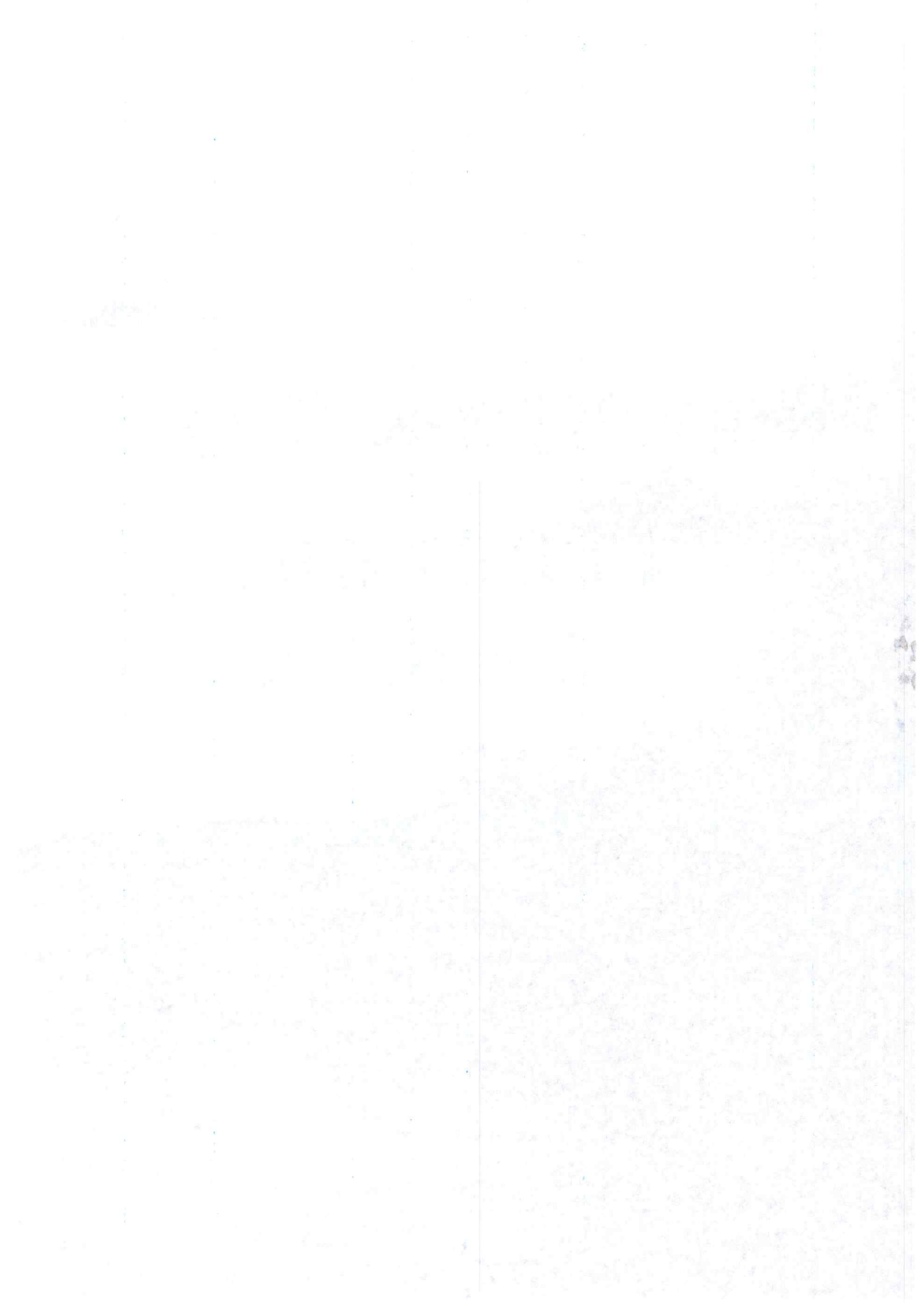


The background of the page is a photograph of a wide, flat landscape, possibly a coastal plain or a large field. The ground is a mix of light brown and green, suggesting sparse vegetation or bare earth. In the distance, a dark, continuous line of trees or shrubs marks the horizon. The sky above is filled with soft, white and grey clouds, with a hint of a bright light source near the top center.

**Sixty five
Years on....**

Les Brown



Sixty Five Years On

Recollections of a 91 year old

Les Brown

Thanks are due to Tom Lockley for printing this account, as well as for organising and assembling the pages into a booklet. His total effort has been extraordinary. I am especially grateful for the care he has taken in reproducing what were quite ordinary photos taken during the war years.

L. M. B.

September 2005

Printed in single copies on an inkjet printer (the ink is not waterproof!).

Tom Lockley

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Part 1: Civilian to soldier

June 2005

Sixty-five? Well, from the beginning. I volunteered on Empire Day, May 24th, 1940, with my preliminary medical in the basement of the Town Hall. When the time came to check vision in my left eye I passed by raising the card that I was asked to hold over my right eye. I was actually reading with my right eye, not my left. (I was born with a weak left eye. That disability did not affect my rifle fire because being right-handed, the left eye was always closed for firing at a target). At the time the disability would have excluded me from the army, as I knew it would have from the Air Force, my first preference.

My call-up came on 18th June, and after first assembling at the Show Ground, and sleeping on a concrete floor in one of the pavilions, we entrained for Greta.

The Greta camp was remarkable for two reasons – first, the lack of basic equipment. Rifles had to be drawn from a storehouse. We didn't have a rifle of our own till we left for the Middle East. Second, Greta was remarkable for night life, drinking in a hotel in Maitland. We drank anything and everything, in the end asking the barmaid to mix everything she could see on the shelves. The result was a khaki colour. Sometimes we requested a 'khaki'.

Some got drunker than others. One of our cooks came home a little later than others with a live cockerel. The customary practice was to wake everyone else and ask if they wanted a pee. There were 24 of us to a hut. When the cockerel was shown one mate could never forget what he saw at about 2 am. 'Two f'n eyes and a beak!'

At Greta most of our training was basic army drill to accustom us to the hard realities of a life so radically different from home comforts. We queued up for meals much as prisoners did at the time (on the evidence of one of our company who'd experienced both), as satisfied as we could be with what our indifferently trained cooks doled out for us. The safety valve opened in the evening. We had nothing else to live for, nothing else except the glow on the foreign horizon, beckoning us, telling us to be patient, for we'd be on a boat soon.

Home week-end leave came once a month. It would have been better for our mental outlook if it didn't happen, joyful as it was in the short term. Returning to camp was too dismal, although it had its moments, especially when someone (who could never be named for such a punishable offence) pulled the emergency cord and the train's brakes squealed to a halt. We

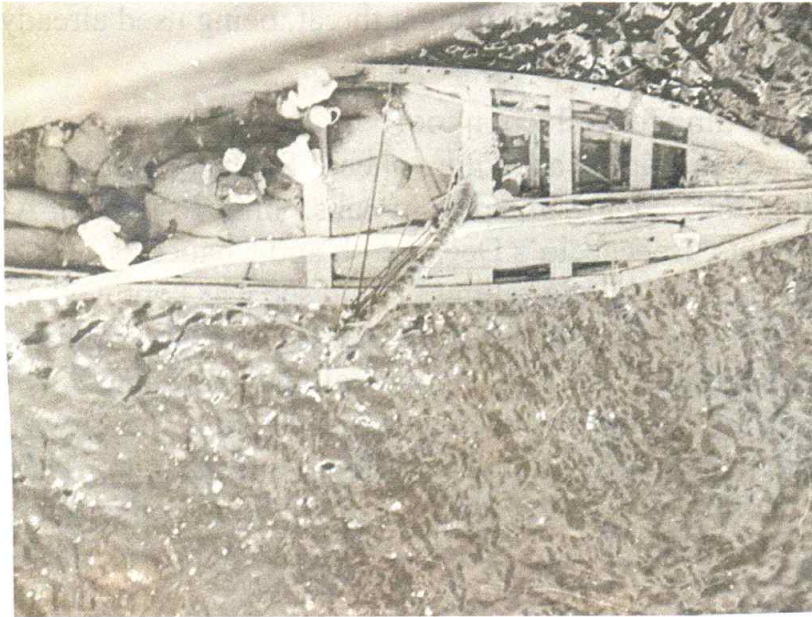
jumped off, clambered down a steep embankment, leapt across a narrow creek and reached our huts. We saved ourselves a walk of a mile or so from Greta station.

After farewelling Greta we became part of an artillery concentration at Cowra. We'd all go off together, guns and all. But the waiting continued. It ate into our bones. We thought that by volunteering to serve anywhere overseas we'd be away in a month.

When at last came pre-embarkation leave we were jubilant, gladly burning our straw palliasses. The OC seemed to lose his head in the excitement. An army manual instructed that troops had to burn all papers before vacating a camp prior to embarkation. Who knows what might fall into the enemy's hands! When he saw some papers on the ground he bellowed 'Gunner! Destroy by conflagration!' We did just that: we were going to burn them anyway.

Part 2: To Palestine

It was nearly nine months from enlistment to embarkation on the *Queen Elizabeth II*, but that was a pleasure worth waiting for! We had beds. Our berths were luxurious, as was the dining room. But we were in for a shock! The meals were substandard. Our first major meals were of bully beef and cubes of beetroot. This was too much, because the cooks told us that officers were living off roast chicken and turkey! The temper turned nasty. Beautiful tapestry on the wall was slashed. To ward off the remote possibility of another Bounty mutiny, the officers bundled into life boats and cut loose on the open sea, a major appeared in the dining room and told us that our complaints were understandable. Remedies could be expected. The next evening we had roast chicken.



Ceylon, looking down on dhow.

The total damage done to the ship's expensive fittings was shameful and distressing. Souvenir hunters ran riot. At other times the behaviour of some of the men was loutish. On deck there were open 44 gallon drums to hold

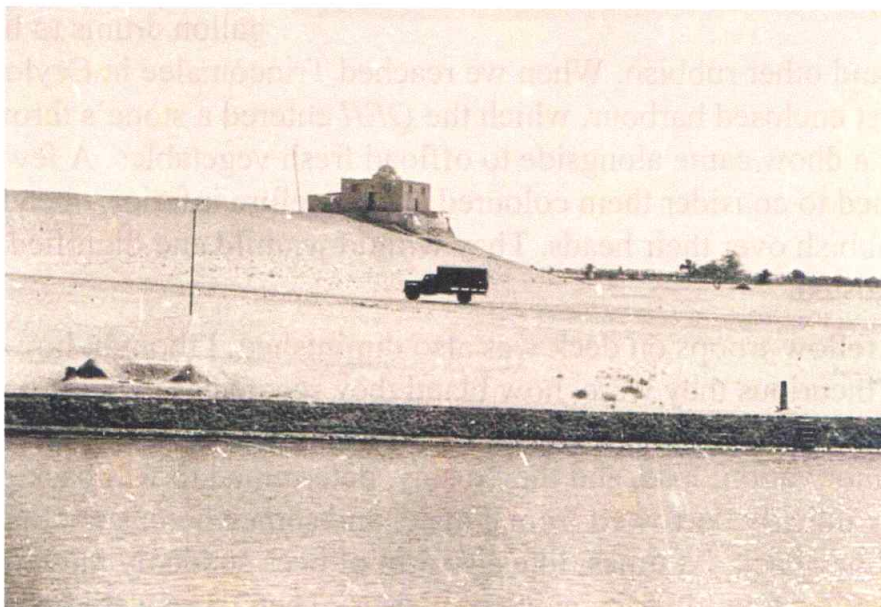
cigarette butts and other rubbish. When we reached Trincomalee in Ceylon, a beautiful, almost enclosed harbour, which the *QEII* entered a stone's throw from the shore, a dhow came alongside to offload fresh vegetables. A few of the troops seemed to consider them coloured and therefore inferior, upending the drums of rubbish over their heads. They withdrew, mild and dignified, but visibly disgusted.

My respect for fellow-troops on deck was also diminished. I thought how indifferent and incurious they were, how bland they seemed as they sat on the deck, blocked passageways and gambled at cards. The money was certainly a big motivation: lose, and they'd stay, determined to win back. But if they lost, they quickly borrowed from a mate, and somewhere, sometime perhaps, they'd pay back. At times, like a swarm of bees suddenly moving to another tree, they'd assemble for a game of two-up. Then there were two or

three concentric circles, again blocking the deck, those behind trying to learn the game or simply amused at the cupidity of those in the centre.

Away from it all there was so much to see, so much to wonder at with the mind open to novelty and speculation. There was the ship itself, its engine like an enormous powerhouse. How did they ever get it down there! There were the powerful double-barrelled Bofors anti-aircraft guns mounted forwards, ready for action. But how few they were! They'd cope with a random enemy plane perhaps, but for a mass attack from the air, how inadequate! (We knew little of the Luftwaffe at this stage of the war). There were several heavier guns mounted for broadsides, but how few and how insignificant against attack by a naval ship! As for submarines, the Indian Ocean was deceptively smooth, disturbed only by flying-fish skipping for almost 100 yards in their desperate escapes from predators. Italians were now in the war, had been since mid-1940, but their submarine capacity was not known. German U-boats were the dominant threat, being used already to German advantage in the Atlantic.

Now there was so much time for reflection too! What a frustrating time we'd had already, waiting naively for the adventure ahead! Boring, repetitious drill in the day, at night the bonding of mates in pubs. Since re-reading A Thousand and One Nights, Boccaccio's Decameron and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the tradition of tale-telling I could see was kept well alive with bushmen and townies in the pubs we frequented. The best of Indian, Persian and Arabic tales, Italian and English, with all their bawdiness, could never surpass the best yarns of the bushmen, told and retold perhaps over many campfires and in many pubs. I found it difficult to resist them. There were so many, and they flowed so freely on any one night. I suppose what is sometimes called retroactive inhibition set in, new yarns tending to erase the preceding ones.



And there were the occasional stunts. These I do recall, especially the feat of standing on the head and drinking a glass of beer!

*Mosque seen
from ship in the
Suez canal.*

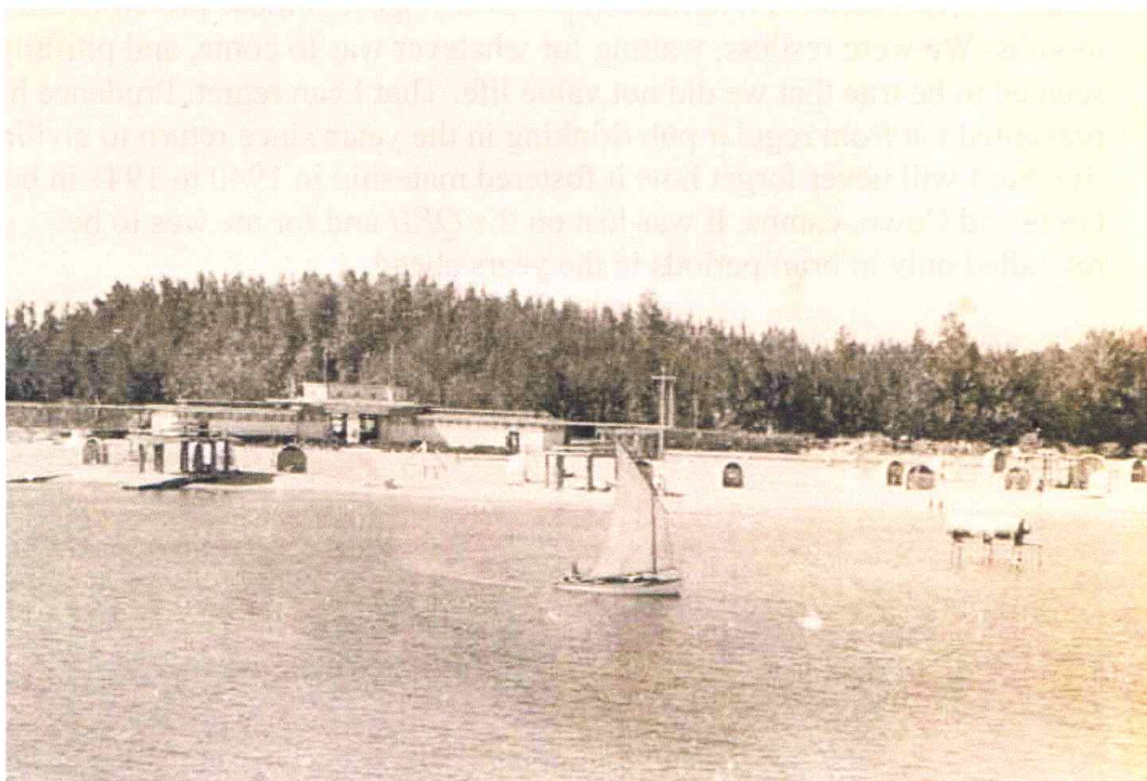
Strangely, as I reflect on it, mateship was strongest in those pre-embarkation months. We were restless, waiting for whatever was to come, and pitifully it seemed to be true that we did not value life. That I can regret. Prudence has prevented me from regular pub drinking in the years since return to civilian life, but I will never forget how it fostered mateship in 1940 to 1941 in both Greta and Cowra camps. It was lost on the *QEII* and for me was to be rekindled only in brief periods in the years ahead.



Suez: off-loading cargo

From Ceylon (Sri Lanka) we were soon at Suez. The *Queen Elizabeth II* had completed her voyage! And what a prize she'd have been to the Luftwaffe! The largest passenger ship afloat (as she would be for 57 years), a ship of 84 000 tons, and with about 5000 troops on board, had poor defences against a skilful U-boat attack.

At Suez we transferred to the *City of London*, packed on deck for several hours on a small trading ship of steel with little shade from a blazing overhead sun.



Ishmalia, Suez Canal.

We saw sunken ships in the Canal. From poor defence in the *Queen Elizabeth II* we now had no defence at all. What an easy target from the air, as simple as stamping on a swarming ant's nest. But as evening drew near it became cool. We disembarked at Egypt's El Kantara and were well-fed by amiable Egyptians whose grandfathers may well have remembered Australian troops from World War I. These also had embarked at El Kantara. A well-remembered call from an Egyptian server was 'Peas George! Very sweet, very clean, very hygiene!' The affability of the Egyptians relaxed us all, prepared us for a jittery late night train trip across the desert to our destination at Gaza.

While the *Queen Elizabeth II* had tried to avert a U-boat attack by zig-zagging in its course, the train encountered an equally sinister threat, this time from guerrilla bands armed with explosives to blow up sections of the track. Impossible for a train to zig-zag on its fixed tracks, but it could stop and let off some men to check the track ahead before proceeding. This it did, and after much stopping and starting we reached Gaza in early morning.

What a disaster it would have been had the track been blown up in mid-desert! Hundreds of troops on board with rifles but no ammunition! And with a blazing mid-day sun how long could troops survive with dwindling water supplies in their personal water bottles?



Suez; gateway to the Middle East.

Below: one of several French control stations on the canal.



Part 3: Palestine

We had no transport at Gaza to take us to our tents in the sand at Hill 95. Instead we had to shoulder heavy kit bags when the sun was already fierce. It was a memorable trek. My mother and other relatives had knitted scarfs and balaclavas. I had stuffed them in my kitbag. The first thing I remember on reaching a tent in the sand was to drop the kitbag, remove its contents and distribute most of the knitted wear among my mates. It was not an act of ingratitude. The fact was that the heavy kitbag was killing me.

We were given a breakfast and soon after had orders to prepare for a route march. Four abreast we tramped along a road when the heat soared to 117°. Here and there were very dark-skinned Arabs sitting in the shade of eucalyptus trees, shaking their heads in disbelief. (Some trees may have been planted during World War I or shortly after.) Instead of toughening us up the route march did more harm than good. A number of our men went down with stomach complaints.

Not a good beginning, but at least it was a beginning to adventures on dry land. The desert about Gaza appealed to all the senses – the novel sights and sounds and the alluring scents. Sentry duty at the top of Hill 95 was to protect a water pump that creaked day and night for want of oil. Unforgettable were the pungent scents that came from boots crushing desert herbs. Sentry duty was never more personally enjoyable than here.

Now I could use my camera, a tiny 35 mm camera I had concealed in my kit bag. I was never able to use it in action. All kitbags were left behind then. But while we were inactive in a camp in Palestine I was able to record the lives of a different, and to us a less fortunate, people. Every Sunday was stand-down day, when we were supposed to do our ‘make and mend’ – washing, repairing. But with several mates I took to the road as much as I



could. That meant walking out of camp and getting a lift to Jaffa or Tel Aviv if possible, otherwise tramping a few miles to observe Arab life.



I preserved one image of an Arab girl with a donkey, leaning over a fence and smiling in her white flowing headdress and her long dark loose-fitting gown. This was my first photo.

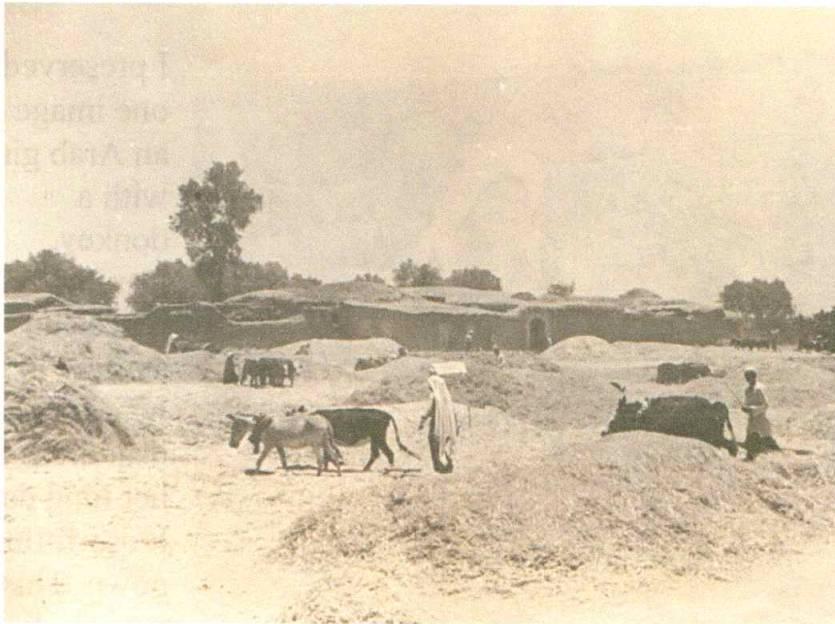


After that I recorded the Arab villages of mud brick, men or girls with heavy drags being pulled over heads of harvested wheat by a donkey or a cow, a mule, a horse or a camel. After threshing the stalks and heads. what was left was pitchforked into

the air on a windy day and the grain swept up as it fell. After this winnowing the grain was sometimes poured from a basket onto the ground and weevils painstakingly picked out.



*Camel ploughing between grapes
— also near Hill 95*



*Threshing: a
village activity*

Searching for weevils



*Girl walks, boy
rides*

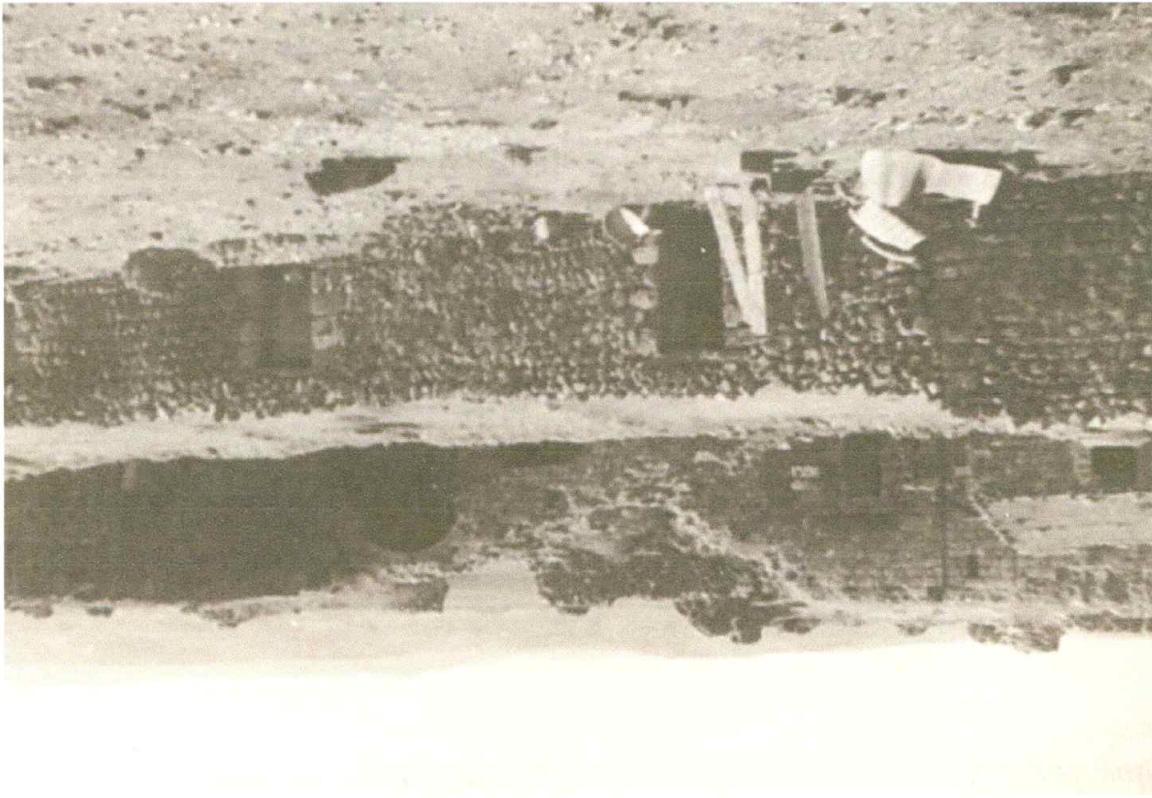
*It was common to see girls
balancing pitchers of water on
their heads. (No need here for
deportment exercises.)*



*Female inferiority was recorded with a family group on the road, the
husband riding a donkey, even a boy riding a donkey, and a girl walking
beside.*

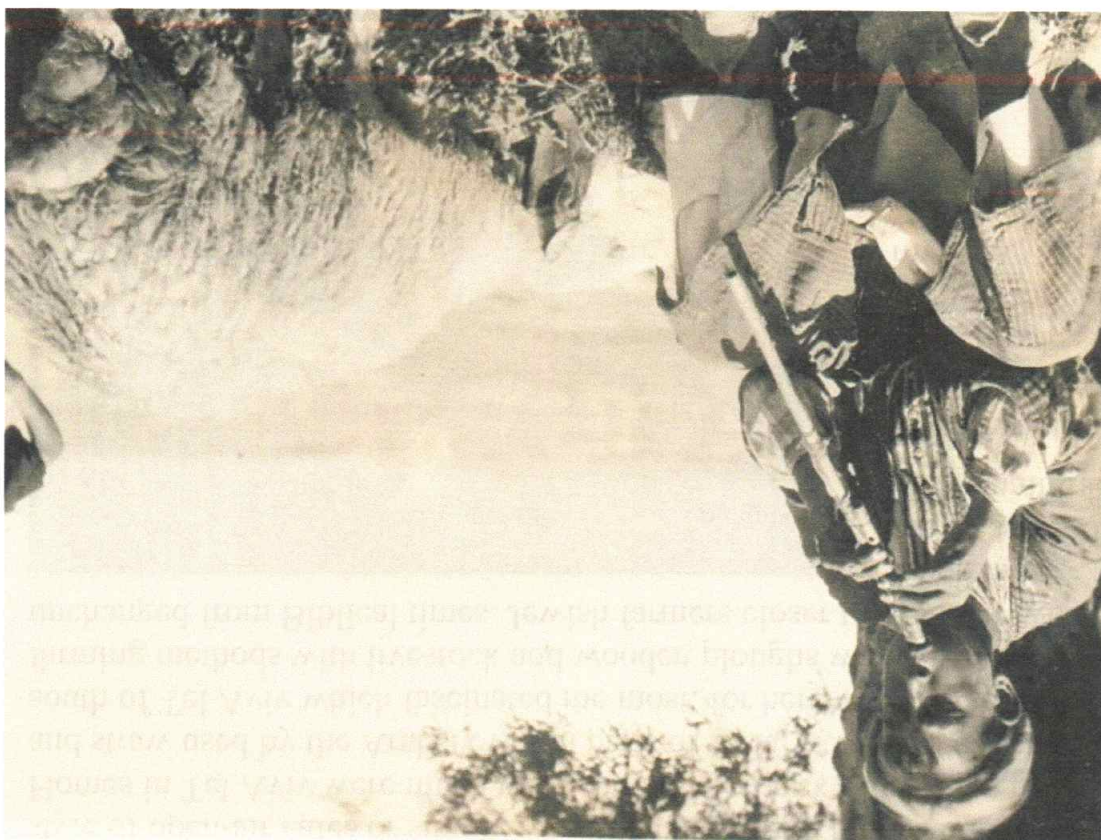


Kleiate Castle, now Arab dwellings



Arab hospitality was not to invite passing male friends inside, but to provide a seat outside, usually leaning against a wall in the shade.

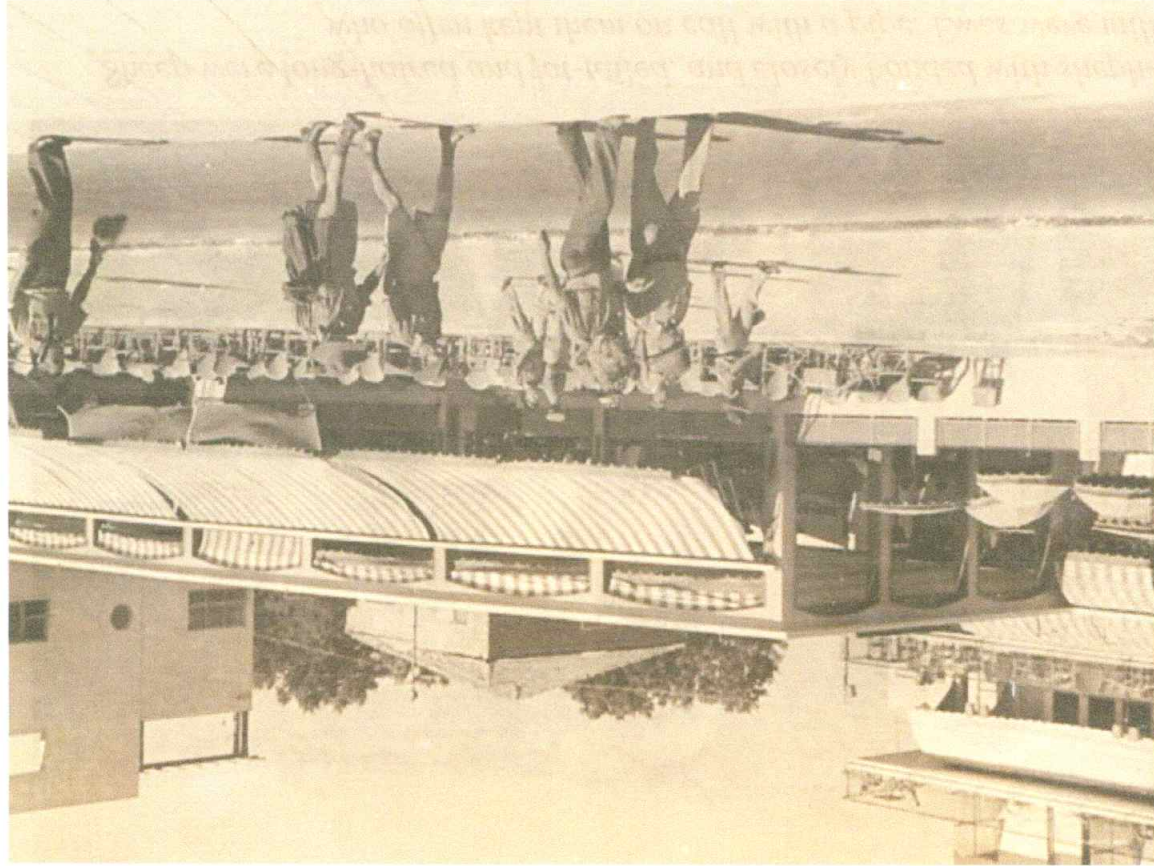




Sheep were long-haired and fat-tailed, and closely bonded with shepherds who often kept them on call with a pipe. Ewes were milked.



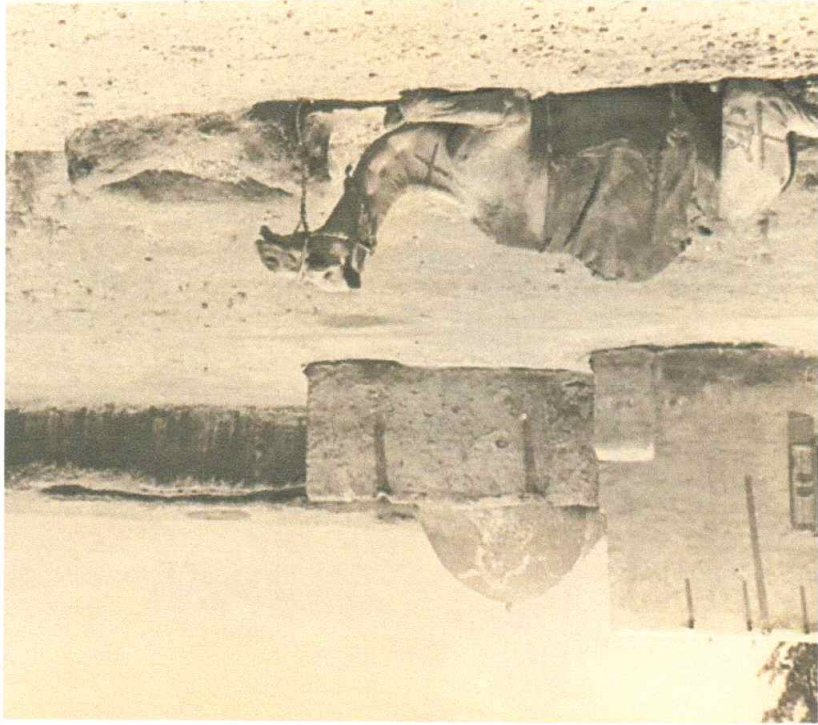
On those days when we reached Tel Aviv, we enjoyed the Mediterranean



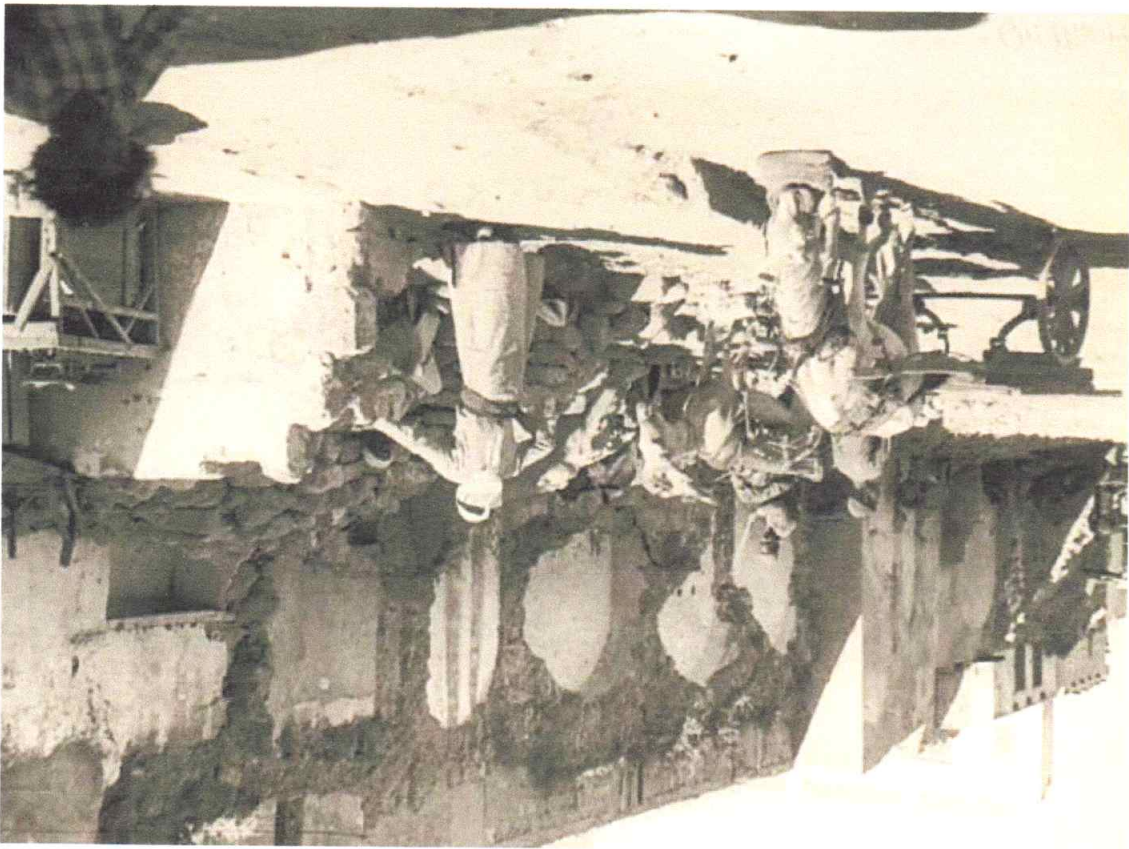
style of open-air cafes or simply sat on the beach and looked out to sea. Homes in Tel Aviv were much more modern, in brick rather than the mud and straw used by the Arabs, even in parts of Jaffa. It was the countryside south of Tel Aviv which fascinated me most, for here were homes, dress, farming methods with livestock and wooden ploughs which were all unchanged from Biblical times. Jewish farmers closer to Tel Aviv were much more progressive, often with small tractors. Old Gaza, too, was of interest for its tiny cubicle shops, such as for chair-making.



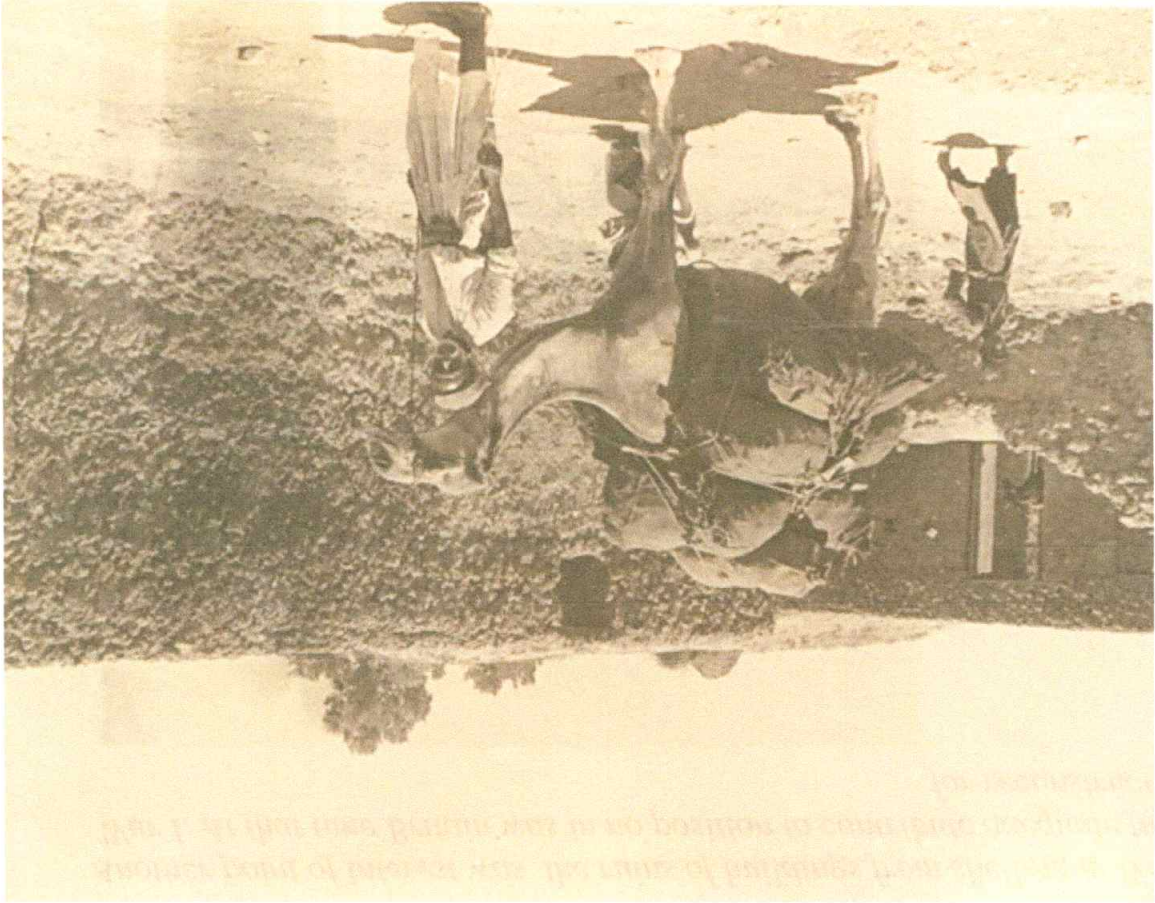
Camel drinking from a baked mud trough.



Another point of interest was the ruins of buildings from shelling in World War I. At that time Britain was in no position to contribute adequate funds for reconstruction.

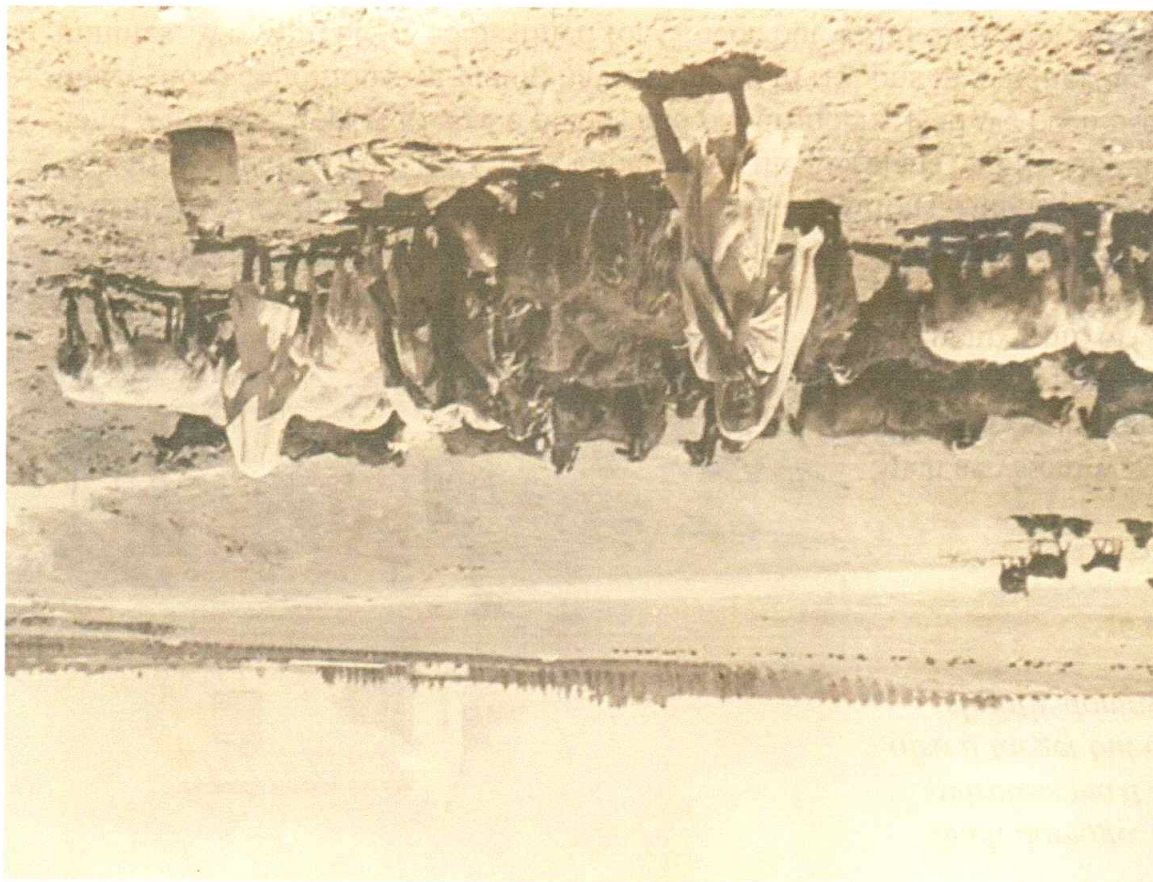


Taking vegetables to market

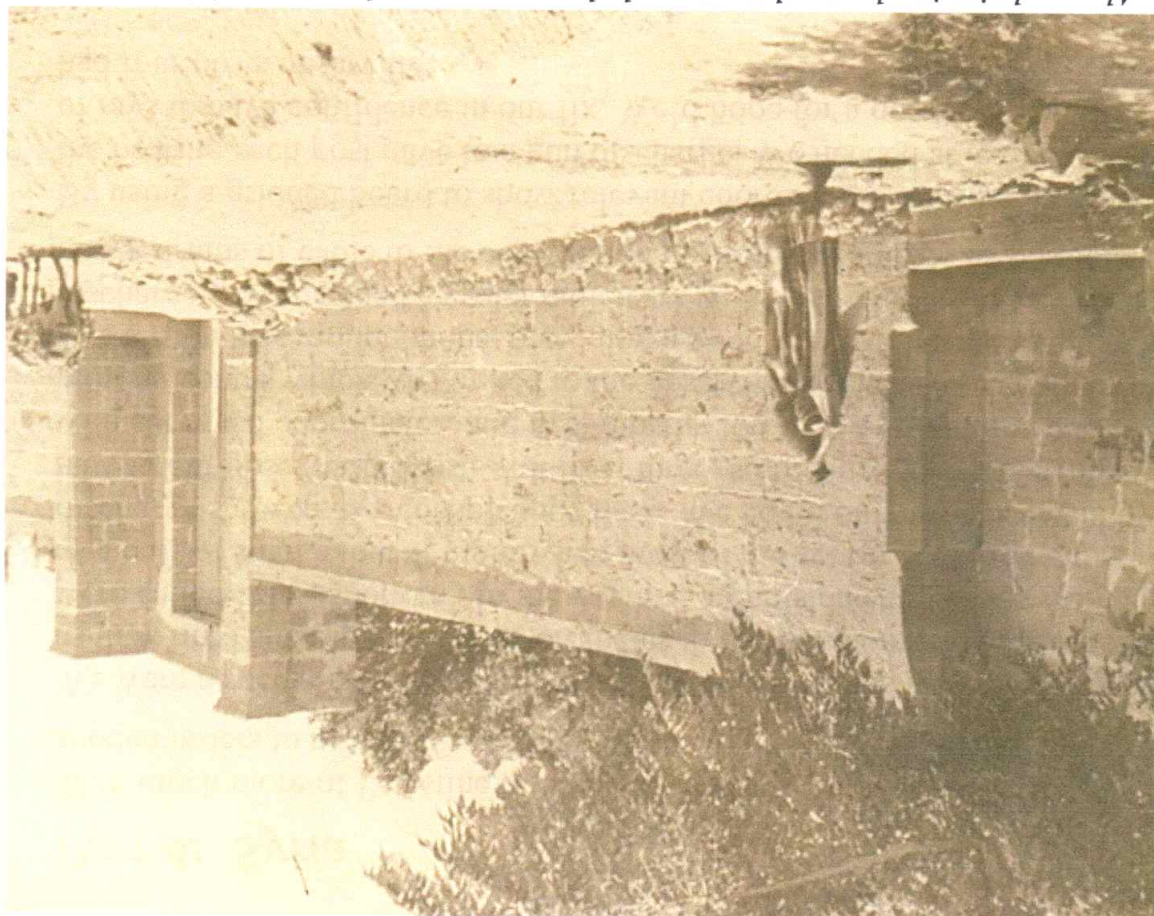


On the road.





Above: bringing home the water; below: water is also carried for the sheep.

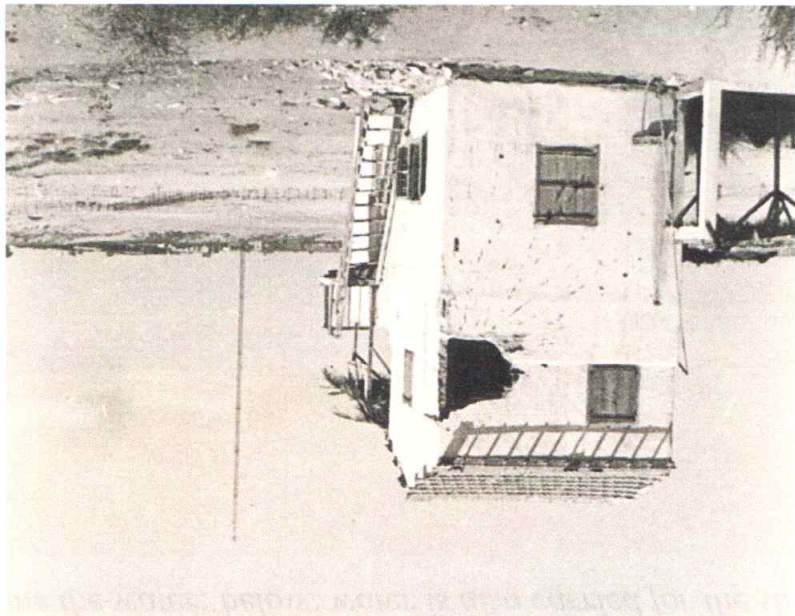


Part 4: Syria

With much more of Palestine to see, and curiosity only half satisfied, we had sudden orders to prepare for action.

We were a specialised artillery unit, whose function was to spot enemy guns as they fired and report their co-ordinates to our gun commander. Hence we were called 'Flashspotters'. In the daytime a gun's discharge was seen only as a puff of smoke, but at night when most of the action occurred, the discharge showed as a conspicuous flash. We could only be successful by having our observation posts – at least three, sometimes four – in sympathy with surveyed coordinates, and in sympathy too with a computing and plotting centre which was linked to the observation posts by telephone cable. The terrain was mountainous, providing a good view of the enemy gun discharges. We needed Cypriot muleteers with their charges to carry the heavy drums of cable to the observation positions as quickly as possible.

By using a gridded board to show relevant coordinates, we were able to plot the bearing each post gave to a gun discharge. We needed at least a trisection of rays to have confidence in our fix. We'd hope for a quadrisection if we had four posts observing.



Shell damage. The wireless mast was also a target but only slightly damaged.

Such a system was obviously vulnerable. An unlucky shell from an enemy gun, or

bayonet used by an enemy patrol could have cut the lines and thrown the system into chaos in an instant. It was good in theory, worked out after World War I or during it, to suit relatively static conditions. But as we were to learn soon after from the Greek experience, the Germans had the upper hand with their hordes of strike planes and paratroopers. Had we been used under those conditions we would have been cut to ribbons in a matter of minutes. We were believed destined for Greece but withdrawn after the

Germans had landed. These had demonstrated a type of warfare quite different from the conditions best suited to our deployment.

In the Syrian campaign we had our own 25-pounders, but much stronger in firepower was a British artillery brigade called 'The Elephant' with 400 heavier guns. When the fighting was over, our OC was advised that 75% of all the information allied gunners used on enemy targets was supplied by us. A massive barrage came without warning at 4 am one morning, timed to coincide with an infantry attack by a West Australian battalion which had to fight its way up very steep slopes likened by some to Gallipoli. The noise was so deafening that in half an hour or so we lost all communication between our own observation posts and the plotting centre. We got used to shells going over our heads, some flapping, some whistling, some in danger of falling short.

Enemy shells came close to us in the few seconds before they burst. The French gunpower was not as heavy as ours, but their gunnery seemed to be very accurate. It was amazing how few of us were hit by shrapnel. Most were covered with flying debris as the shells burst. The nerve centre at this stage was in an olive grove that had been recently ploughed. As a result the shells burst on impact and threw up a lot of dirt. We discovered later that enemy guns were 75 mm guns of World War I vintage, which were much lighter than the medium guns used by the British Elephant brigade.

To secure our advantage we had to move forward near the town of Damour. Our trucks used the only way they could, along the road northward. The French soon discovered our movement and their artillery broke loose. We were forced to stop. The shells came thick and fast, and the OC gave an order, 'Every man for himself! That meant diving out of the truck and making for cover individually. There was a deep gutter below the built up roadway and I lay flat in that for perhaps half an hour. Others dispersed behind any protection they could find in a hurry.

Certainly not the wisest thing to do, to move forward against an enemy on a public roadway in broad daylight! (When we first crossed the border into Syria we had moved along the only coastal road with camouflage nets over the trucks! I thought at the time that such a move was also about as conspicuous as the 'unmistakable plainclothes detectives' in *The Wind in the Willows* or the moving Birnam Forest faced by Macbeth.)

Another time we moved forward under cover of dense darkness. The road was narrow. The smallest error could have sent us down a precipitous slope on our right. The driver could not use lights. He needed cat's eyes.



When the fighting was over we met up with the infantry battalion, resting after their victory. They'd lost a number of men. The night after, we were told, local Syrians had robbed the fallen of their boots.

It had not been easy for our guns to reach their targets because of the nature of the terrain. The French gun positions were in narrow defiles between steep ridges. We could give accurate coordinates of their positions, but gunnery was not accurate enough to direct shells on a very narrow pathway to their targets.

In these well-concealed positions the French Foreign Legion had left behind greatcoats, parachute flares, webbing and other items of souvenir value. I cut off a few buttons and took the spent case of a parachute flare, all long since discarded.

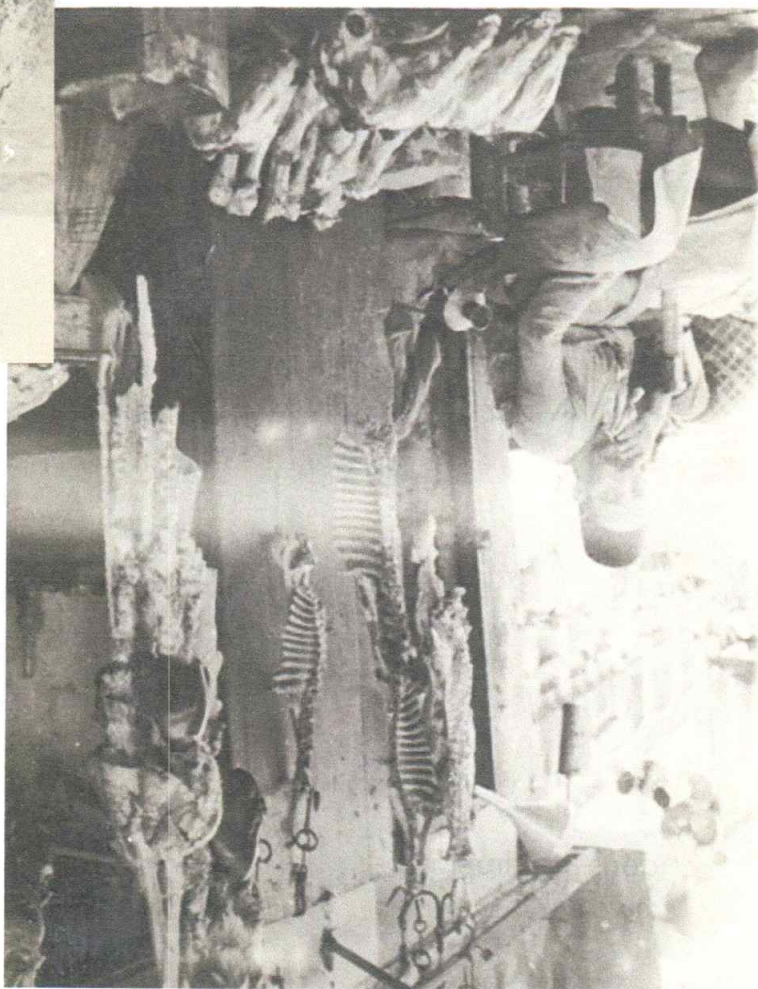
The French commander was Pétain. We walked past his headquarters after the surrender, impressed by his very dark Senegalese troops. If they had been used to infiltrate our positions we'd never have separated them from the night.

Pétain had seen an opportunity for himself after the impressive German invasions of his own country. He was found guilty of collaboration with the enemy after the war, and sentenced to death for treason. He was not executed. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

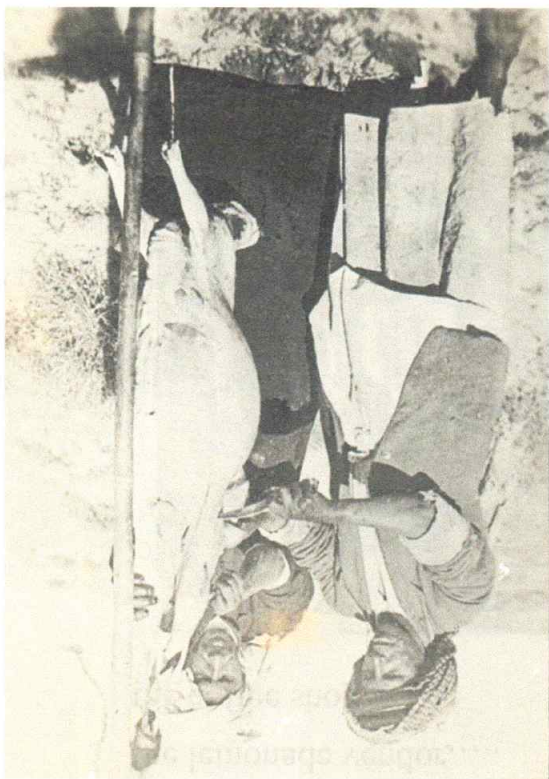
We returned to an olive grove south of Beyrouth and rested for two or three weeks. I could now do some more exploring on stand-down days. Women

and children came to the camp entrance, trying to trade tomatoes and eggs. They were keen to have quinine tablets in return. We were given these only at mess time as we lined up for a meal so couldn't help them find relief from the malaria which plagued them. Syria had been made a French mandate after World War I (as Palestine had been mandated to the UK), so the Syrians spoke French as well as Arabic. My own French was far from perfect, and theirs probably was too. I had little difficulty in communicating with them. It was an eye-opening experience, reviving my meagre language skills by using the language, as I was to do much later when touring in France.

My camera was used to record some of the life around Beyrouth.

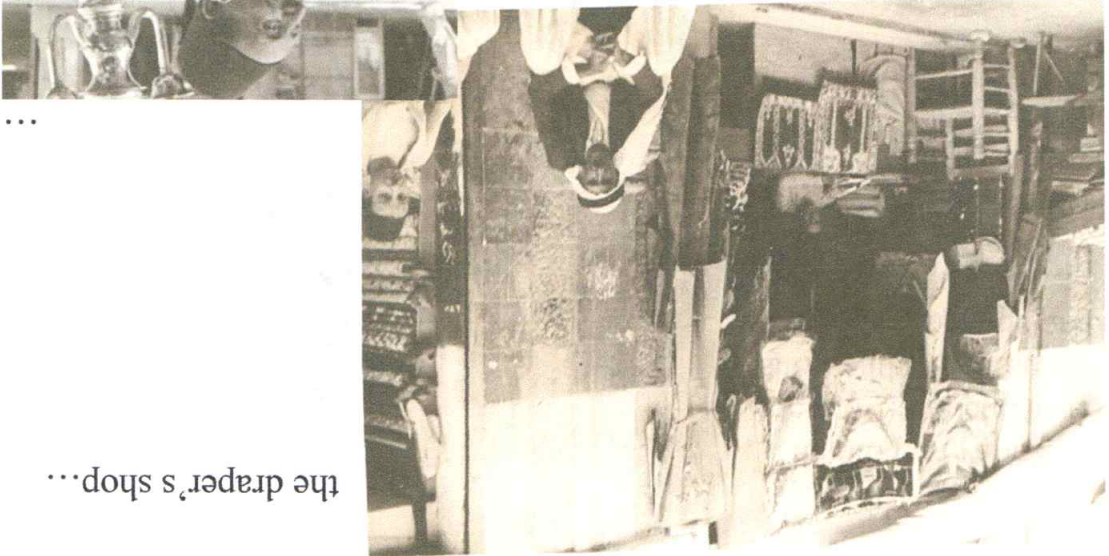
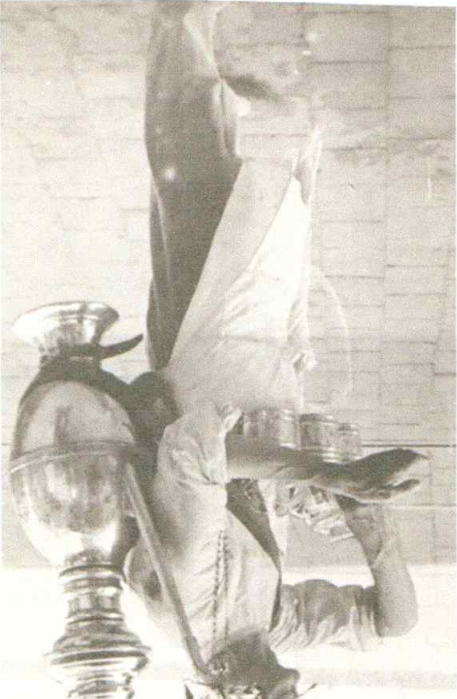


The old parts appealed to me most: the butcher's shop with carcasses suspended outside and crawling with flies.....





the lemonade vendor.....
the coffee shop.....

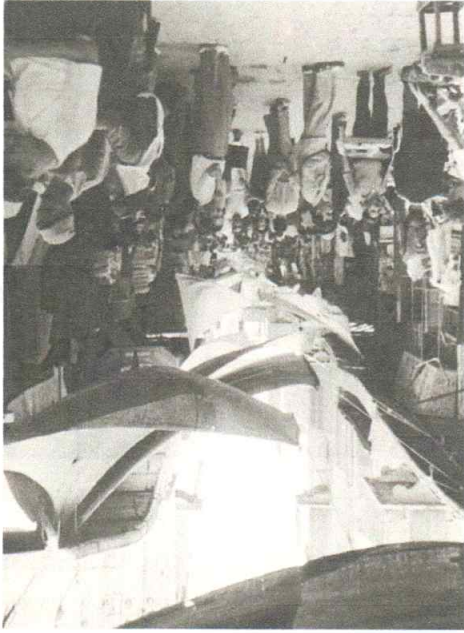


the draper's shop...

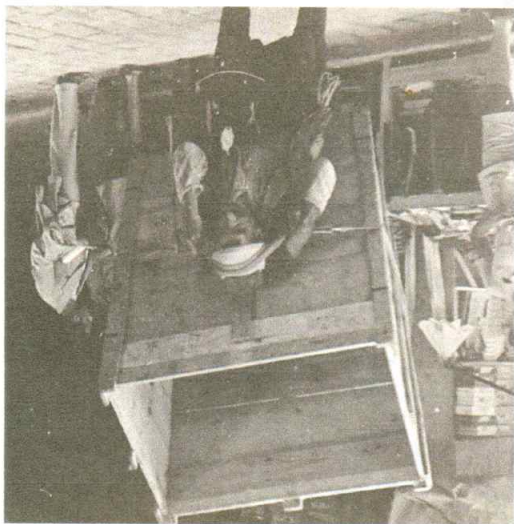
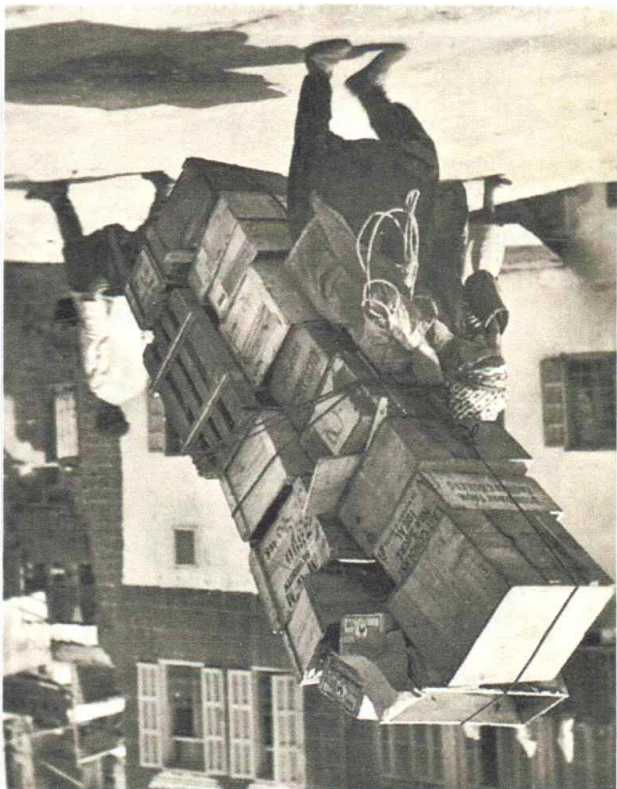


the cobbler's shop.....

Above the coast, homes of the more prosperous were built on a hilly slope, probably homes of Beyrouth business and professional classes.



..... the professional beggar dressed in rags but possibly earning a good income from his business..... and the bustling bazaars.



....the porters carrying wooden cases, each a human donkey if ever there was one

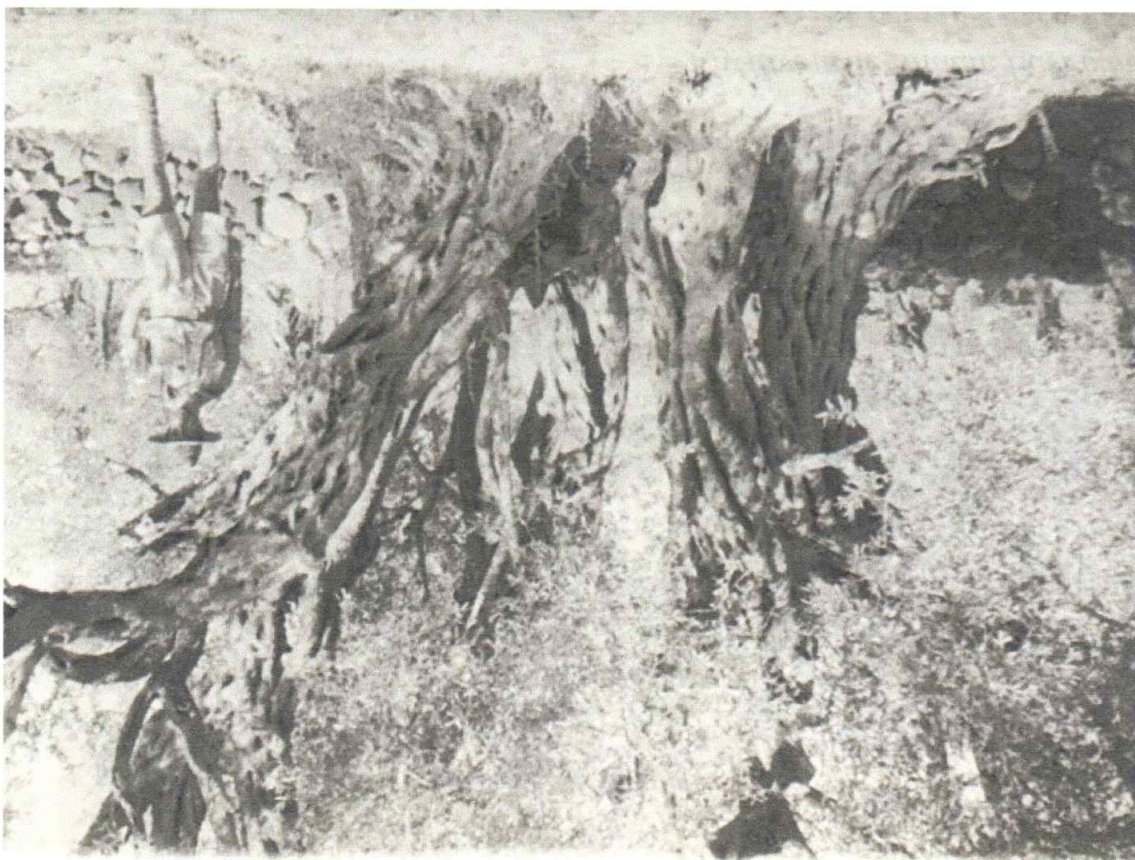


When resting in the olive grove after the campaign, I was photographed by a mate as I leant against a kitbag and read! There was no library, and no one else in our unit had a book with him. Mine was the smallest I could find at home on embarkation leave. It was Palgrave's The Golden Treasury of Verse. I found it helpful to engage the mind, and memorized many lines from it as I read and re-read it in the months ahead.

Many of the poems are now out of date, belonging to the outlook and mood of another time. I have discarded Palgrave years ago, although some of his selections are still readily recalled.



*Chopping
spinach after
the surrender.*



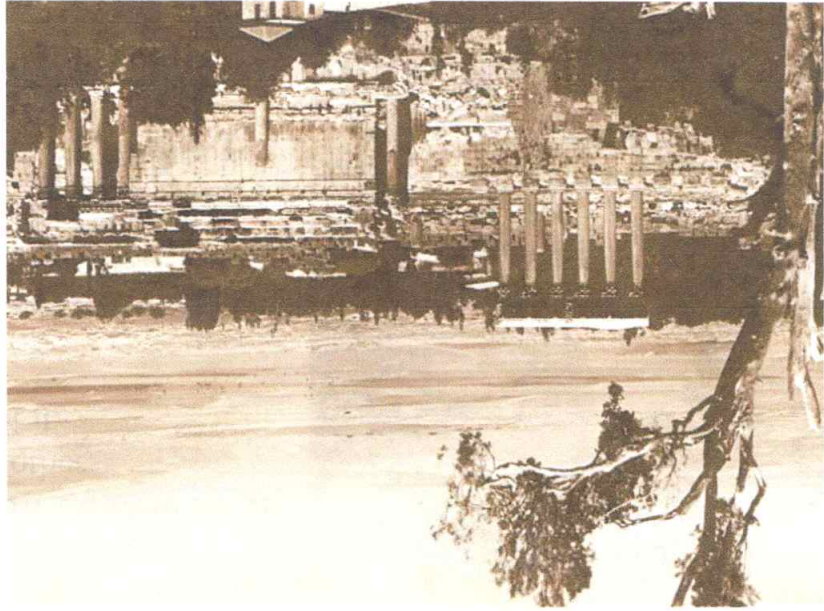
An old olive tree near the camp.



From the Beyrouth area we moved to other camps between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon ranges. The first was a poplar (or more strictly an aspen) grove with a clear running stream flowing through it. This was heavenly – sleeping on the ground with clear skies overhead – skies so different from the skies of the Southern Cross. Now we were under the Pole Star, with other constellations about it.

*Willows white, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver –*
(Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*)

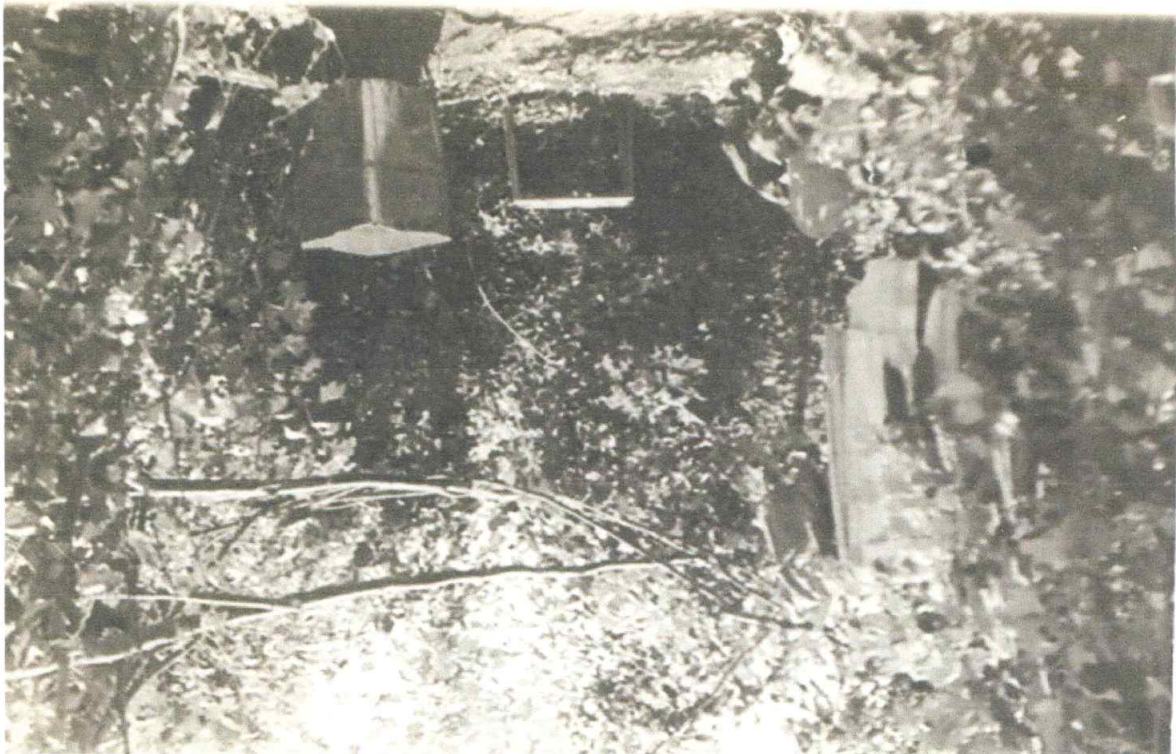
I'll never forget lying under the stars amongst these trees.

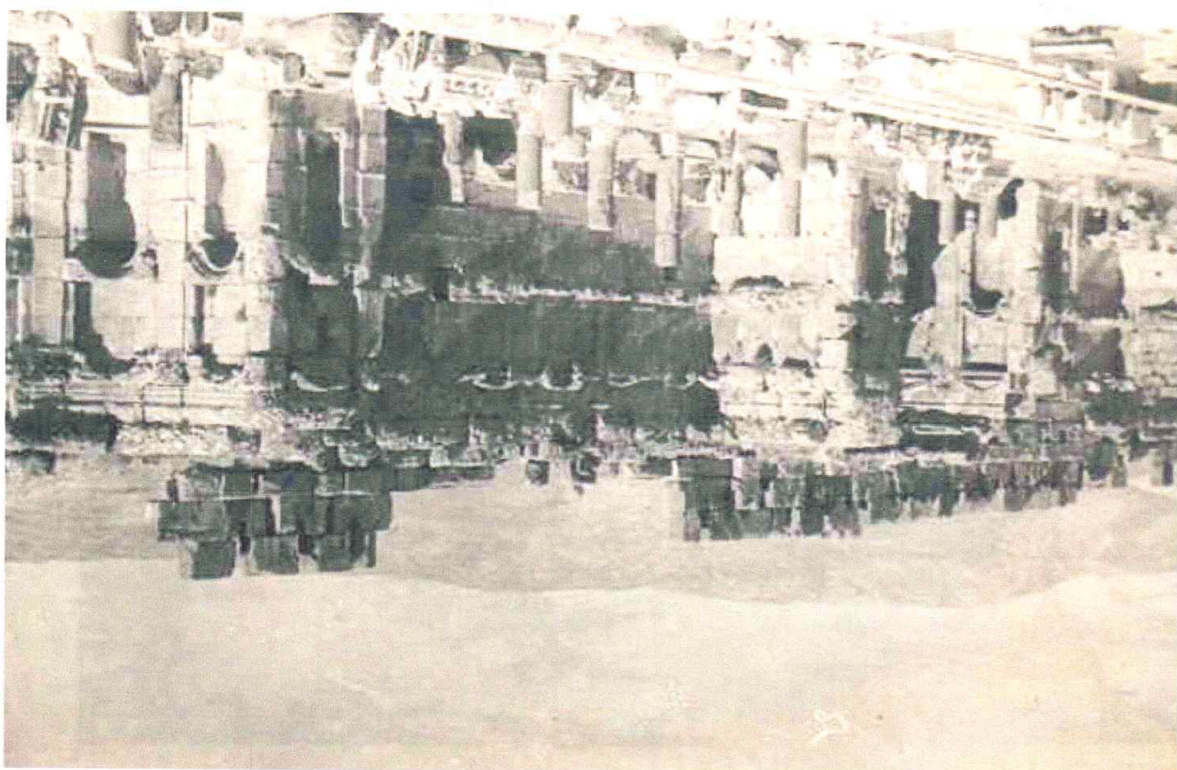


*The Bekaa valley
can be seen behind
the Baalbeck ruins.*

One of the most memorable experiences here was receiving a cake from home. My mother had sealed the tin lid and enclosed the whole with tightly stitched unbleached calico. I opened it, invited four of my closest mates to a feast, and in five minutes it was devoured to the last delightful crumb. But again, that was no act of ingratitude. Sharing was compulsive, necessary. This secluded site had a hidden danger – malaria. Mosquitoes were breeding in the stream and transmitting the parasite as they bit. A number of our men developed malaria, but none of the deadly cerebral type. We moved therefore to another site, close to Baalbeck with its ancient Roman ruins.

My favourite Middle East camp site.





Remnants of the portico columns in the central court of Jupiter's Temple. Red granite was used from Aswan, Egypt.

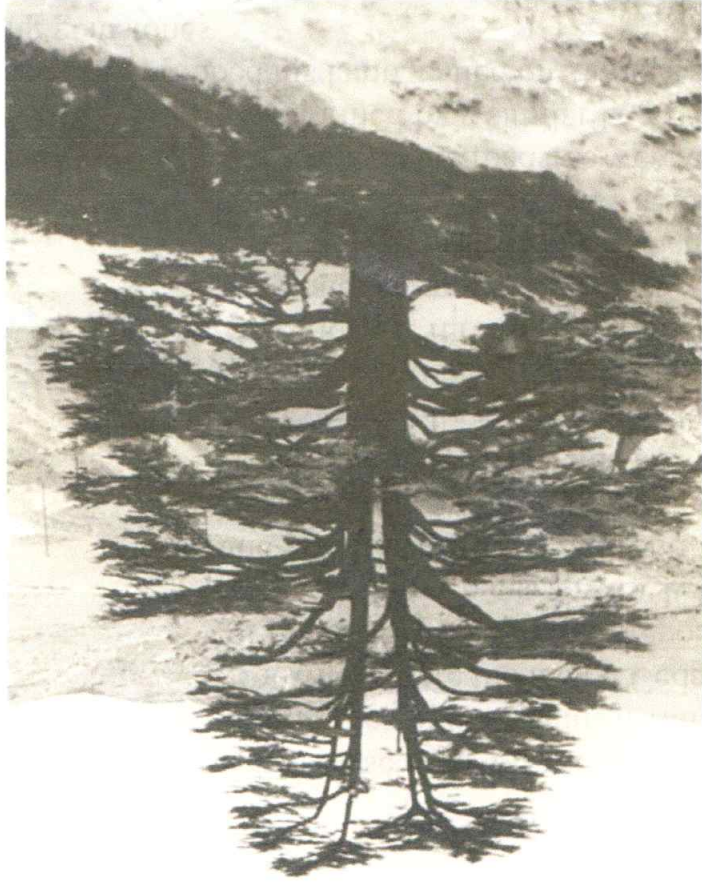
Gnome-like road worker near cedars (page 28).

From these ruins we could see the dimensions of the beautiful valley. But where were the famed Cedars of Lebanon? According to reports, they had all been cut down when the Turks invaded the land and exacted a tax on the number of cedars each property held. The valley was still beautiful. The late afternoon sun lit up the hills until they glowed. It reminded me of a very late afternoon drive from Broken Hill to Wilcannia, when in the first part of the journey at least, the rocks by the roadside were all transformed by a similar late

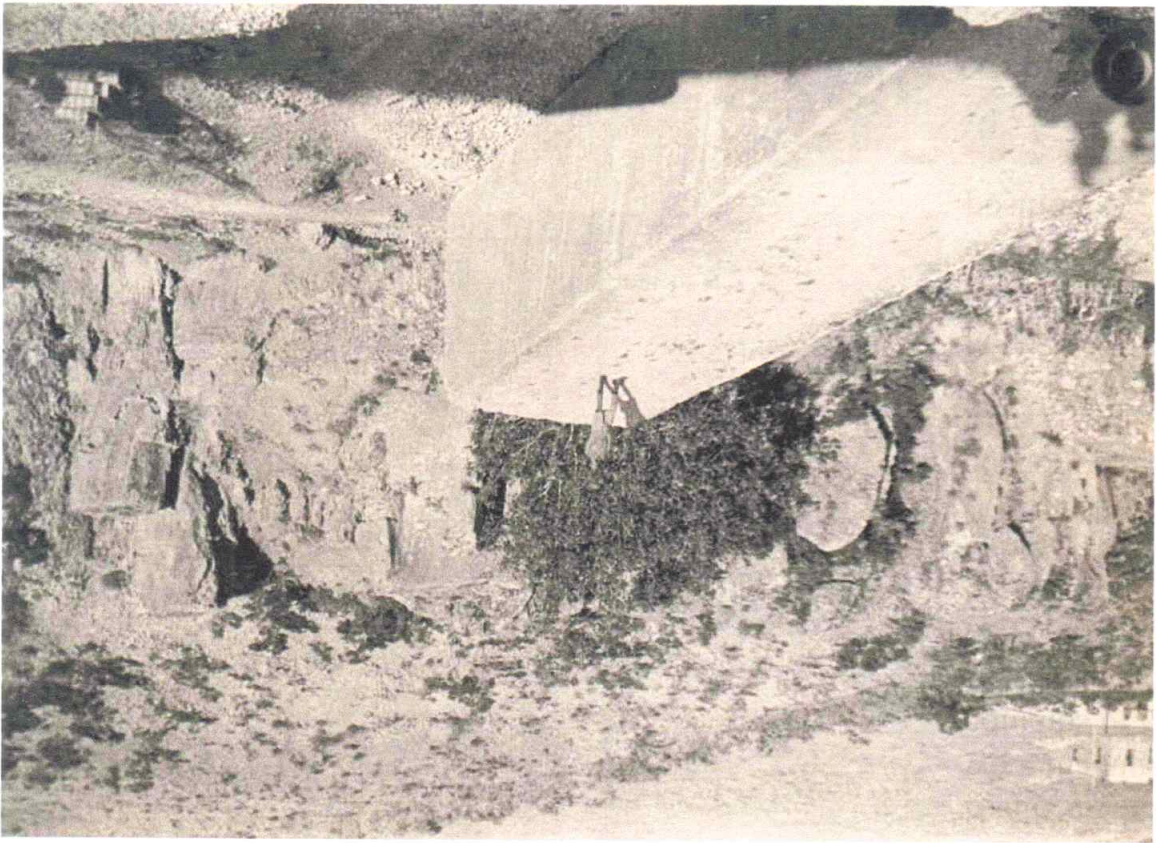


afternoon sun as though Aladdin had rubbed his lamp, called on a *jinn* and magically produced sparkling gemstones.

Those cedars of Lebanon
 still had to be found –
 somewhere up in the
 mountains. One Sunday
 three of my mates and I
 hired an Arab taxi at
 Baalbeck to take us up to
 Becharre where there was a
 clump of about three
 hundred ancient trees
 remaining. The road up was
 narrow and winding, closed
 throughout winters, and
 open only for the casual
 visitors. What would have
 happened with a car coming
 down? We held our breaths.
 There was no room to pass.
 The road was one car width
 at most, and the drop down
 the side was hundreds of
 feet. The driver was mad, we



were quite certain of that. He raced his vehicle up and came down even faster. When we arrived at Becharre we found a friendly monk outside a church. We purchased dissected cones with carvings of cedars which he had stained and polished. The trees were unimpressive. They had been damaged by storms and snow. But we were satisfied. We had seen them and would look out for them in some of our botanical gardens at home, better grown there and better tended. The most interesting of all the Baalbeck wonders was in a quarry a few miles from the ruins. Here huge sandstone blocks had been hewn and transported somehow to the walls of the temple, then, again somehow, hoisted into position. It was a wonder in itself. There in the quarry was one block hewn on top and two sides but uncleared from its matrix at the bottom, measuring 69 feet long and 13 feet high. Its dimensions are best appreciated in a photo of my mate standing at one end of the stone.

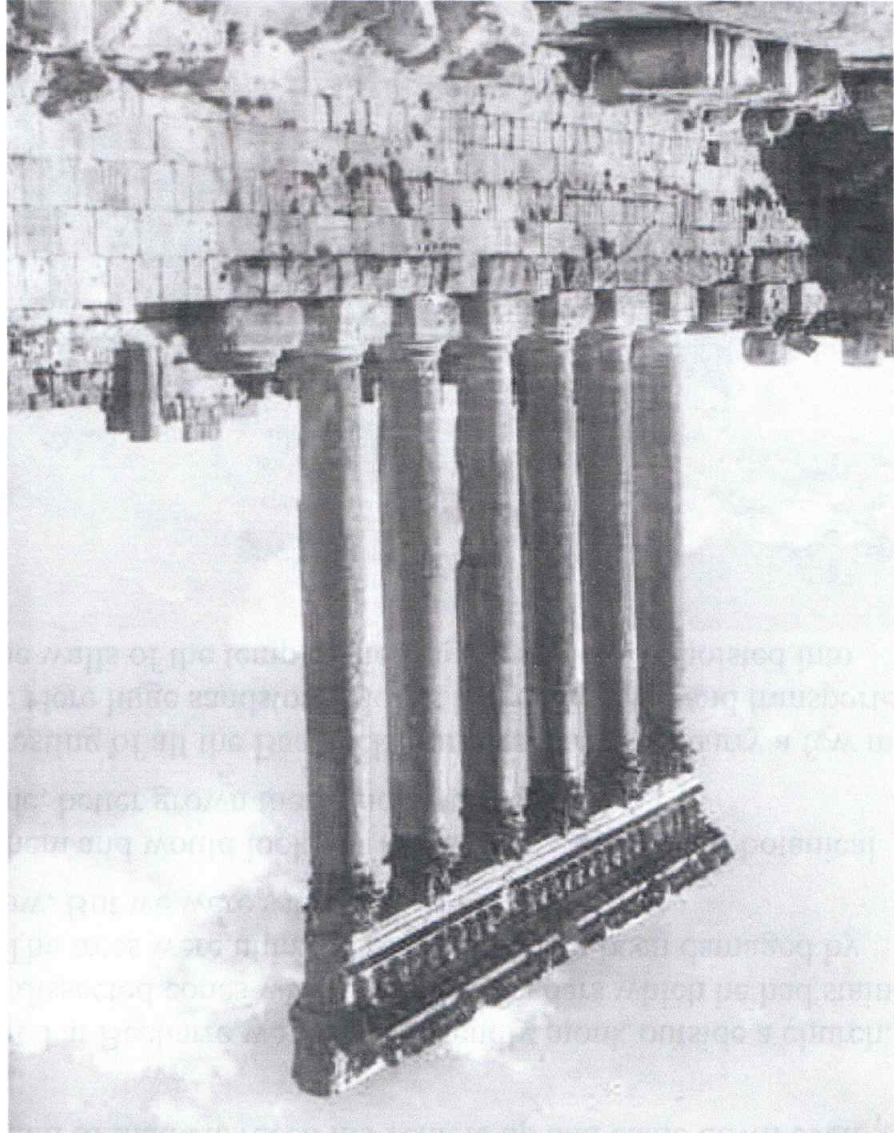


Another wonder to me was how granite columns such as those in the portico of Jupiter's temple could be transported from the upper Nile, where they originated, taken off ships at Byblos, and then by land or river to Baalbeck. Either way there would have been a lot of hauling. Over the ten thousand feet high mountain near Becharre the columns could have been hauled uphill first, then downhill, possibly taking the direct route we had taken on the



*Dancing girl carved on stone at Baalbeck.
Defaced by Arabs in accordance with
Moslem religion.*

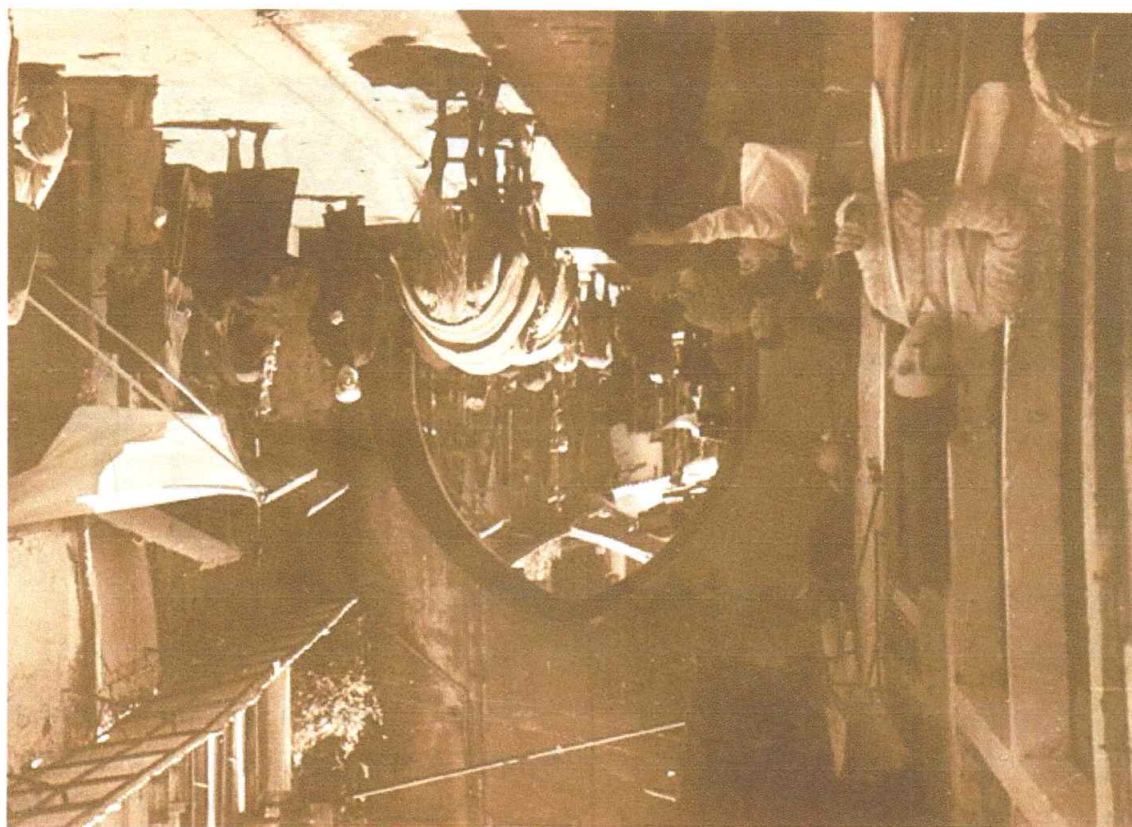
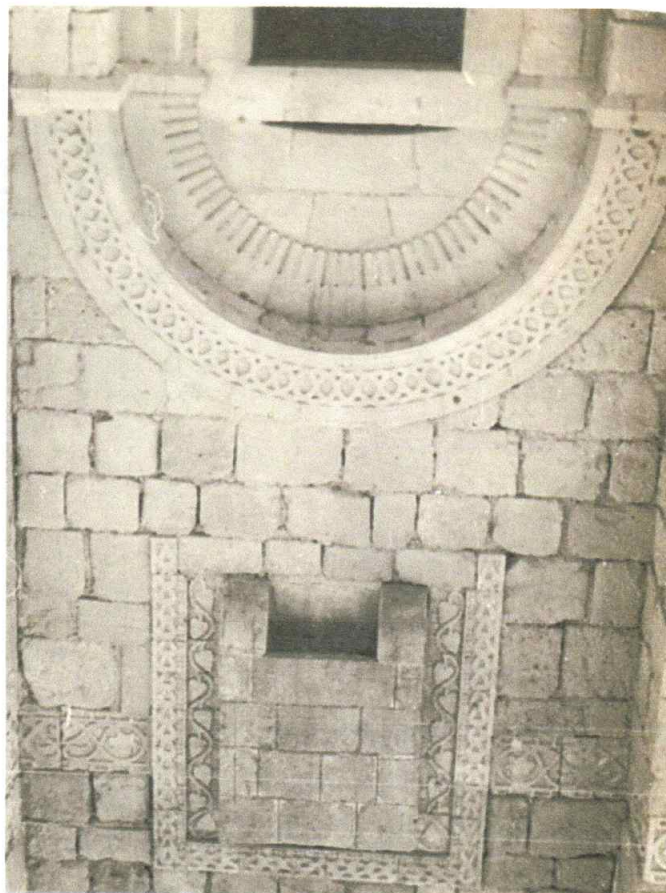
I wondered at the Bacchanalian
celebrations in Bacchus and Venus,
exploited to full advantage in tourist
literature; and admired the intricate
carvings of the Greek artisans employed
by the Romans.



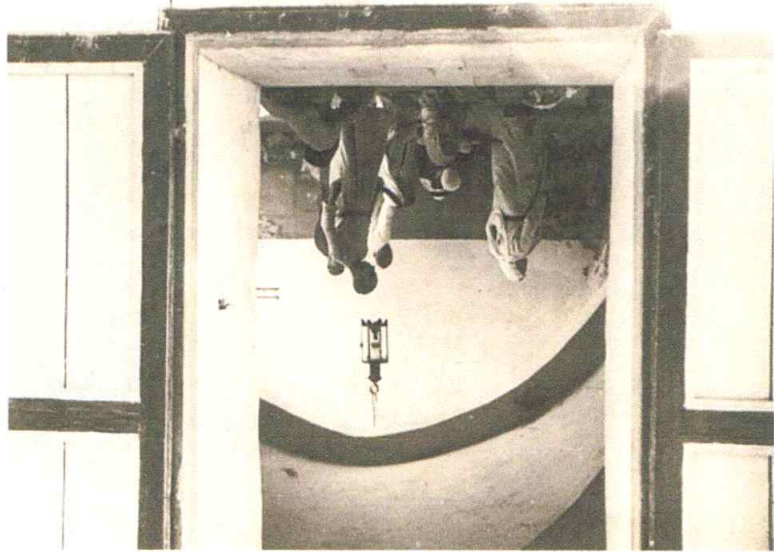
Arab taxi ride.
But the
mountain route
was probably
avoided, via
Tripoli and
Homs, using the
Litani and
Orontes Rivers.
Problems of
construction
remained. At
Baalbeck, how
were the high
columns of the
Jupiter Temple
erected without
the help of
cranes and
other technical
aids of our
time? How
were the huge
blocks of
temple walls so
accurately
positioned?

I made the most of an opportunity to visit Damascus. A truck happened to be going there for supplies, and I became a willing passenger with my curious camera. Before descending from the hills to Damascus, which seemed to be an oasis in the desert, I was impressed by the free-flowing spring water gushing down a gutter. Was it being directed to a reservoir?

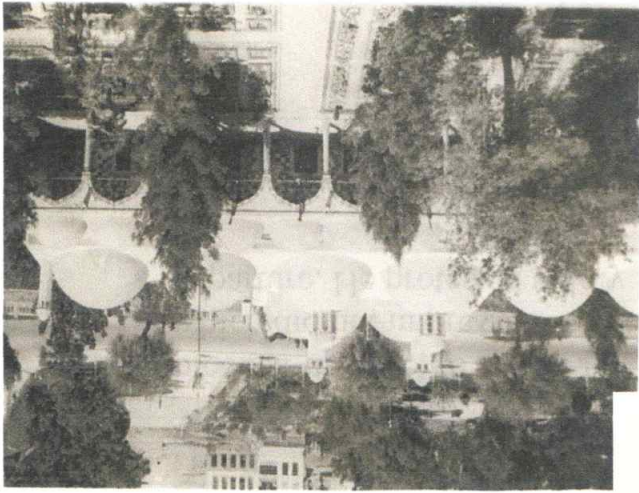
My mates and I had little time to walk about, so we hired a horse and open buggy with an Arab driver. He took us to the sights such as Saint Paul's window, believed to be where Saint Paul made his escape, though now uninteresting in its blocked-up state; to an old Jew's residence, packed with ivory carvings which did not impress us in the least, so we paid him accordingly on our departure. He protested wildly in vain.



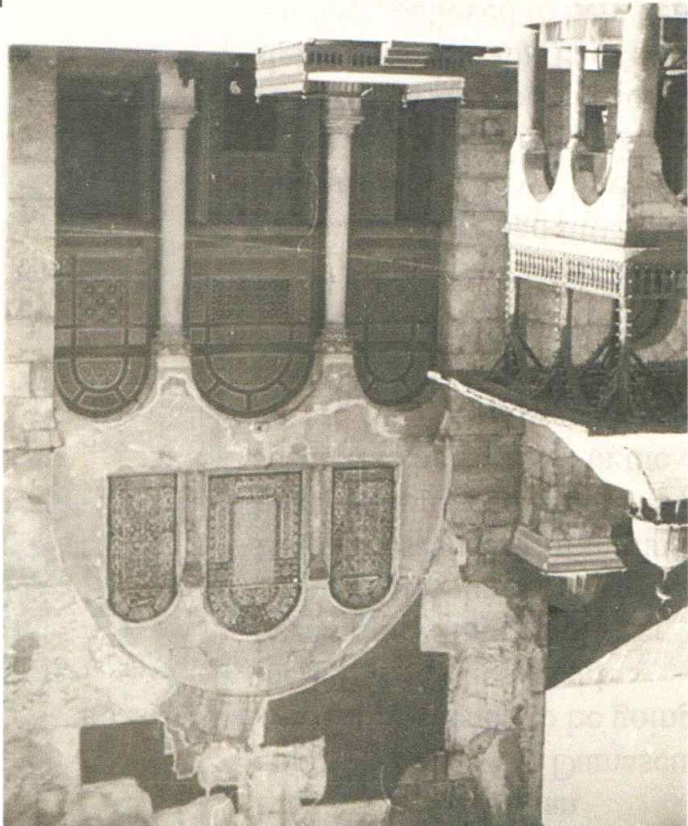
No cameras were
allowed, but I sneaked a
photo from outside,
peeping through a
window.



.....and the Sultan Selim mosque.
We took off our boots and were
permitted to look inside. Here and there
groups sat silently on mats.



The mosques were of some
interest for their history, such
as the Mosque of the
Ommeyyades

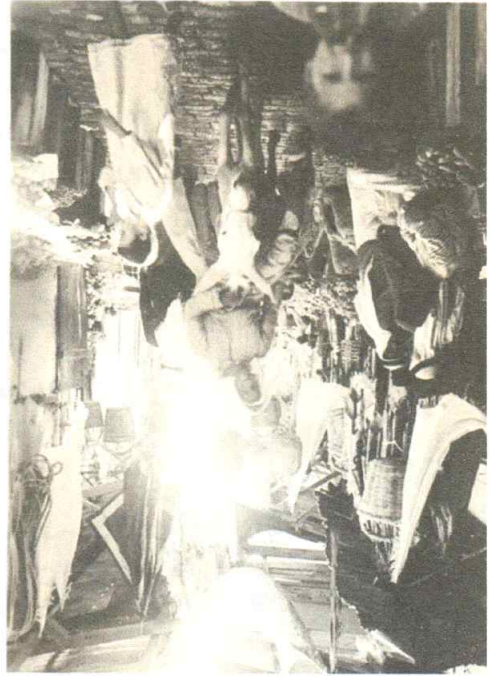


Damascus had an atmosphere, steeped in the history of Turkish occupation and more recently of the Australian Light Horse. But luck favoured me far more when I returned to camp, for I was selected as one of three from our unit to spend a week's leave in Jerusalem. (Other artillery units had similar quotas).

My two mates and I were taken to a modern hotel at Jerusalem where we would sleep at night on a comfortable bed instead of on a groundsheet. We were left hungry in the daytime after the continental breakfast of toast, boiled egg and cup of coffee. Yet we were free to complement this fare with whatever modern Jerusalem had to offer.

I joined my mates in an evening meal at a café. We found much to our liking in a light claret from Mount Carmel.

My mates let me down in the daytime. They sat on a bed playing chess without any apparent interest in Jerusalem's past and present. So I



Waiting at the ablution basin, mosque of the Omneyades, Damascus.
 Soon after, I saw the Street Called Straight, (right, below) and the tiny shops of old Damascus

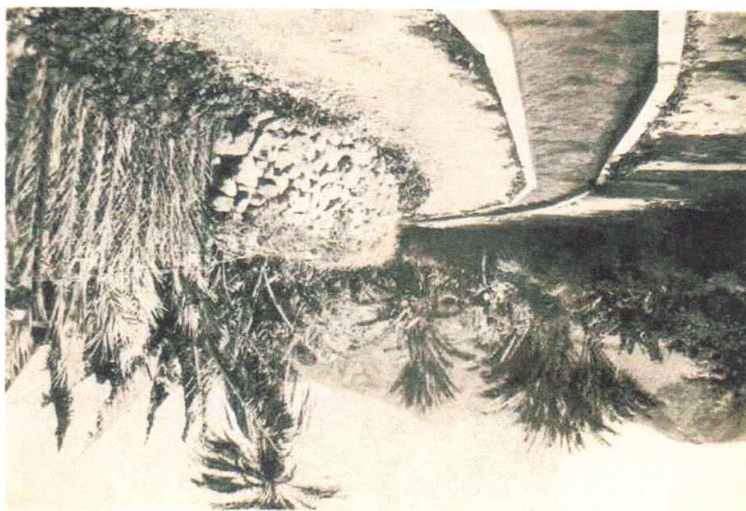


murky grey rain swept lake as far removed from my impressions of a tranquil Galilee as it was possible to be. I photographed a fishing net hung up on a rail and being blown by a strong wind.



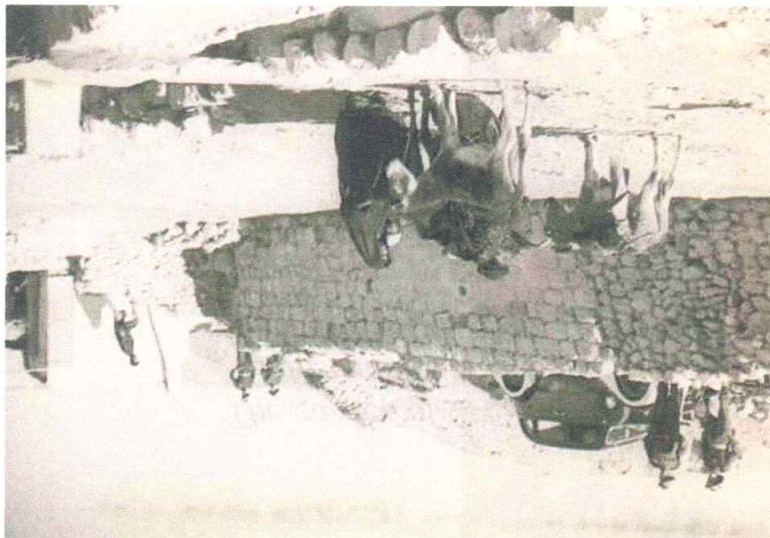
shouldered my rifle and walked alone along the narrow cobbled King David Street (page 33) with barely enough room for a donkey to pass, and with similar box-like shops to those I had seen in old Beyrouth and Damascus. I noted the walls and the gates of the old city, and beyond these I had to see two places – Galilee and Jericho. The only way I could get to Galilee was on an Arab bus. I had my rifle with me for small comfort, and saw much of the countryside including Bethlehem before reaching Galilee, to be named Tiberias after a Roman emperor. My fellow passengers were all Arabs. The bus stayed for an hour before returning. What did I see? A

Only the size of the lake was impressive. I could barely see to the opposite shore. Fish still abound in the lake, as a purchased photo shows.



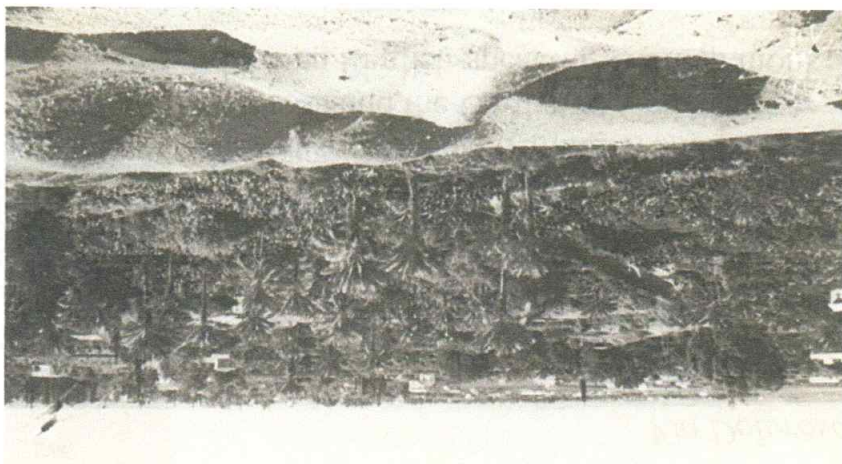
Aqueduct at Jericho.
I saw Jericho also alone, with my rifle and a bus full of excited Arabs. I had time to explore a clear spring aqueduct used for centuries, some archaeological digging sites and the Dead Sea. I did not venture into the

sticky water because I was given only fifteen minutes before the bus would leave. I dreaded being stranded for the night. As we passed again the sign showing sea level, a wide-grinning Arab drew alongside the bus on an old Indian motorbike with a bag full of oranges. These he pelted to fellow Arabs in the bus. Luckily no windows were broken.



Women drawing water, Jericho

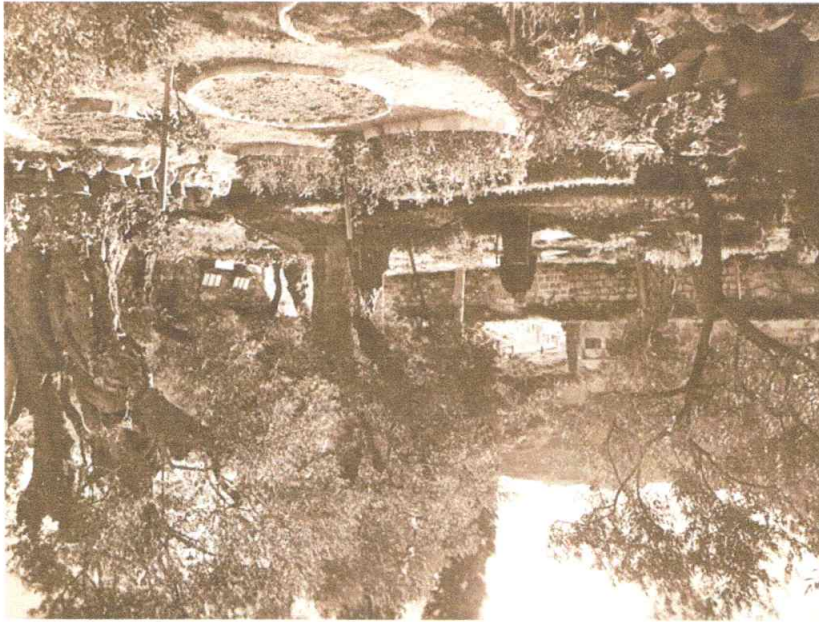
Jericho, with diggings in foreground



Jerusalem had much to offer of historical interest such as the Wailing Wall, the Via Dolorosa and the Garden of Gethsemane, where an English-speaking German monk



Via Dolorosa



*The garden of
Gethsemane.*

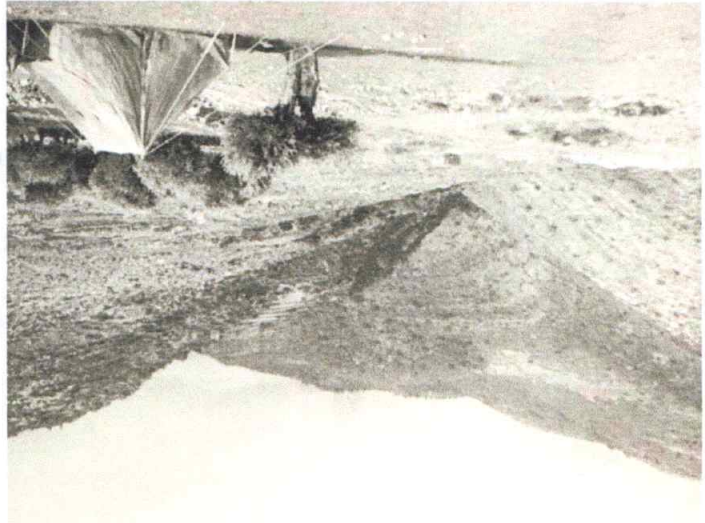


*On the road to
Jerusalem.*

chatted genially with me. The garden had ancient olives: he thought one might go back to the time of Christ, but I had doubts about this despite the very gnarled old trunk. The old city never lost its interest. Time had stood still for many centuries as in the practice of water vendors filling up their goatskins and selling water to homes off King David Street and elsewhere.



Some time after returning to camp near Baalbeck, we moved further north to a hilly and rather barren landscape which we called Rocky Ridge, near Homs. I remember it for its almost complete lack of interest, except in three aspects: first, the friendliness of the people; second, our lack of water for showering; third, my misdeemeanour when on sentry duty.



Roadworkers in typical dress..



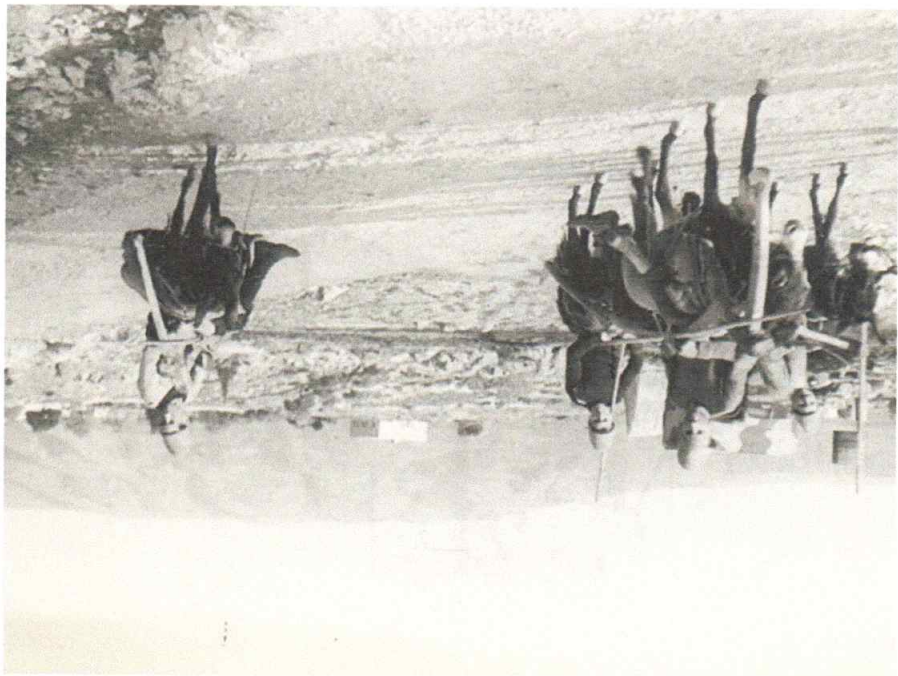
Salt water bath, sea in background



Roadworking gang.



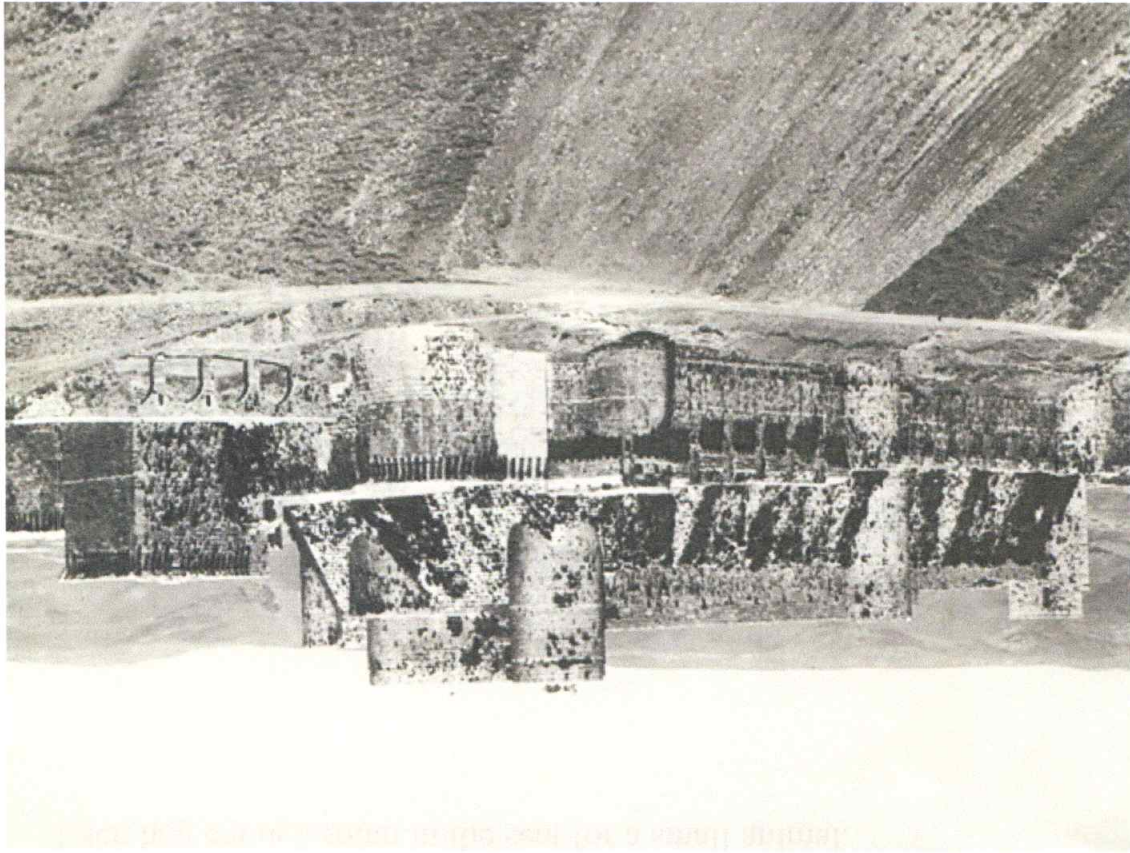
We didn't see much of the menfolk except when they were returning from the day's ploughing. They rode donkeys or mules with wooden ploughs slung over the animals' necks. Head dress was different from that worn by the Arabs in Palestine; it was made of animal hair which was moulded into shape, and was probably warm and soft to wear. Men's trousers were of the baggy black type familiar in the other Moslem countries of the Middle East. Each had enough room in the seat for a small animal.



Our cooks made friends of the children who frequented the kitchen with outstretched hands. Then something happened that made me blink in disbelief. A mobile shower unit had arrived! I was amazed to see it, still more to see how efficiently it could shower over 100 men, warm water and soap supplied. We came out clean, refreshed, mentally as well as physically in better shape.

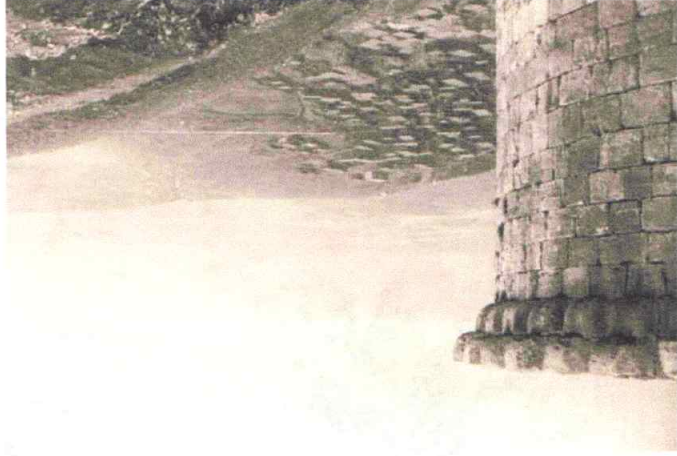


The incident of my sentry misdeemeanour has left no tincture of shame, though I had no wish to repeat it. Sentry duty had to be taken seriously. We had reports of Arabs stealing rifles from tents in other units. So an officer was on the watch. I was passing a friendly tent when a mate called me inside to have a hot brew. It was cold outside. The temptation was too strong. I stayed inside a couple of minutes. I was caught.



A pretty serious offence! Otherwise, why have sentries at all? I was paraded before the OC next day. I had no defence. I appreciated the gravity of my situation. It must have been my air of innocence that let me off: not even a pack drill, not even a week's kitchen duty peeling spuds, not even a denial of a truck ride to the Krak des Chevaliers with better behaved troops!

It was there that we went on a freezing day. As a relic of the past it seemed an historical gem, so well preserved, with its sturdy walls made to last, its defences with slits for arrows, its drawbridge over a deep moat. It commanded a dominating position from every angle. Arab homes clustered below like lowly



mushrooms. It had not only impregnable walls but inner walls as well. But it was a shell. Inside I recall only one thing of interest – the dungeon into which prisoners were thrown, to be scalded with boiling oil poured over their heads.



The coldest day I remember in Syria was when we went on an exercise in open country near Homs. Greatcoats, balacavas, nothing could keep out the piercing cold. We were given a hot meal, all too small, and soon after the exercise that had been planned for us was called off. Snow was much warmer than that, as we were soon to discover.

We had little idea what we were in the army for. Where were we going? Life became aimless; the future barren even of fertile rumours. But soon we found ourselves back on the coast, stimulated by hard physical work at the

top of Mount Tourbol near Tripoli. The mountain commanded a perfect view of a flat coastal plain.

Army commanders must have formed an impression that German paratroopers could land on that long coastal strip north of Tripoli, so we were divided into small parties of seven, provided with picks and shovels and instructed to dig emplacements for weapons, presumably for machine guns or ack-ack guns. It was hard going but thoroughly enjoyable. We could see Cyprus on a clear day, very dimly on the horizon. We were given rations to cook for ourselves, a task shared among the seven of us. When my turn came I cooked a pannikin of rice per person. It swelled and swelled. By the time the meal was to be served I had almost a large kitchen dixie full of rice – ten times as much as I had expected. In vain I begged my mates to have a second helping to save my embarrassment. Nothing could have saved the situation but a village full of hungry Syrians, but they were a thousand feet below, huddled at the foot of the mountain.

Years after in Australia, I engaged a tiler who explained that he had come from Syria. Do you happen to know Mount Tourbol? I asked. 'Know it well,' he replied. 'My home was at the foot of the mountain on the northern slope'. We had looked down on it. It was in a village of farmers who cultivated the rocky slopes.

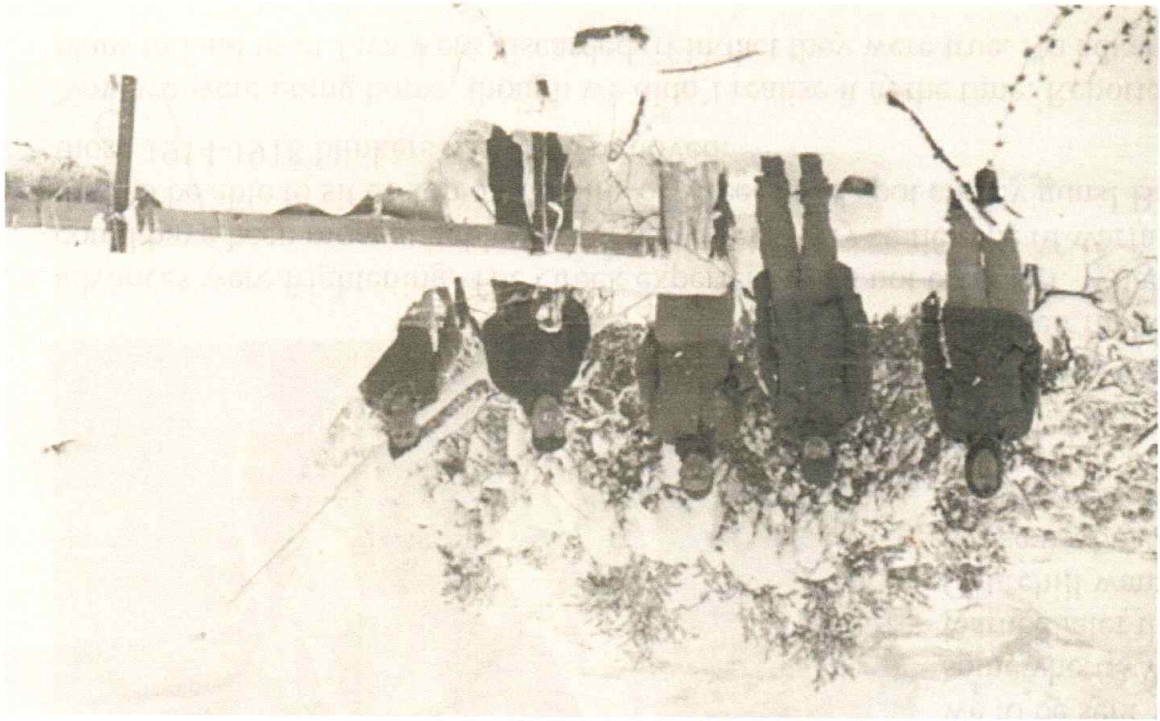
Ploughing on the slopes of Mount Tourbol.

Suddenly the digging was called off. We were disappointed. Did one of the planners suddenly realise that the effort was futile? If the Luftwaffe had arrived with a swarm of planes and

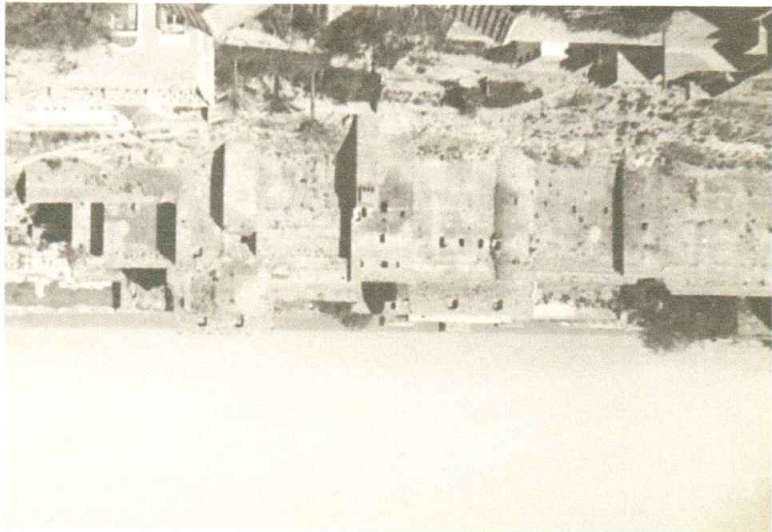


a hundred paratroops why wouldn't they land their troops on top of Mount Tourbol, behind our lines?

On stand-down day we were able to go into Tripoli, but found it less interesting than old parts of Beyrouth, Jerusalem and Damascus. I photographed Tripoli Castle walls (picture at top of next page).



wind blowing off
mountains. Our tent
was covered with
snow, figures looked
picturesque with
snow-hanging
branches. The snow
went down even to
the sea. All our
vehicles were
immobilised.

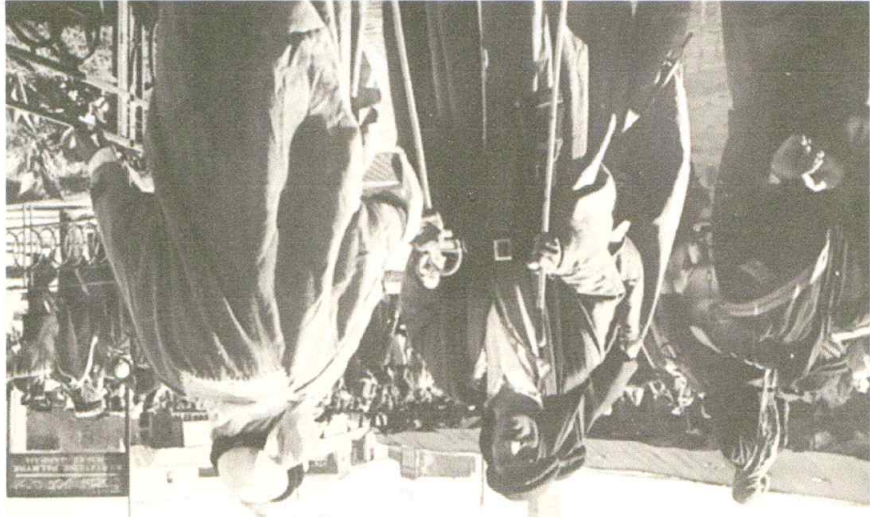


From another camp we
felt the full blast of a
Syrian winter. We slept
on bedboards and were
given an extra supply of
blankets.
With six persons to a
tent and the flaps
securely fastened down,
we were much warmer
than we'd been near
Homs with the bitter

Now we were going home, though we didn't realise it at the time. Reported plans to land us at Java were discarded, if in fact they were true. An advance those 1914-1918 blinkers had to be removed.

than to be able to sit on top of the hills of Greece and spot enemy guns! But could have been more suitable for our slow, relatively static type of warfare advances were frightening. The Greek experience had not come off. What

and their rapid
entered the war
Japanese had
home. The
Curtin wanted us
to use us, but
Churchill wanted
learned later that
somewhere? We
we to be sent
happening! Were
something was
At last,



*Market scene at
Homs*



party had landed there with the famous surgeon Weary Dunlop and had become prisoners of war. With our guns and equipment we were thought necessary to defend Australia. Back to where we started!

Bedouin camp.



In early 1942 we moved to a camp in Palestine. In no time we were busy nailing down wooden cases with our stores and equipment. We were certainly going, going somewhere, and the mood was buoyant. Anything but repetitive exercises and inactivity! No one was to blame for that. It was just the way things turned out. Had the Japanese not entered the war we would probably have been fighting in Europe. And had we fallen into the hands of Germans we'd probably have met the fate of a Canadian unit of flashspotters. They were surrounded by the enemy and executed to a man, but that was towards the end of the war somewhere in the Bulge, I believe, at a time when forward movement was being delayed.

After about a month of packing, I was selected to take a baggage party to Suez, with three mates. Did someone have confidence in my dependability? If so, that judgement proved premature. When the loading of our stores was completed we had nothing to do! No word from our unit. Had it been sent to the desert, leaving us stranded? No such luck! We waited and waited. At night we sauntered off to a café for a drink and a meal. Well satisfied, someone suggested seeing a Can-Can! We had no trouble in tipping an Egyptian lad to give us directions and we set out on a dusty track. We'd gone about a mile when we heard the tramp of marching feet. 'About turn!' came an order, and we responded accordingly. It was a picket of Australians sent

to the Can-Can to safeguard the health of their mates. 'We were only going for a look,' we complained.

We sat out several more idle days until Cairo beckoned. Why don't we hitch a ride? Only eighty miles from Suez! Early one morning we strolled out until a truck came along. 'Going to Cairo?' we asked. The driver warned against it. There were Military Police everywhere. We'd be picked up. We persisted. He was a good sport and took the risk.

We lay flat down on the floor of the truck and pulled a tarpaulin over us. In no time we came to a security post and after a quick glance the sentry waved us through. We were on our way!

Nothing very interesting en route except sand and Egyptian villages, all looking impoverished like those in southern Palestine. We reached Cairo, had a glimpse of pyramids before we saw busy streets, large Coptic churches and mosques, then alighted. We were besieged by swarms of begging children. We strolled along a dirty street with people swerving to avoid each other like an army of ants, saw nothing likely to be interesting after the old Middle Eastern cities, then tipped an Egyptian boy to show us the way to the British recreation centre, the NAAFI. We had avoided MPs and without any leave pass we'd have been in some difficulty had we been questioned. Inside the large quarters of the NAAFI we relaxed. No one had any questions. We sat at a table and ordered drinks and a meal. We were well satisfied and felt like staying for the night, but it was 2.30 pm and we had eighty miles of return road with no clear way of getting back. We had not long to wait until a truck came along. It was from a naval depot. The driver would take us, but he'd be turning in six miles short of Suez. We took the truck. After all, what was a route march of six miles to us?

When we alighted we walked past a sentry post, explained that we'd been out for a stroll, reached our tent only to find that it was bare! Had we made a mistake with our tent? We checked. Our rifles had gone. That could mean a court martial. Our kit-bags, all our meagre possessions had been whisked away. Egyptian infiltrators? We had no idea. We were becoming alarmed.

We waited there, squatting on the bare sand. Not even a water bottle had been left. We looked about other tents nearby.

At about 11 pm in the dark someone called out 'Hey mates! We've got your gear!' He led us to a tent where we quickly found our places, and mercifully, above all, our rifles.

Reveille was at dawn. We had a quick breakfast, then marched immediately to the quayside to board our troopship. It was packed tight with troops, and in no time after boarding the ship we moved off!

We were still in the same unit, something that gave us mixed feelings. It wouldn't have been bad to have stayed, joined some other outfit for a change. But that wasn't to be.

Our troopship zigzagged much more and more frequently than had the *QEII*. We sailed close to the African coast as far as the eastern tip of the continent, then were on our own, it seemed, without even a friendly plane overhead. By now the U-boat threat was more sinister than it was a year or so ago.

I was fortunate to be able to spend the whole of the voyage in a life-boat, with a mate. We were given a Bren gun and ammunition, but no orders whatsoever. Had we seen any movement in the water, or in the sky, we'd have fired without orders. But nothing happened. In that lifeboat we had room to stand, sit down, move about a little, far more luxurious than trying to find sitting room on the crowded decks, where cards and two-up were again the obsession. We spent some of our time stripping the gun, cleaning it and reassembling it.

We had no idea where we were going, had hoped it would be somewhere in the old East Indies where we could oppose the enemy. Instead we found ourselves under the Southern Cross in Australian waters, and disembarked at Port Adelaide!

At the time I felt disappointed rather than relieved to be on home soil again, so much of life on the other side yet unseen! But that was an illusion. As we were to learn after the war, Churchill had tried to divert us to Burma, even when we were in the middle of the Indian Ocean! He saw Australia still as a colony, and so thought it within his jurisdiction to override our Prime Minister, John Curtin. Given our numbers and our resources in equipment, to say nothing of the difficulties of landing and reorganising against possible Japanese air attacks, it seems improbable that we'd have withstood the enemy at that time and those circumstances. In that light Curtin may well have preserved our lives.

Part 5: Back in Australia.

Here the mood was unwelcoming. The wharfies refused to unload our troopship. We had guns and ammunition on board, believed to be too dangerous to handle. There was no alternative than to do the job ourselves. My best mate, from Melbourne, volunteered to man a winch. He claimed to have had a little previous experience. I was on the wharf with others receiving loads as they were swung down. My mate had a truck hooked up, loaded with boxes of .303 ammunition. He swung it over the side and one cable snapped! The truck came crashing down as those of us on the wharf raced for cover inside a shed. It bounced up and down a few times and stopped. Not a round exploded. Had there been one, just one, it would have set off other rounds and there'd have been bullets flying unpredictably in all directions! The truck was a wreck.

We slept on the wooden floor of one of the wharves. At night we usually got a tram to Adelaide for a drink. Then, after a couple of weeks wondering if we'd ever be granted home leave, we were sent to Nuriootpa to pick grapes for German settlers. In one local Lutheran church there was even a portrait of Hitler! The irony did not escape us.

We were pleasantly surprised by the warm and hospitable farmers. They had been desperate for labour. The harvest had to be stripped or a year would be wasted. Army authorities surrendered to their pleas. After all, there was nothing immediate for us to do.

The work was demanding but in a couple of weeks was finished. We slept on concrete floors in different sheds, our meals delivered to us in hot dixies. Not a bad life, but what did we join up for?

After a week's home leave we were sent to Queensland. Did that mean we had a mission after all? Would we have to defend parts of our coastline against Japanese landings? For a time it made sense. But as the months rolled by, moving from camp to camp and eventually to the North Queensland tablelands, possibilities of another engagement seemed ever more remote. I was increasingly convinced that flashspotting was outmoded in the light of both Japanese and German mobility. We could have been retrained, converted to machine-gunners or anti-aircraft gunners, or used in a dozen different ways in action. Instead, we were left to stew, waiting for the boredom of inactivity to suddenly end as it had when we left Palestine for Syria. That end never came.

Our first camp back in Australia was near Esk, west of Brisbane, in relatively untamed cattle country, a tiny pub five miles away but hardly worth the walk. It didn't make a town, as one pubs are said to do. There was nothing else visible for miles.

I remember that camp chiefly from the OC's attempt to toughen us up, as he had done when we had reached our first camp in Palestine. There was a creek half a mile or so away with a pool deep enough for swimming. It was early winter. Diving into a Russian pool cut out of ice could not have been more freezing. I remember only one similar experience: with two mates before the war swimming across the Derwent River near its source at Lake St Clair, clothes held above our chests, when we found we had to get to the other side of the river.

Here we ran down in shorts, stripped off, and when we'd reached shivering point, ran back breathless. It was a bracing experience. But where was the Major? Some time later I thought of Siegfried Sassoon's lines on World War I:

*If I were fierce and bald, and short of breath
I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base.*

He wasn't as bad as that, quite clever mathematically in fact, but didn't he need toughening up too?

When renewed vigour began to pall, and the months of boredom rolled on, I had ample time to reflect on the anguish and torment of that drawn-out period of inactivity. We had our exercises of course, exercise after exercise, with some consolation in facing a novel situation each time. There were different hills to climb, a different mock enemy position out in front, different tasks of surveying and orientation for observation posts and plotting centre.

At times when chores were completed and no mock enemy guns fired, I dreamed of all the absurdities, the impossibilities in actual battle. How can I possibly reconstruct some of those daydreams after so many years? Now, they'd go something like this:

Hey, you on the other side! I want a truce. Won't be long. I want to concentrate, use my brain.

All right for you, with your bowl of rice, all you have to do is squeeze a trigger or ram in a shell. Anyone can do that. You're like Hitler's youth, trained to march, sing songs, salute, toughen up the body.

But this is brain work! You wouldn't understand. If I put a theodolite into your hands you wouldn't know what to do with it. As for a log book, you'd have to rewrite it before you could read it. That would take weeks. I can't wait that long.

But now, hey, stop it! Stop that firing! I've got to focus, see, concentrate. Have to take a reading, plunge the telescope to the opposite face, read again. Then I need twenty minutes to do some computing. All takes time. And please, don't think of overrunning me

with your numbers. Anyone can play that game – if they have the numbers.

Hey! Stop firing, I say. I'm thinking! If you interrupt I'll get everything muddled. Your part is simple. Mine is mathematical, complicated. You've got to understand. Stop it! Stop it! This is serious.

Takes time to penetrate your thick skull. How could you ever expect us to get our men into surveyed positions to observe with their directors? Can't be done in a flash. It's not like your firing. And cable has to be laid, connected from posts to plotting centre, without you seeing what we're doing. Slow, crafty work. That's something you would understand!

Besides, once we start we have to check everything. Are the posts correctly oriented?

Hey! Stop that firing! Listen for a moment, will you! You're too excited. One track minds. If rays don't intersect on our plotting board we have to ask posts to check orientation. Has to be right, see? No use having a bisection only. That could indicate any one of a number of possible positions for one of your guns.

Understand? You don't? Well, for Heaven's sake, just be patient. Hold that fire! How long do you think it takes to get the plotting board set up, ready to plot bearings from the posts? No idea? Well, I have. Could take half an hour at least.

You've just got to understand what brain work entails. Stop it!

Just listen to what I have to say. Is this a truce? Oh, what's the use!

I listen. Not a sound anywhere. Where's the war?

Yet momentary satisfaction came whenever I could use my computations to check theodolite readings, to reach agreement with a rewarding accuracy. It was satisfying on rare occasions to use a nautical almanac, check time for accuracy, then take a reading to a star such as Canopus or Achenar or Rigel, followed by a computation to deduce a bearing. But wait! Where's the war this time? Everything's quiet here. Is there a star war? Is that why my telescope was pointed upward?

No one can play the same game over and over again. Everyone needs a change. Marbles won't do all the time. Besides, I hadn't enlisted to play games.

Flashspotting as we knew it was best suited to hills. Any old hill wouldn't do, and we needed not one but perhaps several. We had to have a clear view in front. If the terrain had been designed for flashspotting we'd have had a number of table-topped mountains. These would have been ideal. We could

have set up a line of posts, minimising the possibility of error and making communication easier. Of course, the table-top would need to be wide enough for the posts to be suitably spaced.

In action, where were those hills likely to be? Where the likely safety for observers? And when there were hills, we'd need to get there first, before the enemy, except for the Germans. They didn't mind who got there, as long as it wasn't the Italians, their allies. They'd knock out anyone from the air. I could only live with flashspotting in a dream world. Now I knew why basic training was so much designed to block the mind, to instil unthinking obedience to orders. Then I could go out on exercise after exercise, have hills picked for me to be suit the exercise, go back to camp content, confident of a positive contribution to the war effort.

The public were not expected to think either. The army was top priority. Pastoralists were inconvenienced, stock had to be moved so that flashspotters could go in, with a mock enemy in front of them letting off flares to mark enemy gun positions. Those flares sometimes set off grass fires, and a few mock enemy with beaters couldn't always control them. The most high-minded of the pastoralists would probably waive claims for compensation. They may have had sons in the war, knew how important army activities were in the national interest. Knew better than I did, looking from the inside.

Yet the war that was so far away, so much beyond our reach, suddenly came to our doorstep. All the explosions, the rope ladder climbing over obstacles, the arduous tasks demanded by Canungra to test the spirit and the stamina in jungle training, all of these seemed to have a purpose. One of our officers was blown up; an attempt was made on his life! Someone had booby-trapped his bed with a grenade. When he pulled back the sheets the grenade exploded. Everyone thought he'd been killed. In fact he survived after months in hospital and a succession of operations. But the incident left a bad taste. Who could have done it? Understandably other officers were concerned for their lives.

Investigations failed to get to the bottom of it. One theory was that it was not an internal matter at all. Other units were camped nearby. Did someone with a grudge commit the offence, someone from another unit? Speculation ran riot. Had the officer married another's fancy?

On return to the camp, every member of the unit was interviewed by the OC. From my own long-standing service in the unit I was able to say with confidence that I knew all the other chaps very well, and simply couldn't contemplate anyone doing such a thing. The officer did not seem in any way to be the kind of person who would incite homicidal passions.

The only positive recollections I have of these back in Australia days were first, using a motorbike as a gun sergeant for reconnaissance work; and second, my efforts to transfer from the flashspotting artillery unit to something that promised action and adventure.

In learning to master the motor bike I had more than one spill as I rode it across paddocks where logs were concealed by the tall grass. I rode it up hills when I felt a surge of power under my seat. That was exhilarating, but the bike had a speed governor. The most frustrating experience was when I was on a road in blacksoil country. Combined with grass from the roadside the mud compacted under the mudguards. I'd go ten or twenty yards and the same thing would happen. I kept pushing the clogging mud clear with a strong stick. I completed half a mile of desperate pushing and trudging until after several hours I was presumed lost and a truck came to my assistance.

The remainder of 1942 after our return from the Middle East, the whole of 1943 and part of 1944 were periods of increasing frustration and disillusionment. Army command was under orders of their political masters. The Prime Minister probably negotiated with the American president, Franklin Roosevelt. General Macarthur could have used us in the Philippines. But who could blame Curtin? The Japanese had the trump card. What would they do? They kept us guessing and waiting. Curtin prevailed.

By 1944 I'd have done anything to escape from an artillery unit whose expertise was highly unlikely ever to be used again. That led to my second main recollection.

I wrote a letter to the OC asking for permission to be interviewed for the Z force. This was a specialised unit doing intelligence work in enemy territory, usually landed by submarine close to a coast, then somehow reaching the shore with the necessary radio equipment.

My application was successful for an interview. I was given leave to proceed to Brisbane and to meet an interviewing officer in Intelligence headquarters. That interview was so short as to be personally degrading. The officer told me immediately that the Z force was full and there was no further recruitment at that stage. Why hadn't he told our OC just that?

Many complaints had been made public about the quality of officers compared with other ranks. The simple fact was that the war had dragged on too long to be content with the haphazard officer recruitment at the war's beginning. General Blamey ordered a panel of senior officers to conduct tests for officer selection. General Blamey's GRO (General Routine Order) was that those graded A were to proceed for officer training 'at the earliest opportunity'. Was this my chance? Could I possibly when asked volunteer for duty away from my artillery unit?

The testing went on for several days. It was far more rigorous than I'd expected. Practical field tests came first. A slimy creek with polluted water had to be crossed. It had very steep banks and there was no possibility of simply taking a flying leap and hoping for the best. A branch barely long enough was lying on the bank. It was the only thing to use. In another test I was moved to a vertical quarry where it was necessary to raise a large boulder (supposedly of urgent significance). Since there was no track up and the object had to be raised somehow, what was to be done? The only solution was to cut steps and lift it step by step.

Another practical test was to measure our recall under stress. We had to run hard a few hundred yards until we came to a blackboard with a message on it. Panting and breathless by that time, we had only a few seconds to take in that message then run back and write down as much as we could recall. I think that we all found that much of the memory was erased under such pressure.

We had to submit to standard pencil and paper IQ tests, aptitude tests and personality tests, after which two psychologists interviewed us individually.

We had to shout appropriate commands in rifle drill. Such bellowing of commands I'd practised for long in my own unit. Every morning I'd been taking the whole unit for physical education before breakfast. Recently I'd been giving bayonet drill, shouting commands to indicate to what part of the body the thrust was to be directed.

A requirement without warning was to address all the rest of the assembled candidates from a stage. The topic was one of one's own choice. I remembered enough of Japanese history I'd been reading recently not to falter, but I'm afraid many others did. I wrote names on the blackboard confidently, without the chalk squeaking as it often did with beginning teachers. This test was sprung on us without opportunity for preparation.

Last of all every candidate was interviewed by the full panel of senior officers, most of the rank of colonel or above. Among the twenty or so were specialists from different branches such as Infantry, Artillery, Engineering, Intelligence and so forth. Only the Engineering officer seemed to rule me out. He asked me if I could assemble a prefabricated building, but my answer that I could if I had suitable plans did not convince him. To avoid Flashspotting I'd nominated Intelligence 1, Engineering 2. I tried to impress on the Engineering officer that I could use a theodolite and was familiar with other basic surveying equipment. I answered all questions put to me by the Intelligence officer and others, and all in all was as satisfied as I could be with the interview. With that battery against me I could have been shot to pieces. Most of the officers were sympathetic. One brigadier asked me if I liked Kipling's poetry. He seemed well pleased with my answer that

although it was not subtle in thought it had a martial rhythm and was very enjoyable to me in the military situation. Did I have no more than one to support me?

When all the testing was over, I wasn't confident of success, because out of the hundreds of applicants at any one time, probably fewer than five per cent would be successful. At the outset an officer had addressed us all and frankly admitted that many existing officers would not pass at the high standard that was necessary because of the small number of existing vacancies for officers, and the impracticality of having a large number of supernumeraries. We had accepted his explanation.

Each candidate was interviewed the next day before returning to his unit. My turn came. 'Intelligence A, Flashspotting A'. I was pleased to be A, one of a handful out of hundreds, but the thought of officer training had little appeal, and I still had the albatross of Flashspotting around my neck. Could I shake it off? I made it plain that I preferred to wait for that 'earliest opportunity' in Intelligence.

Part 6: To Borneo

Photos taken from fighters or reconnaissance planes.



End of a Japanese ship



Jesselton airstrip before the landing.



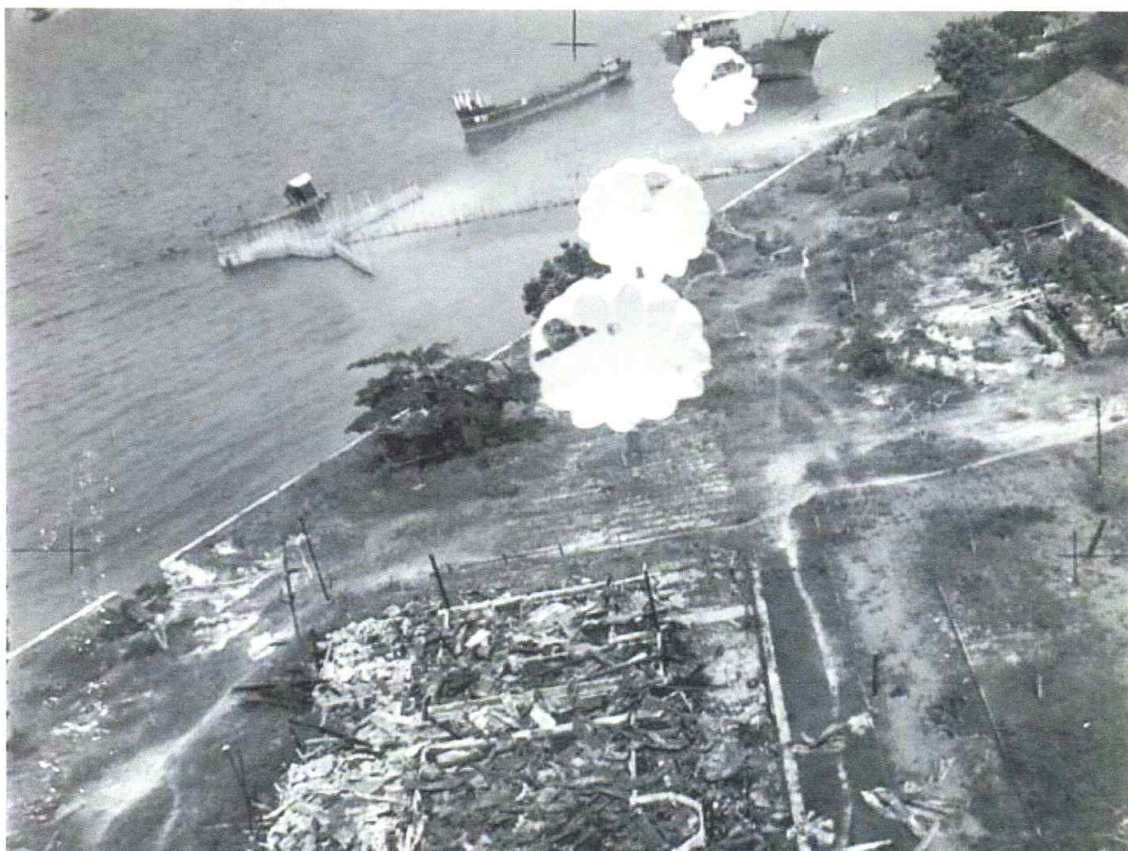
Sandakan



Sandakan Prisoner of War camp



Above: bomb crater; below, parachute bombs



My opportunity to escape flashspotting did not come in a hurry. I waited until the eve of the Morotai-Borneo adventure when I learned that I had been posted to a photo interpretation unit. To a point that was interesting, and required no training. All I had to do was to get used to reading long K17 photos (almost eighteen inches long), which were taken vertically from US planes. Two of these, taken from separate runs of the same target area, though a short distance apart, then positioned under a stereoscope, gave important three dimensional views. From flat, barely featureless terrain, ground objects were given height.

It was simple, untechnical work, compared with flashspotting. One reader's guess of what was seen as dark patches, for instance, was almost as good as anyone else's. Much of the interpretation proved false. Sometimes it was misleading such as reporting an enemy ack-ack gun on the edge of an airstrip only to learn later that it was a dummy. Suspected bunkers sometimes proved no more than hollows in the ground.



Native gardens

At least I was on my way. I had said farewell to the artillery doldrums, and as I soon learned in my new environment, I was going overseas again at last! But a bombshell fell. I was advised, along with others, that all those classified A in officer preselection could not proceed to embarkation. They were to remain in Australia, proceeding at once to officer training. I kept my

mouth shut and left in a truck for Townsville where we were to embark for Morotai. I had averted possible disaster. I could have been posted as an officer to my flashspotting unit! Again, I'd escaped by the skin of my teeth.

Our ship was very basic, something like the *City of London*. My berth at night was against several hot pipes straight from the engine. It was impossible to sleep there. I stretched out on the deck for fresh air.

We reached New Guinea, passed Lae and then Finschhafen, a delightful deep harbour that reminded me of Trincomalee. Despite Japanese occupations here and there we followed the coast northward to Hollandia – nothing but jungle, low hills and small native clearings.

We disembarked at Morotai without sighting a Japanese plane or apparently being targeted by an enemy submarine. Intelligence regarding departure times, fooling the enemy with delays of a day or two, may have helped. The thought recurred that what would be better for the enemy than to take out a troopship loaded with men and supplies on the open sea! I learned later that an Australian hospital ship had already been sunk off our eastern coast with total loss of life.

Morotai was all jungle at our allotted camp site. We had to hack clearings with machetes for our tents. Mosquitoes were lively. This was a planning site for Borneo landings at Balikpapan, Tarakan and Labuan Island off the North Borneo mainland. My destination was Labuan.

We contributed to the intelligence gathered from a variety of sources with interpretations of doubtful appearances on aerial photos. None of the intelligence, including ours, could be guaranteed, unless there had been checks and counterchecks. Validation was often impossible, made more difficult by conditions of war. But what we gathered was better than nothing. Since I was to be the sole photo interpretation person at Labuan I took with me from Morotai a map of the relevant landing area with as much detail as I could plot on it. My equipment for Intelligence was no more than a scale and a portable stereoscope. Otherwise I was fully armed as an infantryman, but liable to be called on at any time for intelligence duties.

Morotai was remarkable for its tropical heat, frequent downpours and generally sweaty conditions. The Japanese had been mostly cleared from the island by the time we arrived, except for one American battalion which was reported as successfully mopping up. They had come across a Japanese nurse, used either legitimately as a nurse or as a comfort woman. She weighed only four stone when brought in, and died soon after, completely emaciated by malnutrition and perhaps riddled with disease as well.

We embarked for Labuan on an American ship, the *Rocky Ridge*, with the very latest radar equipment, according to reports. There must be something

very important ahead of us! Never had I been in an engagement of this size before. I found myself in a convoy of eighty ships of all shapes and sizes. I felt relatively safe, except for a possible air strike or a stealthy Japanese submarine attack, but it seemed that our protective electronic cover was as efficient as it could be at that time.

Destroyers kept racing back and forth around the perimeter of the convoy, like alert and well-trained sheep dogs. We proceeded at a relatively slow pace, around the northern tip of Labuan and within easy sight of part of the Philippines.

When we stopped some miles offshore, the dense convoy had already unravelled. Our troopship with its burden was alone except for American and Australian cruisers, destroyers and other vessels, no longer close to us but deployed in various nearby locations. The night before disembarkation the CO of the campaign addressed all troops seated on the floor of a large auditorium on the ship. I recall his words: 'There are six hundred Japanese on the island. We will kill them all!' Some of them did in fact escape to the mainland under cover of darkness, seizing whatever Malay fishing craft they could lay their hands on.



On the morning of the landing reveille was at 3 am. We had a very small breakfast, donned our basic gear with webbing pouches packed up with ammunition, rifles and bayonets, and waited and waited and waited. At about 7 am we were ordered to prepare for our landing craft. As we looked out at the water we could barely see the island. It was covered with dense smoke

Hand-drawn map of Ransay Pt. showing various military and geographical features. The map includes labels for 'C/D GUN POSN. UNOC', 'POSS PILLBOX', 'SUB-STATION (CABLE)', 'Ransay Pt', 'COPRA PLAIN', 'Lever', 'ROAD', 'Cable', 'CHANN', 'PERSONNEL', 'CAMP', 'HILTON', 'SUB-SEA', '4-2', '5', '6', '7', '8', '9', '10', '11', '12', '13', '14', '15', '16', '17', '18', '19', '20', '21', '22', '23', '24', '25', '26', '27', '28', '29', '30', '31', '32', '33', '34', '35', '36', '37', '38', '39', '40', '41', '42', '43', '44', '45', '46', '47', '48', '49', '50', '51', '52', '53', '54', '55', '56', '57', '58', '59', '60', '61', '62', '63', '64', '65', '66', '67', '68', '69', '70', '71', '72', '73', '74', '75', '76', '77', '78', '79', '80', '81', '82', '83', '84', '85', '86', '87', '88', '89', '90', '91', '92', '93', '94', '95', '96', '97', '98', '99', '100'. The map is annotated with red lines and numbers, indicating specific points of interest and routes.

Hardly, it seemed, at least we couldn't have done so well. We had no landing craft of our own. We used those on loan to us. They were very manoeuvrable, powered sufficiently to sweep us to shore as speedily as possible. The start was like a regatta. We set off in waves of six or eight landing craft, flagged to start together and to reach the beach simultaneously. If it hadn't been so serious with a great unknown ahead beyond the smoke and haze, it would have been ironic, organised as though for a sporting event. But at the time we were anxious, full of foreboding.

As we stepped from the troopship on to a landing craft we were handed two Mills grenades each, asked first if we knew how to use them. I certainly did, had used them more than once in training.

Our landing craft was constructed for going over shallow water. Its apron could be raised over water to protect us from enemy fire. It was let down in the same way as a ferry apron is lowered. These I had known so well in crossing northern rivers in New South Wales in the 1920s as a boy. When the apron was lowered for our landing, we stepped into about a foot of water and made our way. There was no one there to guide us, no one to direct. It was again 'every man for himself'.

The smoke from falling bombs was thick, displacing, it seemed, much of the tropical air, and simply hanging there. We choked, soon stumbling around with depleted energy. An unnecessary encumbrance was the steel helmet. It was useful as a protection against shrapnel, but there was none here, so most of us dropped them and used the felt hats we carried on our epaulettes. To make life a little more tolerable we took full advantage of the green coconuts that had been bombed to the ground, opening them with our bayonets. That sustained us as we pushed ahead.

But wait! This is war, isn't it? We blinked, pushed out of the cordite smoke cover up to the higher ground. We looked about, heard the whiz of random rifle fire, but saw no enemy. Most had fled before the early onslaught.

We came to an obstacle to the main infantry thrust. It was a large bunker, called 'the pocket', large enough to hold even a hundred enemy. How many it held we would never know, because it was blown to smithereens.

Grenades were of no avail. Not even withering heat from a flame thrower could dislodge the enemy or force a surrender. An Australian cruiser, *Shropshire*, was standing off a few miles away. Her gunnery was so accurate that when called on she fired round after round at the bunker as our troops withdrew to a safe distance. The result was devastating. The bombardment from an eight inch gun continued for almost an hour in late afternoon. Japanese losses were estimated as about a hundred. Fragments of bodies were scattered everywhere – hands, feet, pieces of skulls. I might have felt

shocked had the pieces been put together. But here they were just things, disembodied objects like those in an anatomy showcase.

Early next morning it was apparent that a head-shrinker had been at work, for stuck on a post was the head of a Japanese, cheek bones taken out, reduced in mockery to a thing of nothing, without pity. Gruesome on reflection, but it wasn't then.

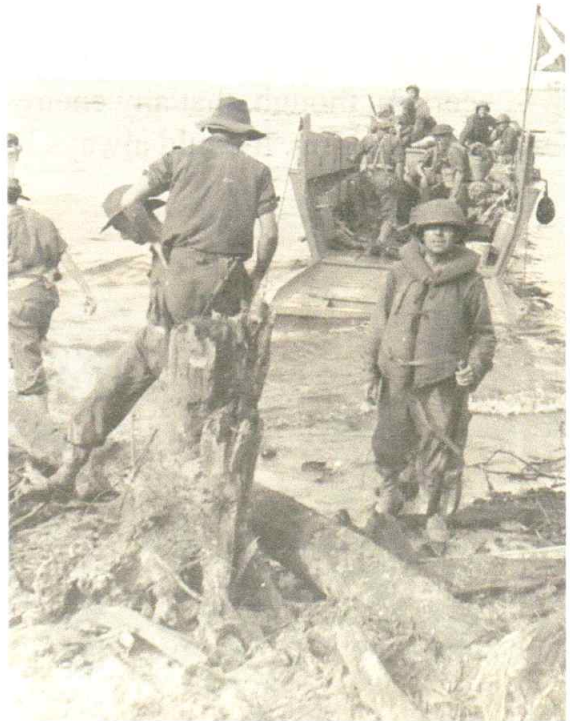
Padas River with Nipa palms

The days and nights ahead were often precarious. On one occasion I happened to be near the headquarters of the sub-commander on Labuan when suddenly repeated rifle fire cracked out. His HQ was above a cliff with a steep track which had been infiltrated by Japanese. On sentry duty were two 'Olds and Bolds', men too old for active service with the fast moving



infantry, but who were selected as keen-eyed marksmen. The firing became more and more intense in the darkness. We hadn't any idea whether it came from our sentries or from the enemy. When the firing ceased we found that several Japs had been killed on the track, bodies still there in the morning, one barely alive with a wan smile on his lips denoting his personal victory – death and a glorious hereafter for the Emperor!

A quieter photo. We left in a hurry from a similar landing craft.



Near the same headquarters on another occasion we were given warning of an enemy plane approaching. Our own radar in the harbour had picked it up long before it appeared, and anti-aircraft guns on the warships were ready for

action. It turned out to be a slow floatplane, heavily loaded with bombs. It dropped its load on harbourside installations. Reported casualties were over eighty. This attack coincided with infiltration by Japanese land troops.

The pilot himself had fulfilled his mission. When the plane reached the harbour and discharged its bombs, searchlights immediately went up. Then the plane was caught by intersecting rays. It ducked and weaved to escape. Tracer shells were bursting very close, but still it eluded destruction. At last when the game was up, it went low over the sea with smoke pouring from its tail. It turned towards land and then, instead of plunging into the sea, it came down as though for a landing on water. No more was seen or heard of it. A party went out next morning to look for wreckage, but nothing was discovered.

As I went forward with the infantry I found night time the most dreaded. The Japs were good at sneaking quietly towards our positions. That had been part of their training. Sometimes a string of small tins was fixed across a possible entry point. These would raise the alarm for our sentries whenever the tins struck against each other. It was not always certain, though, that any enemy were approaching. It could always be a monkey. Small spider monkeys were



everywhere. (Later, after the surrender, when we were in tents, the young would amusingly bond with a soldier, following him about, calling to him as if to a mother.)

Above: Japanese prisoner.

Left: Manager's house, Beaufort



*Jesselton railway
can be seen in the
lower right.*

It was slow going clearing the Japs from their hideouts, sometimes in bunkers, sometimes I believe sitting at the top of coconut palms ready to fire on us below, though



I didn't see any myself. One of my tasks in intelligence was to search empty houses for enemy. This was a welcome change, but we were well aware of its danger. Shortly before, an officer opened a door with drawn revolver and had been hit by a machine gun burst from inside. He was killed immediately. To guard against this fate, two of us together sometimes looked underneath buildings. They were always raised for coolness, often with wide-fitting bamboo slats for flooring. But as we might see an enemy by looking upward, equally we might be seen by an enemy with a machine gun looking down.



Another intelligence responsibility was to interpret photos. Commanding officers had sometimes been uncertain of what lay ahead and had called on me to resolve their doubts from aerial photos. I was even sought by the Commanding Officer, Brigadier-General Porter, on board the troopship from Morotai to Labuan. Another senior officer asked for me after the landing. Dark patches on photos sometimes caused concern. Were they bunkers? I had to be honest, I was no guru with superior judgement in such matters. They could have been natural depressions. I was on

firmer ground when asked to report on the extent of the damage to the metre-gauge railway line near Beaufort. I scaled it off with a fair approximation.

Photo interpretation had its uses, mostly in the planning stages of the campaigns. For quick decisions, approximations were good enough. Its main assistance was in its stereoscopic reports on heights of land formations or installations, again no more than approximations, but certainly of practical usefulness. On reflection, what a difference there was between such approximations and flashspotting! With a theodolite I could easily have measured heights with a high degree of accuracy. But who could carry a theodolite into battle? Who had time for trigonometry?

When it was clear that the enemy was no longer a threat on Labuan we were sent to the mainland at Beaufort with surrounding rubber plantations. On another American landing craft, though larger than our first, we crossed the stretch between Labuan and the mainland and entered the Padas River. Its banks were lined with tall dense nipa palms in parts. Crocodiles basked in places, quickly plopping into the water on our approach. Elsewhere were small village clearings, each with a few clumps of bananas.



At Beaufort there was spasmodic fighting. My clearest recollection here is of the neatly dug foxholes, perfectly cylindrical, with just enough room for one slim Japanese to crouch down and spring up with a grenade when he heard our troops approaching. (Foxholes such as these could not be dug easily at

Labuan because of the sandy soil. At Beaufort the loam was ideal for the purpose).

Suddenly, it was all over! Hiroshima was obliterated, with the most horrible consequences of the war. We still suffered a few casualties even after the Japanese surrender, because of inadequate enemy communication with their headquarters.



The troops crowded around to see the arrival of the Japanese plane and officer.





When the head Japanese officer arrived (seated at right) he was taken to the surrender ceremony by jeep trailer.

Brigadier Porter chatting with some locals after the Japanese surrender





Now, with the war in the Pacific over, I could relax, with an opportunity to observe some of the life about me, even if the original Palestine zest was irrecoverable. Restrictions removed, I could easily have found many uses for my curious camera. In this campaign I had to rely on official photos that mostly ignored the life of the people.

Before returning to Labuan I had the opportunity to use the recently restored railway. Parts of the track that had been damaged by bombs or enemy action, were repaired, and instead of the old locomotive that stood idle at Beaufort

station and that was probably so rusted up over the inactive years as to be unusable, Australian engineers had removed the wheels from a jeep and fitted locomotive wheels.

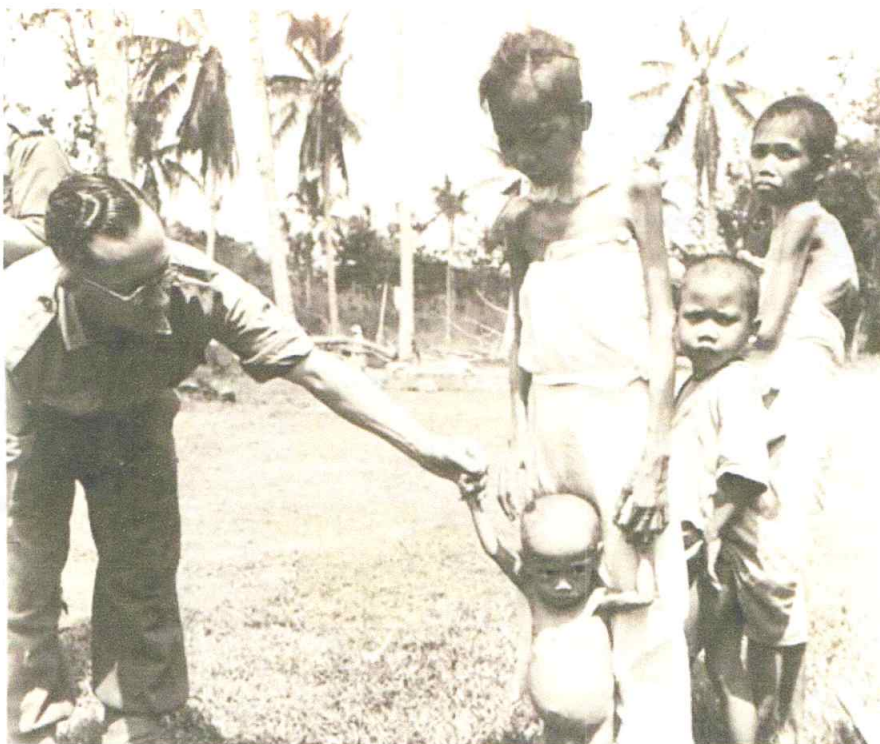


Jeep at Beaufort Station (left); rail track to Jesselton (below)



The transformation worked like magic. With rifle over my shoulder, I jumped aboard a flat-top along with a crowd of Chinese and natives and made my way to Jesselton, passing through rubber plantations, bypassing small villages with their ricefields and gardens, and safely negotiating low-lying parts covered with water. At Jesselton I alighted and walked alone. Apart from a few European homes on a ridge overlooking the sea, most of the houses were either in the water or at its edge: fishermen's houses.

I wanted to check Jesselton airstrip after seeing it on photos. The bomb craters in the sand were each filled with clear water, each crater almost perfectly circular. On the edge of the strip were remains of planes, but most interesting of all was a well-carved anti-aircraft gun, exposed for all to see. But how foolish of our intelligence to be taken in by such deception! Why would such a gun be exposed? Why wouldn't it be hidden under camouflage nets or at least covered with branches of trees?



There were pitiful signs of malnutrition and disease about Beaufort, such as a young child barely able to stand, its spleen enlarged by the malaria parasite, and a Javanese girl suffering from malnutrition (overleaf).

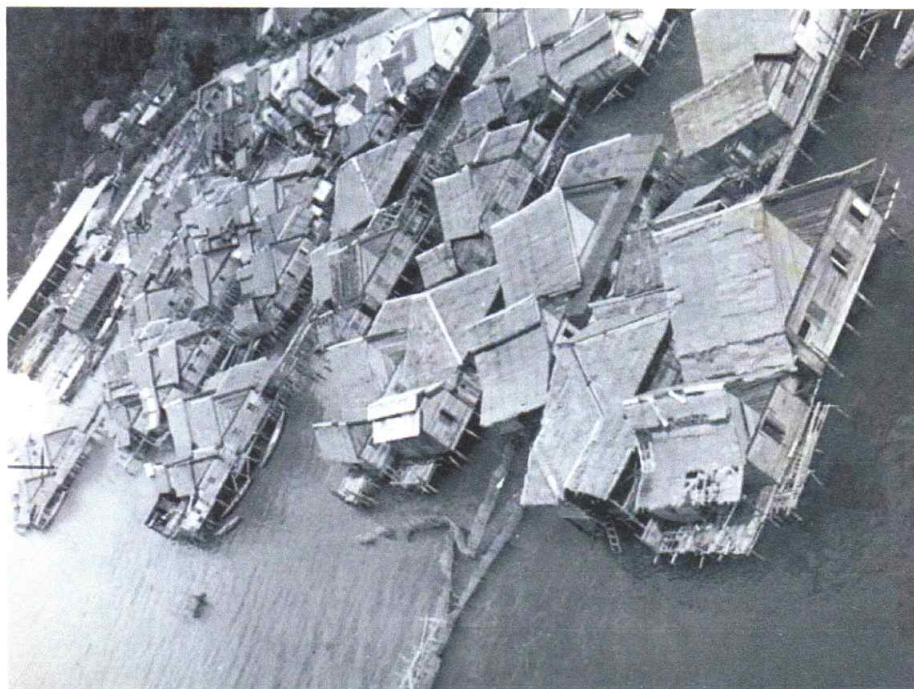


I spent some hours in Jesselton, now the very popular tourist resort of Kota Kinabalu, with its modern hotels. Soon after I returned to Labuan and was there for the official Japanese surrender. Photos show the surrender plane on the airstrip, with troops crowding around, some angry, but most self-contained enough except for an occasional jeer. Anger did spill over however, on one occasion when an infantryman whose brother had been killed in the fighting pulled the pin from a grenade and dropped it into a POW compound. Two or three were reported killed, though I was not an eyewitness to that tragically

unnecessary event.

Sandakan housing, over the water; fish traps at the front door!

Unexpectedly I was called out from my tent one day only to find there an officer from my old flashspotting battery. He had been chosen to lead a small party over the route of the infamous death march



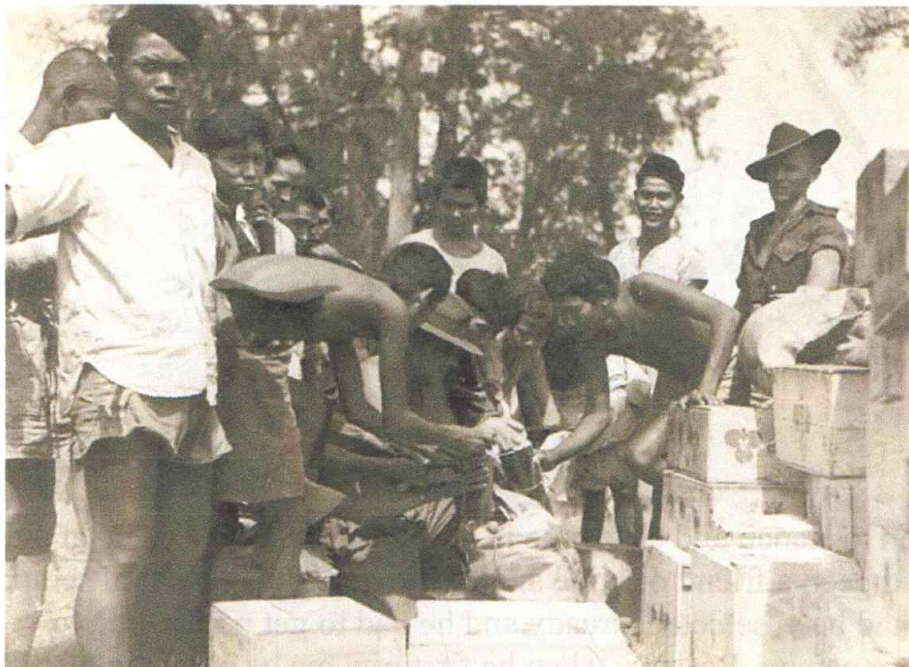
from Sandakan to Ranau and asked me to join the group. I accepted at once because he had been a friend of mine and had got me out of several scrapes, but the party had been selected already and he had to get permission to include an extra person. Besides, when he first saw me he commented that

I'd lost weight, and I told him of an illness I'd had. That may have been a factor, too, in my exclusion. I had in fact lost almost five stone at the end of the campaign, unable to keep food down for weeks. The treatment in a large CCS tent (Casualty Clearing Station) was 48 sulphaguanadine tablets in three lots of sixteen each, after which the patient was returned in a day or two to the field). There was no pathology, and sulpha compounds were the best available at the time. My papers indicated that I had had cholera/dysentery, looking much like conjecture.

I met the officer when he returned. He told me that the party had seen nothing of value, only bones scattered by wild pigs.

The photo interpretation branch of Intelligence was disbanded. I was transferred to the 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion, some of whom were assigned the task of caring for Allied POWs released from Changi. Often I walked along the beach to this rehabilitation camp. Dutch males were re-clothed from their prison rags in jungle greens and slouch hats. They seemed in good health, walking proudly erect. They said they were ready to resume their missionary work.

Dutch nuns were dressed in habits of their order, presumably flown over to them. I met only one at close quarters. It happened that a native boy had begged a ride on a water truck that had been used for repairing the Labuan airstrip. (Coral sand watered and rolled made a foundation as firm as concrete). The driver foolishly tried to thrill the boy by braking suddenly now and again. When the boy fell, a rear wheel passed over his head. The nun and I were both on the spot. It was she who acted at once, though there was clearly nothing to be done in resuscitation. She went to the water's edge, cupped her hands and washed the misshapen head clean of sand.



*Distributing a
sugar ration*

On reflection, it certainly was a pity I had no camera. I could have recorded the Jeep train going to Jesselton, the native homes by ricefields and down in the water at Jesselton, villages between Beaufort and Jesselton such as Papar, swamps, rubber plantations, fox holes, the sweep of the sea and islands from Jesselton's high ground. Then there were native women by the seashore on Labuan, pounding touba roots and squeezing the milky sap into pools of small fish before scooping them into their baskets as they floated, stunned, to the surface. There were the Dyaks by the Padas River, waiting to sell a dagger to some Americans. I got in first, paid them in cigarettes (I did not smoke, but collected my ration), and in cash. I had learned a little of their language. The Dyaks told me the dagger was 'Taoon, Taoon', very old. It had a small hollow in the hilt for dried blood in head-hunting activities. I still have it. And there were the three American Japanese on loan to us in Intelligence for translation purposes. They had been paraded before the battalion so that they would not be fired on in error despite their uniforms. I had found them of doubtful value, never certain that they might be protecting Japanese nationals on the enemy side. When I searched bunkers for information their inevitable reply was 'No use!' Some of it was very interesting to me personally such as the map in red of Japan's Co-Prosperity Sphere which included Australia, but I had no alternative to accepting their negative translations. Perhaps my suspicions were unfounded. I lacked evidence.

There was little to do in Labuan except swim in the unrefreshing luke-warm sea. Army amphibious vehicles, DUKWS, were made available for excursions to Kuraman Island, a few miles offshore. With only a few inches of freeboard, I was relieved that the sea stayed calm for both crossings when I went over.

On Kuraman we found the remains of a shattered lighthouse with large lumps of prismatic glass on the ground. The water was so clear that two of us stripped off and practised racing from the clean cool sand and diving in. We competed to see how far we could go under water, foolishly ignoring the possibility of a lurking tiger shark. Natives on Labuan had told us that sharks had been driven off by 'Bom Boms'. We took their word.

Part 7: Home and Demobilisation

Late in January 1946 my call came for my return to Australia. Some troops had returned by air, sea or warship. My luck was a small coastal trader called the *River Clarence*. Had she ever gone as far as Grafton? I wondered.

I could not have been luckier. Seas remained smooth. We returned around the northern tip of Labuan, then southward, weaving our way between lush green islands of the East Indies, soon to be reclaimed in a war of independence against the Dutch colonials and to become the Republic of Indonesia. Sea-life was fascinating. Now and again an orange sea serpent would turn about and swiftly disappear as we approached. Fights at sea between shoals of fish and attacking sharks were numerous. Sea turtles floated by. It was a first-hand zoology lesson, easily the most fascinating experience at sea I've ever had. Towards the end of this voyage we anchored off Thursday Island but had no permission to land. When a pilot came on board he took us close to the Cape York coastline. Here there was nothing much to see except a line of low sandhills and beaches, sometimes broken by rocky outcrops.

So that was that! Back home! My demobilisation came near the end of January 1946. I had time to reflect, as I've often reflected since. The army had changed over the years. That early mateship had somehow lost its lustre. Some of the original unit had become ill, had found an early way out. The zest for adventure had been tamed by months, years, of simply waiting, waiting for the thing to happen that we had joined up for. There's nothing like frustration to destroy an ethos. Yet that early ethos, if truth is to be told, had been fortified in Australian pubs.

It seemed to me, on early reflection at the end of hostilities, that I had had insufficient relief from monotony, except for the early days in Palestine, my good fortune in the Jerusalem leave, our Sunday adventures in Syria such as the dare-devil taxi drive from Baalbeck to Becharré, and the opportunity to see Damascus, Galilee, Jericho and the Dead Sea. Back in Australia the daily prospect had seemed erodingly dull. But there were exceptions.

When our artillery had wanted to practise firing over open sights an area had been chosen near Coolum, now a fashionable recreation area with an international golf course. Then it was considered wild pig country, made up of sandy creek crossings that would bog our gun carriages, and vegetation that was almost useless even for cattle grazing. We had to cut down trees, cut saplings into lengths and lay them close together in 'corduroy' crossings over shallow creeks. For reward we were given a week's rest with our tents pitched on Noosa Beach! I remember a house near the entrance then, but

nothing else but an unbroken beach. We had drunk beer in the evenings. At that time we needed it. We were all dehydrated.

Further, we had organised a boat race on the Noosa River, from the present Noosaville to the heads. We had flat-bottomed boats, fishing boats, all so heavy that each boat needed a crew of two, one person rowing till his arms felt like falling off, then handing over to a mate. At the end of it there had been more beer.

We had been sent to Canungra for jungle training. That must be it at last, we had thought, New Guinea or islands to the north! It had been a tough course, but quite tolerable as long as there was hope. Explosives had been discharged close to us, bullets had whizzed past our ears. Did someone think that we were like horses, needing to be accustomed to such shocks? Were we seen on the same level as Light Horse in World War I? High hopes had been buoyed up soon after. We were divided into small parties to make our way through jungle similar to New Guinea's, every now and then jerked back in our stride as we fell victims to the thorny 'Wait a while'. Sure to go somewhere now, we had felt on return to camp. But nothing had happened.

Now and then an army school had been a diversion, especially in the Weapon Training School I recall. I had familiarised myself with Bren machine guns, a variety of sub-machine guns such as the 'Tommy', stripped them, assembled them, fired them; had even fired a Bazooka from the shoulder and experienced its powerful recoil as I fired it at a heavy armour plate and pierced it, as I might have pierced an enemy tank. I had thrown grenades into a concrete building, waited for the explosions, dived through an open window with bayonet at the ready. Again, confidence developed then had never been used in action.

Part 8: In Retrospect. Changing War Impressions.

Ah, youth! Youth indeed! It takes a Conrad to extol its virtues, capture its ebullient and soaring spirit. As for me, as I reflect on the war years youth does not emerge untarnished. For what I recall is a youth of dreams, a youth of restless feet, fundamentally a self-seeking youth, a youth of discontent, a youth of petulance at times, a youth subject to peer-group pressures and complaints, some wildly irrational, influenced by a mood that could sweep and engulf a unit like a virulent disease.

At least on the surface, one of the most profound statements in human thought is in the two simple words on Apollo's temple at Delphi: 'Know Thyself'! To the extent that this is ever possible, does this lead me to the truth about the war? That I can never claim. However close I get to it I am not philosopher enough, in Plato's ideal sense, even to glimpse things exactly as they really are or were. Any tendency towards overconfidence is curbed by a universal reminder from Jane Austen: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken'. (Emma)

In the war years I have made many comments which in the present light appear ill-informed, immature, lacking dimension. I have learned many things about myself, but any assertion that I see myself now free of distortion would be pretentious, as it would be in any other person. One thing emerges above all else though, that some of the things I have said would have been better not said, or at least would have been better amended in the light of unforeseen complexities and prejudice.

'The well-adjusted organism would be silent' said E M Forster (A Passage to India), but it is probably better to present a slanted statement, even one that is slightly mistaken, than none at all. So as I erase some of my early impressions, try to straighten out some and to eliminate others, I see no point in being silent. In the account that follows, I do not claim strict impartiality. I cannot be completely objective, cannot stand aside from the subjective Self. I'm at the centre as I write, so I concede that my account of the war based on recollections and amendments is inevitably about myself as well as about the war.

Now and again I realise that when criticising others I should at the same time have directed the spotlight onto myself. I realise now how difficult it is to be honest when writing about oneself, how difficult it is, for example, to resist an impulse to present one's recollections in a light favourable to the Self. I believe that the self-image is the most important part of the human psyche. Often quite unconsciously it is protected from damaging criticism, or given unwarranted support. Is it not at the very heart of the fundamental self-

interest that impels most of our behaviour, an active force of which most of our lives we may be at best only dimly aware?

In the following comments I shall try to lift the veil of the Self, to draw attention from others to the observing Self whenever appropriate. I shall begin with the comments I have made on others, especially on what I have seen as others' shortcomings. I have observed others' vanity in leadership roles, for instance, and I have fastened critically at other times on what appeared then to be moral collapses.

To illustrate, quite unexpectedly and not long after I had landed, I saw General Macarthur and General Blamey stride side by side to the tent of our recently established command post. At the time I asked myself why Australians were not trusted to conduct the land campaign themselves. Whose show was it? I wondered. It seemed to my sceptical perception that Macarthur knew, and wanted others to know too. Was that a reasonable reaction?

Isn't it simply human nature for a commander to be proud in those circumstances? How would I have acted had I been, as Macarthur was, in charge of all the land forces in the Pacific? Besides, since Macarthur had committed considerable initial aid to the invasion of Labuan, isn't it understandable that he should be interested in the progress of the campaign? From the complexity of the situation I had prejudicially excluded the fact that the air pounding beyond the island's landing beaches was both efficient and thorough. Those planes were American, with American crews. They were not missing their targets, though some Australians at the time were apt to be derisive of Americans in action, falsely construing occasional errors as typical.

My summary condemnation of Macarthur had been largely speculative. What the truth is about the charges of jealousy commonly levelled against him, I do not know. But if these were true, with Macarthur wanting the world to know that victory in the Pacific was fundamentally an American victory, under his leadership, could that attitude be fairly claimed as 'a grievous fault', to use Mark Antony's words of Caesar? How far from the truth was this claim of the American contribution?

Similarly, my first impression of others' frailty in battle I see now as superficial. On the American troopship to Labuan one soldier started to scream and howl. Some said he'd 'gone tropo', meaning that he'd fallen victim to the heat and stress of the tropics and to the anxieties of an imminent engagement. I suspected then that it was an act to be hospitalised as a means of escape. Yet did I know this? What did I know of the psychiatric condition that may have led to this apparent collapse?

Again, what did I know of the situation in the Syrian campaign when one gunner left his post and went into hiding from a continuous barrage of enemy shells in one particular period? Was this transparent cowardice, or did I judge him too harshly with no evidence whatever on his mental condition? Everyone is afraid in battle, everyone anxious before the unknown. That is a natural condition, and it would be dangerous to be otherwise. With the spotlight on myself, how superior could I claim to have been? How different? Was I a model of courage, in full command of debilitating emotions?

Other early criticisms were similarly flawed, it seems to me now, in failing to bring together all the relevant facts in what were complex situations, flawed too in inadequate self-understanding. One area of such judgements referred to early training methods.

In our first camp at Greta NCOs seemed bent on reducing us to mindless automata. The apparent objective in sight was of a fighting force that would instantly and unquestioningly obey orders. I confess to feeling some resentment, to being indignant and not a little affected in claiming to have tertiary education, as half a dozen others had in our particular unit. I said to myself that the strategy of implanting implicit obedience through blunt and sometimes brutal domination could never work. I could never be made unthinking, uncritical. I refused to go on compulsory church parades, declaring them to be a denial of personal freedom.

Was the Self at this stage bordering on arrogance? Had I taken the trouble to reflect on the composition of my unit? While a tertiary education may have been useful in carrying out the specialized tasks demanded of a comparative few, there were others whose roles could have been performed with no more than an elementary education. There were drivers, linesmen, cooks, for instance, all of them competent enough for their particular tasks without any knowledge of trigonometry.

Further, the army as a whole was composed of a cross section of the population's eligible men. Had I come to terms with the fundamental importance of obedience to orders, acknowledging that for a minority of volunteers submission to discipline was likely to be a novel and sometimes a painful experience? These could not be segregated and trained separately. All volunteers initially faced a seemingly destructive and mindless barrage of orders.

Yet under the conditions of army training at the time, with limited resources in men and equipment, it is difficult now to see what alternative there could have been. My reaction, my criticism, my negative emotions, were all a product of my failure to find purpose and meaning behind the surface situation.

This distorted perception was probably influenced too by the nature of my artillery unit. The fundamental importance of obedience to orders may not have been so evident for a few who were entrusted with carrying out specialized tasks. But had I been more experienced in my own outlook, would I not have seen that such a situation was far from typical in the army as a whole, vastly different for instance, from that facing infantry moving forward almost daily over extremely difficult terrain, as in the land offensives in New Guinea.

There orders were terse, explicit, compelling. They may have been addressed by a general to his brigadiers; by these in turn to the battalion commanders; by these to company commanders, and so on. All of the orders required immediate obedience. Why had I not realised that they gave security to men in the field, instructed them in plain language what they were to do? Why had I not looked further to the possibilities without such obedience to orders - to the chaos of each commander testing the ground, formulating his own plan of action, groups fighting their own little engagements with no clear plan in mind for the way ahead?

I see now what I failed to see then, the purpose behind those early training methods. Obedience to orders along the whole chain of command from general to lieutenant to NCO's was not only obligatory, it was also logically necessary for any campaign to be able to move forward. General, brigadier, lieutenant-colonel, major, captain, lieutenant, each of these depended on the next lower in command to successfully prosecute the task allotted to him. A general may send an order to a brigadier to control a section of a coastline; the brigadier may send orders to his battalion commanders to control respective parts of the coastline; battalion commanders may issue orders then of an increasingly more specific nature to company commanders, they in turn to lieutenants, the last of these, for example, to take a patrol to ambush Japanese near a particular ridge. If a battalion, or any part of it, failed to obey orders and to implement them as effectively as possible, a whole brigade or division might ultimately be at risk. (Detailed illustrations of such orders are given in David Dexter: The New Guinea Offensives, Canberra. Australian War Memorial – eg p 505, an order to a general; p 603, an order to a battalion commander.)

There are times when the young mind is prepared to listen, other times when it may be unreceptive to advice or information, perhaps diverted by impatience to be away overseas, to begin a great adventure where the probable horrors were being selectively suppressed.

That reflection raises the question of my own values during the war. Did I enlist to oppose the very real threat of Hitler dominating the free world?

While conceding that motives may be mixed, which was the stronger motive at the time of enlistment and at least during the basic training period : the motive as a freedom fighter, or the motive to seek adventure, excitement, to see the overseas world? My curious camera had recorded scenes of Arabic life in Palestine and Syria. At the same time, had it not also left a record of an adventurous Self, with many interests outside military engagements.

In retrospect I have wondered also about compassion in the value core of the Self, as when I looked on enemy dead without a passing thought for the families they left at home; saw shell-shocked prisoners in a compound with exposed urinals in the middle, scarcely arousing even derision, much less any pity; looked without the smallest human recognition at the personnel of the Japanese surrender plane when it landed, surrounded and almost submerged by the victors pressing in on them.

I have wondered also why I should have been dissatisfied with my inactivity, with my own contribution as so infinitesimal against the dimensions of the total war effort that led to victory. As so many others had done, especially in artillery units, I had considered that if my general usefulness in the war had been averaged out to the hour or minute over the five and a half years and longer, how could it be assessed as a significant contribution? Much more conspicuous was the effort of those turning out machine guns in factories, and of those toiling on the land to keep the country fed.

I see now the shallowness of that perception. From the personal point of view it disregarded the fact that such a course of inactivity was not of my choosing, but was rather dictated by military circumstances over the years. Besides, how could any war be designed to maximize individual satisfaction? From a national perspective, certainly an army in waiting is a more formidable defence than no army at all. 'They also serve who only stand and wait' had more depth than my limited perception could grasp at the time. Throughout my criticism of the army while I served I am now impressed by how much I was thinking of myself, how fundamentally central to me was the Self-image, how little I seem to have thought of the national interest.

How that narrow perspective contrasted with Curtin's, as he resisted Churchill and demanded that Australian troops be held in readiness to defend Australia rather than be despatched to Burma or elsewhere! Why did I not acknowledge such political influence on the course of the war? The fact is that I knew too little of the cross-currents of personal ambitions, personal, political and military planning conflicts to understand that MacArthur was not solely responsible, if at all, for keeping us out of the Pacific war as long as possible.

I failed to see that with all the restrictions placed on Australian officers from General Blamey down, they had no alternative to obeying orders, to sitting and waiting themselves after the Middle East engagements. As for the unpreparedness of Australia for war in poor equipment, I had too summarily condemned instead of looking at the complexity of the situation. Where did the responsibility lie? Did successive governments allocate low priorities to Defence in their budgets? How little thought I had given to the size of the Australian population, to the number of taxpayers it depended on for its military and other resources! I have to admit to having been too little informed.

Another of my naive questions at the time was, Why do we not do what the Germans were doing? Why had we not learned the lesson of rapid progression with hundreds of tanks and swarms of supporting planes? I had not paused to ask where such equipment was coming from. I concluded that our military effort was guided by outmoded World War 1 equipment and strategies. Could we have done otherwise, matched German and Japanese mobility without adequate resources? It had been all too easy to condemn.

In the review of my war-time perceptions, I may have implied that because I am older, perhaps wiser by life-experience and continuing education, certainly better informed with the advantage of post-war publications, less influenced by youthful enthusiasms, my present perceptions are therefore truer, more dependable. That conclusion can never be taken for granted.

The main difficulty I see in attaining a stable and reliable perception of the war is in the Self. I am continually prompted to ask how genuine I am in the statements I make. If I could only cancel the Self, see things without its intrusion! But would not that Selfless state lead to silence, to statements without substance, or to no statements at all? How could any human assume such a state of perfect adjustment?

As far as I can judge, I seem to be as honest as I can be in stating that in my war experience I have no glorious deeds to relate, nothing to give pride to my children and grandchildren. Even that admission returns me to a Self that is sensitive, always aware of its standing.

I have never marched on Anzac Day. This I state with some diffidence and not a little perplexity. My reason, or rationalization, is that I have found nothing worthy of celebration in my experience of the war. I have looked on some of the marchers with a critical if not a sceptical eye. But what did I know of any of them? If they seemed to be flaunting their medals and marching with a swaggering air, enjoying the crowd's acclamation, did I know enough about them to challenge the grounds for their overflowing confidence? I had thought of Henry V's comments before Agincourt:

‘Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he’ll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day.’ (Henry V: 1V,3,49-51)

I have never condemned national days of remembrance for the fallen, acknowledging that these have a much wider and deeper significance than individual satisfaction. But when I comment that this significance seems to be lost in so many of the marchers, and in the subsequent self-indulgent story-telling with ‘advantages’, I have to concede that I am again speculating, without evidence.

On reflection I sometimes wonder if I am not unduly concerned with the status of the Self. Am I too Self-aware to attain a clearer measure of objectivity, one that is more balanced, more fair-minded, more rational? Is it pride that has influenced my attitude to Anzac Day? But what claim have I to self-pride when I state quite unreservedly that I have experienced no personal glory, no outstanding feats! Am I ashamed of a disproportionate amount of inactivity? Am I protecting a fragile Self? Why have I isolated myself? Is there a false modesty below the surface? I have no answer to these questions. I simply do not know.

In my early focus on war experiences I began with an assumption that the war was something out there to be caught hold of, as firm and graspable as a Bren gun or a grenade. That apparent irony is matched by another: that in my reflections sixty-five years on from the events, I have moved from the war to the observing Self.

There is in fact no contradiction here. Perfect sight is denied to all of us, but the clearest perception, I believe now, is attainable only when we are aware of the Self, both for its power to enlighten, and for its power to obscure.

As for youth, would I have seen things in the war years with less error, less distortion, if I had followed the Apollonian decree to Know Thyself? How far would I have succeeded? Would I have checked some of the presumption that characterised my attitudes at the time? The essayist Montaigne called presumption, with respect to humanity at large, ‘our natural and original disease’ (*Essays*, Ch XII, ‘Apology for Raymond Sebond’.) If that extends to the elderly, to those of sober judgement based on wide life experience, is it not likely to be more pervasive in youth? For feeding presumption then are tendencies such as impulsiveness and other emotional excesses, as well as overhasty denigrations flowing from ignorance of others’ abilities and powers.

Therefore I make no apologies for my youth. I do not blame myself for whatever impulses and misdirections it may have given me. I do not fall back on any authority, such as Montaigne’s statement on presumption, aware

that reasoning from a supposed authority is unreliable. His is a useful statement only inasmuch as it draws attention to what in common observation is prevalent in human behaviour. Is it more so in youth?

To condemn youth for what it is, is circular and absurd. Youth is youth. Reprehensible it may be for particular acts of folly, but certainly not for what it is. And Know Thyself also borders on an absurdity when applied to youth, especially if self-knowledge is thought attainable merely by effort. Perhaps I could have been a little less so than I was, but to take my youth away, to remove youthful qualities and transplant an older head on my shoulders would have been asking too much. It seems to me now that Know Thyself has little current relevance to youth, that its relevance is mainly to retrospective eyes. But then, who is to say that those older eyes see the truth? Do they not need a reviewer too?

Ah, Youth of those early perceptions! Youth of the wild and reckless spirit! Youth of change, Youth hungry for novelty, Youth indifferent at times to life itself! How the war years teased you with early opportunities, then suppressed you, horrified you, tormented you, gave you an extended sentence, crushed enthusiasm, then finally snuffed you out altogether!

