

14 MAY 1940: GERMANY INVADES FRANCE

Message du Lord Maire de Plymouth.

(Viscount Astor)

FRANCAIS, soyez les Bienvenus !

Vous êtes sans nouvelles depuis plusieurs jours. Nous nous efforcerons de vous donner le plus vite possible un aperçu de ce qui se passe dans votre pays à ce moment.

D'après les termes de l'armistice conclue avec l'Allemagne, la France s'est engagée à céder à l'Allemagne ses forces armées et tous ses matériels et son matériel de guerre, et de mettre à la disposition de l'Allemagne la plus grande partie du territoire français, afin de lui faciliter la poursuite de la guerre contre la Grande-Bretagne.

On tolérera que le gouvernement français continue à exister dans un territoire plus ou moins restreint, mais il dépendra entièrement de l'Allemagne. Aucune indication n'est donnée quant aux conditions de paix, mais il paraît clair que l'Allemagne n'a aucune intention à présent de discuter la paix. Bref, les termes de l'armistice exigent la capitulation complète de la France.

Les termes de l'armistice avec l'Italie complètent l'affaiblissement de la France. Quoique la France soit déjà désarmée et hors d'état de nuire aux Allemands ou aux Italiens, l'Italie, dont la France dans toutes les attaques a été victorieuse, exige à son tour la démilitarisation d'une zone de 50 à 200 kilomètres en France, Algérie, Tunisie et Somaliland pour assurer que la France ne recommencera pas la guerre. De plus, l'Italie prend contrôle du port de Jibuti et du chemin de fer de Jibuti à Addis Ababa.

Voici les termes des armistices.

Ceux de la paix seront . . . quoi ? . . . quand les fortresses de France seront anéanties, les armes abandonnées, les soldats sous l'effroyable surveillance de la Gestapo.

Le Gouvernement de Bordeaux, sous pression d'Hitler, a signé ces exigences honteuses mais ce Gouvernement n'est pas celui de la Vraie France.

Les événements nous ont montré, que les promesses germaniques ne valent rien.

Les événements dans cette guerre nous ont montré que la Grande Bretagne tient ses engagements—

Winston Churchill représente la Grande Bretagne. Il a dit :

“ Quand la Grande Bretagne sera victorieuse, *elle gardera chère la cause du peuple français* malgré l'action du gouvernement de Bordeaux et une *croix britannique* est le seul espoir possible pour le rétablissement de la grandeur de la France et de la liberté de son peuple.”

Les Français sont un Grande Peuple ; ils ne doivent pas se laisser anéantir.

L'Unité fait la Force. Ralliez vous au drapeau Britannique ; il aussi porte les couleurs bleue-blanc-rouge.

Courage. Calme. Victoire. Vive la Vraie France. Vive l'Angleterre !

Méfiez vous. Les Radios Français sont tous sous le contrôle Allemande.

Vous pouvez communiquer avec le General DE GAULLE, à

125 ST. STEPHENS HOUSE,

Tel. Abbey 1384.

WESTMINSTER, S.W. 1.

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- 9 February: Churchill orders halt to British and Australian advance at El Agheila to allow withdrawal of troops to Greece
- 14 February: First units of the Afrika Korps under Erwin Rommel start to arrive in Libya during Operation Sonnenblume
- 24 March Allied forces at El Agheila defeated
- 3 April: Benghazi captured by Axis
- 10 April: Siege of Tobruk begins
- 15 April: British pushed back to Salum on Egyptian border with Libya
- 15 May: British launch unsuccessful Operation Brevity
- 15 June: British and Commonwealth troops launch unsuccessful Operation Battleaxe
- 5 July: Auchinleck replaces Wavell as C-in-C Middle East Command
- 15 August: German Panzer Group Afrika activated with Rommel in Command
- 1 October: 5th Light Division redesignated 21st Panzer Division
- 18 November: Auchinleck's offensive (Operation Crusader) begins
- 26 November: Ritchie replaces Cunningham as commander Eighth Army
- 7 December: Tobruk siege relieved by 8th Army
- 25 December: Agedabia reached by the Allies
- 31 December: Front lines return to El Agheila

1942

- 21 January: Rommel's second offensive begins
- 23 January: Agedabia captured by Axis forces
- 29 January: Benghazi captured by Axis forces
- 4 February: Front line established between Gazala and Bir Hakeim
- 26 May: Axis assault on the Gazala line. Battle of Gazala and Battle of Bir Hakeim begins
- 11 June: Axis forces begin offensive from "the Cauldron" position
- 13 June: "Black Sunday". Axis inflicts heavy defeat on British armoured divisions
- 21 June: Tobruk captured by Axis forces
- 30 June: Axis reaches El Alamein and attack to start the First Battle of El Alamein
- 4 July: First Battle of El Alamein continues as Axis digs in and Eighth Army launch series of attacks
- 31 July: Auchinleck calls off offensive activities to allow Eighth Army to regroup and resupply
- 13 August: Alexander and Montgomery take command respectively of Middle East Command and Eighth Army
- 30 August: Rommel launches unsuccessful Battle of Alam el Halfa
- 23 October: Montgomery launches Second Battle of El Alamein
- 5 November: Axis lines at El Alamein broken
- 8 November Allies launch Operation Torch in Morocco and Algeria under Eisenhower
- 9 November: Sidi Barani captured by Eighth Army
- 11 November: Tobruk captured by Eighth Army
- 17 November: Eastern Task Force (First Army) and Axis meet at Djebel Abiod in Tunisia
- 20 November: Benghazi captured by Eighth Army
- 27 November: Allied advance halted between Terbourba and Djedeida, 12 miles from Tunis, by Axis counterattack
- 10 December: First Army front line pushed back to defensive positions east of Medjez el Bab
- 22 December: First Army starts three day offensive towards Tebourba which fails
- 25 December: Sirte captured by Eighth Army

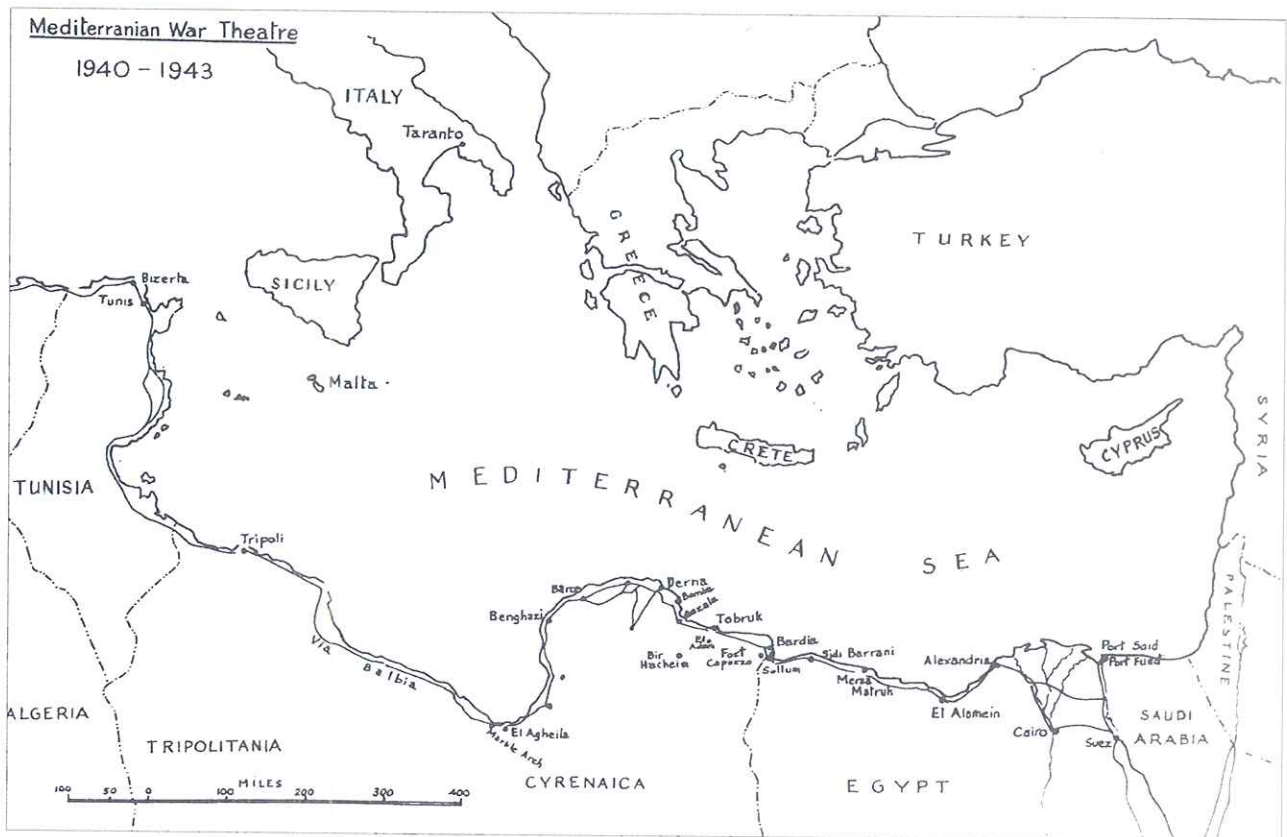
1943

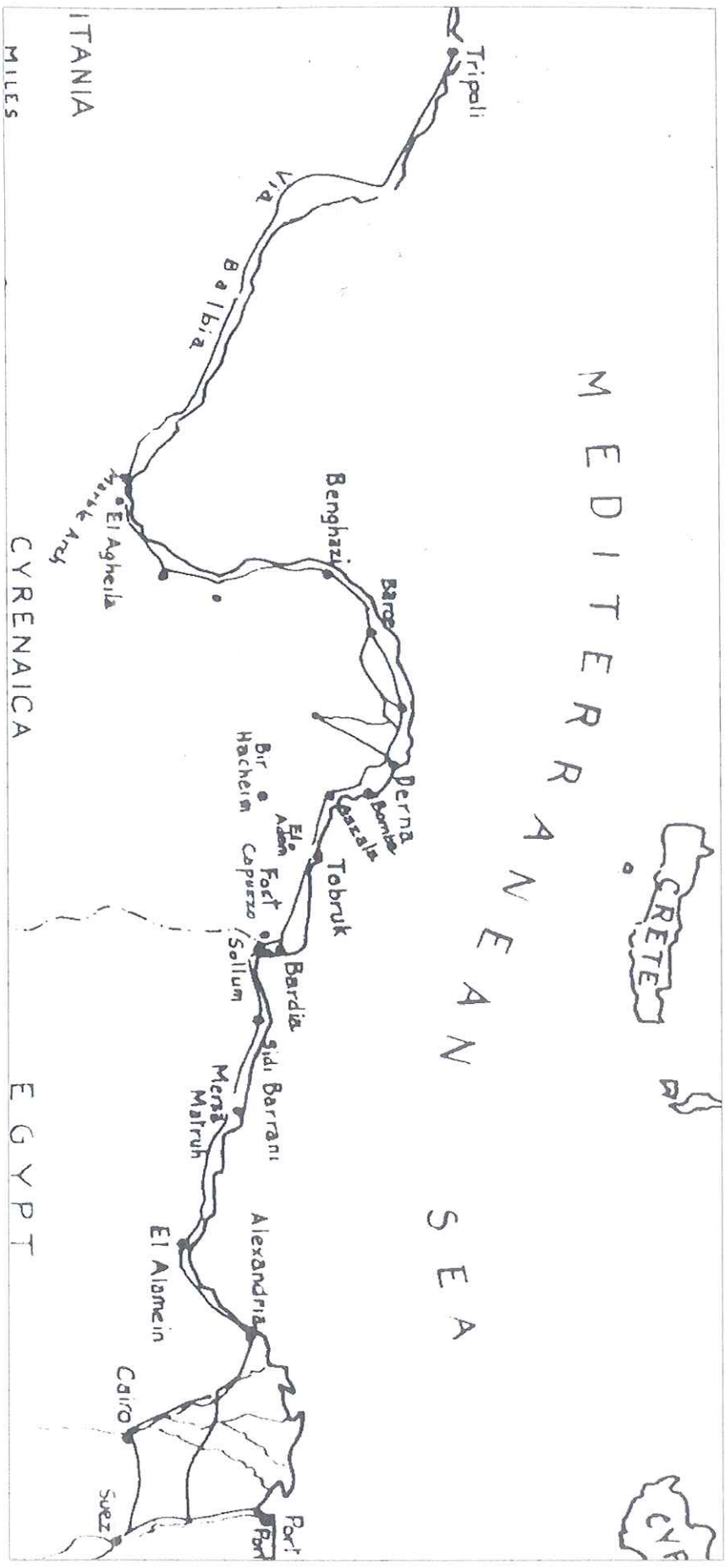
- 23 January: Tripoli captured by British Eighth Army
- 30 January: Axis forces capture Faïd pass in central Tunisia
- 4 February: Axis forces in Libya retreat to Tunisian border south of the Mareth Line

- 14 February: Axis advance from Faïd to launch Battle of Sidi Bou Zid and enter Sbeitla two days later
- 19 February: Battle of Kasserine Pass launched by Axis forces
- 6 March: Axis launch Operation Capri against Eighth Army at Medenine but lose 55 tanks
- 19 March: Operation Pugilist launched by Montgomery
- 23 March: U.S. II Corps emerge from Kasserine to match the Axis at Battle of El Guettar
- 26 March: Eighth Army launch *Operation Supercharge II* outflanking and making the Axis position at Mareth untenable
- 6 April: Right wing of First Army links with Eighth Army
- 7 May: British enter Tunis, Americans enter Bizerte
- 13 May: Axis Powers surrender in Tunisia.

[http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/North African Campaign timeline](http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/North_African_Campaign_timeline)
(accessed 2/9/2010)

The Mediterranean War Theatre (*Map taken from 'Top-Hats in Tobruk'*)





Detail from the above map of the Western Desert during the North African Campaign. (Cyrenaica is present-day Libya)

HENRY'S JOURNEY TO TOBRUK *(see Appendix 1)*

29 December : Henry and Alec's Battery leave Ben Yusuf camp, near Cairo, for Bardia.

30 December : After travelling all day, they sleep in an Australian camp.

31 December : Still on the road. They sleep in the wagon.

1941

1st January : 153 Battery passes through Mersa Matruh en route to Sidi Barrani.

2nd January : They pass through Sidi Barrani.

3rd January : Travelling all day.

4th January : They enter Sollum and experience shelling. After a cooked meal they start off again. They pass through Fort Capuzzo.

5th January : After firing on enemy planes, they are told they are the first Anti-Aircraft battery to come so far up the front.

6th January : They take Bardia and move towards Tobruk. They camp 30 miles south of Tobruk in Sidi Mohamed.

"In the lorry; Wavell's campaign" Photo taken December 1940



Gnr HH Kassman
1474509
153/51 HAA Regt RA
I Section
M.E.F.
9/1/41

(Mother's note: Received April 24th 1941)

Dear Mother,

Just time for a short letter. We are both still very fit. I have not yet received a reply to my Dec. cable but I suppose there is some delay.

As you know, there is quite a bit of activity over here and we have seen literally thousands of Italian prisoners, most of whom seemed quite pleased with their fate. I dare say you know much more about the news over here than we do.

Fondest love
Henry



Italian prisoners, outside Bardia, 1/41



More Italian prisoners



"Western Desert Brew-up 1/41" (*Henry is in the centre*)

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

I am quite well.

I have been admitted into hospital

~~sick~~ and am going on well
~~wounded~~ and hope to be discharged soon.

I am being sent down to the base

(letter dated _____)
 I have received your telegram "____"
 parcel "____"

Letter follows at first opportunity.

I have received no letter from you

~~lately~~
 for a long time.

Signature only

Henry Kassman

Date

15/1/41

Forms JA 2042/7. 51-4997.

(Army Form A. 2042.)
 (R.A.F. Form No. 1029)

FIELD SERVICE



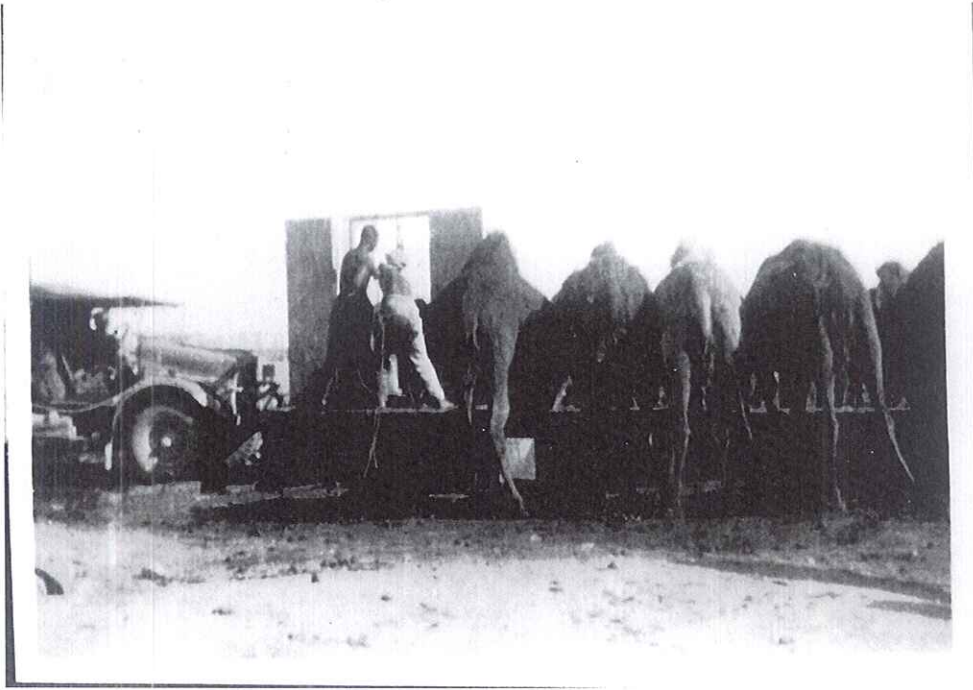
POST CARD

The address only to be written on this side. Anything else added to the post card will be destroyed.
 [Green Copyright Reserved.]

Mrs. R. Kassman
 Flat 122
 10 Abbey Road,
 St. Johns Wood
 London, N.W.8.



"Western Desert, 1/41"



"Oasis south of Tobruk 1/41" Sidi Mohamed?

17th January : 153 Battery moves to the western side of Tobruk



"Tobruk Harbour 1/41 note burning oil set alight by Italians before our entry."

23rd January : The Allies capture Tobruk

Gunner H.H. Kassman 1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.
I Section
Middle East Forces
8/2/41

Dear Mother,

I am afraid that I am not a very good correspondent; it is now about a fortnight since I last wrote, for somehow the more time I have to myself, the less I have to write about.

I received your cable a few days ago. There must have been some delay in it arriving because I was 27 years 8 days when it came; but I guessed you would cable and your health was duly drunk at the birthday party (of beer, wine and bully beef). [*Henry's birthday was on 26th January*]

You will be glad to know that Punch, Lilliput and the Manchester Guardian are duly arriving, and are worth their weight in gold (or even air-mail postage stamps) even though they all arrive about four at a time and three months late. The M.G. is especially welcome because it is a remarkably fine paper and, apart from Inaction, good newspapers are non-existent out here. The N.P.I. sent me three August issues of the Economist but then suddenly stopped sending them and I should be grateful if you would phone Mr. Ashford there and ask him the reason. If he cannot send them, I wonder if you would mind doing so, as I should like to keep in touch with economic events.

Everyone here is very pleased about the fall of Benghazi which should prove to be of very great strategic value to the Navy, and from all accounts the Italians put very little heart into their fighting. We have heard first hand, from the Australian and other troops from the front, how hundreds of them lay down their arms at the very sight of our men, while prisoners are left to find the prison camp by themselves. There can be no doubt that we would have had a much harder time if the Germans had been in Libya.

I knew Mrs. Hirschsohn cabled you about our seeing her, but I believe we are still unable to mention the place in our letters. I can assure you however that we had a magnificent time there. We went to the Hirschsohn's shop, had supper with Louis and met Cissie there. We saw Mrs. H. the next day. We saw everything worth seeing in the town and the hospitality of the locals was almost overwhelming. Almost everyone in the convoy was taken by someone home to a meal and many were taken out for the day. We met one Jewish man who insisted on my bringing 20 men to his house for lunch the next day. Unfortunately we had lunch some miles away from him as we set off the same morning, nor somehow do I think that the substitute lunch was as good as the one we missed.

As far as I can make out, the scarcity of onions and lemons seems to be troubling you at home more than the raids. It is rather ironic that onions are one of the four things the Egyptians grow in any quantity, the others being tomatoes, pyramids and sand. I do not suppose I shall bring you any of the first three, but believe me when I come home I shall have plenty of sand.

There is no other news except that in addition to omelettes, I can now cook biscuit pudding and vermicelli cheese.

Fondest love
Henry

G [?] Townsend
(*ensor*)

YMCA

Gunner H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 Heavy A.A. Regt. R.A.
I Section
Middle East Forces
23/2/41

Dear Mother

I am afraid there is not much to write about since my last letter. We are still taking things very easily and in fact are almost having a holiday. We are of course on duty pretty regularly, but in between these spells we manage to get in a good deal of bathing and cooking. We are left very much to ourselves when off duty and in fact are leading quite a pleasant camp life. The weather has been quite cold during the last two months – cold enough to make us glad of our six blankets and a great-coat. But during the last few weeks, it has been getting warmer and the swimming has been most delightful. I must say that I little dreamt that I should ever bathe in the sea on my birthday – or even yours. Even Alec, who seems to have a vague idea that he is in the South of France, anoints himself with olive oil for about a quarter of hour and goes in the water for three minutes. This duty done, he fries himself for half an hour. The only real difference between here and Juan is that here he does not even wear a bathing slip.

As for cooking my changed circumstances have served only to increase my appetite. Alec of course sneers at my activities but is none too slow to eat my chocolate pudding, macaroni cheese or coffee. Nowadays in fact we only pause from cooking to eat our normal Army rations.

By the way, you will probably be interested to know that among the many and varied colonial troops that we have met, we have now discovered a large company of Palestine Jews including a fair proportion of refugees*. In fact this letter (even if written on Y.M.C.A. notepaper) is being composed in their canteen. Coming to their canteen from the Y.M.C.A. is very much like leaving an A.B.C. for Ross's. There is an abundance of chess, cards etc; the wireless is full on and everyone is talking at the top of his voice, including Alec who has found a victim and is giving him important information as to the correct interpretation of Freud's more abstruse theories. I believe even Freud would be interested. From all accounts here, Alec and I (who are now, by the way, the only Jews in the Battery) missed a great deal by not being sent to Palestine where all English Jews have had a great welcome. Unfortunately, such other English or Australian troops as have been to Palestine have not been welcomed quite so cordially.

Naturally, I have been sorry to hear this, but troops are rather intolerant of customs other than their own and are probably as much to blame as the Palestinians. The Jews there certainly have little reason to open their arms to British regulars who have been notoriously pro-Arab for many years, but the Territorials and 'Militia' who go there now would respond to hospitality and I am afraid the Jews are missing a great chance of establishing good feeling.

By the way, I met a Czech from Bratislava three days ago but we had to part in rather hurried circumstances before I could find out his name. He knew Innsbruck, Bolzano and Cortina very well.

The principal grouse at the moment is lack of mail. I have not received a letter for a month, the last one being dated the first week in November. Your birthday wire arrived – although about a week late. I have had a letter from Deacon who is waiting his turn for an OCTU [*Officer Cadet Training Unit*]. I have also heard from Estelle Stone who is engaged, and probably married by now.

Kindest regards to all
Fondest love

R. Nelson [?] [*censor*]

Henry

* Since 1923, Palestine, formerly a province of the Ottoman Empire, had been a British Mandate. Over the centuries, usually as a result of anti-semitism Jews in Europe and elsewhere, Jews had emigrated to Palestine following the Jewish religion's emphasis on the Law of Return, whereby eventually all Jews would return to Israel. Following the creation of the Zionist movement in the 1880s and the increased anti-semitism in Tzarist Russia and other countries in Eastern Europe, emigration increased, reaching a peak in the 1930s and 1940s when Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe headed for Palestine to escape the Holocaust.

Gunner H.H. Kassman,
1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.,
I Section
Middle East Forces
5/3/41

Dear Mother,

We are having some very tense moments on our gun-site nowadays. We are periodically undergoing warnings of forthcoming visits from Colonels, Brigadiers and even Generals; while the possible or probable arrival of Junkers, Heinkels, Saroias [*German bomber aircraft*] leave our nerves in excellent condition, the threatened visits of these formidable warriors have rather an opposite effect. Anyhow there is not a piece of paper, match stick or even a stone anywhere near our site. I often wonder why Colonels etc. dislike matchsticks so much; you might ask your neighbouring Colonel next time you play bridge with him.

Apart from all this, we are in very good spirits. March has come in with very strong gales and if we shut our eyes and pretended we were sitting in an armchair instead of the floor, we might imagine we were home. Actually the winds are very much more unpleasant here than at home, for they invariably bring sand with them, and very occasionally rain.

We are going on a short trip today in connection with our tradesman's occupation. I understand that I am supposed to cook for the party! I do not suppose I shall be at a loss providing I do not lose my tin opener. Fillets of veal are rather rare in our RASC [*Royal Army Service Corps*] supplies.

Fondest love
Henry

Censor's signature [*illegible*]

TELEGRAM TO MOTHER DATED 8 MARCH 1941

EFM KASSMAN FLAT 122 20 ABBEYRD STJOHNSWOOD LN
MANY HAPPY RETURNS BOTH FIT DEEPEST LOVE
KASSMAN

Gunner H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 Heavy A.A. Regt. A.A.,
I Section
Middle East Forces
16/3/41

Dear Mother,

We received your letter of 11th December yesterday. There has been no post received of any date in November later than about the 11th and it is beginning to look as though this mail has disappeared. I have received a letter from the N.P.I. informing me that a Xmas parcel is on its way! They enclosed also the attached statement. Perhaps you would be good enough to check that my November and later salaries decreased by £2:9:6 from that of October. If you are doubtful about anything, please see them about it. I am also sending you our Xmas Eve menu which I have found in my greatcoat pocket. Needless to say, we did not work all the way through page 2.

Nothing very exciting has been happening out here. I took on the job of cooking for a small party of men last week. This did not last very long. The first supper was burned to ashes. I have never seen anything blacker than the bottoms of the stew and rice dixies. The next day I did not do so badly, but the other men hired one of their number to lay me low, for he exploded a petrol can about two yards away from me. Fortunately, I was not greatly damaged, but I have made up my mind never to cook for an armed party again. Incidentally, on both days we had fried onions, which I understand from the press, should move anyone in England to a high emotional pitch.

I'm glad Emmies made a profit last year. I am also sure that Bert Joseph's information about Ultras is extremely well founded (Oh yeah!). As a matter of fact, I am receiving next to no financial news, as the Manchester Guardian considers the whole world of finance to be bound up in the Cotton Industry. I am therefore keenly awaiting a renewal of the Economist as indicated in my last letter.

We heard about your impromptu party from Miss Wasserman who wrote to Alec. I am sorry she found the floor hard; she should try some of the floors I have slept on. She also said John Appleby was leaving England and naturally thought he might come out here. If he does, I am afraid we shall be occupying rather different dining-rooms.

Nothing much else, except the following story by which you may be amused. I went into an Australian lecture the other day and began to do the M.G. X-word. An Australian rushed in very hurriedly, looked at me very scornfully, and yelled out to an acquaintance "There's a Tommy in here and he's writing a ----- letter."

Kindest regards to all and sundry,
Fondest love
Henry

P.S. We are not on the telephone, so why write your 'phone number at the top of your letter?

P.P.S. Re Chester's small car, please try and persuade his father to send us a Vickers Valencia [*Troop-carrying plane*]

Gunner H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 Heavy A.A. Regt. R.A.
I Section
Middle East Forces
25/3/41

Dear Mother,

The Army Post office is doing its stuff. We received yesterday your letters of 18th, 21st, 27th December and 21st January. Three Manchester Guardians and 3 Punches arrived at the same time and we hardly know which to read first. I also heard from Deacon who is at an OCTU in Wales and from Nightingale who sent an Xmas card. The last time I heard about Nightingale was last June when Mr. Melville received a cable from Stockholm. He must have had rather a time getting home.

Need I say how glad Alec and I are that you are contemplating joining Mrs. Goodman. I suppose you have the cash question well in mind although it seems to me to be prima facie rather difficult! I suppose you will ask the N.P.I. to continue our newspaper subscriptions and tell them to invest all the rest of my money in Saving Certificates (they are already putting away £4 per month for me). All this assumes that, if you joined Mrs. Goodman, you could not use my salary; if you can use it, needless to say you are welcome to it.

Things are extremely quiet out here. I believe that in the Middle East we are waiting for Germany to have a bonk through Bulgaria or Yugoslavia. It would never surprise me if we enlarged our education by a visit to Greece or Turkey. We might even see Bunny [*the brothers' former nanny*] in Athens. By the way, I suppose you have not heard from her.

We are both very envious of your visits to the theatre. We saw from the Guardian that Shakespeare, Ballet and Dear Brutus were being performed in London. I suppose you did not happen to see the Unity Theatre Panto; it is usually worth a visit. I am afraid we are rather short of entertainment other than that which we manufacture for ourselves. We have a wireless on our gun-site and hear the London programmes very clearly. Unfortunately the music broadcast nowadays puts no great tax on the intellect. I was rather disgusted to hear a dance-band orchestration of the middle movement of Chopin's Minute Waltz last night. It is no affectation to say this because after hearing no decent music for months, it is almost disturbing to hear such a travesty.

I am trying to summon up enough energy to write to all the Tramps. I have quite a large number of people to write to, but somehow the more time I have on my hands, the less inclined I feel to write letters. Please tell Uncle Bert he is on my writing list. As for the Tramps I often wonder if they will ever function again. We had some pretty good fun out of them, and it would seem a shame for them to die out. But with all of us three or four years older and with all these War marriages, I feel it doubtful whether we shall continue.

I am astonished at the number of people who, I hear, are getting married. Talbot is there or thereabouts, and Estelle Stone also. I do not think the emotional atmosphere of a War is a good setting for a marriage. We have not seen a woman for about three months and are beyond temptation – through no fault of our own!

By the way, I do not remember receiving the letter from Mr. Bunford that you mention. Could you let me have a copy? Best of luck if you join the Goodmans,

Fondest love
Henry

Censor's signature [illegible]

5 APRIL 1941: START OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

Gnr H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 HAA Regt. RA
I Section
Middle East Forces
9/4/41

Dear Mother,

We received your letter of the 6th January today although we had already had a later one about a fortnight ago. Alec was very pleased that the Kanter Wedding was held at the Howard Hotel as Alfred Baker is one of the directors of this establishment. We are rather surprised that Emil is in the R.A.F. In the good old Ducks [*cricket club*] days, he was known as "Yessir" owing to his deferential attitude to Rushworth and we both thought he would have good prospects in the Army.

[*Section crossed out by censor*] ----- has just begun. I am afraid my knowledge of Staff secrets is not profound, but it does look as though we have been [*Section crossed out by censor*] ----- too -----.
Like everyone else, I have little doubt that we shall recover all we have lost and in any case it seems that the Germans are trying to divert us from their real effort in the Balkans, whether successfully or not remains to be seen.

Actually, we ourselves have not been unduly disturbed by recent happenings, except that guards have been intensified with the usual loss of sleep. I have been reading quite a lot during the past month and have actually finished the eleven hundred odd pages of Tolstoy's 'War & Peace'. Apart from the very short 'Kreuzer Sonata', this is the first book of Tolstoy that I have read. To tell the truth, I was surprised that I found it so exceedingly interesting. He is very interested in the philosophy of history, that is to say, he discusses whether a man like Napoleon or Hitler causes events to happen or whether events cause the hero (or villain) of the piece to happen. He also gives a vivid description of the years 1805-12 and his knowledge of human nature is very profound. I should advise you to read it if you have not done so. I have also read Oscar Wilde's 'Importance of Being Ernest' & 'Lady Windermere's Fan', G.D.H. Coles "Practical Economics" and Jean's "Mysterious Universe".

I remember seeing a splendid production of "The Importance of Being Ernest" at the Globe last year. It seems like many years back now. I see theatres have re-opened in London. I suppose you have been to one or two.

We are both very interested in your proposed trip to the Goodmans and in your circumstances think it a very good idea indeed.

Fondest love

Censor's signature (illegible)

Henry

P.S. I nearly forgot. We are both very well, thank you!!

TELEGRAM DATED 22 APRIL 1941 TO:

EFM KASSMAN 20 ABBEYROAD STJOHNSWOOD LONDON
SAFE AND WELL FONDEST LOVE KASSMAN

Gnr H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 Heavy A.A. Regt RA
I Section
M.E.F.
24/4/41

Dear Mother,

We were delighted to receive your special Air-Mail card of the 8th April fourteen days after you sent it. I can only hope that these letter-cards reach you as quickly – but I doubt it.

Unfortunately we had no means available of ascertaining when Pesach* occurred so that we could not keep it. In fact, we could easily have observed the festival by eating army biscuits instead of bread, they are certainly unleavened enough. We were interested to read that you had twelve people to Seder and were with you in spirit and port.

We had the wrong idea about the temperature here. In January, when we were wearing as many tunics, pullovers and coats as possible, we were saying “Ah! But wait till February.” In February, we took off a pullover and waited for March. We are now waiting for May! Believe me, we need all the clothes we possess when going on guard at night even now.

Things are not going too well out here at the moment, but the war is far from finished yet and everyone is in an extraordinary state of optimism. I cannot tell you what we are doing or where we are doing it, but we are both safe and well.

I have not had any papers for about a month, so anticipate a large batch of reading material very shortly.

Regards to all

[*sensor's signature illegible*]

Fondest love

Henry

* *Pesach (Passover) begins on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nissan. The primary observances of Pesach are related to the Exodus from Egypt after generations of slavery.*

Extract from 'Top-Hats in Tobruk' for parts of the entries for 26 and 27 April 1941. (Another diary of the siege by a comrade of Henry's from his own battery is found in Appendix 1.)

26th April 1941

"..... In the evening my thoughts turned home and to all those wonderful reunion scenes ahead; sat drinking all these lovely thoughts deep into my soul, only to be brought back with a jerk by the sound of artillery fire – the wind had veered to the west and, in glimpses of visibility the guns must have found a target. We all expect an offensive very soon now. The news in the evening talked about 'futile attacks on Tobruk.'"

27th April 1941

"Still blowing hard – cool breeze from the west instead of that burning southerly gale, but foul dust still flying around everywhere....."

"Another slack morning except that I had a few jobs as orderly officer. After lunch checked up my bank statement and did some C.S. reading."

"Suddenly the alarm went and dive-bombers appeared all over the place. At first I took very little notice, but suddenly thought they were coming at us, and told Blimp he had better get right down. So we lay flat on the floor of the dug-out. Then the bombs started falling all around us; the noise was frightful and our dug-out fell all over us. I just lay there, feeling all the time that God was near, and knowing my safety. Huge rafters came down wedged just over me, machine-gun bullets, and bits of bomb fell and whizzed around us. Twice I called out to find out if Blimp was all right and he was. The bombs continued to shriek down and crash all round us. Wondered if it would ever stop, and some were terribly close and the shaking ground and smell of burning was horrible. All guns had ominously ceased firing, but there was a tremendous noise when a lot of ammunition went up in one of the gun pits. Eventually all was quiet except for voices of injured and others starting to sort it out."

"Climbed out of our hole with some difficulty, wreckage all round as it was. Obviously the damage was considerable. Heard of two lads who were buried, so rushed for a pick and shovel and went over to help them. They were Matador drivers, both suffering from shock – a bomb had fallen three yards from their dug-out. Swearing like hell one of them – the other quiet. Their Matador had suffered a bit but looked capable of repair."

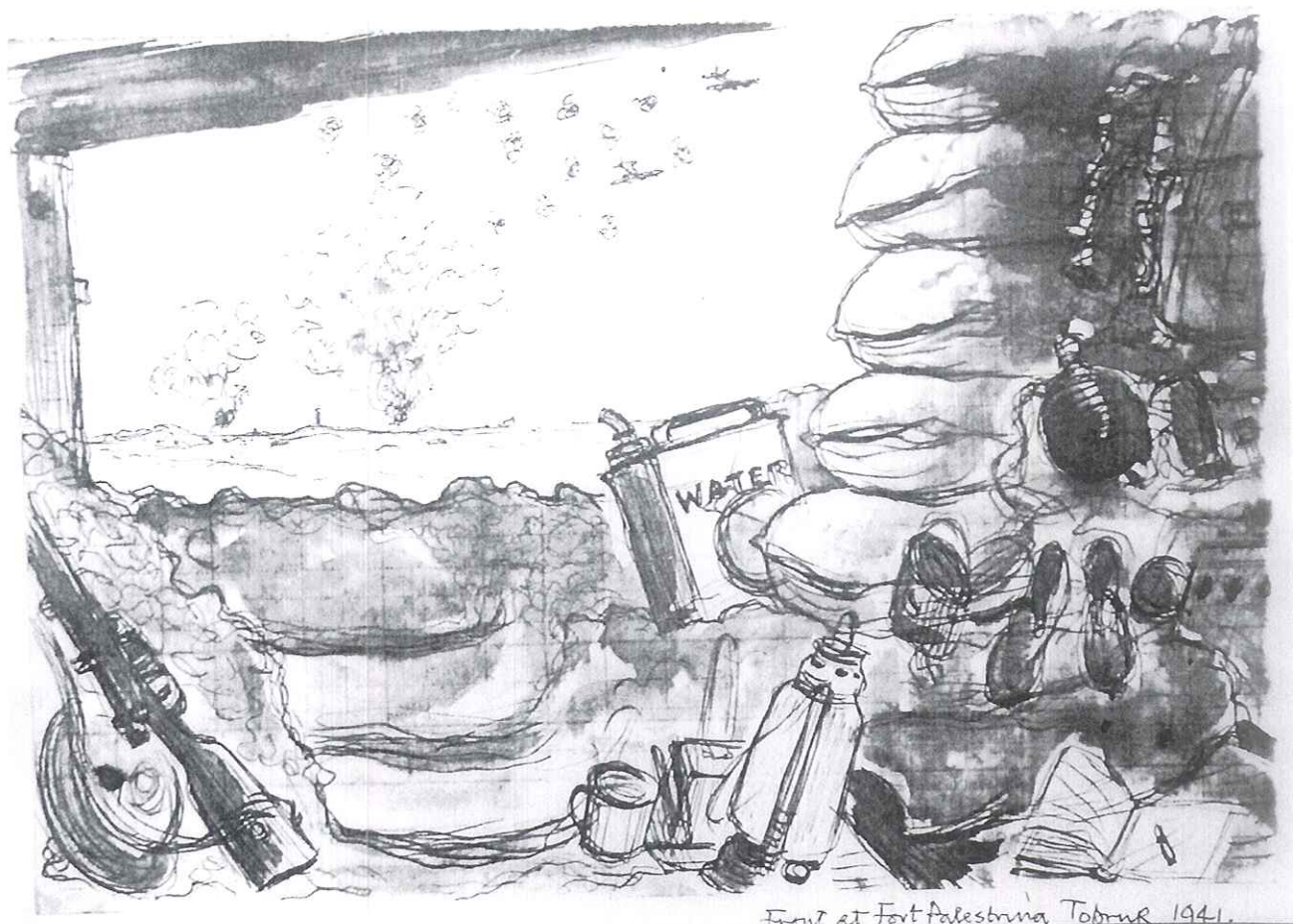
"Caught a glimpse of Jimmy rushing about with a large spot of blood under his heart; but this came from someone he had been carrying away. Two poor boys were killed outright and I helped cover them up and carry them away on a stretcher. Others were badly injured – I got hold of a bottle of whisky and started giving it to those in need, whilst hastily running around looking at the wreckage. Soon some doctors and willing helping hands were on the scene; ambulances and lorries turned up. Three or four were badly injured and about twenty-five injured altogether. It was tragic to see the cases of shell shock – weeping and in a terrible state of nerves. One lad said 'they got my best friend', and he was piteous to see. Tried comforting him as best I could. Kept running about doing all I could and eventually came back to look at the wreckage in our dug-out. Just where I had been standing, and just above my head where I was lying, machine-gun bullets and shrapnel had been doing terrific damage. My tin hat was ruined with a huge hole on either side where a lump of bomb had gone right through it. My greatcoat and battle-dress were ruined filled with huge holes. My haversack had a machine-

gun bullet right through it..... My revolver had its handle shot right off, my glasses were hit and then I found poor Sam B... was wounded in the shoulder and arm. Jimmy's clothes were ruined too – this party looks like costing us £20 or more each. My mackintosh was ruined.

“We had only one gun left in action, but managed to get another one going. None of our instruments were serviceable. It seems that the machine-gunning had done more damage than bombs.

“An R.C. priest turned up and I took him over to the two poor bodies where he administered last rites to one of them. Arranged to meet him tomorrow at the cemetery for the burial and service.

“Everyone was very sad, sorrowful and jaded after this. They must let us have some leave now – four months in the desert ending with this awful show.....”



Front at Fort Palestina Tobruk 1941.

Drawing by Jack Daniel ('Dan')

AIRGRAPH

Gunner HH Kassman
1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.
M.E.F.
30/4/41

Dear Mother,

This is the first edition of a new, rather ingenious air-mail system which we are told should reach you seven days after being written.

I have just received the Manchester Guardian of February 14th, just about the time that Benghazi fell. The news in it makes rather ironic reading but I was very pleased to receive it nevertheless. I hope you are not depressed by the current news out here. Nobody that I have met seems very upset, except Alec who has a slight touch of Gippy Tummy (Egyptian Abdomen). This does not mean that his skin is brown below his waist.

Have you received the third or fourth copies of Inaction yet? We have not produced an issue since December. You may be interested to know that one of the fourth issue went to Winston Churchill through A.V. Alexander who is related to one of the editors.

This is an awful time of the year for nostalgia. Two years ago we were arranging a team for Little Marlow; last year we had just finished seven days leave. I do not think we shall have much cricket this summer.

Fondest love

Henry

[Note by mother: "Received on June 1st 1941"]

AIRGRAPH

The message should be written very plainly above the middle line.

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Fondest love
Henry

Write address in large block letters in the panel below. Nothing else should be written below this line.

The address should be written in large block letters within the panel below. Nothing else should be written below this line.

Mrs. R. KASSMAN
20, ABBEY ROAD,
ST. JOHN'S WOOD,
LONDON, N.W.8

1213875

Our...
30/4/41

Extract from Top-Hats in Tobruk from part of the entry for 3rd May 1941:

“Woke up after a very disturbed night to the sound of still more artillery fire and other battle noises. Felt so sleepy and dirty.

“Had several alarms mostly due to Me. 109s appearing in groups of three or four. Artillery fire continued, and it seemed some of last night’s noises were enemy shelling us. Encouraging rumours persisted; an advancing army of ours said to be coming up from Sollum. Had a good wash and shave – my first for a few days. Then we had some Me. 109s floating around and we put up a harbour barrage which looked most effective. We also fired one round ‘gun control’ at them. Quite a few of our boys came back from hospital; mostly cases of shell shock, who were more subject to bombings and loud bangs in the hospital than they would have been on the gun site. Tom C....., one of the survivors of No. 3 gun, was one of them; he still retained his wonderful sense of humour and kept us amused with his hospital stories.

“Went over for a bathe in the afternoon and then on to the hospital to see our remaining fifteen-odd wounded lads. What a tragic place – the hospital was itself battered and bashed to glory, and the mere sight of it made you wish to get out quickly. All the poor wounded lay around, mostly trying to be cheerful, but suddenly a gun went off, the atmosphere became tense; those that could took cover, the remainder just remained helpless in bed, waiting to be bombed. Cases of nerves all over the hospital, and we felt everyone would get nerves after a few days there. It is so close to the docks that bombing is inevitable – but so tragic; Poor wounded boys would say ‘take me back to the front line for Christ’s sake’.

AIRGRAPH

Gnr HH Kassman
14747509
153/51 HAA Regt RA
M.E.F.
14/5/41

Dear Mother,

We have just received your letter of the 16th November, enclosing Mr. Bunford’s of 6th Nov. I also received the Institute of Actuaries’ Year Book 1940/1 by the same mail. You may be interested in the following extract from the President’s speech:- “Among (the Fellowship Certificates presented) was one to Gnr H.H. Kassman, serving in the 99th (L. Welsh) Royal Artillery. The President remarked that this was unique in the annals of the Institute.” Unfortunately I am still more or less unique!

We have just heard the news of Hess’s landing in Scotland. Alec thinks it may be a new Trojan Horse; It will be interesting to see what transpires.

We are both very fit. We have changed our camp site temporarily and are now swimming every day, sandstorms permitting.

Hoping you are safe and well,
Fondest love

Henry

TELEGRAM DATED 15 MAY 1941 TO:

EFM KASSMAN 20 ABBEYROAD STJOHNSWOOD LONDONNW20
BOTH WELL THANKS CARD LOVE = KASSMAN

AIRGRAPH

Gnr H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.
I Section, M.E.F.
22/5/41

Dear Mother,

We have received all your letters up to Feb 4th as well as your Air-Mail card of early April so that all mail seems to be arriving sooner or later. We have had no cables since March. I am delighted you are keeping so well and that you still keeping open the flat as a sort of reception room. Please tell Dr Winter how delighted I am that he is at last allowed to practise. We have a wireless set on our new site and hear the London propaganda blurb to the U.S.A. every night. The similar blurb from Berlin lends some variety and we really only listen to the programmes other than the news to prevent our going to sleep on night duty. We listened in to a feeble account of the amazing War Armaments week in London which had reached £70 millions up to yesterday. What a shame they cannot describe this sort of thing better to the Yanks. We were interested in the 'pageantry' in Hyde Park, but it made us rather homesick thinking of the rhododendrons and tulips which are probably flowering there. You were correct in guessing the reason for mail delay in January. Did you receive any of our letters or cards of the first three weeks of this year? We heard on the wireless that our first Airgraph reached home after nine days; this is the third one I have written. We are both A.1 and still bathing daily, (sea not soap).

Love

Henry

AIRGRAPH

P.S. Not back at N.W.3 I notice!!

Gnr H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.
I Section, M.E.F.
22/5/41

Dear Viviane

I hope you are not too alarmed at receiving two letters in the same month. My last letter may not have reached you as the Commanding Officer and I do not always see eye to eye. He is rather an odd type, probably a relation of the officer you met at Xmas, and I have long since decided to make him the villain of my monster War novel, which I have barely begun, being now on page 2793½. (I received your Feb. letter last week.) I am glad you had such a good Xmas; we did not have any dancing at Xmas, nor at Easter, nor owing to technical difficulties are we likely to at Whitsun, August B.H. or Guy Fawkes Day. Referring to your Officer, I am surprised at your being only momentarily deceived; any Gunner could have told you that he comes of a licentious race, utterly without human sympathy. We are comparatively happy nowadays; we have been bathing in the Med. since January, which is probably more than YOU ever did. We also had a bar of chocolate last week. Mother is still in St John's Wood and seems to be undisturbed by the surrounding chaos, (or choss, a much better word). I hope on the 26th June 1944 (old Henry's date for the end of the War) to pour a complete account of my great battles into your shell-like ear and to hear yours from your own rose-bud lips. (I can't keep this up any longer.)

All the very best

Henry

AIRGRAPH

Gnr H.H. Kassman
1474509
153/51 H.A.A. Regt. R.A.
M.E.F.
30/5/41

Dear Mother,

Your card of the 7th May to Alec has just arrived. I am surprised you have only received two Air Mail communications from me; both Alec and I have bin writin' regular for five or six months. As we are still receiving November mail from you, there are no doubt the usual military slipshod methods at the A.P.O. Incidentally, it hardly seems worthwhile cabling in view of this Airgraph reaching you so quickly; but I should like to receive some occasionally from you as hitherto.

We heard Roosevelt's speech in toto on the wireless last night; I suppose you heard it too. He is an excellent orator although without Churchill's gift of relieving serious items with occasional humour; but perhaps he did not think it the right time to be humorous. Anyhow, it was certainly the type of speech for which we have all been waiting, even if it was intended mainly for American consumption.

There is nothing you can send us here, except maybe some fresh asparagus, grilled sole and mushrooms, escallop of veal, cherry tart and coffee. I am broken-hearted about the 'Café de Paris'. We have not heard from Mr. Malikont (?Goodman).

Love Henry

Gnr. H.H.Kassman,
1474509
153/51H.A.A. Regt. R.A..
I Section,
M.E.F. 5/6/41

Dear Mother,

Whitsun has just passed, but what a Whitsun! It was only by some abstruse mathematical calculations and the use of last year's diary that we suddenly realised that three days ago it was Whit Monday, not that it was any different from Shrove Tuesday, Good Friday or August Bank Holiday. We changed our ----- [*word crossed out by censor*] again last Friday and consequently are no longer having our daily bathe nor have we a wireless. Not that the loss of the wireless is any great hardship; if you can remember what it was like at home and imagine three men in a confined space fighting for mastery of the knob, you may have a rough idea of the placid atmosphere during duty.

We have received a very large amount of mail recently, including a dozen Economists which make remarkably good reading after the Egyptian blurb which we occasionally see. I am sure you will be delighted to know that Hammond and several other notabilities are fighting hard out here — on the Cairo cricket-pitches!

I am afraid another cricket season is drifting by. This used to be the time when we went to the Pillars of Hercules to discuss exactly why Eastcote beat us again on Whit Sunday. It also used to be the time of summer-holiday decisions. It is impossible to imagine more contrasting scenery than the North African desert and the magnificence of the Alps and the Tyrol. I can still remember coming back to a Swiss village in 1939 after an all-day climb, and seeing the sunset reflected on the snow-caps of mountains on the other side of the valley. I sat down and watched it for an hour even though a large supper was waiting for me down in the valley. There is nothing you can watch in this

country for more than five minutes without falling asleep. I would give a good deal to see an Alpine sunset now – and to eat an Alpine supper!

I hope you are receiving our many letters by now. I should like to know the dates of those that you receive if you are not getting many. Apart from mail, the all-important topic is leave. I do not think there is the slightest chance of leave out here for months in view of the situation, but we have our optimists who have been forecasting it since January! If we do go back for a short spell, I shall make an effort to visit Tel Aviv. I believe the fare for the air journey from Cairo is £2:10/-. It almost seems fantastic for us to have been in the Middle East without visiting Palestine.

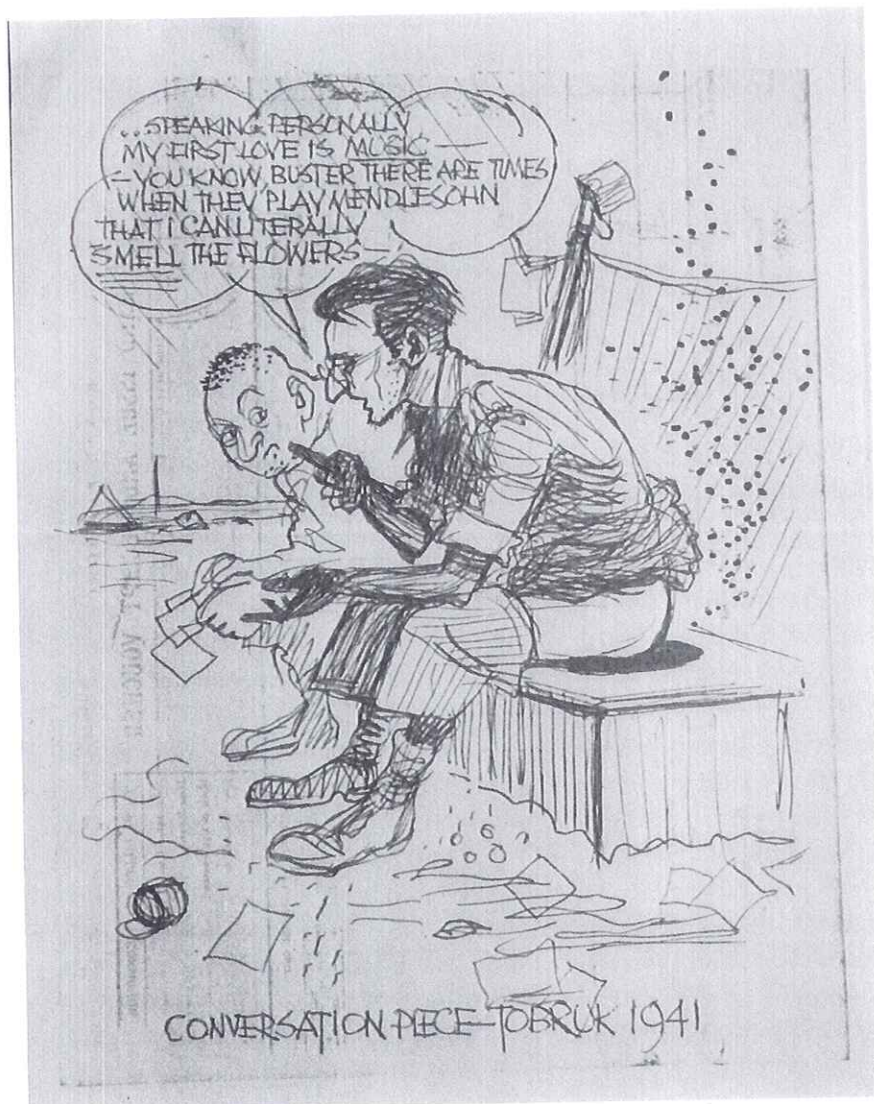
Have you any news of the Goodmans recently. I still think it would be a good idea for you to visit them. Have you heard from Bunny? I suppose she is a neutral! Fancy the fighting Irish staying out of a fight.

Do you remember Edgington of the Welsh? We heard from him the other day. Remember me to Dr Winter, Aunt Addie, Uncle Bert etc. I must write to them some time.

Censor's signature [*illegible*]

Fondest love

Henry



Drawing of my father by Jack Daniel 'Dan'

Extract from 'Top-Hats in Tobruk'. Parts of entries for 10th, 13th and 14th June 1941.

10th June 1941

"Had very little sleep what with fleas and air raids, gun fire and bombs. While firing at one raider a stick of bombs fell quite close to us – between us and our dummy gun site. One boy got hurt failing to get out of the way of the recoil on the gun – knocked his nose about and it was at a most peculiar angle when I looked at it, though someone said it was quite natural in his case. Oil bombs and thermos bombs were dropped amongst other things, but all, as far as I could see with no effect at all.

"When 'A' site were heavily bombed by Stukas recently about sixty bombs were dropped on them, and very few went off. A large 250 pound bomb fell in a small L.A.A. [light anti-aircraft] pit and did not go off – one member of the crew got hurt when they all made a rapid bolt for it – that was all! There must be some good fifth column work in some of these bomb factories!

"Went down to see Jimmy and told him about Bombardier Yorke. He was as disappointed as I about it all. Placed Bombardier G.... under arrest for reading a magazine when on duty as a spotter. As another Bombardier is losing his stripes too, in unfortunate circumstances, there will be more stripes going for those who have earned it through all this difficult time.

"An Me. 110 went over dropping bombs and was heavily engaged by A.A., going away in difficulties.

"Organised a fly-swatting party – every man in the camp to kill 100 flies a day in the cookhouse! Killed off my hundred and ticked my name off the list.

"Spent some time preparing a charge against Bombardier G....., and I put him under Section 40 of the Army Act. I hate doing this kind of thing but it has to be.

"Went down for an afternoon bathe and complete change of clothes, catching several large fleas in the process, and disposing of them. Came back for tea and went over to the ration dump, wandering around and eventually finding Captain Littlewood who very kindly arranged to send us over a load of extra rations tomorrow. Saw a lot of thermos bombs which had been dropped; evidently 157 of them were dropped in the ration dump enclosure alone. Saw two which no one else had found yet and reported them – lethal looking objects, which I would not touch for a fortune. Had a long talk with Captain and swapped yarns with some of his boys, but I learnt nothing new. No one seemed to know anything except that we had a good strong force at Mersa.

"Came back quite tired of feet for a game of solo with the Sergeants. Quite good fun.

"One third of June gone! And still in Tobruk!"

13th June 1941

..... "Had a sleepy game of solo with the Sergeants and tried to get off to bed around nine-thirty. In spite of extreme fatigue and a splitting headache, could not get to sleep by reason of those infernal fleas. They simply tormented me. It was agony to move because of my head,

and yet kept having to jump up and chase one of the beastly little things running over my neck, arms or legs. This process went on until I could have cried.

14th June 1941

“Then, of course, the raids started and went on non-stop all night. We fired one barrage after another, occasionally getting back to bed and the fleas, only to be called out again a few minutes later. They were trying to prevent our use of the docks by continuous bombing, and we with our A.A. fire were trying to put off their aim. The lights in the town were put out of action and a few small fires started by incendiaries. Telephone lines went down but I think it was ‘business as usual’. After one raid I came back to my dug-out to find a frightened flea-ridden dog in amongst my blankets – Oh God! Finally it began to get light and we were told of large numbers of planes coming from the east, suspected as friendly. We were too tired even to get excited about it, and no one even raised so much as a cheer when some Glen Martins, Tomahawks and Hurricanes put on a show for us – what we have been waiting for for months!

“Felt so dispirited that even good news failed to make any impression. The Free French had occupied Damascus, the Governor of Syria had fled to Vichy, we had attacked and almost certainly sunk a pocket battleship off Norway, the Ruhr had had the biggest raid ever carried out by British aircraft, and finally forty-six American ships had recently been unloaded at Suez. And yet it made no impression!

“We were told we could expect much increased friendly air activity as from today, and the local aerodrome might come into use again. A large flea on my leg, quickly caught and put to death on this page, resulting in the splash of blood below – my blood of course!

“Slept all morning and afternoon up till tea time. Then we had two Ju 88’s come over high and drop bombs fairly close to us – close enough to be uncomfortable.

“Some Commandos were thought to have gone out last night, armed to the teeth and with thick rubber soles on their shoes, everything points to the show starting soon now – the sooner the better! Apparently the Commandos went off in a motor-boat and were almost surprised by a German tanker in the darkness. One of their jobs is said to be poisoning wells – a nice war!

“Had a lot of work thrust on us on ammunition which was rotten luck. It all had to be sorted out although lying in dumps all over the desert.

“Had a game of cards with the Sergeants and retired to bed for my usual battle with the fleas.”