

So this is

BENGASI

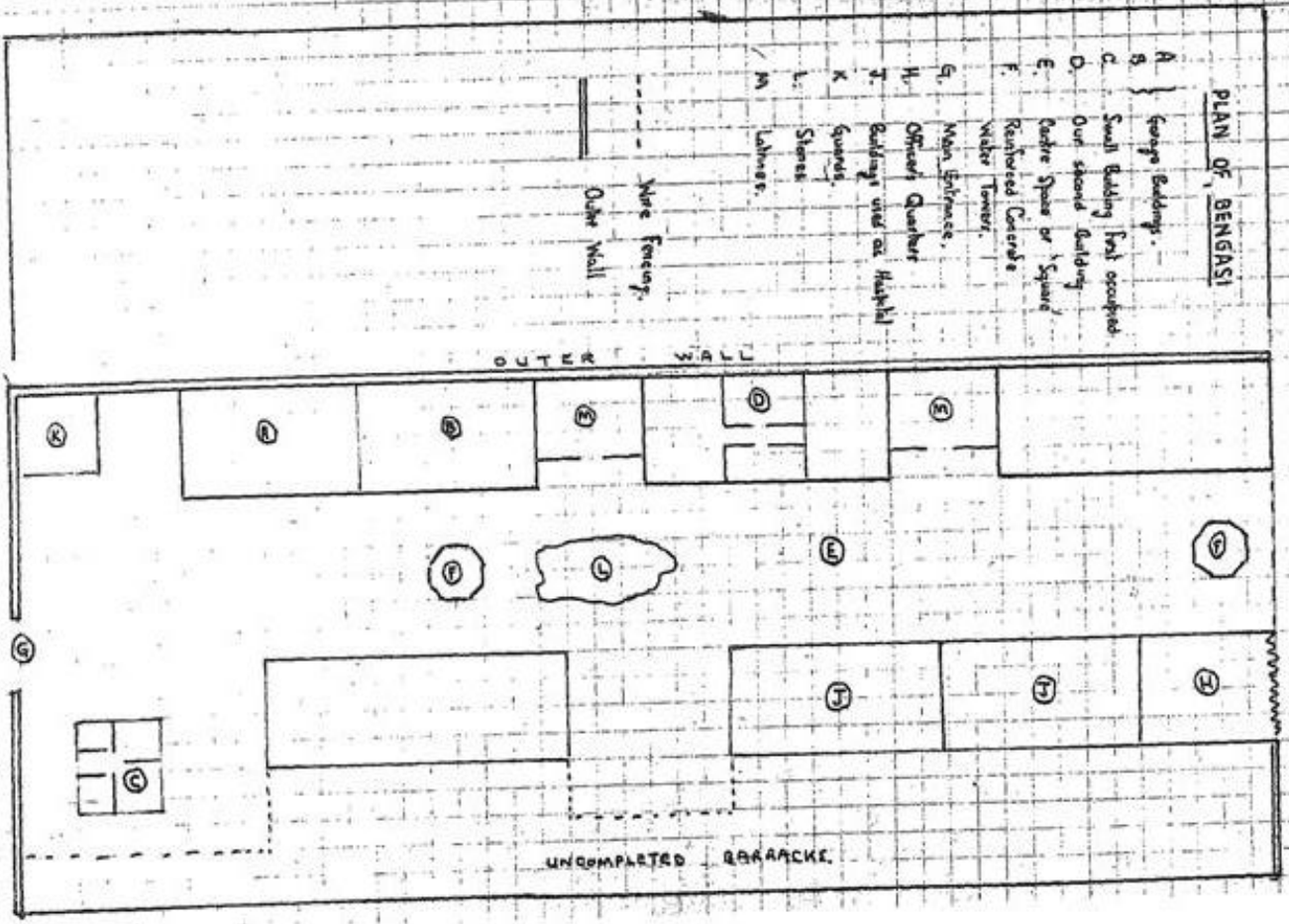
[APRIL 23 to MAY 3]

South, after our arrival the rest of the camp arrived. The fellows dismounted truck by truck and were shown into Building A & B (see from aerial). It looked as though we were still to be a separate party, particularly when they wanted us from Building B to Building D as the former was reported as a M.I. Room. Later in the afternoon we were allowed out of the building and were able to take look of our surroundings.

His quarters at the conclusion of the last night, we were situated in the corner of a barracks the majority of which was still under construction. Our section was wired off from the rest of the camp and was, really, the only part containing completed buildings and free from building materials. The dimensions of this section were roughly 150 yds X 40 yds and the double fence (it was bordered by buildings which were primarily intended for Japs; being large single-room affairs with walled roller-shutter doors. Two reinforced concrete water towers (F) each about 150 ft. in height were erected either end of the double fence. The whole barracks was, obviously, part of the

This military expedition plan in Libya which had been cribbed with the outbreak of war. The gateway (G) is a gap in the outer wall, led off to an expanse of flat waste land across which could be seen the white buildings and palms of Benghazi town. The water supply was drawn from a narrow wadi by a running down from the top of the tower opposite building G. It was then and quite fit for drinking. Officers were quartered together with Japs in Building H.

Having examined our surroundings, we made our way to Buildings A & B where the senior personnel were still busy sorting themselves out. They had, apparently, left Dema on the previous afternoon and had spent the night in the trucks (I) just outside the gate. They were excited to death over the rumors about Hitler's surprise attack on Greece, but their amusement turned to error when we had news of the species and carcasses which we had not had. They had received very little food in the last twenty-four hours, in fact nothing apart from bread stuff they had saved themselves, and when they left Dema things were becoming pretty grim. Many of the



Chaps. were suffering from mild form of dysentery, which night's spent in trucks did not improve. I was good together, that before this next afternoon was through, but were each issued with two boxes each of 1/2 lb. of "M.V." - the Italian counter part of the British M.V. but containing no vegetable and only wheat in gelatin.

It began to get dark at about 6.30 so after having a wash using our steel buckets as wash basins (there were no other washing facilities) we returned to our building, made a wash of the bully beef issued that morning, made our beds and turned in.

The following morning was spent in sorting us out into units, and worked the end of our small separate party. The teamsters (Lionel & Spang) were put into building 4 and other units (C.A.C. Tanks, Cavalry) into various other buildings. We were then subdivided into Squads of 25 for the purpose of removing rubbish and in-vasion of various areas, and were organized in the building accordingly. I was fortunate in getting alongside the wall with three or five cases from No 2 Squadron. Each Squad was a "numbered" party since No 5

Ration was brought in to the Camp on trucks and issued to Squads at about 11 A.M. daily. They consisted of two boxes, a tin of tinned corn, powdered sugar, a lemon or two. There were no central cooking facilities so each man or small party had to make their own arrangements which consisted of collecting tin cans bits of wire spars or collecting tin

wiring a small fire in the square and cooking the food in mess tins. As the daily ration issue never varied there was little we could do in the cooking line.

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Although we were made to eat the M.V. we had up into small pieces and mix it with baked bread and then to cook the whole in a mess tin in the form of a soup or porridge. Owing to lack of fat and vegetables this was not too successful. For the dish would burn around the water tin and not on top. It made a change however from having the meat and bread in its original form. There was no issue of coffee or tea and unless you had brought these commodities with you, a hot drink of any sort was out of the question. My No 2 Soda condensers, who had been on a number of air-draws working parties at Derna, kept me pretty well supplied in this direction.

Our officers, under a bearded Arabic Colonel had now taken complete charge of the running of the Camp. Orders were, as inspection parade at 9 A.M. which would be attended by every body except those going sick and those out on working parties. The drawing of actions at 11 A.M. would be done by Squads which would parade only when called out to do so. The only other parade would be on a "P.T." parade at 2 P.M. The only substitutions in which were the sick men, working parties, out a P.T. parade at 3 P.M. in the half of the afternoon. - It was not exactly encouraging the gentle art of physical culture and was just one of the things which caused frustration. Another site had after this visit from the working parties we should carry stones from one pile to another in the square to get us fit or as barracks rooms.

A good idea, perhaps, but a day's work of doing it - or so we thought. We had by

now being captured over a fortnight. It had been a period of change, food and insufficient food and water and very tight living conditions. Small wonder was it that our suggestions for our own food which would "satisfy ourselves" was with "contaminated". We were reaching a stage when a change of diet and conditions was becoming necessary for our health and as the days passed, we became more and more disgruntled. Several instances occurred of ill men complaining back the officers which only went to show the state of their nerves. Every day we hoped for the news that we were to move on to Tripoli - a kind of promised land with a properly organized camp. But each day drew to a close with no such news.

It was apparent that we were still in the trap of the Squadron and other personnel who had gone on ahead of us from Mechili. Familiar names were found scribbled on walls and on our fifth day, two H.Q. St. Sq. fellows came out of hospital, having been victims or dysentery, and enough to prevent them making the journey to Tripoli. They gave us news of Capt. Gibson's 4 Gill. Batters parties which had been completely absent from Derna and Mechili, and which had been picked up by German patrols.

Apart from the parades mentioned above, we were free to do as we saw fit. Certain amount of reading matter which was very precious and a few very much worn books of cards, hymn books, mass two copies of newspapers, the day

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was spent in sleeping, walking up and down the square and attending to our personal requirements, such as cooking and washing. The weather was always bright and sunny, but the temperature varied with the direction of the wind. When blowing in from the sea, it was possible to sit out in the afternoon sun but when blowing in the opposite direction from the desert in the south, it became unbearable. The wind varied in this way on alternate days. Whatever the temperature during the day, the nights were very cold and it was always a case of dressing for heat and not undressing.

Darkness fell quite suddenly between seven o'clock and half past and it was orders that every man must be indoors by that time. There was no interior lighting so that on bare or so was usually spent in talking, jokes or community singing. There was plenty of lanterns.

On the second evening, we were busy amusing ourselves in that way when the programme was suddenly interrupted by a series of loud reports. Then the call came of an aeroplane was heard which grew gradually louder as the gun fire grew heavier. So our days were on the job! - well, let 'em have it good and proper. This developed into a night's visit about an hour after midnight. The noise of the A.R. fire was the only part of it which was effective for whilst we were there, they never brought down anything. As there was no moon, the planes stopped twice which we were able to see through the wide darkness, as they sank back in the sky. It became apparent that their position was somewhere

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In the neighbourhood of the camp. Perhaps the aerodrome about 1/2 miles away or the docks about the same distance in the opposite direction or why not the camp itself? - Some of the bombs dropped close enough. The British authorities might not know we were there and although still under construction, the camp provided a useful target with its two water towers and buildings. Which, if not completely were quite usable. The latter possibility made our opinion of these raids somewhat worsened. Naturally, we were glad to know that the R.A.F. were doing something in that part of the world. We would like to see the whole of Benhari wiped out. But knowing the accurate bombing of our beds, if it was the camp they were after then we were in for an unpleasant time. In buildings A & G were over 200 yards and a bomb on that lot would have meant very heavy casualties. Besides, the idea of war was not to be killed by accident by your own people. So that these raids proved somewhat nerve-racking to most of us. The possibility of being hit was emphasised in our minds by our physical weakness and the fact that there was no way of taking our wounds off it. We just lay on our beds listening and waiting. Most of us, I think, were glad when the day to move came and we were moved out of this hellish position.

Working parties started two mornings after our arrival. The signal system worked very well for it ensured that all personnel excepting the L.A.M.C. and others engaged on camp duties, would have an equal share of work. His the work turned out to be only a step removed from slavery with no possibility of obtaining any extra food. It was as well that the system was efficient. Squads were warned the night before by work cards. The following morning this enabled us to prepare ourselves by shaving overnight and filling our water bottles in readiness for the parties left before 7 A.M. At that ungodly hour, two or three German trucks drove into the camp. A tall German officer demanded of the English officer in working parties that all personnel should be walking ready to move off - and if they wanted or if there were one or two stragglers, he cursed us in German the length and breadth of the German Empire!! He was a real - It was usual for a Sergeant to accompany any such working party and consequently I got straggled in to two expeditions which I will describe as being typical. The first was to the aerodrome. We had been warned the previous evening and by the time the German officer arrived all workers up to create hell, we were, I am thankful to say, ready to pile into the lorry. On this lorry, there was only one Squad employed - 35 men which included myself and two other sergeants. We skinned the lorry and passed the hardware on which were three flying boots and after twenty minutes at sea, arrived at the aerodrome. The guard immediately put us on to clearing a blind-out ration store - the work the lorry two or three weeks previously. The foot was completely destroyed and the crumpled remains together with those of the buildings contents, were what we had to

clear up. We were provided with brushes, shovels and a couple of barrows and a cloud of black dust we set to work. The job took us all morning without a break at the end of which time most of the black dust was deposited on our own persons and we resembled a gang of troglodytes. At twelve o'clock the guard called a halt for lunch which consisted of half our daily ration - 1 lb of rice between two and a half - brought out from the camp during the morning. One of the great attractions of these working parties, the only one in fact, was the chance of picking up some extra grub. Derna had been excellent from that point of view. Some water and biscuits were issued by the guards and there was always the chance that bit of foodstuff might be picked up. In this direction, full particular expedition proved a complete failure. All the warning whistles clearing out that burnt-out building, we had kept our eyes skinned for anything edible, but with no luck. The job of destruction had been too thorough. So we had to be content with our rations which went only a little way to appease our voracious appetites. In spite of advice to the contrary, one or two fellows ate food from partially buried cans which they had found. Better to go hungry, I thought, than to eat anything in a lousy condition.

An hour was allowed for lunch and within an hour of our resumption we had completed the cleaning of job and lorry: that is would now be returned to go back to camp. We were not to be left off quite so light however, for we were taken over to a stores place where a room packed tight with huge water tins had to be cleared and the tins loaded on to trucks. That proved very heavy work and by the time the job was completed, it was half past three. Our guard then uttered the words "Zat iss all" and we piled into the truck and drove back to the camp realising that we were lucky to be back so early. So much for the first fatigue party.

The second fatigue in which I was included was for the docks. From we were rudely hatched together by the tall German officer of the cold and ridiculous hour of 6:45 a.m. The party consisted of two Squads - about 70 men - and I was the only sergeant. Away we went in two trucks and within a quarter of an hour, were unloaded on the dock-side. At Gouss there are two guys - an outer one for large vessels and an inner for smaller craft up to the region of 2000 tons. We were taken to the latter and we had to await the arrival of a boat with a cargo of ammunition which we had to unload on to the quay-side and then load on to trucks. The boat - about 800 tons - drew in about a quarter of an hour later and we lost no time in getting down to work. To start with there was a plentiful supply of working horses so that we were able to transfer the goods direct from the ship, but once the lorry were all loaded, the stuff had to be stacked on the quay-side. Twenty of the men had been taken for another job further

along the quay and I divided the remainder into two parties of twenty-five which worked in alternative shifts of twenty minutes. This scheme proved very successful for there was not sufficient room for all the men to work at one time and it kept the men comparatively fresh. Six men worked in the hold of the boat loading up the sling and the remainder on the quay unloading the sling, stacking the crates as they arrived. The work proceeded all morning at break-neck speed. I judging by the bustle, the animals was probably figured so-writers, boxes of machine gun bullets, two pounder, A.I. shells and various sized bombs: up to 500 lbs, came out of that boat in an never ending stream. As the stuff was unloaded from the sling it was checked and listed by a young German quartermaster. He was an exceedingly pleasant sort of chap, a "territorial" from Mainz, on the Rhine who and a clerk in civvy street before the war.

He had a very good knowledge of English and I had quite a long talk with him during the day. He was a confirmed Hitler disciple and of course was firmly convinced that Germany would win the war. The fall of Tobruk was imminent and an invasion of Britain - necessary to win the war - would be made in July or August. By the autumn the war would be over - that was his story. It was during one of our chats that he pulled out a packet of cigarettes and from sheer desperation - I hadn't smoked for 2 days - I asked him for one. He raised his eyebrows in surprise

and asked "Have not you of your comrade any cigarettes?" When I replied that I had none, of us had not had a smoke for 4 days or there days he said "I will try to get some for you when I go to dinner. True, he his word he returned with four packets of Winstons after lunch and I divided them amongst the men as a kind of bribe to spite them on as by this time, their efforts were beginning to flag. Winstons later at the time I wrote this book I often wonder what had happened to you. I think he is still on Bengazi docks supervising the unloading of ammunition, then I don't envy him.

The lunch interval came round at twelve-thirty and, as on the previous nights, we were given half our dogs rations. The ship's galley staff also lobbed us up some coffee - rich, thick & sweetened. Also, we were allowed on the boat to refill our water bottles and the cook shared out to six of us the remains of their mutton dinner. It didn't amount to much but what there was was good. After lunch, in spite of the heat of the day, the unloading continued at a packing pace. As the afternoon wore on, it became increasingly difficult to keep all the chaps at it and I kept sparing them on with the promise of more cigarettes when the job was finished. I gave a nice promise but it served the purpose. The serious work now shifted to the streets and from the main way through the afternoon we were joined by a gang of 25-30 men carrying equipment. When so it would be where child's play to them and we gradually eased up our own efforts leaving:

them to do the bulk of the work. In any case, as while men, we resented working with a gang of mopers. Five aback, six electric bowls and went and still the coast came out of that boat when I had Friday that we were could not go on much longer, he apologized and said that he had orders to empty the boat which would not take much longer.

Further along the quay, a jug was had up, plugged. I happened on one occasion to look towards it and saw one of the crew peering we over. He called me on board and presented me with a large handful of mutton, a mug of wine and some bread and for the next few minutes I made a pig of myself. On my way back to the main party I was stopped by three German guards. Being unable to speak their language I prepared my excuses in simple English and imagine my astonishment when instead of being reprimanded for my short absence one of them stuffed a handful of soap in my hand. Soap! - a fascinating one would not have been appreciated half so much. At last at 7.15, exactly twelve hours after we had started on the job, the last load was taken from the ship. We had completely unloaded the boat in twelve hours, quite the bestest day's work I had ever experienced. Feeling very weary, we drove back to the camp where we reached well after dark, not that that mattered for all we wanted was our beds. So much for a 24-hour day, or the best.

Working parties such as that

deterred above were sent down to the docks every day and it was very good fun. One that I was only included on one of them. The parties always left the camp before 1 A.M. and if, for some reason, after dark, when I returned in the evening. This all went to show that the Germans were loading the majority of their ammunition at Bengazi. With the exception of about some one with oney, it was the only port left open to them along that coast. This knowledge was crucial because this could not expect to land enough ammunition to maintain a large offensive from the small gun-boat ships that we had seen.

While on the subject of the dock, an incident worth relating occurred one afternoon after we had been in Bengazi a week. The calm, lazy atmosphere of the camp was suddenly disturbed by a series of three terrific explosions followed by columns of smoke, coming from the direction of the docks. The working party returned soon afterwards and told us that an R.A.F. machine had dived out of the sun and dropped incendiary bombs on three ammunition ships working in the outer harbour. The whole lot was completely blown up. Fortunately, our loads had been working in the inner harbour when this happened so there were no casualties amongst their party. We did hear however, that several of them were killed. And so the day's work ended. The morale and physical condition of the men was slowly weakening. I remember stopping to chat with COLONEL Smith, G.A.C. Massey to our Mel Spenser, and in saw,

he had at the time greatly built. When I asked what about, he said that he had been trying to remember what he had done wrong in his lifetime to deserve this kind of existence. Well, that was one way of looking at it but I took a much more fatalistic view.

Sickness was on the increase. Every day the working periods to the M.I. room was getting longer. Food was poor. We had nothing in the way of green vegetables, fat (except a very little in the fish fry), sugar and salt. And unlike Derna, it was difficult to obtain any extra. Guards came round with lists of milk, flour etc for sale at fabulous prices. A half-pound tin of jam, for instance, would cost 10 lires - about 5/-! Fashion pens, watches, lighters could be exchanged for these commodities and I had several laughing offers for my combined cigarette case, sand lighter and, one day, one of the guards offered me a tin of milk for just 'wedding ring'. Perhaps it was as well for me that I could not speak Italian.

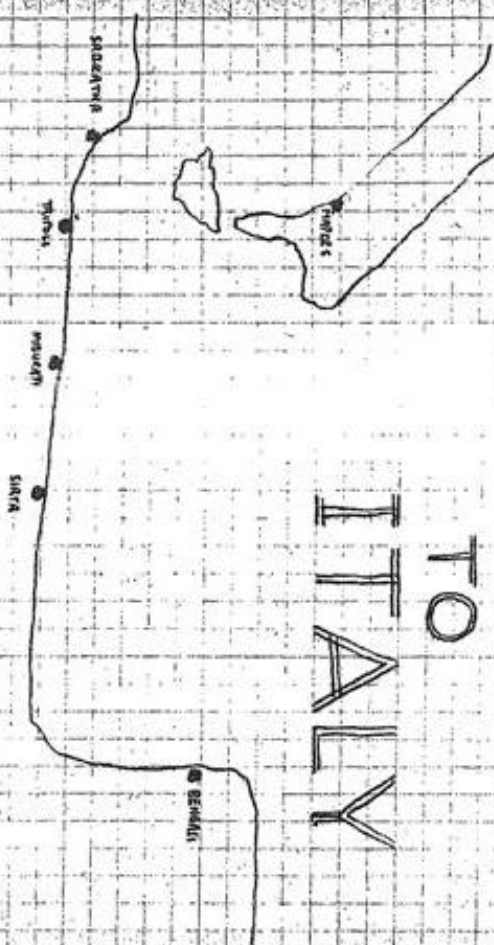
There was one way of obtaining extra food in the camp which went to show the low state we were in. An Italian officer each day, a truck arrived with the Italian rations. These consisted of bread and mutton stew. After the guards had drawn their share, there was a small stowaway for any stew left over.

This became a proper racket and fellows would wait at the gate for the truck to arrive and then rush it before the It's had drawn their share.

At last, on May 2nd, after ten days of these expeditions with alternating success each night, came news of a surge. At last, this was in the form of a movement. Then the balance told us that the officers only were going. And this we heard it would be the non-fighting units (R.A.M.C. etc) and we were very astonished when, that afternoon, the R.A.C. General himself came along and told us that we, the Signals, were to be ready to move early the following morning. The effect of this announcement was amazing. We straight away forgot our wages and cheerfully splashed on our new life which would start at Tripoli. There would be probably organized person camps; money to buy things with and, surely, better food. In any case, it was a step nearer Europe. A step nearer the time when we should leave Libya, once and for all.

So we went to bed, very cheerfully that night and did not mind the usual visit by the R.A.F. and before I dropped off to sleep, I offered up a little prayer for this welcome wave.

THE JOURNEY TO ITALY



Although the journey from Bengasi to the far land of Italy was accomplished in three distinct stages, it was, apart from the five days halt at Sabatha, a continuous journey taking just over 11 days. I shall, therefore, deal with this in three one chapter.

The three stages were:
 Bengasi to Sabatha via Tripoli
 Sabatha
 Sabatha to Naples via Tripoli
 Our route can be traced on the rough map shown above.

We had been warned for sometime at 6:30 A.M. on the morning of our move from Bengasi and when Sgt. May, taking charge, had to stir us up at 5:45

did not want telling a second time, so eager and glad were we to get on with it. At 6.35, then, we were paraded in our Signals on the Square, complete with all our traps and trimmings. There was no sign of any transport, but that would arrive any moment. There was great excitement and activity. Our officers began around furiously checking up the names and number of personnel in each party. In the Signals, there were six Signals and 24 in each Signal. In addition, there were a few officers and a small section of the R.A.M.C. The remainder of the camp (A.P.C., Tanks etc) were to remain behind but had been told that they would follow on in a day or two. Two German trucks arrived and took away the usual