

CHAPTER 16

"BENGHAZI"

On the move once again, - complete with full water bottle, two biscuits and a tin of Itie bully, we mounted the trucks and did our sardine act.

This time I was positioned on the trailer, so going up the cliff face once again, not only did I have to hope the brakes would hold, but also the bolt that secured the trailer to the truck. For the whole of the journey up the cliff face, I never took my eyes away from that bolt, - heaving a sigh of relief when the summit was reached without incident.

Much of the journey took us through cultivated areas of Italian territory. What a most pleasant sensation to view belts of green vegetation after so much sand. I'd almost forgotten what it looked like. Italian farmers came to the doors of their cottages, to give us the thumbs down, - which being immediately answered with the two fingers up. We were down, but a long way from being despondant.

Several times the truck halted to enable men suffering from dysentery to reach the side of the road. Hardly had they done so, when Libyan soldiers would fire over their heads for them to return. How I longed to strangle one of these bastards! Unfortunately we were powerless to interfere, - they would have shot, for almost blinking an eyelid.

Eventually Benghazi came into view, - soon we were stopping outside the compound. What a vast difference from Derna, - plenty of space to move around, with tents provided for shelter from the blazing sun, also the rain, which did occur now and again.

After being allocated a space in one of the tents, I decided to take a walk around to discover my surroundings. Imagine to my delightful surprise, I made contact with several of the men from my own battery. This being the first time we had met since being parted at Tobruk, although I failed to discover the whereabouts of either Harry or Percy. Neither did they have any inkling of where they were. Nevertheless, it felt wonderful to

have made contact with them after so long. Perhaps now, we would be able to keep together, - but alas, it was not to be.

Rations continued the same, except for an additional cup of coffee, which were more than appreciated, - also a daily issue of five cigarettes. This seemed like manna from heaven, after so long with out a smoke. Almost like living in the lap of luxury once again.

Water was not plentiful, but sufficient for one's needs, - even to the extent of a mobile shower every few days. Surely, we must have reached paradise at last, - everything had changed for the better recently. Obviously I must awake soon, - only to find it all a dream.

Any article of value, could be exchanged with the guards for cigarettes or bread rolls. A fountain pen being worth five cigarettes, - a good watch, twenty cigarettes, plus a couple of bread rolls, - cigarettes lighters depended on how good or efficient they were. Soon a miniature barter market had suddenly sprung into being, - but sadly, after a very short time, one had nothing of value, remaining to barter.

However my luck changed dramatically, - whilst walking around the camp compound, - who should I meet? - none other than my very good friend, Captain Scott-Atkinson. Needless to say, we were both absolutely delighted at meeting each other. "How many of our men are with you?" he asked, - I replied, "Actually I am unfortunately not with them, but I do know where to contact about six or seven of them."

After a lengthy chat he pulled from his pocket a wad of £1 notes. "Where did you get that lot?", I asked in surprise. "When Tobruk fell everything had to be destroyed," he replied, "However one can't burn good money, it's very very hard, so you take some and share it out with our men when next you meet. Now you will be able to buy a little more food and cigarettes on the barter market". That being the very last time I was to meet him, I can only hope he managed to survive and now living happily somewhere in the United Kingdom. For me, he'll never be forgotten, - a really great guy, - one of the very best.

The money being equally shared between us, we were able

to buy further cigarettes, - bread rolls becoming harder to come by. However as all good things must come to an end, so did the money, leaving us in exactly the same place as when we started.

By this time the R.A.F. were taking more than a passing interest in the docks at Benghazi. Almost every night, bombs would crash down throwing piles of debris into the air, - with thousands of voices cheering every bomb that dropped. Italians scurrying into their shelters, would bring forth screams of delight from the prisoners.

These raids did an enormous job, - not only for the damage they created, but also for the morale of all the prisoners. The humiliation, being almost forgotten, as each bomb crashed down. Long after our planes had disappeared, enemy fighters would take to the air. Better late than never, appeared to be their motto. One had to admit, it was much safer.

Conditions now, were much more severe, - the barter market had long disappeared, - probably because no one had anything of value left to barter with. Very little food came our way. Dozens of dysentery cases, were being taken away daily to hospital. Most men, including myself, began wishing we could contract dysentery, so being taken to hospital, where at least one hoped one could have some food. Shortage of food, plus the everlasting confinement, can make the mind work in so many ways. I fell to wondering if we were all losing our sense of reasoning. Sometimes I do believe, we must have been.

As yet, we had no means of contacting our wives and relatives, as to whether we had been killed or taken prisoner. Obviously everyone wanted to write home to allay their anxiety. However the Italian authorities informed us, that it would not be possible until we reached Italy. God how much longer had that got to be!

Actually, it happened sooner than expected, - a few days later, we were awakened at 3 a.m., - told to pack our kits, then marched to the docks for our trip to Italy.

Arriving at the docks we were able to view the damage

inflicted by the R.A.F.'s frequent bombing attacks. Complete and utter devastation lay all around. Three cheers for our air-force lads, - inwardly hoping that we should have departed before their next performance. I being quite happy to view from a safe distance, the farther the better, by the mess they had already accomplished.