your letters at Antwerp, which I should reach about midday with any luck. It will be rather fun going back to Antwerp now that the flying bombs are a thing of the past."

John duly reached 106 General Hospital on 10th October from where his last four war letters were written: "My own precious love — I arrived at Antwerp at 11.0 this morning and am now comfortably installed in a new mess. I found all your missing letters here, darlingest, and am a little disappointed to hear you think it may take two months to get the

house in order and that you have not been able to discuss terms yet. Still, as long as we have something definite in view, I can put up with Q.E.W. for a little longer. I had quite a good journey from Paris and slept most of the night in a first-class seat. On arrival at Brussels, I nearly got stranded in the centre of de Gaulle's reception and reached the Gare du Nord with considerable difficulty." General de Gaulle happened to be there at the same time as he was being awarded the title of Honorary Citizen of Brussels in gratitude for his wartime leadership of the Free French Forces.

The next day John got on with odd jobs and was himself given a medical examination: "In a way I am glad we shall spend our first fortnight at Q.E.W. as we have spent so many happy times there. I now have three more whole days to spend here in which I shall get through a good deal of reading. I really do feel I am getting to know a bit more now, though I shall not have had much practice in examining orthopaedic cases. However, I am now glad that I did enter for the exam. I hear rumours that I shall be released from Oxford... I will let you know definitely later."

His next update was sent on 12th October: "I have finished getting my medical documents filled in today,

and I am glad to say the X-ray which they took shows only a little thickened pleura, so I don't think my six years in the army has done me any harm. They have given me the X-ray to keep so that I shall have it for comparison later if necessary... It is exciting to think that I might get to you before this letter... Your own adoring John." The X-ray referred back to his illness in Egypt in January 1943, when he had been admitted to hospital for several weeks with severe pneumonia.

As had so often happened before, the army made the last leg of John's final journey home more difficult than it need to have been. His release was arranged so that he would arrive at Bedford station at 1.0 o'clock in the morning, with no means of travelling any further that night. He therefore telephoned Maida to ask her to meet him there; the car was fortunately ready, but the journey was alarming. Although it was only 30 miles away, she had to drive in the dark and had never previously visited Bedford. The signposts had been removed in war-time with very few so far replaced. However, she got there safely and they drove joyfully home together.

John therefore arrived back in Cambridge just in time for Charles' first birthday on 18th October. This brought their long separation to an end and he and Maida were never again parted for more than a few days until his death in 1985. On his final return home he received a letter from the War Office and a certificate from Field Marshall Montgomery, both thanking him for his war service. He never managed to be promoted to Major but was entitled to continue using the honorary title of Captain.

Postscript

IT IS NOTICEABLE FROM these letters that significant tensions had been building up during the war years between John, Mamma and Adda, even though they were genuinely very fond of each other. Mamma was widowed in 1914 and had been living in charge of her own all female household ever since. She had been upset by the war, becoming tired and nervy, and she was also starting to suffer from dementia. Adda was prepared to do a lot of housework and to help look after the children. She was, however, very set in her ways. While John's leave periods were clearly a time of great happiness for him and Maida, his visits to Queen Edith's Way inevitably disrupted the normal running of the household.

The house was only small in size, so they would

all have been living on top of each other. Some of his comments in the letters concerning the children, meals and appearances show that he had his own firm views on how things should be done, but he would not have found it easy to impose these on the others. Additionally, food was scarce and having a man in the house significantly increased Adda's workload in terms of both cooking and washing. On John's part, he had been moved around from one place to another at the whim of the army for six years. Quite apart from the traumas caused directly by the war, he had been living in poor accommodation with few comforts and had had to mix with a constantly changing stream of soldiers and medical staff, with no choice of those he had to share rooms with or to work alongside.

It is therefore not at all surprising that, when John did finally come back for good, he and Maida were both desperate to be able to set up the family in their own home. They took the house which Maida had visited in Eaton Terrace and moved in quite soon, initially leaving Harriet and Charles behind in Cambridge with Mamma and Adda. The building was in a very bad state of repair and they had hardly any furniture. Maida recalled a mattress, a sack of coal and an old rug to pin up over the window as a curtain. She therefore set about cleaning it up sufficiently to enable them to fetch the children to join them. John was given a registrar's job in London by the resettlement service at the Royal Northern Hospital, Holloway Road. He did not pass the notoriously difficult F.R.C.S. examination at his first attempt in November 1945, taken only a few weeks after his return to England, but was successful at his second attempt in 1946.

In a further blow to John's career aspirations it soon became plain that, in order to continue with full-time surgery, he would next have to take a residential post in a hospital. To be parted again after six years was the one thing they could not bear, and after all his war time travels John longed to have a settled home of his own. He therefore decided to go into general practice, so he took one on at 36 Malden Road, Wallington in Surrey, where they arrived in 1946. This house had also been bomb-damaged but was a reasonable size with a surgery at the side to see the patients and a good-sized garden at the back. John established a well patronised bird-table outside the window of his consulting room, so that he could watch the birds while examining his patients.

He did, however, manage to continue with some surgery. In 1947 he was elected as a general



Staff at the Royal Northern Hospital. John is fourth from the left in the back row.

surgeon to the staff of the War Memorial Hospital in Carshalton and in 1954 he added on a similar position at the Wilson Hospital in Mitcham. He settled into a routine of dealing with his general practice patients in the mornings and evenings and completing his operating lists in the afternoons. These hospitals both later became part of the larger St. Helier Hospital Group, also in Carshalton. His experience of dealing with men and the varied medical expertise acquired during his war years were a valuable preliminary to his dual roles of G.P. and surgeon. Had the war not intervened when it did, he would almost certainly have used his considerable academic ability coupled with his passion for surgery to have become a full-time consultant surgeon in a more prestigious hospital.

John and Maida's longing to set up home on their own was also short-lived. Mamma's health continued to deteriorate and it soon became impossible for her to go on living with Adda in Queen Edith's Way. They therefore both moved to Wallington to join the Bulman family in 1946. Uncle Philip also came to live with them for his final few months until he died in February 1947. Mamma was later moved to a nursing home and died there two years later in 1949. Adda remained in Wallington for the rest of her life, where she continued to help with the cooking, cleaning and childcare well into her old age. She eventually relocated to a nearby Old People's home for her final year and died in 1967, aged 80. Maida's dream of having her third baby delivered at home did, however, come true when Andrew was born on 28th November

1947. On this occasion her labour was so quick that neither the doctor nor the midwife arrived in time, so on this occasion John was the only other person present. Claire was also born in Wallington on 5th August 1953 to complete the family.

Regarding her own life, Maida had won a scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge in the 1930s at a time when few women went to University. Indeed, Cambridge did not actually start to award degrees to women until 1948: before then they sat the same examinations as the men but only received certificates by way of recognition. After resigning her teaching post at Wycombe Abbey in 1939 she never again had a full-time job. After the war, apart from bringing up the family, she devoted her time to helping John by acting as his medical secretary and receptionist. As the practice was run from the house, this was in itself a demanding role.

Her Christian faith remained strong, so she attended the local church regularly and also engaged with the Mothers Union and the charity Christian Aid. She really enjoyed meeting interesting people and tried to keep in touch as much as possible with the friends she had made during her time in Cambridge. The highlight of her year was a visit to France each spring, usually to the Alps, where John could witness the annual bird migration and Maida kept up with her many French acquaintances. Augustin Jordan and his family remained firm family friends.

Neither John nor Maida ever really enjoyed living in Wallington as they missed both the social life of Cambridge and easy access to the countryside. They remained there, however, for 30 years until John retired in 1976. They were then able to relocate to Appletrees, their much-loved holiday cottage at Burnham Thorpe in Norfolk, which they had purchased in 1963. Sadly, John had by then contracted Alzheimer's disease, so they never properly shared the happy retirement together that they so richly deserved. Maida spent the rest of his life caring for him until his death in 1985. In her own later years she typed out the war time letters which have formed this book. She concluded these by saying that, although John never became rich or famous, he could look back on a happy and useful career in which she was always at his side to help him as much as she could. Their ashes are now interred together in the churchyard in Burnham Thorpe.



36 Maldon Road, Wallington, showing the front, with the surgery and waiting room on the right hand side.



36 Maldon Road, Wallington, showing the back of the house before the bomb damage had been repaired.



John and Maida's shared gravestone in Burnham Thorpe churchyard, Norfolk.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Summary of John Bulman's Career in the Royal Army Medical Corps

Date	Location
3 September 1939	Declaration of war. Enlisted R.A.M.C. shortly after.
13 October 1939	Army call up and moved to Crookham Camp, Aldershot.
15 November 1939	Left UK on boat to Egypt.
27 November 1939	2/5 General Hospital, Alexandria.
10 January 1940	Medical Officer to the 4th Royal Horse Artillery (R.H.A.), initially stationed in a camp on the outskirts of Cairo.
12th May 1940	Into Western Desert with 4th R.H.A., initially near Mersa Matruh.
10th June 1940	Italians declared war and army started move into Libya. John remained with the 4th RHA in the desert for most of the rest of 1940 apart from some leave in Cairo.
Early 1941	In desert near Benghazi until mid-February when back to Cairo on leave.
27th February 1941	Regiment stationed in Beni Yusef, an Army camp outside Cairo.
20th March 1941	Back in the desert as part of an expedition to capture the oasis of Giarabub.
4th April 1941	Left 4th R.H.A. Transferred to 64 General Hospital, Alexandria.
22nd May 1941	Temporary posting aboard ship to assist an R.M.O. in the Queen's Royal Regiment during evacuation of Crete.
4th June 1941	Back to 64 General Hospital, Alexandria.
17th June 1941	Officer-in-Charge of the Medical Reception Station at Mustapha, Alexandria.
Early May 1942	Military Hospital, A.P.O. S287, M.E.F. at Safaga, Red Sea port.
31st December 1942	No. 6. General Hospital, near Cairo.
9th March 1943	M.O. to the R.A.O.C./R.E.M.E. Base Depot, Cairo.
12th June 1943	No. 8 General Hospital, Alexandria.
18th July 1943	No. 22 General Hospital, near Cairo.
11th November 1943	No. 10. C.C.S. Moved with them from Egypt back to Cambridge, England, arriving 11th December.

25th March 1944	Shaftesbury Military Hospital, Dorset.
11th July 1944	No. 114 British General Hospital, Naburn, York.
18th August 1944	No. 114 British General Hospital, Examination Schools, Oxford.
16th November 1944	Shaftesbury Military Hospital, Dorset.
30th December 1944	Military Families Hospital, Tidworth, Wiltshire.
24th January 1945	Military Hospital, Edinburgh Castle.
1st February 1945	Drymen Military Hospital, Loch Lomond.
5th March 1945	No. 9 General Hospital B.L.A. Based in Antwerp, Brussels, then Venray in Holland. Formed part of 21st Army Group .
26th April 1945	No. 96 General Hospital, B.L.A. Tournai, Belgium.
25th June 1945	No.34 Field Dressing Station, B.L.A. Bayeux, France.
16th September 1945	H.Q. 49 Group, Pioneer Corps, B.A.O.R., Bayeux, France.
9th October 1945	Started on final return to England via No. 106, British General Hospital, B.A.O.R., Antwerp.
18th October 1945	Demobbed and returned to Cambridge.

APPENDIX 2: R.A.M.C. Guidelines regarding the roles of medical staff and hospitals*

Regimental Medical Officer (R.M.O.)

The primary duty of the R.M.O. was to maintain the fighting strength of the unit he was attached to, a role that was crucial to maintain the overall health of the army. This was done via daily sick parades in both peacetime and war. During wartime he would man the Regimental Aid Post (R.A.P.), along with 4-6 R.A.M.C. orderlies, which was ideally situated a few hundred meters or so behind the front line. He was also responsible for training the stretcher bearers drawn from the ranks of the regiment to which he was attached.

General Hospital (G.H.)

A G.H. was not unlike the hospital that we know today. It was sited in a large base area, with good access: i.e. in close proximity to a rail siding and a metalled road(s). The hospital might be housed in buildings, hutments or tents, or a combination of these. There were two basic sizes, 600 or 1,200 beds. Manpower for the former was 23 officers, 114 soldiers of other rank (O/r's) and 50 nurses (female) of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (Q.A.I.M.N.S.), while the manpower allocated for the latter was 35, 229 and 80 respectively. These numbers included administration staff, a dentist, chaplains & electricians. The G.H. was divided into a number of sections which included administration, reception, dressing, pre-operation and resuscitation, operating theatre, X-ray, medical and surgical wards, infections and venereal disease, laboratory, dispensary, mortuary and dental. There was also provision for the staff i.e. sleeping accommodation, kitchens, washing facilities, etc. The manpower allocation would also include soldiers from the Royal Engineers (to repair damaged machinery and construct and repair buildings, sewers etc.) and men of the Royal Army Service Corps, who provided the drivers for the ambulances and other vehicles required by the hospital.

Medical Reception Station (M.R.S.)

These units were established to treat minor ailments and injuries and were located in small garrisons and regimental depots. The M.R.S. consisted of medical inspection rooms and 6 to 12 beds. The M.R.S. was designed to accommodate illness cases that would recover within a few days and to provide facilities for medical treatment in conditions more favourable than the barrack accommodation.

Casualty Clearing Station (C.C.S.)

During combat Regimental Aid Posts (R.A.P.) were responsible for the evacuation and immediate treatment of battlefield casualties. These were situated as closely as possible behind the front line and were staffed by the unit's Medical Officer, a Medical N.C.O., a small number of medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers. From there the casualties were sent on to a C.C.S. This was about 8-10 miles away from the fighting and was the first point in the evacuation chain during combat, providing full surgical treatment and some hospital accommodation. The sections to be found in the C.C.S. were as follows: stretcher exchange dump, receiving, resuscitation, pre-operation, operating theatre, dressing, evacuation and wards. A C.C.S. was designed, supplied and staffed by 8 officers and 77 other ranks to cater for 200 wounded (50 in beds and 150 on stretchers). A patient was then moved on to a General Hospital as quickly as was possible, so a stay at the C.C.S. was only for a matter of days.

Field Dressing Station (F.D.S.)

Field Dressing Stations were designed for two different functions according to whether they were situated in a Divisional or Corps area. A Divisional F.D.S. was intended primarily as a resuscitation centre for casualties suffering from severe shock who had been passed on from an Advanced Dressing Station in order to receive this specialist treatment. At Corps level the F.D.S. were employed as Advanced Surgical Centres operating in combination with one or more Field Surgical Units (F.S.U.), the latter being small mobile units with enough surgical equipment for 100 operations.

* My thanks to Rob McIntosh curator of the Museum of Military Medicine based at Keogh Barracks, Aldershot in Surrey for supplying this information. As became apparent from reading the letters, the reality of Army provision during wartime did not always meet their own guidelines.

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Portrait of a Wartime Marriage

The outbreak of the Second World War kept John and Maida Bulman apart for most of the early years of their marriage. For the six years from November 1939 until October 1945 they kept in touch by writing to each other almost every day, interspersed with occasional telegrams for special occasions. Remarkably, much of this correspondence has survived.

This book is a testament to their enduring love for each other which enabled them to overcome all the challenges of the war years. Their experiences fully lived up to the motto of the Royal Army Medical Corps '*In Arduis Fidelis*' (meaning 'Faithful in Adversity').

