



Friday

30 July 1943.

UNITED STATES ARMY
CAMP SWIFT, TEXAS

Dear Toots:

How grand to hear from you after all these months, and I ca'nt tell you how disappointed I was to learn that your furlough had expired so short a time before I got there. The fortunes of war!

As your last year or so has been a sort of odyssey from one Navy plane to another, so mine has been one from country to country, from city to city. South Africa, India, Lebanon, Syria, North Africa, Ceylon, Australia, New Zealand; Cape Town, Bombay, Beyruth, Damascus, Tobruk, Wellington, and many others. I saw such a vast panorama of places and people that it would take well over more space and time than I have to relate it all to you. I would prefer a dimly lit nook with a few friendly beers. Ah! there we could exchange much indeed.

From the standpoint of the war the time between the first of June last year, and the beginning of the end in North Africa was the most interesting. They warned us that much of the time would be spent sitting on our fannies waiting for something to break, and wishing to hell that it would, and during the balance of the time things would be moving so fast and hot that we would be wishing to Heaven that it would stop and let^{us} catch up at least.

We arrived in Tobruk early in May when the British seemed to be pretty well ensconced on the line between

Tobruk on the north, and Bir Hachim on the extreme south and only waiting for more materiel before launching a devastating offensive. Our job at that time consisted mostly of hauling the wounded from the clearing station at Tobruk to another one at Caputzzo some ninety miles to the rear. The coast road was good except in one place where it was unfinished, but if the patients were sitters it didnt make much difference. If we had stretcher cases it was a different story. You usually could'nt haul these men at over ten miles an hour, and we used to pray for sitters. That was probably the hardest work I ever did. Try driving ninety miles averaging only nine or ten miles an hour for the distance. It's really nerveracking, and add to that a groaning patient, the morphine would begin to wear off after a few hours, and you have a lurid combine. ~~emb~~The harbour at Tobruk was attacked almost every night and we, who were some miles away, were treated to the best fire works you ever saw.

In the middle of June when the British lost a greater portion of their armor in one day and were forced to retreat we evacuated the hospital and took off with the rest of them. That retreat was some sight! Something like the river drive on a boating day. Vehicles of all sorts and sizes, tanks, guns, staff cars, three ton trucks, tank carriers all crowded bumper to bumper and from ten to twenty abreast across the desert. Had the British not had air superiority at that time I am sure the complexion of the war would be quite different at the present time. For had the enemy had air superiority he could have cut our retreating columns to pieces and driven through to Alexandria with so great speed that the reinforcements from The Levant, The Australian Ninth Div.



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would never have gotten to Alamain in time to back up the badly decimated British and New Zealanders. The enemy would have rolled on to Suez, and ultimately ^{to} the desired oil of Iraq and Iran. We saw not a single enemy aircraft in daylight so effectively did the ~~RAF~~ keep them down or at least in their own territory. At night it was a horse of a different color. My friends and I spent ~~an~~ sleepless night just outside of EL Daba when the "Iguie Birds" discovered our Bivouac. There was a perfect bomber's moon. We were a little agitated because three of our ambulances had become stuck in a salt marsh, and so we forgot a simple precaution; namely to sprinkle sand on the top of the vehicles so they would not glisten in the moon light when they got wet with dew. They got wet with dew, and they glistened. How they did glisten! They must have been visable for miles. Jerry came over six times that night and dropped every thing he had except the kitchen sink. I've never gotten closer to the ground in my life. I was so low that I could very easily have crawled under a snake. Well our friends must have thought they had hit everything on the map, and to tell you the truth I still don't know how they missed. They had a couple of near misses, very near. One was within two feet in fact. This one served to bounce a few rocks off the vehicle's roof. It all went to prove that no matter how easy the target, bombing just isn't too accurate.

After we got the static line at Alamain we worked from

the various stations along the route of evacuation. It was routine work but had its moments of suspense. Altogether I drove some forty thousand miles without denting a fender.

I'm sure you don't want to hear any more of these dull so called experiences. You imagined that war is grim. It most emphatically is all of that, both in itself, what it does to mens bodies, but some times I think more so because of what it does to their minds and spirits. War is a dirty dull business; dirty because of its physical nature, dull because it is senseless and unreasonable. Destruction becomes the rule, and it makes little difference what it is that is destroyed, a man or a machine. I remember watching a Kitty Hawk plunge out of the sky and drive into the ground not over threehundred yards from where I stood with a roar and a belch of flame. It must have been going at a terrific speed as it scattered parts for a quarter of a mile. The pilot had never had a chance. Two Messerschmit 109s came belting out of a cloud and nailed him. The other War Hawk lit out for home. The enemy must have been Eyties. The Germans would have gotten both. But the point I want to make is this. When I went over to inspect the remains I could'nt tell which of those myriad pieces of nothing had once been part of a machine and which had once been part of a man, and I suddenly found that I had to admit a ghastly truth; in war it does'nt make much difference. That's what I mean about war being dirty. The result is'nt so much grim as it is nothing.

Toots, you would have enjoyed Lebanon in the spring; the snow still clinging to the tops of the hills ten thousand feet above a sea every bit as blue as the travel agents say it is. The olive groves in many places grow almost to the water's edge, wonderfully dusty blue-green and old. David was gazing at those majestic hills when he wrote the song of praise: " Iwill lift up mine eyes unto the hills from



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whence cometh my help". The cedars are gone except for a few too small for the beams of the temple, but the hills are eternal. From Tripoli the road runs sixty miles to Beyruth, always by the sea. It passes many towns of ancient fame. This land was the crossroads of the world and the flavor of antiquity is still strong there; in the people, the houses they live in, and the customs they adhere to, even the wine they drink is old. The road winds out of Beyruth up the Lebanon hills, past the fantastic little town of Alle a summer resort for the rich Lebanese, up and up to, where, looking back, Beyruth seems to be directly beneath your feet, but incredibly far away. Now the road dips down into the fertile valley of Bec once dominated by the Town of Baalbec, now a grandiose pile of Roman ruins. The valley is flanked on the eastern side by the bare wall of the Anti-Lebanon mountains. Through these the road winds and finally after eighty miles enters that fabulous oasis, the necklace of pearls about the throat of the world, Damascus. There is something terribly persistent about a building with a thousand domes. It's a sort of tenacious reiteration of faith, an attitude which you find the rule in the peoples of the east. Ideology is much more ingrained in their natures than it is in ours.

Beyond Damascus I never went. Beyond lay the great Syrian desert, Palmyra, a city of fabulous history once the most powerful in the eastern world, and beyond that the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers and between them the Garden of the World, the cradle of mankind.

Names, places, people, redolent with the aromatic juices of history (some Metaphor, hey kid!) these take a deadly hold on you. I am reminded of a poem of E.A. Robinson, a friend of the late L.E.R., I can't remember the name right now. It has to do with wander lust: " None will own his enmity, none will call him brother. "

While at good old Groton H.H.R. took me over in a totid golf game. I got a par on the second hole, the one that goes up hill, but at the fourth I pulled a stunt that would have made ~~the~~ Rubber Coor/dinator, if such an animal exists, have a hemorrhage; I sent two precious pellets into the drink. As you can well enough deduct my golf, as the German war plans, is " progressing according to plan. "

I suppose you know that Lt. Richards, WAAC has been stationed at Bergstrom Field, Austin Texas, not a stones throw from Camp Swift, Texas. I hope to be able to induce her to have a short beer with a certain Private First Class who seems to be pretty well stymied in that exalted position. Do you think that she would disguise herself as a LF civilian and give him a break?

How did you like that race Dodds put up last week end? " He will not suffer thy foot to be moved " ! The Sky Pilot would certainly have to take those words back. Someone will hit under four minutes one of these days because the ultimate is zero, or infinity, and the progression is geometric. Boy! I sure would like to see Hagg run. I saw a movie of him and his style reminded me of liquid flowing. You and I were power runners, you know , all strength but little real natural grace. We put up a good show, and won once or twice, but it's those naturals that take the cake. Well more power to them. My running days are over. I could'nt run a hundred yards for a beer right now.

Damn it all, I meant to stop on this page now I have



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to cram another page into a G.I. envelope.

Well I'll fill up a page with a picture of me, a
Medical Man in full pack, you lucky fliers!

Good flying dear Toots. I'd much rather have a chat
with you, and perhaps another trip up Katardin.

aye then
J.B.

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