

CHAPTER XVII

BY UNDERGROUND TO LEROS

SEVERAL days later Colonel Philip Astley, the suave and debonair 1 Old Etonian, who was chief of Army Public Relations in Cairo, called me to his office for a conference. In the outer room I met his genial second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel Oakshott, into whose sympathetic ears I had poured the tale of woe about my unsuccessful efforts to get to Leros, up to the time when the Navy apparently went so far on the whole idea.

Oakshott said: "Do you still want to go to Leros, Marsland?"

Truth to tell, I was now not nearly so keen, especially after hearing what General Scobie had had to say. However, the kindly and well-intentioned Oakshott had apparently been taking a deal of trouble to "lay something on". Also, I had tried so hard and so long that it had almost become a habit with me. So I said: "Yes."

Oakshott then took me into Colonel Astley's room, where I met Captain David Crichton, who was to be my conducting officer, and Sergeant Wood, of the Army Photographic Unit, who was coming to take pictures. Crichton, like his commanding officer, was an Old Etonian. He was well over six feet tall, dark and serious, and wore thick-lensed horn-rimmed spectacles which were inclined to slip down his abbreviated nose. He proved an extremely conscientious conductor, and agreeable and determined companion. Incidentally he had once been a sub-editor on the *Daily Telegraph*. Astley then explained that I could go to Leros only on condition, in the event of a German invasion of the island, I would agree to the pooling of my story with all other correspondents in Cairo. If, however, the Germans did not invade Leros then I was free to reserve any feature article exclusively for the *Daily Telegraph*.

The newspaper proprietors had themselves arranged this pooling system, and although it had broken down at the first trial in the Middle East, I had no reason to suppose the newspapers had changed their policy regarding this sharing of news stories on occasions when it was only possible to send one man. In any case, I appeared to have Hobson's choice, so I agreed to Astley's condition. Sergeant Wood was to come with us as official photographer. The Colonel said that I must leave the island, with Crichton, at my own discretion to ensure that I provided the fullest possible eye-witness account to the newspapers of the world.

Both Astley and Oakshott seemed to think that it would be comparatively easy to send dispatches away from Leros by warship. Taking one glance at the map and the long-stretched, dangerous lines of communication, I could not agree with this. But there was little point in discussing it, we must go and see.

The Colonel then came out with the great secret, how we were to get to Leros. We were to embark at Alexandria in a Sunder-land flying-boat, and fly direct to the little island of Castelrosso, some 160 miles from Cyprus, and barely half a mile from the Turkish mainland. Then we were to proceed from there in a small naval vessel of some sort. It meant that we had to pass unhealthily close to several islands in German hands. The odds on being spotted and blown to Kingdom Come looked, on the face of it, extraordinarily high, but I had gone too far to draw back. The only thing to do was to "stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood". I drew what small consolation I could from the news that the Germans had sent no bombers to Leros for nearly four weeks. Perhaps, after all, they had decided that they could not afford to divert men and materials to the Dodecanese, and were abandoning the whole enterprise.

Oakshott said that, in the military view, Leros was a natural fortress, and should be much more defensible than Kos and the other islands that the Germans had captured. We parted with handshakes and their good wishes.

So next day, Saturday, November 6, Crichton, Wood and I motored down to Alexandria, launched upon an adventure which became more hazardous and melodramatic than any of us then dreamed. In Alexandria we spent the night at a desert transit camp, in charge of a genial major who carried out his thankless task with great efficiency. He equipped each of us with various items which had a rather unpleasant implication, such as mosquito ointment, water sterilising tablets, and, finally, a two-gallon water carrier. As some consolation, however, he told us we need not take gas-masks.

I slept on the ground, under canvas, for the first time since my trek to the Arakan front. In the mess a quiet, little red-faced Captain was pointed out to us, and we were told, with bated breath, that he was "Long Range Desert Group, from Leros". Naturally we were all extremely anxious to get the "low down" from him, but found that he was very taciturn, and all he could be * persuaded to say was that there were a few mosquitoes, that they were a "bit{short of water", that there was plenty of food, and that there had not been many air raids lately. Other officers at the transit camp regarded him with great respect, and the O.C, confided to me, out of his hearing, that they were "good chaps,

the L.R.D.G." They used his camp as the last jumping off place for the islands. This particular man had been through about four weeks previously, and was now returning with reports to headquarters.

Next morning we assembled on the parade ground with other officers who were also bound for Leros and Samos, mostly on Staff appointments. We were then taken in lorries down to the flying-boat base and, as usual, found that we had arrived there about three hours before our aircraft was due to take off. It was odd to see Italian pilots and ground staff, now generally referred to as "our gallant allies", working at the base with R.A.F. personnel.

On the door and the exterior of the wooden Army hut which, erected on a barren beach, served as the main office, various ruderies and sarcasms had been impolitely scrawled for the benefit of the Italians, such as "Will all wops read regulations 4 to 6?" Our fellow passengers included a Brigadier and a Colonel, but it was interesting to note that the priorities had not been arranged by rank, and that they did not head the list of passengers.

A three-engined Italian flying-boat was lying at anchor, and was apparently also being used for the trip to Castelrosso. There were two Sunderlands, and we noted that the one in which we were to travel had been painted a dazzling white. It seemed a curious style of camouflage.

We were officially allowed sixty pounds of baggage each, little enough, as most of the officers were intending to stay on the islands indefinitely. So when the weighing-in process began, everybody was found to have too much. Most of the officers overcame the difficulty by throwing out their camp-beds. Even then, the patient Squadron Leader calculated, we should be overloaded by several hundred pounds. The last passenger on the list of priorities was therefore required to stand down, and a Major, reluctant and protesting, had to return to the transit camp. Whether he ever reached the islands I do not know, but it may be that this was the best stroke of luck he ever had.

At last we were all stowed aboard, and the flying-boat was roaring across the calm Mediterranean which sparkled under a chrome-yellow sun. We were heavily laden, and the Sunderland seemed reluctant to take off. After an unconscionable time, we lifted clear of the seas surging past the windows. We had been pouring with sweat, and thankfully put away precious handkerchiefs as we climbed into cooler air. It was important to conserve handkerchiefs and all clean clothing, for it would obviously be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get washing done.

LONG ROAD TO LEROS

After about two hours' smooth flying we sighted a craggy coast which I failed to recognise, and declared to be Turkey. I was wrong, for our navigator identified it as the* western end of Cyprus. We had taken this roundabout course to time our arrival at Castelrosso at dusk. Castelrosso is only about eighty miles from Rhodes, and was under constant surveillance by German aircraft based there. We needed a certain amount of light for landing, but to contemplate an arrival in broad daylight in that lonely, slow flying-boat would have been highly risky. An hour later, as night closed down, we discerned the mainland, and Castelrosso, a limestone rock, like a more sharply rugged Gibraltar, rising steeply from the sea. We made an even landing among perilous rocks and shoals, gathered our belongings, and went ashore in a naval tender.

Negro soldiers humped our heavier items on to their broad shoulders, and, through the baffling darkness, we all stumbled in a follow-my-leader file up hundreds of stone steps, between deserted bomb-shattered buildings. We were finally parked by our guides in a large, bare and dirty schoolroom built in ornate Italian style and looking out on to a tessellated sunken courtyard.

On the verandah were ugly brown statues, made still more displeasing by the sabotage of some disapproving visitor. We managed to borrow a hurricane lamp from a Royal Artillery mess in a house not far away, and then sorted out our belongings, Crichton announced that he had lost his tin hat. Then we discovered that, in the confusion, we had got our battle bowlers exchanged at some point, and the one I had been zealously guarding as my own was, in fact, his, whereas mine was missing. So, after carrying the thing about for two years through many countries, I had mislaid my tin hat at the moment when I looked like needing it most. Crichton said magnanimously that I could share his, but in the meantime I picked a derelict object out of a waste-bin.

We fed on typical Army food in the hospitable Royal Artillery mess where we found that the* island was in the throes of an invasion scare which, in that isolated, alien outpost caused much morbid excitement. They had had five air raids in three weeks from small formations of Ju 88's and, as the comparatively few light and heavy anti-aircraft guns on the island were clearly no sufficient deterrent, these raids were considered to be merely the preliminaries. Fighters based on Cyprus could not provide effective protection, though Beaufighters and long range Hurricanes had done their utmost, and had destroyed several enemy machines. The island was defended by a few hundred men, chiefly Indians of the Frontier Force Rifles, and

a small detachment of the R.A.F. regiment. The anti-aircraft crews were diluted by negroes, and an uncertain number of anti-aircraft guns, I believe half a battery, had been lost to the defences when a transport was sunk by Stukas on its way to the island.

Early next morning I was grappling with the sordid details of a comfortless toilet, involving use of my upturned tin hat as a basin, when Sergeant Wood clattered across the courtyard and announced abruptly that the flying-boat had "disappeared". I stared at him disbelievingly, then walked to a balustrade from where we could look down on the little harbour. Sure enough the Sunderland, whose engines we had heard roaring in preparation for the return flight, was no longer visible. Scrutinising the bay carefully through glasses I could just see its tail fin sticking up out of the shallow water near a rock. Apparently, in attempting to take off, laden with passengers for the return flight to Alexandria, the flying-boat had first come into collision with a launch and later had hit a submerged reef and sunk. Her passengers and crew just had time to scramble out into boats as she began to fill with water. ,

We stared at the wreck ruefully, reflecting that the way back to Alexandria was made the more difficult and uncertain by the loss of one of the few big flying-boats available to make the flight. But we must not think yet of the return journey, for we were still far from our destination, Leros. Word had come from the naval officer-in-charge that we were to assemble on the quayside for embarkation at 10 o'clock. Before leaving I made my way through Castelrosso's steep alleys, cluttered with rubble and wires, passed rows of empty ruined stone houses, to army headquarters on the bay.

Most of the Greek inhabitants had fled to the mainland; there was about a score of old people, a handful of fishermen and some children clinging on to their homes, or the remains of their homes, in distressful conditions of poverty and scarcity. Some children, whether in ignorance; insolence or flippancy I do not know, gave me the Fascist salute as I passed. A young fisherman stepped in my path and to my astonishment muttered words in Greek and wiped some shaving soap off my face. I was none too pleased at this impudence, but, in the belief that it was kindly meant, did not take the invited kick at his pants.

I had a friendly reception from the O.G. troops, Lieutenant-Colonel M. E. Ruffer, a gunner, who told me the story of the occupation of Castelrosso. On September 10 two motor launches containing sixty men approached the island at about 2 a.m. Italian sentries fired a few rifle shots, slightly wounding a naval lieutenant

but two men who went ashore in a small boat were able to secure the formal surrender of the island. The Union Jack was run up on the old Red Castle, situated on a 150 foot eminence, from which the island is named.

Though willing to submit to the British, the Italians did not relish the French, and when a French sloop arrived off the island some days later, the Italian Commandant threatened to fire on it. An "incident" was averted by the British Adjutant, who promptly cut the telephone wire between the Commandant's headquarters and his coastal battery, thus making it impossible for him to give the order to fire.

When the British invaders arrived they found that the population numbered about a thousand, though there were houses four times that number plus a mosque, a cathedral, four churches and about six monasteries, mostly half-ruined. This curious, decaying, forgotten little island, though Italian owned, stood in the same relationship to Greece as one of the Channel Islands to Great Britain. It was considered an admirable place of retirement, and the inhabitants included many remittance men supported by successful fish-shop keepers in Australia.

Only a small area lent itself to cultivation, and there were seventy-eight agricultural holdings on terraced slopes, green with vines and olive-trees. There were only two Italian civilians on the island, one the postmaster and the other the schoolmaster.

As we said farewell to Colonel Ruffer an air raid warning was sounded and expanding black puffs from our heavy anti-aircraft guns began to frame a high flying German reconnaissance aircraft. The visitor seemed in no way inconvenienced by this reception, and weaved to and fro across the sky taking photographs and making observations. And now the privileged passengers for Leros and Samos, nine altogether, were assembled on the quayside in charge of a bearded Lieutenant-Commander, R.N., who shortly embarked us all in a motor-driven caique. We were now informed that there was plenty of well-water in Leros, and the filled water carriers were therefore left behind. We were very grateful at this further reduction in our burdens.

The caique began to chug out to sea as soon as the German reconnaissance plane had gone. Presently we sighted three small

vessels, a small boat put out and rowed towards us as we hove

to and three passengers were embarked in each of them.

The

luckiest, we thought, were the three bound for Samos, who were put aboard a trim, speedy-looking naval launch. Crichton,

Wood and I were next. We found that we had been assigned to a

grimy, overcrowded motor minesweeper of, perhaps, five hundred

tons;

As we climbed aboard we noticed that the narrow decks were packed with boxes of ammunition. Picking and squeezing our way forward we came upon fifty troops gathered in the only reasonably clear deck space engaged in a "quiz" game. A broad, fresh-complexioned officer with a George Medal Ribbon whom I afterwards knew as Lieutenant J. L. G. Warren, was the Master of Ceremonies. As I loomed up he was just asking, "Who said, 'To be or not to be?'" The assembled troops stood in moody silence. Then somebody suggested "Macbeth".

The game had been organised to relieve the tedium and discomfort of the overcrowded voyage. Most of the troops on board and three officers were Buffs, who had been scraped together from various sources. There were men discharged from hospital, and some from training depots. With Warren, the other two officers were Lieutenant A. C. S. Waley and Sub-Lieutenant S.R. Hills.

Grichton and I were now invited to share the tiny ward-room with these three officers, the captain, a Newcastle man named Lieutenant Brawel, R.N.V.R., and his No. 1, a New Zealand called McCallum, also R.N.V.R. The table would only seat five at a pinch, so we always had two sittings at meals. Two cupboard-like cabins belonging to the Captain and his First Lieutenant were available when they were on duty, otherwise we snoozed in sitting postures, or sprawled on the floor.

Brawel, whose acquaintance we now made, was a determined, enthusiastic sailor, an amateur yachtsman, who had flung himself whole-heartedly into naval service at an early stage of the war. He now found himself in unfamiliar waters, engaged on a dangerous mission, and equipped with inadequate charts. Nevertheless, despite all the perils and uncertainties which faced us, he was unfailing in courtesy, always unshaken in his resolve to see the job through. With any luck he might have succeeded, but the Fates were against him.

Now we began to steam away on a westerly course. Brawel took the lead, and was followed in line by the naval launch, and by the third of the vessels which turned out to be another minesweeper also carrying fifty troops and ammunition to Leros. Under clear but darkening evening skies we had made good progress for about an hour when the launch signalled that, for some unexplained reason, she was returning to Castelrosso.

The two minesweepers drove on into the darkness. At intervals through the night I visited the bridge in case of any excitement. Brawel's stocky figure and his ready flow of north-country speech contrasted with the lankiness and laconicism of his imperturbable Lieutenant. They stood side by side on the bridge, neither willing

to take his turn of rest down below till both grew red-eyed with weariness.

We passed between Rhodes and the mainland without incident, then crept on towards the next bunker in our path, the island of Simi from which the Germans had finally expelled a small British garrison several weeks before. Sailing through these dark, treacherous waters was an eerie, unnerving experience. I did not feel so much like a brave Argonaut as a timid little mouse scuttling across the kitchen floor hoping against hope that I should dodge the house cat. Simi lifted itself out of the sea, a black and silent mass. The moon, almost full, glared down balefully. Lightning flashed round the horizon and there was an inopportune stream of sparks from the funnel which drew some sharp comments from the Captain to the engine-room. Poking his head into a curtained cubby-hole Mac. our No. i, pored intently over his small chart, and from time to time advised Brawel. Look-outs stared and stared into the night till their imaginations conjured up ghost ships. Then, to the general relief, the moon was obscured by passing clouds, and we passed the danger point in a convenient black-out.

Dog-tired from watching and high tension, I slipped down to the cabin to rest in the small hours. Hours later some uneasy stir aroused me, and I became keenly awake to the realisation that our engines had stopped and we were motionless. When I went on deck it was first light. I saw that we were in a narrow inlet between hilly shores, and our bows were wedged firmly on a spit of land that unexpectedly jutted out, making one side of the bay rather like q, huge figure three.

Brawel., in great concern, told me briefly what had happened. At 5 a.m. he had prepared to follow his instructions, which were to anchor during daylight in a certain convenient creek, with a view to making a dash through a narrow island-fringed channel on the following night. As the minesweeper came nosing in Brawel saw the riding lights of some caiques ahead. In the blackness he did not observe the slender point of land running out between him and the caiques till too late. As he ran aground the second minesweeper coming up fast behind narrowly a collision, and then made off.

It was now 7 o'clock and we were stuck fast despite all attempts with the engine in reverse and the donkey engine pulling on the anchor. To make things worse a slight leak was reported aft, As the sun rose we could see, some miles away, the blue outline of the island of Kos where the Germans had two, and perhaps three, air-fields. Kos brooded ^on the water like a pre-historic monster with a great hump and a long tapering tail.

Our attempts to keep our unwilling arrival a secret were frustrated by the prompt arrival of two local inhabitants. Soon quite a noisy crowd had collected among the tumbled rocks ashore, and a deputation put out in a small boat and clambered on board. However, much chattering achieved nothing, and at last they obeyed a polite request to leave us to get on with the job ourselves, and all went ashore again.

The troops now shifted all the ammunition boxes aft, and the engine was again put into reverse, but without shifting us an inch. We tried a kedje, also without result.

In the ward-room the three Buffs officers, Crichton and myself, all in a somewhat gloomy frame of mind, did crossword puzzles and played pontoon.

Crichton took the situation rather more philosophically than I did, and deprecated my suggestion that I should go ashore and attempt to find somebody who spoke English. During my recent stay in Cyprus I had interviewed several soldiers who escaped from Dodecanese islands and I felt that anything was better than idling on board the grounded minesweeper, suffering all the pangs of claustrophobia and frustration.

We were, indeed, like bluebottles in a meshed fly-trap, and I felt that exasperated buzzings were likely to grow noisier as time went on. A high-flying aircraft went overhead, and the wiseacres declared it to be a Ju 88. There was anxious speculation as to whether he had spotted us. I carefully scrutinised Kos through glasses, but could see no sign of life. We were forbidden to use any water for washing or shaving. Luckily, though a water shortage threatened, we had plenty of food. Meanwhile our radio operator, "Sparks", was making vain attempts to contact Alexandria or Beirut, thus breaking wireless silence.

Brawl also decided to send a scout ashore to see if he could find the other minesweeper in a neighbouring creek. This sailor, a muscular A.B., stripped to the waist and swam ashore. We hopefully watched him disappear over the hill. Two hours later there was a flutter of excitement, and the word passed that our scout was returning. Alas, he only brought the report that he could see nothing of the other minesweeper in the next bay. Despite a hearty and well-cooked luncheon, served by a steward whose ineffable cheerfulness was one of the outstanding features of life on board, this latest setback caused a great slump in spirits. By nightfall deep depression had settled upon us all. At intervals other German aircraft had passed over, and we heard distant explosions. It seemed that there could be only one end in store. Discovery, a short sharp attack and an ignominious death.

At about eight o'clock I was leaning on the rails, filled with a gentle melancholy, when I heard the creak of oars. Instantly my mind was a whirl of apprehensive conjecture and hope. Who was it? Were they Germans, or . . . ? In a few minutes the boat was visible, and we joyfully heard an English voice. It was the Captain of the other minesweeper, a young Lieutenant, R.N.V.R., who had waited till nightfall before coming to hunt for us. He had a short conference with Brawel, then left, returning about two hours later with his ship. A tow line was made fast, then, ecstatic moment, he had pulled us clear. Our spirits soared like mercury on a midsummer's day. The Captain, who had been very subdued and preoccupied all day, was a new man. Once again we took the lead, our consort and rescuer following, and we crept out of the creek on our way. All the sailors were infected with the jubilation. I heard one say, "Give you a dollar for every Stuka you hit".

We were due to reach the most critically dangerous point in our voyage shortly before dawn next morning, when we would pass through a narrow strait, threading between shoals and rocks on the one %and and minefields on the other, besides contending possibly with other unknown and unpredictable terrors. Good-natured Brawel, tired as he was himself, now insisted that I should go down to the cabin and rest, and said that he would call me when we had reached the deadly channel.

A thump on the door of the congested ward-room roused me at about four o'clock. It was Mac, who said, in his slow drawl: "We're just passing through the strait. D'you want to have a look?" I thanked him, and accompanied him back to the bridge, where I found Brawel still in buoyant mood, still tireless. The moonlight, which seemed to reveal us with terrifying clarity, disclosed a cliff away to starboard while the black bulk of a large island^ rose ominously, equally close, to port. Brawel expounded the topography, and I listened, thinking inwardly that I should be extremely glad when we were through the channel.

Then my flesh prickled and my heart thumped hard as I felt ajar and a shudder. "Christ almighty. We're aground again," said Brawel. "Full speed astern, full speed astern." It was no use, we were wedged firmer than ever.

The second minesweeper was now manoeuvring alongside, and her Captain shouted across to Brawel: "Do you want a tow?" Brawel, to his eternal credit, knowing his predicament full well, replied stout-heartedly, "No. Keep away from here for God's sake". It was a noble gesture.

As the Germans, now thoroughly uneasy, began to fire red Very lights, the other minesweeper slid off on her way.

There was no further sign of life on the German side. As dawn broke Brawel began preparations to surrender, and started to burn all secret and confidential documents in the galley fire. In the growing light I could see a town clearly, a bare three miles* distant, and now used by the enemy as a seaplane base.

On the minesweeper there were long faces. An Arado came noising round at a height of only fifty feet, and Brawel said it had observed his White Ensign, which was still fluttering bravely. We prayed that something would turn up quickly, though what, precisely, we were going to do we could not imagine. Meanwhile we had breakfast. Looking back what ensued seems a miracle. There was a cry from a look-out, and we all rushed out on deck to see a large sailing ship, propelled by an auxiliary motor, bearing down on us. In the bows were two wild-looking young men. The taller of the two began to hail us as his craft drew nearer and, with a voice of authority, asked for the Captain. "Do you think you have been spotted by any German aircraft?" he said.

Brawel told him about the inquisitive Arado, and the two new arrivals consulted together. The other, who spoke with an American accent, then said: "All troops are to go ashore taking a minimum of equipment. They are not to wander about or talk to the local inhabitants" (I reflected that this would be difficult). The American continued: "The only reason we are doing this is because we think you may be bombed. We will try to provide other craft to take you on later."

They now began to tackle their task with great energy, efficiency and speed. Half a dozen small boats were collected and the troops, taking their own rations, went ashore, assembling on the barren hillside. Crichton, Wood and I joined them. Now the fishermen arrived and began taking the troops ashore, organised by our two mysterious friends. I said a reluctant farewell to the plucky Captain and his faithful No. 1 and jumped into a boat.

We spent a restful afternoon ashore watched by half a dozen listless local inhabitants. Some of the troops bathed in the sea, the majority lounged on the hillside. Early in the afternoon our new friend, who reminded me more and more of Bulldog Drummond, turned up again with a sizeable tug which began fruitless attempts to pull our luckless minesweeper off the rocks. He and the American left the tug at work and went off once more, to return just before dusk with a whole fleet of small sailing caiques. We were now all ordered to embark at once in these boats.

The whole episode seemed to me like a fantastic dream. I could not believe that the Germans had not observed all these happenings on their doorstep, I could not believe that they would allow all these men carrying their arms and equipment to

re-embark and proceed on their way. German bombers, in formations of five or seven, had flown over in the direction of Leros all the daylight hours. We had observed two or three hundred, and heard the distant crumps of their bombs. But the boatman spoke soothing words, "Bulldog Drummond" was signalling from a motor launch, and the re-embarkation began. All the vicissitudes of the past forty-eight hours had not damped the irrepressible spirits of the British troops. The arrival of a cockleshell boat which would carry only one man, with his weighty equipment, caused great hilarity. Somebody sat in it, overflowing the gunwales, and the little thing went frolicking over the waves threatening to capsize at any moment, and followed by a torrent of catcalls and wisecracks. There were bets on whether this solitary adventurer would reach the sailing caique, for which he was bound. He did, with nothing worse than a wetting.

Crichton, Wood and I were taken on a motor-launch. Our host invited us down into his cabin, where he served out steaming mugs of tea. Then in the pleasant fug below he took off his coat and I noticed that he wore on his khaki shirt, as a shoulder flash, the words "Royal Navy". So I realised now that he was a commander, and the American was also a naval officer. They had been cruising about and had come to our help.

The Commander told us that we were making for another of the numerous creeks that indent these lonely islands. Here the Greek destroyer *Adrias*, which had had her bows blown off by a mine during the island operations, was lying at anchor used as a depot ship and a last jumping-off place for Leros.

As we bounded over the sea, whipped into a swell by a rising wind, we saw a red flare over Kos, perhaps a sign of a visit from the R.A.F., perhaps the harbinger of attack on the helpless minesweeper. We feared that she might be torpedoed that night by an E-boat. This, happily, did not occur, but she remained firmly aground next day, defying all attempts to drag her free. After that I had other and still more serious preoccupations, and heard no more of the minesweeper.

The *Adrias* was anchored in a winding inlet closely resembling a miniature Norwegian fjord. She was, alas, only one of many casualties in the Dodecanese campaign. The Navy had, in fact, begun to take an extremely poor view of the operations, finding themselves compelled to operate once more in narrow seas without adequate air cover. Officers and men argued that the Army had wilfully created a new and still more perilous and costly Tobruk. Moreover the Germans had begun to deadly use of their new radio-controlled glider rocket bombs.

Dornier flying-boats, operating at a safe distance outside the range of anti-aircraft guns, could steer these flying bombs direct on to their target. The launching of a glider bomb, which in form is like a miniature aircraft, was preceded by a puff of smoke. The uncanny thing could then be made to circle round and dodge ack-ack fire by hiding behind clouds. Finally it would select a victim and fall upon it with several thousand pounds' weight of explosive.

The *Adrias* had not been hit by a glider bomb, but mined, and the damage to her bows was appalling. The steelwork had been twisted and mangled into all manner of weird shapes by the violence of the explosion which killed twenty men and wounded thirty. Her forward guns were cocked into the air in absurd positions, the ward-room had disappeared, blown to smithereens.

Her Captain, Commander Yannis M. Toumbas, of the Royal Hellenic Navy, had had a miraculous escape. Having inspected the shattered bridge where he was standing, I could not understand how he survived. But there he was, jovial, though not fully recovered. He treated me to several drambuies in his cabin, and also insisted that I should sign his visitor's book.

The four Army officers and I were accommodated in the Petty Officers' mess, which had escaped damage. We had slightly more room than on board the minesweeper, but somehow seemed to make even more muddle with our various kits. The Greeks turned over a galley to our cooks, who produced great quantities of meat and vegetable stew. We lined up with the men, with our enamel plates, to be served out of dixies. Afterwards most of the troops bedded down on the steel decks, no intolerable hardship since the weather was dry and mild.

It was the night of November 11, 1943, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Armistice, and some of us recalled stories that Hitler was intent on giving his long-suffering people a victory to offset the dismal reverses of the Russian and Italian fronts. We wondered whether he would choose Leros for this demonstration. I did not intend to let this thought spoil the first comfortable night's sleep in a bunk for four days, and so for the first time since leaving Cairo took off my clothes, donned pyjamas and was soon asleep.

When I toured the decks next morning I made the discovery that the troops, with their usual resource, were busily devising entertainments, chief among which was fishing in the creek. They showed great ingenuity at devising hooks out of bent safety pins, but the fish would not bite. But when one of the Greek sailors came to fish he had immediate success, so a good-tempered

rivalry developed, the Greeks showing our men what bait to use, and lending their lines.

My own entertainment was listening to an excellent radio set which reproduced the BBC programmes with the same clarity as if it were in my London home, and also reading an account of the Crete campaign. The only comfort I could extract from this latter occupation was that there was, at any rate, no airfield on Leros for the Germans to seize.

The day wore slowly on. Junker bombers were passing overhead in monotonous procession, heading northward, and we heard the rumble of explosions. From the damaged bridge forward we could see columns of smoke billowing over Leros. Yet, although the *Adrias* was not camouflaged in any way, not one of these numerous German aircraft took any interest in her, or made any attempt to molest her. At dusk two naval motor launches came alongside, we were divided into two parties of about twenty-five, and once more embarked for the final dash.

CHAPTER XVIII

INVASION

THE Greek sailors watched our departure with sympathetic, serious faces. It must have seemed a suicide mission to them. One of them noticed that I was using a tin hat without any inside fitting, and in a touching gesture he ran down below to bring me a new one, probably his own. The distant thunder of explosions from Leros had died away, the German bombers had returned to their bases for the night, and there was a deathly stillness in the evening air. Heartbeats had quickened and excitement was half cancelling some of the forebodings we felt. We humped our baggage on to the crowded decks, turned up coat collars against the chill wind, the launch cast off, and we purred out of the inlet by fitful moonlight.

This launch had recently come from England, and the young R.N.V.R. Sub-Lieutenant in command invited Crichton, Tony Waley and myself down into his cosy little cabin, where he generously broached his small reserve of whisky. He told us that the "buzz" which had spread round the *Adrias* that Brawel's minesweeper had been successfully towed off was, unfortunately, not correct. This youngster with a fresh, unwrinkled face might have been a public school prefect. Here he was cheerfully, reliably, heroically shouldering responsibility for thirty or forty human lives in dark, dangerous waters. He had just navigated his tight craft from England, and was, for us, an unexpected link with home on the eve of battle.

On deck there was nothing to see but the moon playing will-o'-the-wisp among scurrying clouds, the restless sea and vague outlines of land. It was all incredibly peaceful, yet in a disturbing way uneasy. I thought, for some reason, of Tennyson and

"Twilight and evening bell
And after that the dark,
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark."

After two hours of sailing in line, our two motor launches entered a bay enclosed between two massive humps. We could distinguish a small jetty to which were tied up half a dozen motor torpedo boats, and where, in due course, after delicate manoeuvring, we ourselves came alongside. As we disembarked

—it was Alinda Bay, as I found afterwards—we were accosted by a smooth, round-faced embarkation officer whose joviality I found, in all the circumstances, a trifle excessive. He said that the Major-General who was in charge of the islands operation was that night moving off to Samos, but that if we would wait till he had fixed up the General and found transport for the troops, he would send a jeep along for us. "And, by the way," he added as he turned to go, "there's a terrific flap on tonight."

I smiled knowingly. "I hear there always is a terrific flap in Leros," I said.

"Oh, yes, but this seems more serious than usual."

"What's it like here?"

"Oh, not so bad. Bombing doesn't cause many casualties,

but it's a bloody awful row. And there are millions of flies."

After much waiting about, we were taken in a jeep to a collection of bare wooden huts which served as a transit camp. There was more waiting, and I spent the time pumping various officers about the place for details of the garrison and defences. The garrison, it seemed, had been built up in dribs and drabs to about three thousand British troops and eight thousand Italians. The British force was composed of a battalion of the Royal -i Irish Fusiliers, a battalion of the Royal West Kents, and a battalion of the Buffs. There was also a battalion of the King's Own. One company of Buffs had been sunk on the way to the island, but according to my informant most of them had been picked up and taken back to Alexandria. Only about a thousand of the Italians were said to be first-line fighting troops. There were gunners, coastal and ack-ack, many technical and line-of-com-munication troops, numbers of marines and landlocked sailors,, and other miscellaneous elements. As the coastal defence had been entrusted to the Italians there was much speculation and considerable doubt as to their fighting quality and zeal.

The Italians had spent years in fortifying Leros as a naval base, and its geographical features lent themselves admirably. It has a most peculiar shape, both in plan and contour. Slightly smaller than Guernsey, and so consistently rocky that there is no space for an airfield, the island is also bitten into deeply by half a dozen bays. Two of the main bays, Alinda and Gurna, almost cut Leros -in two, leaving a narrow strip little more than half a mile wide. All these bays are commanded by heights on which the Italians had installed formidable coastal batteries.

So impressed were the British military authorities in Cairo with the natural strength of Leros that before I left, although we had

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been pushed off all the islands except this one and Samos, I was assured by more than one "expert" that we had a reasonable chance of holding it. This despite the fact that owing to the great distance of our nearest fighter bases there never was any chance of putting up a fighter umbrella unless we could persuade the Turks to let us use their airfields. There was also a persistent report, which I came across from time to time, that Mr. Churchill had said Leros must be held at all costs.

The most unfortunate thing was that a few days before my arrival in Leros a broadcast had been put out and picked up by the garrison to the effect that there was a good chance that Turkey might accede to the request for the use of her airfields. As days went by and the situation grew more and more desperate without any sign of that effective succour from the air so urgently needed, there was much bitter comment on this report.

When I arrived Leros had suffered over a thousand enemy air sorties in six weeks, and had been plastered with seven hundred tons of *bombs. By comparison with our subsequent raids on German cities this is, perhaps, not impressive. Nor were the casualties or the damage commensurate with the sustained effort and material expended. The principal effect was to tire and demoralise the defenders with the spectacle of German bomber formations stooging overhead all day long in undisputed possession of the daylight sky, practically unchallenged and rarely harmed by the anti-aircraft fire.

After the capture of Kos by the Germans and their occupation of the adjacent island of Kalymnos, separated from Leros by a narrow channel only about three miles wide, the Leros garrison had considered their situation desperate indeed. There came, however, a sudden pause, during which the Germans, for some reason, probably reorganisation, stopped all bombing for a period of four weeks. This bombing had been as suddenly resumed two days before my arrival, and the men on the island were anxiously wondering whether this was the "softening up" process preliminary to invasion.

At last, when Crichton, Wood, and I had waited for several hours at the transit camp, with growing impatience, an officer arrived with the suggestion that Crichton and I, as officers, should spend the night at B Mess, a house on the waterfront of Alinda Bay, while Wood remained in the transit camp. Again Crichton and I entered the jeep and we jolted off back to a point very near where we had disembarked, and where we were now directed to a little two-storied house. We entered, stumbling, in the pitch darkness, over bodies sleeping on the floor, then made our way up a rickety wooden staircase to a bare room where

we were able to put down camp beds. The rightful owners of this room apparently preferred to sleep on the ground floor.

There was an oppressive air of impending doom and calamity which sapped the will and undermined the courage. Outside all was still except for an occasional challenge, abrupt and hoarse, from the sentry at the mess front door. Once or twice desultory anti-aircraft fire roused the echoes. All night, at intervals, air craft droned overhead, whether friend or foe we did not know. I suspect they were our own Dakotas dropping supplies. Once I fell off to sleep, only to be roughly shaken by Crichton, who had been awakened by some particularly loud explosions which might have been guns or bombs or both. We leapt hurriedly to our drowsy feet, and then, as nothing in particular seemed to be happening, sank back on to sleepless beds again.

It must have been about four-thirty in the morning at first light, or what the R.A.F. indelicately call "sparrow fart", that we heard a slight stir downstairs. Somebody came clumping heavily up the bare staircase in heavy nailed boots and entered our room. He revealed himself as a little Cockney orderly, who spoke in a quiet, unhurried voice, half apologetic at disturbing our rest, and betraying not the slightest sign by his demeanour that anything unusual was afoot. "The German invasion fleet has been sighted, sir," he remarked casually. It was so like a butler's entrance that I half expected him to add, "Shall I show them up, sir?" Instead, he merely said, "All officers will proceed to battle stations—at once".

Crichton and I, of course, having just arrived, not only had no battle stations, but were also extremely short of clues about the whole subject of Leros, its defences and defenders. We had not the faintest idea, in this violent emergency, which way to go or what to do. Officers downstairs, without any attempt at eating, were in a flurry of preparations to depart. They were buckling on belts and holsters, shouldering packs and water bottles. There seemed to be a general impression that B Mess, the sort of house that would have been described by a British jerry builder as a "bijou baronial hall" was no longer a desirable residence. We followed the general example, except that I had no pistol, and instead carried my typewriter, a small haversack containing toilet essentials, and a water bottle. My trenchcoat, which had a wool lining, had to serve as my only bed for some days.

Nobody seemed particularly alarmed or even excited. We attached ourselves to a Captain, who said he had a jeep at his disposal, and could take us up to battle headquarters on Mount Meraviglia. This was, indeed, a stroke of luck, for battle headquarters was not only the obvious place to make for, but also

we straightway had transport to take us there. As we walked sharply down the road in the growing light there was still no sign of anything untoward, and no sound of gunfire. We found the jeep, mounted, and our guide agreed to go by way of the transit camp to pick up Wood, whom we found with gear packed up all ready. Various other people now began to clamber on to the jeep, sitting on the bonnet and hanging on to any hand or foothold. I began to wonder whether our chariot would take off. It did, without apparent effort, and began a steep climb up a mountain road full of hairpin bends with an assurance which still further increased my admiration for these wonderful trucks.

We were able now, for the first time, to take in some of the peculiar geographical features of Leros. It is a switchback of rocky scrub-covered slopes, strewn with loose boulders. The so-called "mountains" are not particularly high. Meraviglia, the most central point, was only about 650 feet. This would have been high enough to survey the whole island, which was only seven and a half miles long, but for other lesser hills which screened off coastal areas. Thus, although on the summit of Meraviglia and at the two exits of the battle headquarters tunnel, I had magnificent vantage points giving a gallery view of the drama below, I was unable to see much of the early fighting, which took place on the shores and slopes hidden by neighbouring hills. The Germans took advantage of L^{eros}'s topography with characteristic skill, for many weapon and machine-gun pits had been hacked out of the sides of Meraviglia, commanding Alinda and Gurna Bays. As will be seen, they obtained their first footholds at points out of sight and out of range of the guns on Meraviglia.

As we climbed the last stretches of the winding road to battle headquarters our guide confided to me that he did not believe in the invasion story, and thought it was a "phoney". I cordially agreed with him. Then I leapt out of the jeep, scrambled up to the highest point and saw for myself. Looking eastwards I could see the coast of Turkey twenty miles distant. In the valley below was the town of Leros, a collection of square, coloured doll's houses with flat roofs. There was practically no sign of bomb damage or of any residents. On the hill opposite which rose to about five hundred feet stood a picturesque Crusader's Castle, and close by there was a church whose bells pealed air-raid warnings. To the north-east in the foreground was the blue expanse of Alinda Bay, from the northern shores of which another steep hill lifted to the skyline.

Five or six miles out to sea, in a north-easterly direction, moving northwards, was a line of tiny craft. I stared at them incredulously, wondering. Cold morning light, an empty stomach, a

sleepless night, and a vivid imagination make an unpleasant combination. Then scepticism, was torn away by the sharp explosion of one of the Italian coastal guns. It seemed an age before the plume of water and smoke rose far away, much too far away, from the distant landing craft. I glanced at my watch. It was ten minutes past five. The Battle of Leros had begun, a tiny incident in the history of the second world war, but an affair of the gravest moment to three thousand British soldiers and one British war correspondent. The melancholy clangour of the church bell struck on our ears with infinite pathos. I scoured the sky, and saw four specks resolve themselves into Stukas, our first aerial visitors of the day. The Italian coastal batteries now opened in earnest, their shells churning up the sea all around the invasion craft. I was standing beside a sturdy, sandy-haired sergeant of the Royal Irish Fusiliers who was staring intently through glasses. He turned and remarked to me in his soft, fascinating brogue, that if only we had the Malta gunners on the island they would blow the whole adjectival lot out of the water in no time, but that these adjectival I ties couldn't hit an adjectival thing. Just then, as the Stukas approached nearer, the anti-aircraft defences of the island began to join the chorus, plastering the sky with expanding black and white blobs. The Stukas, in no way inconvenienced by the ack-ack fire, cruised round and round overhead, seemingly in no hurry. I conjectured that the Hun intended to use them as flying artillery, sending them over in constant relays and waiting for signals from the ground before bombing. It was an infuriating reflection that the Stuka dive-bomber was regarded in the R.A.F. as obsolete. Yet here, because of lack of fighter opposition, the enemy was preparing to use them again, as in the Battle of France.

Meanwhile, out at sea many confusing things were happening. The Germans began to lay down a smoke screen to conceal their landing craft from the enthusiastic, if erratic attentions of the coastal guns. Presently from the smother there emerged a second line of vessels steaming southwards and led by two small warships that looked like sloops. This was the signal for a renewed and more furious outburst of firing. The new arrivals did not relish this at all, and sheered off farther out to sea. I counted only seven landing craft, one of which was suddenly enveloped in smoke and spray from a near miss. The officer commanding this particular party then evidently decided that it was not good enough. The line of ships continued to circle the island/at a respectful distance, and finally steamed off in a northerly direction.

At this moment I saw a tall, spare figure in Brigadier's uniform striding rapidly up the hillside. He stared at me and my unfamiliar

uniform, with its green and yellow badges and the "C" on my cap. "Hello, who are you? Where did you spring from?" he inquired in the voice of authority. It was Brigadier Robert Tilney, the garrison's Territorial commanding officer, formerly of the Leicestershire Yeomanry. I explained myself, and he laughed. "Good, glad to have you. You're just in time. But don't hang around here making the place look too much like Piccadilly Circus, there's a good chap." As he turned to stalk up the hill to an observation post I overheard his remark to a staff officer, "In my opinion we've repulsed their first rather feeble attack, but they'll come again." Unfortunately the Brigadier's optimism was not entirely justified, but his prophecy was accurate.

Battle headquarters consisted of a twisting tunnel blasted right through the mountain peak and entered each end by cuttings covered with camouflage netting. From one end, where there was a Bren-gun pit, one could observe Alinda Bay, Leros town, and the Crusader's Castle on Castle Hill. At the opposite end there was a view of Gurna and Portolago Bays, and the rocky peninsula that lay between Portolago Bay had been used by the Italians as the principal naval anchorage. It was nearly two miles long, and averaged half a mile wide, with an entrance that narrowed to a quarter of a mile.

The tunnel, at a guess, was five or six hundred feet long, and only the central part, from which two or three underground chambers opened out, was lighted.

After glissading down the hill for about fifty yards, I found the landward entrance where, just inside, a dynamo was humming. Somebody wanted to see my identity card, and then I was allowed to enter, being immediately swallowed in blackness, my hands stretching out blindly to feel the rough walls as I stumbled forward over loose stones. But the blessed feeling of security under that mass of rock was something to remember for a lifetime. Turning a corner, I came upon the illuminated caves opening out to right and left, where Brigadier Tilney's staff were at work on trestle tables. In another chamber the signallers were busy coding, deciphering, tapping at their instruments. This last sight roused in me the determination*to ask the Brigadier at once if he could afford facilities for despatching my messages to Cairo and thence to London. I went outside again and, luckily meeting him as he came down from the observation post, tackled him there and then with great temerity. The Brigadier, harassed as he was, gave my fequest a moment's thought, then said: "I should say, at the moment, definitely not."

Invasions may come and go, but men must eat. Two cooks, attached to battle headquarters, had begun to prepare a brew of

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that sickly brown fluid, with milk and sugar already in it, that passes for tea in the Army. Their kitchen was a pit situated in the open near the western, or Gurna Bay, exit of the tunnel, r They then followed this up by cooking large quantities of tinned bacon and sausages. The cooks were by no means pleased at the notion of adding three new-comers of strange genus to their ration strength. Crichton, Wood and I looked like going hungry, till a pleasant, urbane Lieutenant-Colonel, whose name I cannot remember, intervened, and insisted that we must be given our meals with the rest. So we lined up with our enamel plates and mugs, and eventually ate with relish.

Rumours and reports, true and untrue, crackled up and down the overcrowded tunnel like wildfire. Fortified* as we were with that welcome breakfast, we felt slightly less care-free when we heard that the Germans had obtained a footing at two places. When the overworked brigade intelligence staff let up for a moment, I checked with them, and found that the news was true, but not yet alarming. Five landing craft had attempted to enter the little Delia Palma Bay at the north-east corner of the island. Three were hit by Italian coastal guns and one sank. Survivors swam or struggled ashore on the tiny islet of Strorigilo. Five other landing craft were apparently putting troops ashore at the point Pasta di Sopra, and I heard the Brigadier inquiring in his equable, unexcited tones, "Is anybody doing anything about it?" He was assured that somebody was. However, these two parties were now assembling somewhere in the Mount Vedetta area, the total strength being estimated at only three or four hundred, though they had mortars with them.

The second bridgehead had been established almost on our own doorstep, namely on the shore of Castle Hill and the adjoining peak Mount Appetici. Both these hills, visible due east across the valley from our "front door" were between four and five hundred feet high and scarcely a mile away. Immediately on landing the Germans attacked with great dash and resolution, although they were reported to be only about a hundred strong. They were determined to establish themselves at once on the summits of these two steep and barren heights, in which case our battle headquarters, if spotted, r would have immediately come under fire. The Italians in the Crusader's Castle and in their gun positions stuck determinedly to their posts for a time. Then they showed signs of wavering, and the Germans captured one gun.

All these events, enacted on the seaward side of the hills, were invisible to us from the eastern end of the tunnel, but as I returned to this vantage point I was in time to see some figures streaming down the slopes of Castle Hill. The Irish Fusilier manning the

Bren gun had some uncomplimentary things to say about the Ities who, he averred, were abandoning the castle. Then we saw some of the figures check in their flight and begin slowly to re-climb the hill. What had happened was not, at that distance, very clear, except that someone or something had put fresh heart into the Ities, who were returning to their posts. I learnt afterwards that the Irish Fusiliers counter-attacked vigorously, retook the gun, and eventually drove the enemy down the southeastern slopes of Castle Hill and Mount Appetici. Unfortunately they did not succeed in pushing him right back into the sea.

Clambering once again to the summit of Meraviglia, I was in time to see the German dive bombers come into action for the first time. From behind the hump of Mount Vedetta, to the north-east, two red Very signals sailed slowly into the air. The four Stukas, which had been patiently stooging round for over half an hour, now formed into line astern, and their purpose was plain. The German troops on Vedetta had been checked by the Buffs, who were holding that part of the island, and had now sent up their SOS for bombing support. It was the intention of the Stukas to drop a lihe of bombs across the Buffs' front.

I happened to be standing beside an Italian oerlikon gun pit as the first Stuka began its screaming dive. The Italian gunner, generally referred to by the Irish Fusiliers as Francesco, had been firing with great verve and prodigality all morning till the barrel of his gun went white hot. Now his great moment had come. He stood there waiting, his eye glinting. Then as the leading machine came into closer range he directed a stream of shells into its belly. The Stuka faltered, recovered, and then turned away towards Kos, leaving a long, thin trail of black smoke. Francesco, hugely delighted, turned to me and grimaced his pleasure, his smooth olive face, square jawed, radiant. It was the face of a Roman legionary. I could picture it under an antique helmet, and thought that here was the answer to the idea that all modern Italians are decadent, excitable, poor material for soldiers.

The other Stukas, after this unexpected shock from the island's despised anti-aircraft defences, now began to reform, and in a minute I realised they had abandoned their project of bombing the Buffs and had chosen a new target—Francesco. This looked so unhealthy that I hastily slithered down the hillside and flung myself into a shallow crater. Francesco stood his ground calmly, blazing away at the swooping aircraft. Three, bombs came swishing down, falling hundreds of yards away, and making hardly any impression on the rocky slopes. When the choking dust and black smoke had subsided I saw Francesco in his pit unharmed^

the frustrated Stukas making off, and another formation approaching to take their place. Francesco looked at me and said proudly, "I Italian".

There were now other and still livelier diversions. Successive relays of Stukas, in fives, sixes, and sevens, now began a systematic attack on the Italian battery on the Scumbarda heights, which rose to a ridge between six and seven hundred feet high. This battery had been mainly responsible for driving off the fleet of invasion barges which we had earlier seen retiring. The Stukas had now been ordered to knock it out. One aircraft after another came plunging down, released its bomb and then zoomed away. Great clouds of yellowish black smoke and dust hid the mountainside from view, the earth trembled and the delayed, thunderous roar knocked on the eardrums till my head ached. But after each attack, when the smoke had dissipated and the Stukas were forming up to return home, one of the Scumbarda guns would fire a defiant shot, just to show that the battery was still working.

It was the practice of our motor launches and m.t.b.s to stay in Leros only at night. The Germans did not bomb at night, and our destroyers were scouring the seas hunting for German invasion fleets. At first light, however, when our destroyers retired to avoid almost certain destruction from dive-bombing or radio-controlled glider bombs, the small craft followed suit, and left anchorages for the safety of various scattered havens. It was, therefore, a fairly safe, but not a certain bet, that any small boat near the island or in its bays during daylight was a Hun.

At about 8.30 when I was standing by the Bren-gun pit at the eastern end of the tunnel with a group of officers who had come out for a breather, we noticed a small landing craft creeping impudently round Pasta di Sotto point into Alinda Bay. We inspected it dubiously. The craft was fully exposed to the fire of a Bofors battery and numerous machine-gun nests on the hillside. But that morning there had been one of those unfortunate incidents apt to occur in war when a young R.N.V.R. Lieutenant of twenty, leaving Leros in daylight, had made a gallant solo attack on the invasion craft, only to find himself under the fire of Italian batteries. Captain E. H. Baker, R.N., the naval officer in charge of Leros, who sat at Brigadier Tilney's conference table in the tunnel, took an extremely poor view of this, had entered a vigorous protest, although the R.N.V.R. officer had escaped destruction.

So the Italians, through their Commander, who also sat in the tunnel, had been told to exercise more care, and our own machine-gunners as far as possible had also been cautioned.

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The solitary craft crept slowly on with an audacity and pride that characterised the whole German effort against Leros. It was madness, suicide. Our gunners restrained their fingers, doubting, then the storm broke. Tracer streaked from a dozen points, the Bofors guns whanged till all the sea round the target was spattered. The craft began to drift helplessly, and presently came to rest behind some rocks. There was no sign of life on board. Many must have been killed or wounded, the survivors cowering below.

Just after this, in one of those lulls which brought blessed from time to time, we noticed a solitary rowing boat pulling the bay. What on earth it was doing there I cannot imagine. Practically all the inhabitants of Leros were Greeks, and had fled to the mainland. The few remaining were sheltering in the many caves. Why a fisherman, or anybody else, should suddenly choose to start rowing about in Alirida Bay at this moment is a profound mystery. At any rate the machine-gunners on Merav-iglia decided as one man that he was a Hun, and poured a torrent of bullets at the intrepid oarsman. Forward movement stopped. It was too far to see what had happened to the rower, but the boat began to drift. Our attention was diverted to other things. About half an hour later I happened to glance back to the boat, and saw, to my intense surprise, that rowing had begun again, and this time, for some reason, there was no firing. The inan with a charmed life reached the shore and quietly stepped out.

About this time a prisoner captured by the Royal Irish Fusiliers on Castle Hill was brought in for interrogation. I did not see him myself, but was told he was a mere boy clad only in boots and a long coat. He was whimpering with fright, and a very deflated young Nazi indeed. Such an arrival in our midst had a most heartening effect, as a clear demonstration that the enemy was by no means composed exclusively of supermen.

We had lunch in a fairly optimistic atmosphere. Brigadier Tilney was busy with plans for counter-attacks to "winkle" the Germans out of their two bridgeheads. I had opened negotiations with the chief signals officer for sending a story by radio to Cairo, and he was showing himself very sympathetic. I pleaded that the one way of ensuring maximum support for the garrison was to stir the imagination of the outside world with a live, newspaper account of the battle. He agreed to ask the Brigadier, and eventually secured his permission to send three hundred words in code. This was a journalistic triumph indeed, and I must here pay my tribute to the signallers who slaved far into the small hours to get my message over, wedging it in piecemeal between the more urgent

signals to Cairo. It is no reflection upon them that by the time the various groups had been decoded in Cairo some of my phrases got twisted beyond recognition. I was even credited with saying that it all reminded me of days in Tobruk. I was never in Tobruk.

Our meal consisted of that wonderful universal standby, hot meat and vegetable stew, out of tins with biscuits. We had no ground for complaint that we were underfed. There was also a fair supply of water, though none for washing purposes, as the water carriers had to be laboriously carried up the hill from wells in the valleys. Consequently attempting to clean plates and mugs, especially when greasy, was a sore trial. I achieved a fair job with earth and a handkerchief that got steadily grimier.

CHAPTER XIX

PARACHUTE ATTACK

Two months before the Leros adventure I had visited a parachute school in Palestine. The learners jumped on to a ploughed field from a low height and landed with a heavy thump. On hard ground there was an extremely good chance of breaking p, limb and one said, he felt as if his hip bones were pushed up into his chest. Men of my age, that is over forty, were not recommended to try it, as bones become brittle. The general feeling was that the actual jump was no more venturesome than springing from the top board at a swimming bath. In one case you knew that the water was going to cushion you, in the other that your 'chute would open and float you down to earth. There the analogy ended, for, when parachuting, there was the big bump at the bottom. The practice is to roll over and take the shock on the rump and fleshy parts of the body.

When, therefore, I first saw the rocky slopes of Leros, it struck me as almost the last place on earth I would choose for a parachute descent, and derived a certain amount of comfort from the thought. Yet I heard later that our intelligence had reported the arrival of a German parachute battalion in Southern Greece. The presumption was that it would be used in the island campaigns. On studying the map it was apparent that only one area offered anything like reasonable chances to parachutists, and even then it appeared to be a reckless hazard. That was the region due east of Alinda Bay where the mountain sides shelved less steeply down to the sea. Dropped hereabouts, the parachutists might be able to seize the central strip between Alinda and Gurna Bays, thus cutting the island into two halves and isolating the Buffs from the other British troops. But such an enterprise, even on paper, looked a desperate gamble.

I had been watching a rather mournful sight, immediately after lunch. Two Beaufighters, the only British aircraft we had so far seen, appeared, skimming the sea in a northerly direction between us and the mainland. On their tails were four Messerschmitt log's, and it chilled our blood to see the hunters waiting to strike. We felt a surge of anger at the thought that brave young lives were being jeopardised in a vain attempt to match long distance against short distance fighters. If only we had the Turkish airfields. . . .

An officer emerged from the tunnel mouth, excited and rather

pleased because, said he, he had just seen twenty-five aircraft manoeuvring low to the westward. "They must be ours, I think," he said. "Jerry doesn't go in much for wave hopping." I went back through our foxhole, and on emerging at the other end had the severest shock so far. Roaring towards me at what seemed eye level were two twin-engined aircraft spouting fire from their machine-guns in the wings. Afterwards I learnt that they were also scattering anti-personnel bombs, but none fell near me. I flattened against the protective earth while the bullets sang overhead. Then, greatly relieved to find myself unhurt, bolted back in the tunnel and to the eastern end.

The idea that the Germans would use parachutists was so remote from my thoughts that the happenings of the next few minutes had a supremely theatrical and dreamlike quality which almost obliterated the breath-taking surprise. To the east the squadron of low-flying destroyer planes which the Germans had used to make the garrison duck their heads were now bound for home. Twelve or fifteen troop carriers, Ju 52's, were flying at a height of about three hundred feet in line astern across the island's narrow waist between Alinda and Gurna Bays. As I watched, fascinated, something white appeared under the fuselage of the leading machine. It bellied out into a great mushroom, beneath which the dark figure of the parachutist looked absurdly small and helpless. Then came another, and another, fifteen altogether, most with grey parachutes. The first man, who was probably the group leader, had touched ground before the machine-gunners on the sides of Meraviglia had recovered from the paralysing shock of surprise. Then began a wild outburst of firing from the ground till the air was crisscrossed with red tracer dashes spurting from twenty directions.

The slow flying Ju 52's were such a tempting target that the Irish Bren-gunner beside me emptied magazine after magazine into the retiring aircraft after they had dropped their parachutists, for the other troop carriers proceeded, in succession, to discharge a total of about three hundred. True the assembling parachutists were mere specks about a mile and three quarters away, and beyond his range, but it was obvious, from the tracer streams, that many other gunners were also shooting at the empty aircraft. A Captain leapt into the Bren pit, elated as a schoolboy. He took charge of the gun, squinted along the sights, and blazed away at the Ju's. "It's just like duck shooting," he shouted. "You aim just ahead. Have a go." One aircraft, obviously crippled, went off in a shallow dive.

Then, abruptly, it was all over. The last troop carrier had departed, the machine-gunning died away. What had happened?

The parachutists surely had all been massacred. We searched the hillside through glasses and could discern parachutes strung on telegraph lines and tree tops. Great optimism prevailed, for it seemed impossible that the survivors, however courageous, could arm and establish themselves before being fallen upon and exterminated by the troops whom we assumed would be in the neighbourhood. This was one of the occasions when all decent feelings of humanity are in most men swamped by the instinct of self-preservation. We thought of those recklessly brave parachutists as vermin to be wiped out ruthlessly, instantly. I still fail to understand why it was not done, before they had time to reach their containers and equip themselves. Nor can I fully understand why such a large proportion escaped the fusillade of fire poured upon them as they descended.

In high military circles it is, at the time of writing, the fashion to underrate the importance of parachutists in modern warfare, and to contend that methods of defence will always be able to cope with them. In theory this seems a very strong argument. The harmless, trussed figure swaying in mid-air ought to be cold meat for the sniper and machine-gunner on the ground. Resolute troops should be able to round him up almost at leisure while he is picking himself up, discarding his harness and running to find the equipment container. This line of thought, however, leaves out of consideration all human factors. The General, weighing up pros and cons in cold blood, does not feel the sudden clutch at the heart, the uncertainty, the excitement and the indecision of an isolated sentry who sees a host of parachutists falling all round him with altogether unexpected speed. At any rate let all the Leros facts speak for themselves, as far as I know them.

I re-entered the tunnel and found Brigadier Tilney urgently, coolly collecting all the information possible about the parachutists—their numbers, casualties, approximate situation. It appeared that they had dropped in an area held by a platoon of the Irish Fusiliers. Confused accounts began to reach us about the fighting between the Irishmen and the new arrivals. Personally I felt convinced that a great many of the parachutists must have broken limbs or sprained ankles on the rocky hillside, that many must have been shot in mid-air, and that troops rushed to the spot would have no difficulty in mopping up the rest.

Then some disconcerting reports began to trickle in, partly by telephone and partly by runner. An officer who had been down the hill in an observation post came in hot indignation to say that he could see Italians running down the main metalled road from* the north of the island to Alinda Bay with their hands above their

heads in surrender, and that Germans were "mowing them down". Later a corporal of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, who had been with the platoon engaging the parachutists, toiled up to the tunnel. He was one of those men whom the journalist frequently encounters, who has the finest story in the world but simply cannot find words to tell it. All I could discover was that he and a handful of men had been in a hot fight. He claimed that the platoon had inflicted fifty casualties on the parachutists, but that they themselves had suffered heavily. Eventually he and two men had fought their way out, but he was of opinion that the parachutists had now fully organised into a formidable force.

This was dismaying news, but there was worse to follow. As the afternoon went on the telephonist reported that he was getting no more messages from the Buffs, in the northern half of the island. The telephone was cut, and there was every evidence that the parachutists, by seizing the island's wasp waist, had sliced Leros into two halves. It was obvious, however, that unless they had been reinforced by some of their troops landed in the Mount Vedetta area they must be very thin on the ground, and it was with high hopes that we overheard the Brigadier planning a counter-attack which was to take place that night, and to drive right through the German positions in the Alinda-Gurna Bay area to re-establish communication with the Buffs.

I suppose it must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon when I had a further shock. Making one of my periodical expeditions to the eastern exit to the tunnel I encountered an intelligence officer with a great armful of papers which he proceeded to dump on the hillside, drench in paraffin and set a match to. This struck me as a remarkably fine way of informing the bombers which were circling perpetually overhead of the location of battle headquarters. I asked what the idea was. "Oh, we're just burning secret documents," he said casually. "Just a precaution, you know, code books and all that." The fire crackled merrily as others began to make their contributions to the pyre.

Crichton came and suggested that I ought to burn all my papers and also destroy my war correspondent's badges. This I objected to strenuously, and after some discussion Crichton sensibly agreed that it was somewhat premature. Smoke from the bonfire began to ascend in dense clouds, and, with dust from the numerous bomb explosions, blew into the congested tunnel, making the atmosphere intolerable. As night fell it was still flaming up vigorously, and made such a beacon that I went out on to the hillside and stamped it down. Even then the fresh breeze stirred it into flame again from time to time.

If the physical atmosphere in the tunnel was fetid, the spiritual was mercurial in the extreme, ranging from lighthearted optimism at one time to unrelieved gloom at another. That evening there was a surge of high spirits caused by a radio report received earlier in the day that six destroyers and a cruiser were on their way, and would patrol round the island all night, ensuring that no more German reinforcements could land during the hours of darkness. The psychological effect of this expectation was enormous. We deluded ourselves and clutched at straws. I for one, began to pray for darkness, when we knew that, according to the German custom, the incessant bombing would stop, and when now, we were promised, the Navy would draw its protective ring round the tortured island.

As stars began to spangle a velvet sky the last three bombers discharged their loads and then, true to form, flew off to their bases, leaving the echoes to settle finally into an uneasy brooding silence. Inside the tunnel Brigadier Tilney was in anxious consultation with his staff over counter-attack plans. Sleeping forms of exhausted men lined the sides, and we became so crowded that there was no room for a single person more to lie down or even sit with his back propped anywhere. Smoke from the badly situated bonfire outside began to blow in till all our eyes smarted and the overtaxed atmosphere grew still more fetid.

I went outside to our eyrie at the eastern end of the tunnel, and found the little group of soldiers that habitually gathered round the Bren pit there were pleasantly excited at the prospect of help from the Navy. They were in such good heart that somebody started a sing-song, and I found myself, in that extraordinary situation, joining in the harmonies of "She'll come rolling down the Mountain when she comes", "Roll out the barrel", and similar songs. We knew that somewhere in that tiny island, not more than a mile or two away, a German Commander was planning and organising. German troops were perhaps at that very moment beginning to creep and crawl forwards. Somehow it didn't seem to matter.

I was weary from the strain and physical effort of the day and tried to lie down on the hillside to get some sleep, wrapping my wool-lined trench coat round. The loose stones made easily the most uncomfortable bed I have ever had, having no experience of the fakir's couch of nails. One of the Tommies crunching past to duty, with rifle and pack, noticed me, and asked if I would like a blanket. The night air was extremely chilly, and I gratefully accepted his offer, but even then it didn't make much

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difference, for I was then a little like the fairy story Princess who could feel a pea under forty mattresses. However, I recall this as one of the kindly gestures which are so much in character. The infantrymen who come into actual fighting contact with the enemy, take the greatest risks and endure the severest hardships are only a small percentage of a modern Army. They are the salt of the earth. Selfless to a fault, brave as any knightly hero of antiquity, yet so unglamorous as to be practically unsung. I think of them always with emotion and pride as they came out of battle dirty, unshaven, their clothing torn and sometimes bloodstained, foul-mouthed, yet still game and good-humoured. The General with his breast blazing with medal ribbons plays his part in victory truly enough, but these men, in all conscience play a greater.

Sleep being impossible, I abandoned the attempt and was returning from one of my expeditions to stamp out the dying embers of the fire of secret documents when suddenly the Italian searchlight on the Crusader's Castle opposite tunnelled into the night with its roving beam. It roamed hesitantly over the sea for a time, drawing an ineffective stream of red tracer from German Spandaus on the beach. Then it illumined for a brief moment a beautiful sight—two grey, streamlined shapes of British destroyers steaming silently line ahead. There was a spontaneous, low cheer from the little group outside the tunnel.

"Good old Navy," said the Bren-gunner sentimentally, "they never let you down." He went on to reminisce about Dunkirk.

Abruptly the General enthusiasm turned to anger, for the search light was lingering too long as the Italians were uncertain of the ships' identity.

"Put that bloody light out," yelled somebody across the valley, as if there were the faintest chance of the Italians hearing. Then we thought of sending a message inside the tunnel to the Italian Commander who could telephone across to the castle.

After what seemed an interminable time the searchlight was switched off, and we presumed that the destroyers continued their circuit of the island. We had noisy proof that they were still about when they began to bombard the German positions in the waist of the island. This operation in that small area called for very precise marksmanship and good information, and I heard afterwards that some of the shells came unpleasantly close to our own troops. At the time, however, our spirits took another leap.

The night dragged on to a cloudy dawn. We had felt confident that no more German troops could have got ashore through the naval patrol, but now, once again, with the coming of daylight

the destroyers and motor torpedo boats must bolt before the dive-bombers arrived. It was perhaps the most extraordinary situation of the war. We held the sea at night in a secure blockade. The Germans held both sea and air from dawn till dusk, and could do practically what they liked in both elements. The Navy, operating at great hazard in those waters, had, in the six weeks before my arrival in Leros, sunk eight enemy merchant ships carrying troops and supplies and sent another seven large lighters to the bottom.

They had also finished off four anti-submarine escorts and a destroyer, besides damaging a number of other craft of all types. This, however, was not sufficient to deter the enemy in a campaign launched with the intention of influencing Turkey to remain out of the war. They sought to prove that Germany had unassailable power in the eastern Mediterranean, and was quite capable of holding the outer iron ring of islands against all comers, thus preserving her position in the Balkans.

We, on our part, in circumstances which history must view as hopeless from the military and naval standpoints, set out to establish the contrary. One is entitled to deduce from the fact that Mr. Anthony Eden had just been conferring with the Turkish foreign minister in Cairo that the question of using the Turkish airfields as bases had been discussed, and that there were reasonable hopes. This may, in fact, have been the basis of the broadcast report which, as I have already mentioned, buoyed up the garrison with false hopes.

We on the island were not, however, concerned with the political poker play of statesmen, but faced the fact in the cold morning light that we would undoubtedly once be mercilessly bombed, and that the Germans would make renewed attempts to reinforce their troops. I did not know in the least what had happened during the night, for Brigadier Tilney had been snatching a few hours of much-needed rest, and in any case was too engrossed and preoccupied with a hundred worries and details to give "press conferences". My usual informants, the intelligence officers, were also too busy collating the scrappy and inadequate information they had to give a clear picture.

I soon gathered, however, from a drop in the mercurial tunnel morale that during the night there had been some "box up".

A counter-attack had been planned with the intention of breaking through the parachutists in the island's waist, and thus reuniting our forces in the severed north and south halves. Owing to some misunderstanding of the Brigadier's orders, this attack was never launched, thus giving the German infantry in the

Mount Vedetta area time to join hands with the parachutists and greatly strengthening their hold. The cause of this muddle was not clear, but it proved absolutely fatal to our chances of prolonging the fight. At the time, naturally, we did not realise this, and the Brigadier, exercising great patience and restraint, showing much less irritation than might have been expected in the circumstances, immediately began to organise and plan again for an attack to be made that night.

Meanwhile the full noisy and terrifying performance had started again, with daylight. More landing craft had made their way into Delia Palma Bay, significantly coming from the direction of the Turkish coast, and having successfully dodged our naval patrols. We could not see them from the tunnel exit, but could imagine that they were pouring ashore on to the beaches now safely held by their comrades. The Stukas had begun their usual shuttle service, and our anti-aircraft chorus was in full, but somewhat ineffective, blast. At about nine o'clock more parachutists were landed, with an exact repetition of the technique used for the first contingent. Destroyer planes machine-gunned the mountain slopes and scattered anti-personnel bombs. Then two squadrons of Ju 52's came in from the west, flying low, and the paratroopers began to bale out between Gurna and Alinda Bays. Again our machine guns chattered away furiously. Bofors guns joined in, and one of the slow troop carriers, hit fair and square, went flaming down into Alinda Bay, a horrifying spectacle, with one solitary parachute visible dragging behind it the doll-like figure still attached. Another Ju flying lower and lower in distress dropped all its parachutists into the water where the silken chutes lingered for a short time like water lilies. Once again, however, it seems certain that a large number of the paratroopers did land safely, and went to reinforce their comrades.

The Germans seemed ill-informed about the state of affairs in the island. One seaplane came boldly down into Alinda Bay and attempted to alight, as if the island were already in German hands. It met such a torrent of fire that it sank immediately. Another landing craft also entered Alinda Bay in full view of our numerous guns. The Germans thus repeated the blunder made on the previous morning, and the fate of this craft was even more dramatic. After only a few minutes I saw a tiny tongue of flame licking round the stern. Clouds of black smoke developed, and soon the whole vessel was a roaring furnace. Then it blew up with a mighty explosion showing that its chief cargo must have been ammunition. I doubt whether many on board survived.

It was a Bofors which scored the decisive hit, and there is

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no doubt that if we had had a hundred instead of only a dozen it would have made the island an even tougher proposition for the invaders. I clambered up through a shaft in the tunnel to the emplacement of the gun that had been firing so successfully. The gunners already claimed nine German aircraft, and were delighted at this fresh proof of their prowess. They had come from Kos, having been, as they then thought^ luckily shifted before the Germans took that island. Their chief worry was that they were running short of ammunition. Brigadier Tilney was, as it happened, at that moment dictating an urgent signal to headquarters in Cairo asking for reinforcements, supplies and ammunition, and above all, for air support.

The day dragged on, and reports coming in began to show that the enemy was making no great progress, but was apparently organising. The intelligence staff estimated that he had six hundred parachutists and four or five hundred other fighting troops on the island. With our total of eleven thousand we should have been able to hold off such a small number easily, even if the Italians *were* a doubtful quantity. But, I think, in the light of what happened later, this estimate of the enemy strength must have been far too modest. For a time the Irish Fusiliers, having pressed the enemy back on to the lower slopes of Mount Appetici,³ had him pinned down there in a comparatively small area. We were optimistically expecting to hear at any moment that this particular party had been "liquidated," but the news never came. The Germans hung on with great grit and pertinacity, and in the afternoon aircraft came and dropped supplies by coloured parachutes.

Meanwhile the Buffs, fighting with great gallantry in the northern half of the island, were meeting with considerable success. They had retaken an Italian battery captured by the enemy overlooking Blefuti Bay, and had rounded up one hundred and fifty prisoners. News of what was going on in that area was, of course, extremely difficult to come by, as it had to be brought by runners, who passed through the rather thinly held German line between the bays. At dusk, as final preparations for our main counter-attack went forward, we felt we had no particular reason either for depression or elation.

The Brigadier had hit upon an ingenious plan for foxing the enemy and confusing his system of dive-bomber support. It was, simply, to instruct the infantry to use the same coloured Very signals as his did when asking for bombing support. Thus the Stukas might very well be persuaded to drop their eggs in the wrong places, possibly to the discomfiture of their own troops. The success of this depended on our advance knowledge of what

signals he was going to use. But in any case it would be difficult for him to change his signals often enough to prevent our copying them. We were all pleased with the prospects of this ruse, and it served to encourage us afresh, an illustration of how we all clutched at straws.

There were many men who habitually went about the tunnel with smiling faces and high morale, entirely unperturbed, and always intent on their job. Among them I recall a young naval Lieutenant, R.N., encounters with whom were a refreshing tonic. I met him just before dusk, and found him bubbling with the news that on the following day twelve Beaufighters were coming over to our support. To us, who had seen only two or three British planes over the island, this seemed a gigantic armada, and we imagined them shooting down the Stukas "left, right and centre". In a second our vivid imaginations had the sky cleared of the enemy, and then it was another easy step to suppose that, after all, we had obtained permission to use the Turkish airfields. So easily is hope aroused when men are in a tight corner.

The most encouraging news was, however, that reinforcements had been promised, and were expected to arrive during the night. Supply-dropping aircraft were also due to come over. In all the circumstances, therefore, there were distinct hopes that the defence of the island might be prolonged for a considerable time, long enough perhaps for the enemy to tire of his expensive siege.

I had managed to get off another short message by army radio signals during the day, consisting of two hundred words. There was no way of telling whether this or the previous signal had got through to London. In reaching the island at the critical moment and seeing all the madly exciting and fantastic opening stages of the siege I had accomplished half my job. The other, and more important half, was to ensure that the story was published. I therefore now began to consider, very urgently, ways and means of leaving the island, and returning quickly to Alexandria or Cairo, from where I could telegraph the complete story to London.

Not the least of my difficulties was psychological. Anybody who left the island at that time might be stigmatised as a coward; Furthermore, his going might very well affect the extremely sensitive morale of the island defenders. There was, of course, also the physical problem of finding a ship to take me. In my innermost mind I felt convinced that Leros could not hold out indefinitely, but I thought it quite conceivable that the siege might drag on for some weeks. I consulted Crichton, and he agreed

that it was my duty now to get back to Cairo as soon as possible to write the full story. He well understood that the sight of the Press departing might be misconstrued, and therefore approached the movement control officer to make it perfectly clear why we wished to go. That officer, who, I believe, consulted the Brigadier, gave his consent, and said that a destroyer was due to arrive that night with reinforcements and supplies.

There was now only one harbour which this expected destroyer could conveniently enter, namely Portolago (or Portolaki) Bay, in which, incidentally, two other British destroyers, had already been sunk by dive-bombing. Both Alinda Bay and Gurna Bay were in enemy hands. The movement control officer advised us, therefore, to take all our belongings down to the Italian naval headquarters by Portolago Bay, and to contact the British naval officer in charge there.

He, it was arranged, would take us out to the destroyer, if and when she arrived, in a motor launch.

Before leaving we took reluctant farewell of Sergeant Wood, who had had explicit orders in Cairo to stay on the island with the garrison. Wood, who had shown great enterprise and courage in taking his pictures, never questioned that it was his duty to stay. He stuck to his camera and his picture-taking like the gallant little man he was, to the last moment, and was, I believe, taken prisoner when eventually the surrender came.

When we left the ill-ventilated tunnel the heat, dust from bomb explosions, and smoke from the bonfire had become so insufferable that our eyes were streaming with tears. It was a blessing to breathe the cool, fresh night air. Lugging our remaining possessions, which, in my case, consisted of the precious typewriter and a haversack containing a few toilet items, we scrambled down the boulder-strewn hillside, a little uncertain of our way. Presently we hit a rough track and turned right, according to instructions. I was apprehensive about this, for I knew if we went on far enough we would strike a road junction called Charing Cross, the ownership of which was, at that particular time, a little uncertain. All was deathly quiet except for the small avalanches of stones which our slipping feet had started. A dark figure suddenly presented itself in our path and, in a comforting Cockney accent, demanded the password. By an idiotic oversight neither of us knew it, but there is something in the English tongue which, when spoken by Englishmen, will carry its own conviction. So we were allowed to pass, and at my suggestion took another short cut down the hillside so that we need not be obliged to follow this track to Charing Cross.

Soon we were on another path where we could take what was much more to my liking, a definite left turn, and we trudged on down the mountain towards Portolago. Crichton, no doubt influenced by the considerable experience he had had in the desert campaigns, was much more cautious in his movements than I was, and, as the winding road began to straighten and level out, frequently stopped to ask the roadside sentries what was going on. As we approached a bridge across a culvert Crichton's wisdom was demonstrated. The particular sentry whom he spoke to said that there had been some shooting across the road, I pooh-poohed it, and said it was impossible in that part of the island, confident in the information I had from the headquarters intelligence staff concerning the enemy's dispositions.

We slogged on; then both simultaneously fell flat on our faces as the sentry was proved indisputably right by some "dying whistles over our heads. We were puzzled to know where the firing could be coming from unless it were distant Appetici. But we did not stop to inquire, for when the unpleasant whistling had ceased we legged it down the road as hard as we could. The sight of a file of men marching towards us along the side of the road gave us pause again. We both dived for cover. Crichton raced back towards the sentry's post. I, somewhat breathless, crouched in the shelter and shadow of a low stone wall. Our alarm was needless, for I heard some expletives which left no room for doubt that the marching men were British. They were, in fact, a platoon of the King's Own tramping up for the counter-attack.

We were now in the bomb-wrecked outskirts of Portolago Town, and Crichton's knowledge of Italian began to come in useful, for there were a number of Italian marines about, provisionally on our side, but a little light on the trigger. His "Don't shoot" in Italian was a great success. We came across an Italian lorry-outside a garage, and the driver roused from slumber by our footsteps, offered us a lift. When we had clambered in and dumped our baggage, to our immense surprise he went off to sleep again. So, after momentary irritation, we struggled out and walked on again.

We found the naval headquarters at last, consisting of a series of tunnels honeycombing the hills on the northern side of Portolago Bay. After a little more research we also found the British naval-officer-in-charge, a bearded young Canadian with a D.S.C. ribbon on his uniform. We explained ourselves, and his first question was "What's the idea? Why are you clearing out?" I told him truthfully that this was not a *sauve qui pent*, but an effort to ensure that the story of Leros was published. He seemed mollified, and then said that he had no definite information

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as to when this destroyer was coming in, but proposed that we should go out in a motor launch and wait at the harbour bar. We went down to the quayside, and were there joined by two Army officers. One, whose name I cannot remember, I will call, for the purposes of this narrative, Captain Davis. He was a movements control officer, who had come down to arrange for the disembarkation of troops and supplies from the expected destroyer.

The five of us embarked in the waiting launch, and began to chug over still waters illusively reflecting the moon's white fire. We reached the bar, switched off the engine and rocked gently in the swell, waiting. Another launch which came alongside with a naval officer on board went out to sea to guide the destroyer in. While waiting, we five discussed the prospects of the night's counterattacks, the audacity of the German parachutists' attack, and all the anxious, exciting themes with which our brains were buzzing. One of the Army officers had in his pocket a signal from R.A.F. headquarters in Cairo in response to the numerous appeals which we had sent for air support.

It stated that every available long-range fighter had been sent, setting out the sorties and the times. There had also been bombing raids on the enemy's airfields in Rhodes, Crete, Kos and southern Greece. It was plain that R.A.F. Command in Middle East were doing their utmost, but as far as we were concerned the result was negligible. The dive-bomber shuttle service had been entirely uninterrupted all day except for a brief period when the weather clouded over and rain began to fall. Compelled to use bases in Cyprus, more than 250 miles away, we were at such a disadvantage that one wondered, more and more, why this luckless campaign was ever embarked upon. I do not know how many Beaufighters were available, but between us that day we had only seen half a dozen, usually scurrying away hard with the Messerschmitts from Kos, for which they were no proper match, hot in pursuit. When in Cyprus I had seen a squadron of Lightnings that could probably have been used more effectively at this extreme range, but none arrived over Leros, to my knowledge. The message from R.A.F. headquarters finished up with "God bless you all".

While we waited, with increasing drowsiness, there came a shattering roll of gunfire from somewhere out at sea. We surmised, correctly as it turned out, that our destroyer had arrived, and was pounding the German positions in preparation for the counterattacks. The night dragged wearily on, punctuated by more gunfire from the sea, sounds of small arms machine-gun fire and mortaring from inland. At intervals the big guns of the Scumbardo

battery immediately above our heads cracked out with startling effect, but no obvious purpose. We were full of wild conjecture as to what was happening in the island. Davis said, half in jest, half earnest, that if the worst came to the worst, we could put out to sea in our cockleshell and hope to make one of the other islands.

The sky was greying into dawn, ominously disclosing the superstructure of a British destroyer that had been sunk in the bay, when we heard the purring of the second motor launch. The young Sub-Lieutenant in it called across, "They left it too late. They'd been doing some bombardments, and they can't come in in daylight. We've had it". Our launch turned round and took us back to the quayside. Crichton and I got out, rather dolefully, and Davis, who had a jeep, said he would take us back to battle headquarters.

Before leaving the Italian naval headquarters we had the rather disconcerting news that there was no telephonic connection with the headquarters tunnel. This might mean an unimportant breakdown, or something much more sinister. However, we started off, stopping various soldiers whom we met on the way to ask for news of the night's fighting. The island was buzzing with conflicting rumours. There was no positive information except that Charing Cross, through which our jeep would have to pass, was under mortar fire. Davis thought, and we agreed, that in view of the general uncertainty, the best thing to do would be to return to Portolago with the jeep and its trailer until we could get more positive information.

So we trundled back, and I sank into a camp chair to try to snatch some rest. There was one great advantage to the Italian naval tunnels as compared with battle headquarters, namely that they had clean concrete floors and were well-lighted and fairly well-ventilated. They were, however, hideously overcrowded with unemployed sailors and marines, who were in the habit of clustering round the entrance till they saw a flight of bombers arriving. Then they made a rush inside, although very often the bombs were falling miles away, sometimes at the other end of the island. Some of the young sailors would fervently cross themselves as they stood lining the tunnel walls.

I found this unceasing panic surge at once irritating and infectious. Many times I checked the impulse to join in. My effort, by example, to dispel the illusion among the Italians that every bomb was directed at them personally, and that it would be better for everybody if they either stayed in or stayed out, was entirely vain. They expostulated with me, waved and pointed, and continued to stampede to and fro with inexhaustible energy,

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gazing at me sorrowfully as if I were mad when I declined to take cover, as a formation, obviously going elsewhere, passed over.

After an hour of troubled dozing in the camp-chair, rather like trying to sleep on the side of a tube escalator with cascades of humanity sweeping past, I roused myself and went outside to review the situation. I met the bearded R.N.V.R. type who reported that Davis and Crichton had gone off in the jeep to round up stragglers and deserters who were reported to be hiding in the tunnels and caves. In due course, some time before noon, they came back, both in much more optimistic mood.

The stragglers whom they found had all been rallied and marched off. The telephone line to battle headquarters had been restored, and there was most welcome news of the success of our counter-attacks during the night. Then there was also bright sunshine to dispel the last misgivings of the night and fill our hearts with hope. The Germans had been pushed off most of the central strip, including the two hills of Mount Rachi and Mount Germano, which were about four hundred and two hundred feet high respectively. In the northern half, the five-hundred-foot height of Quirico had been captured, presumably by the Buffs. At least, that was the information imparted by a gleeful Davis and subsequently checked by me at battle head-quarters. Clido, another small hill, was also said to have been recaptured, and the Italian battery there recovered intact.

In this apparently favourable situation, I suggested to Crichton that it would be a good idea if we returned to the tunnel in order to get another message through to London. David took us in the jeep as far as he thought prudent, then we toiled wearily up the barren rise to the tunnel entrance. Battle headquarters was full of dust and smoke, hot and airless, strewn with the recumbent bodies of exhausted men, while others stumbled, red-eyed and weary, about their duties. The eastern exit was now under observation from the Germans on Appetici, and as occasional mortar shells lobbed down, was no longer the ideal grandstand position. Brigadier Tilney, imperturbable and intent as ever, was holding conference again.

Wood, who had been fearlessly exposing himself to take pictures, and had been shaken by a near explosion, told us that during the night the battle had fluctuated violently, and at one time headquarters had been nearly surrounded. The Brigadier had been snatching some well-earned rest. When he woke up and received the alarming report that German parachutists were actually creeping up Mount Meraviglia itself, he immediately armed himself with a tommy gun and ordered the whole headquarters staff to turn out and repel the attack. Staff officers, signallers and

intelligence officers all clipped on belts and holsters, seized pistols, rifles, tommy and Bren guns - in fact any weapon that came to hand, and followed the Brigadier into the night. Accounts of the scrap that ensued were scanty and confused, but it seemed the arrival of these unexpected reinforcements and the volume of their fire was effective. The enemy retreated down the hill, and we re-established contact with the forces in the northern area.

The great disappointment of the night had, however, been the non-arrival of any reinforcements or supplies. After his conference, the Brigadier, therefore, began to dictate a very urgent appeal to Cairo for help, addressed, I presume, to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Sir Maitland Wilson. He outlined the successes achieved by the defenders in their intensely difficult circumstances, pointed out that his hard-pressed men were now very tired, and that there were grave shortages of ammunition, particularly for the invaluable Bofors guns. He ended with some, such phrase as "We have done *our* part. It now rests with you. I shall fight to the last".

Crichton, whose role of conducting officer was not fully understood or appreciated by fighting soldiers, volunteered to do guard duty. A Canadian Captain approached me, and suggested that I might do likewise. With great reluctance, I refused, fully realising that my refusal might be misunderstood. I explained that I felt I must stick to my job, and not get sidetracked. He replied that he thought guns would be more useful than fountain pens in our predicament. I insisted, however, that I had only one thought in mind, and that was to secure the best possible story, and to see that it reached its destination and was duly published. He did not persist.

Signals agreed to send another two hundred words, and having despatched this third message, by which time Crichton was relieved, I suggested a return to the Italian naval base, in the hope that our destroyer might that night turn up. As we slithered once again down the hillside the noise of bombing had grown to even greater volume, and the intervals between visitations shorter. We were getting numbed by the noise, sickened by the sight of the black spouts of earth, and now by the bloodstained stretchers carried laboriously up the hillside into foxhole dressing stations with their limp loads.

As we dropped onto a rough track that disappeared round a breast of mountain, a grey marching column swung into our view. Germans! We both thought, for a fraction of a second, that this was the end. Then we quickly noted that they had no arms, and at the rear of the party of about fifty there strode a solitary British

sergeant with rifle and fixed bayonet. They were prisoners, husky, blond fellows, a trifle glum, but well dressed and well fed, not deigning to turn their heads when the bombs burst near, and marching together as if they were on the barrack square. They all looked imposing enough now, but somehow or other they had all been frightened into surrender an hour or two before.

Our spirits soared at the sight, and we continued our way to Portolago hopefully. A Red Cross jeep, very slowly carrying a motionless stretcher case down to the Italian hospital, gave us a lift on the bonnet for a short distance. We passed the stretch of road where bullets had been flying on the previous night. All was quiet, and at the time I thought it was another encouraging sign that the Germans had been shoved off vantage points. It now occurs to me that we might have been still under observation, but that the Hun, showing one of his curious inconsistencies of character, was refraining from firing at a Red Cross jeep.

As we bowled along the debris-spattered avenue that led into the outskirts of Portolago the noise of gunfire and bomb bursts was mounting to a new crescendo. I felt mentally and physically exhausted, nauseated and appalled by the idiotic futility of it all. We dismounted when the jeep reached the Italian hospital and trudged off, I lugging my typewriter still and wishing it had been half the weight and size. "Electric Whiskers", as we now called the Canadian **R.N.V.R.** officer, greeted us at the tunnel entrance with the news that the destroyer would definitely come that night. We received this with silent scepticism.

Inside the tunnel we found that there had been a further fall in morale. The lights, including the emergency system, had failed. Tempers had frayed. The Italians watched our movements still more closely and suspiciously. In the darkness the recurring stampedes became even more irritating and inconvenient. I lost my water bottle, my towel, and most other toilet articles except for a small piece of soap. In the circumstances I preferred to risk the bombs outside rather than stay in. I attempted to wash, using my tin hat as a basin and my one remaining filthy handkerchief as a towel. There was plenty of water obtainable from a well, but the insanitary habits of the Italian sailors made the whole area round the tunnel entrance most unpleasant.

It was with feelings of profound relief that I saw the sun slipping behind the trees, and realised that soon we should be able to make another attempt to get away. Before dusk there was an extra violent alarum and excursion. Somebody reported that more parachutists were being dropped in the Appetici region. One half-pint sized Italian, with an incipient beard, seized a

tommy gun and came rushing out shouting in English (perhaps for our benefit) "The mosquitoes". He disappeared into the wood and I did not see him again. It turned out that the Ju's were dropping supplies and not men.

At last darkness had settled, and we waited ready to go. Davis and another movements control officer arrived from battle headquarters in a jeep, and raised our depressed spirits by saying it was confirmed that a destroyer and at least one other ship would come in that night with reinforcements and munitions. Once again we gathered together our dwindling possessions and trekked down to the quayside. As usual the bombing had automatically stopped at nightfall, and the sudden quiet relaxed nervous strain. The Italians had apparently decided that our departure did not foreshadow a general evacuation, and took no special notice.

It was an eerie night. The moon stared down coldly on the ghostly waste of Portolago Bay where if you looked hard into the shadows you could see the sunken destroyer's masts. The heights of Scumbarda rose black and forbidding, screening the sea, and every now and then a solitary gun rang all the mountain echoes. "Electric Whiskers" put out in his little motor boat to guide the ships in, and we waited hopefully. Minutes ticked into hours, during which we mooched about with increasing moodiness. We wondered what the gun in the brave Scumbarda battery could possibly be firing at. Aircraft began to hum over at intervals but we felt convinced that they must be our own, dropping supplies. This surmise was correct.

At about ten o'clock we noticed a small boat moving through the shadowy waters, and thought at first that it was "Electric Whiskers" returning in triumph with our destroyer. We soon discerned, however, that it was a rowing boat, and further, that it was crowded with men. Davis fingered his revolver apprehensively. The boat grated against the quayside and then the tension was released when I heard a well-known expletive pronounced in an Irish brogue. Half a dozen men of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, tin-hatted and armed, came clumping along the wharf and uttered many expressions of relief when they discovered we were English.

They explained that they had been concerned in the fighting on the slopes of Appetici, and had been captured by the Germans. Their captors put them in a cave, but were later too preoccupied with repelling a counter-attack to guard them properly. So they all escaped, and, what was more, recovered their weapons. They then discovered a small fishing boat, and in it made their way round to Portolago Bay. The Germans they said, had treated

them fairly well, but had given them nothing to eat, having very little themselves. So they were desperately hungry, and all they asked of us was to show them the way to a cookhouse. They had not the slightest idea what part of the island they were in, nor where the enemy was, and were delighted when we assured them that they could safely reach a cookhouse near at hand without running into any Huns.

This little incident well illustrates the confusion of the Leros battle. The wonder is that on such a tiny island it was safe to move about anywhere at all.

Another tedious hour dragged past, and at last we heard the welcome chugging of the motor boat. We assumed that it was leading the awaited destroyer in to anchorage. Instead we eventually made out the outlines of the motor minesweeper which had accompanied Brawel's ship when we set out on our dash to Leros. She manoeuvred alongside, and began to discharge ammunition. Crichton and I began to wonder whether this might not be our best chance to quit. Her Captain said, however, that he was going back to an anchorage, and thereafter his movements were uncertain. If we cared to take the chance we were welcome to travel with him.

We thought that in view of the uncertainties and disappointments of the previous night it might be a good idea, hoping to "hitch hike" on. Davis and the other officer thought otherwise, and insisted that the destroyer, which would go speedily straight to Alexandria, was the best proposition. I felt extremely doubtful about our prospects, but the transmission advantages of returning direct to Alexandria were so great that I was bound to agree. So with great reluctance and many regrets we saw the minesweeper push off, and settled down to wait again.

Crichton, with great kindness, had offered to share his bedroll. I had the first session, and resigning myself to a long wait, wandered along the quayside till I found a shattered iron tank possibly blown off one of the destroyers. I was still clutching at a faint hope, although by now we were well into the small hours and it would be madness for a destroyer to come into that trap in daylight. Crichton, however, now took a somewhat gloomy view of our chances, and because of his more strenuous day was very exhausted. He had been charged with the task of protecting my life and ensuring that my story reached the transmitter. These duties he took very seriously. He had been determined, from the start, that we should get to Leros by hook or crook. There were times, such as the first occasion when our minesweeper grounded, when I had wondered whether it would not be a good idea to abandon the whole thing. This Crichton strenuously opposed.

However, the discussion never passed the academic stage because, as already related, the minesweeper was pulled off. Grichton was now equally determined to get me away, and he was annoyed at the attitude of the movements control officers who, he considered, had condemned us to another twenty-four hours on the island. He strode off to find some more sheltered spot, as the wind was blowing fresh. I lay huddled in the iron tank, sleepless and in a mood of deep depression. It was three o'clock in the morning and dawn was soon after five.