

Please note change of address

Gunner H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) H.A.A. Battery R.A.  
M.E.F.  
3/11/41

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the letters written since the 28<sup>th</sup> September, which you have no doubt written but which I have not yet received. Due to certain natural phenomena we also receive our mail rather spasmodically and have had none for nearly a fortnight.

You must get very bored with these uninteresting\* letters but there is very little to write. I like to give the impression that, were it not for the Censor, I could write of momentous matters for which the London Press in thirsting, but in fact, even if the Censor lost his pencil, I do not think my letters would be much different.

\* I do not really think them uninteresting. Secretly I think them very interesting, but I can hardly say so myself.

Yesterday was rather evil as there was a sirocco blowing all day. A sirocco is a wind from the south, that is the Sahara, which not only brings a goodly amount of the Sahara with it in the form of sand, but is also intensely hot. It is rather like spending a day in front of a furnace with clouds of sand blowing out of it. It is about the most depressing thing I have ever met with, except possibly 6 o'clock Roll Call.

It was still very warm in the evening and a few of us went for a moonlight bathe as it was full moon last night. It really was delightful, although the water was rather colder than the atmosphere in our sleeping quarters and resulted in our making rather a lot of noise. In fact the noise was sufficiently alarming to bring out some Poles to our rescue. I am afraid they are rather serious little men and were quite annoyed when they discovered that there was no-one to rescue. It almost looked at first as though they were going to throw into the water one of our fellows (the smallest) and rescue him whether he liked it or not. Fortunately the situation was saved by one of the Poles realising "Five Polski come to rescue: no British," and they went off a bit happier. I can just imagine some English soldiers playing cards in their quarters, hearing these screams and saying "----- them, chum," and dealing the next hand. I am afraid one or two of our lesser spirits were a bit alarmed when we told them of this at breakfast. "What" they said "if one day we really are drowning and no Poles come to the rescue?" "What, indeed" as we told them.

Regards to all

*Censor's signature (illegible)*

Fondest love  
Henry

*[An almost identical letter was written to Viviane on the same date]*

Gunner H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) H.A.A. Battery R.A.  
M.E.F.  
11/11/41

Dear Mother,

I hope you are well as it leaves me at present being in the pink if you see what I mean that is.

As you may or may not have noticed, this is the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. I do not know if you had any ceremony in England but we certainly had none here. In fact a more unceremonious day it would be difficult to imagine. Little did we think you and I, 23 years ago, (you waving a great Union Jack and I probably investigating the larder for jam if my later tendencies are any witness), that on the same day in 1941 I should spend my time lying on my bed in a desert wondering whether the corned beef for supper would originate from New Zealand or the Argentine; (this is a very long sentence I am afraid, as the convict said when condemned to transportation for life).

As a matter of fact, I could well share the convict's opinion, having now landed in this benighted part of the world somewhat over a year ago. I have certainly seen a good deal of history in the making, and for that matter, in the unmaking, but I cannot honestly say that I have proved a very potent factor in it. Still, as Tolstoy so comfortingly points out, history makes the man not man the history. He did not say what history makes the man but I can assure you it has made me uncommonly hungry. -----

----- [words deleted by Censor] Fortunately I found a small horde of spaghetti and vermicelli last week and clutched it as a camel would a straw. (Somehow this simile does not quite seem right, and anyhow it was not straw, but vermicelli which is much the same thing). Soaked in water and boiled in jam or cheese, it makes a dish of rare delicacy. No mail of any sort here for well over a fortnight.

Regards to Alfred,  
Fondest love

Henry

*J Ronald Shearan (censor)*



“--- [word deleted by censor] guns shelling El Adem aerodrome, 11/41”  
[A copy of this photo is at the Imperial War Museum, reference HU 49287]

P.S. I have sent a Xmas card to Mr.  
Miller who sends the Readers Digest.

Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) H.A.A. Battery R.A.  
M.E.F.  
16/11/41

Dear Mother,

I received your Airgraphs to Alec and myself of the 15<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> October today, together with one from Alfred, which I shall answer as soon as I obtain a stamp. I hope you do not mind paying double on this, for there is not a stamp in the place. I also had a note from Alec who is still at Base for treatment to his sinus trouble. Apparently the treatment takes the form of more or less perpetual fatigues. Nevertheless, he does not appear to have been too busy to cultivate the friendship of a French girl, who incidentally was good enough to help him send you a Xmas parcel which should reach you by the end of January! As a matter of fact, he sent me a parcel of "desert stores" which have not yet arrived and are keenly awaited with equal proportions of greed and curiosity. What "desert stores" are I cannot imagine, but so long as they are not boot-polish and Silvo they are sure to be welcome.

There is no sign of our leaving this place before Xmas, and provided that we have some beer sent up I do not really mind; (we have had none for over six months). The stories of the horrors of Base life in Cairo which reach us make an Aldershot parade ground seem like Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday. Even the prospect of leave (of which we have had none since leaving England) would hardly compensate for the change from the free and easy life we now lead.

I was very touched by the mention of the bulging cricket-bag at Harrods. I think in the circumstances that you are right to sell your furniture if you can get a good price for it. £35 p.a. seems rather a heavy insurance, but how much of this is accounted for by my piano?

I had a letter from Russell Talbot in Rhodesia the other day. He certainly seems to be having a pleasant War. He told me how very pleased he was to see you and how well you were looking. Did Albert Levine look you up? He asked for your address a couple of months ago.

I am still very fit and Arab complexion all over. I am glad you received the two snaps last year which were all that I sent.

Regards to Alfred

Fondest love

J. Ronald Shiaran [*censor*]

Henry

P.S. Please tell Mother I had a very cheerful  
letter from Bert Joseph

Gnr H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 H.A.A. Bty R.A.  
M.E.F.  
19/11/41

Dear Alfred,

Very many thanks for your October Airgraph which I was delighted to receive.

I suppose that, by the time that this reaches you, you will be in the middle of winter. I hope you get in some skating; there are some good rinks in London, if they are still undamaged. I am afraid you will not have much ski-ing until after the War. Unfortunately I do not know the Salzkammergut; a friend and I had meant to spend a few weeks there, but the Anschluss intervened. I know the part around Innsbruck fairly well, the Karwendel, Achensee, Brenner district, and do not think it can be improved upon for scenery.

There is next to no news from here,  
Kindest regards

Henry

Gnr H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) HAA Bty RA  
M.E.F.  
24/11/41

Dear Mother,

Our monthly batch of mail has been finally sorted out, and it is now well over a week since any letter has been delivered. The delivery of mail seems to get worse the longer the War is waged, but the current delay is probably due to the battle now being fought and is therefore excusable. I dare say that outgoing mail is equally bad.

It rather looks as though the "Ministry of Information" have made another bloomer in their propaganda for the battle in Libya, and I have a feeling that in due course they will be in for another trouncing in Parliament. Everyone here is fully confident of our ultimate success, not through lip service but because tactically our supply lines must be better than the enemy's. But no-one really thought that Jerry would sit on the Egyptian frontier for over six months just waiting to be pushed back whenever we felt like doing it. Consequently there was a fair amount of disapproval for the enormous flare of publicity with which the BBC started things off, probably leading people to think we should sweep through to Benghazi in a week. Nevertheless, and I hope I do not have to eat my words, I rather feel that, by the time this reaches you, we shall have won fairly decisively. Perhaps, and this is not so probable, by that time we shall also have had a spell of leave for which we have waited since arriving in the Middle East.

As far as we ourselves are concerned, things are still quiet although they have naturally livened up a little during the past week. The weather is much colder now; probably like fine April weather at home as regards temperature. We still manage to bathe pretty well whenever we want to, and this is our only form of exercise. Did I tell you that I had a large parcel from Alec in Alexandria? It was certainly very welcome, as our diet is rather monotonous. I believe you know that Alec has sent you an Xmas parcel of tea and sugar etc. but I doubt if you will receive it in time, not that it matters much.

Regards to Alfred,  
Fondest love

*J.Ronald Shiaran (censor)*

Henry

AIRGRAPH

Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) H.A.A. Bty.R.A.,  
M.E.F.

2/12/41

Dear Mother,

Airgraph this week, as there is little to write. Everyone is very bucked at the news on the Russian front; the current news is that the Russians are attacking at all points. They must be magnificent soldiers. We were all very cheered at the establishment of the link with Tobruk; and although the Libyan battle is probably much tougher than anticipated, judging from the note on which the BBC opened up, I think that we shall win it in due course. The weather is much colder now, and very wet too. If I can get a bathe in this month, I shall have been in for twelve consecutive months. The last two days have been far too cold however. There seems little chance of our leaving here before Xmas, and the prospect of having it here is not very cheering. An extra tin of bully each to celebrate the occasion I should imagine. Oh yes, some beer came up yesterday, the first for about 7 months. I swapped my cigarettes and have quite a store.

Fondest love      Henry

Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) HAA Bty RA  
M E F  
3/12/41

Dear Mother,

This letter card was handed to us this afternoon with the information that the R.A.F. had guaranteed (barring acts of God and Jerry) to deliver it by Xmas. I have already sent off an Airgraph today in which I had nothing to say, so that there is little for me to do than to wish you and Alfred everything of the very best this coming year.

I also received a couple of Airgraphs dated 27<sup>th</sup> October which I have sent on to Alec. He is still at Base with sinus trouble, but seems to be enjoying himself.

I am afraid this Xmas is not likely to be so congenial as the last which, as you know, we spent in Cairo. This year we shall be spending it in the same place as we have been for Lord knows how long. The food is none too good or plentiful at the moment; reasonable enough considering what is going on, but I hope you received my letters asking for a Xmas parcel.

We do receive all the papers you send, but they take months to arrive. So far we have had papers up to the beginning of August!

Fondest love

*J Ronald Shiaran (censor)*

Henry

## 7 DECEMBER 1941: SIEGE OF TOBRUK LIFTED

In 'Top-Hats in Tobruk', Kenneth Rankin wrote the following as part of his Epilogue:

### 1. "THE FINAL COUNT"

*Looking back over the records, we had had, in about six months [Kenneth Rankin's troop was evacuated in September. Henry Kassman left Tobruk early in 1942] nearly 1,000 air raids, including sixty-one mass Stuka raids, in eleven of which we were one of the objectives. We had also been bombed many times, by day and night, from a high level, and been machine-gunned by fighters and dive-bombers flying low.*

*Since leaving civilisation at the end of December 1940, we had lost forty per cent of our personnel through casualties and sickness, but twenty-five per cent were lost in one raid on 27 April, before we learnt how to fight back. Since that date we had had only two killed and four wounded and all our guns remained in action throughout, taking part in what was undoubtedly the first complete victory over the dive-bombers in the 1939/45 war. The numbers of planes we destroyed must have run into scores, and the numbers damaged into hundreds. A fine record for a little over 100 men [Kenneth Rankin's troop?].*

*There were no more awards or decorations, and promotions were to be long delayed. The rewards lay in the matters of the spirit, comradeship, cherished memories, gratitude and enduring admiration for our Australian friends, and thoughts of that unconquerable spirit of 'THE RATS OF TOBRUK'.*

*The dive-bombers had met their match."*

Section 4 of the Epilogue contains the following extract from 'Parade' of 20th December 1941.

### "GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

*Says a Sergeant, seven months in Tobruk*

*Tobruk relieved! It doesn't seem possible! Seven months of bombs and boredom, dust and flies, rumours of relief and regular disappointment had almost made us believe that we were destined to grow wrinkled and grey-headed in this desolate semi-circle of desert flanked by the blue waters of the Mediterranean.*

*And now that it is over some of us feel a kind of twisted affection for this place which we have cursed so often. We have so many memories bound up with it, so many ghosts of comrades dead or departed.*

*Some of the memories are pretty grim. That blazing afternoon at the end of April when the Stukas first swooped on us. We sighted a squadron far out to sea making for the harbour. I pick them up in the height-finder. Out of range. Slowly they swing inwards and I take a height on them.*

*'Twelve five hundred,' orders the G.P.O. [Gun Position Officer] to the Predictor.*

*'Steady,' reports the Predictor and the G.P.O. orders 'Fire'.*

*There is a rattle and clang from the guns as the long shells are rammed home, a pause and then the air is torn with the crash of a salvo. A pause which seems like an age, and then four little puffs of smoke appear round the leading Stuka. Again the guns crash out and the plane staggers and plunges sideways. Nice shooting! Now for the next one!*

*Suddenly a yell 'Plaane' cuts through the din. Even as the look-out shouts his warning the shoosh of the falling bombs tells us what has happened. A second squadron of Stukas has come in behind and is diving on us out of the blinding sun. 'Craash' go the bombs like the splitting of a thousand trees and those of us who are not already on the ground are hurled flat. 'Crrash, wurrmp, crash' come the bombs again and again and again.*

*We are blinded, suffocated, the breath knocked out of our bodies as the earth heaves beneath us. The world is crashing around us and burying us in black darkness. We claw at the ground and pray. Nothing can live in such an inferno. It is going on for ever.*

*Suddenly everything is still. As the clouds of smoke and dust drift away we pick ourselves up, scarcely believing that we are still alive. But not all of us.*

*From the reeking gun pits stagger tattered grimy gunners carrying limp, blood-stained forms. A blackened figure stumbles towards us, its clothes hanging in ribbons. It is my buddy Phil West shouting that his gun pit is afire and his ammunition exploding. He has already dragged a couple of his wounded crew to safety out of the inferno. If ever a man deserved the medal he was awarded, Phil did. He died some weeks later, in agony, from the burns which he had received.*

*And then that hospital in the town, where those wounded who could move rolled under their beds twenty times a day as the building shook to the crash of bombs outside and the A.A. barrage overhead. And those who couldn't move lay in their beds and prayed while the shell-shocked cried and trembled in their helplessness. But of course it wasn't all as grim as this.*

*We had many other dive-bombing attacks on us, but we survived them, and gave them back rather better, sometimes it seemed by a miracle, than we got.*

*Almost worse than the bombs as a tribulation to the flesh and spirit were the fleas. The desert flea is famous, and ours were obviously in the pay of the enemy. How we cursed them on the nights when the moon was late up and we hoped to snatch a couple of hours sleep before the inevitable procession of night bombers started. They would march and counter-march up and down our twitching bodies until we thought we would go crazy.*

*And we needed those hours of sleep for, when the moon was up we would get mighty little rest. Twenty-one alarms in one night is our record; and it was nothing to have half-a-dozen night after night.*

*No wonder we looked forwards to our periodic 'day off' by the sea. Even if we had to keep an eye open for bombers and dive into the caves for shelter from swooping Stukas, it was heaven to wash ourselves and our sweaty clothes in the clear sea water and lie on the sand and dream of home, beer and beauty.*

*And then we had our 'quiet days' when the wind howled and the dust devils swept over the desert so that one could not venture out without goggles or eyeshields; and as we lay in our*

*shallow dug-outs dozing or reading some tattered paperback the dust would settle in a floury yellow veil over face and hands and blankets. We ate and breathed the stuff so that we scarcely noticed it.*

*But most of our grouse was plain boredom – week after week, month after month, the same eternal desert, the same discomforts, the same raids. Danger itself becomes tedious after a time.*

*Well, it's over now. Goodbye Tobruk, with your shattered snowy walls and your crazy harbour full of tilted sunken ships.*

*And goodbye old comrades in the little desert Cemetery – you deserve to sleep in peace.*

**SGT. PERRY**  
*Left Troop (Heightfinder No. 1)"*

*“Comment [From the Preface of ‘Top-Hats in Tobruk’]*

*But for the British and Australian ‘Rats of Tobruk’ the war in the Middle East would inevitably have been lost in 1941. Alamein would not have taken its honoured place in British military history.*

*Tobruk is a name which once gave new spirit to millions. The garrison, for the first time, brought to a halt the Panzer divisions of General Rommel in one of the blackest moments of the war. ‘Tommys’ and ‘Diggers’ showed that mechanised power could be defied by resolute men who refused to be intimidated.”*

LETTER FROM HENRY OF 7 DECEMBER 1941

AIRGRAPH  
7/12/41

Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 (London) HAA Bty RA, MEF

Dear Mother,

Thank you very much indeed for the parcel which arrived today in first-class condition; I should think it must have required an extra large supply ship to bring it up. I have not yet opened the “Barnzone”; somehow it sounds too much like Benzine to be very tempting. I was very pleased with the Bovril and especially with the recipes; I have not yet decided to use it for flavouring steak and kidney pie or for sprouts on toast. I cannot make Bovril jelly as I have no bouquet garni. The chocolate was the greatest surprise as it fell out of a sort of false bottom when I was going to throw the wrapping away. Alec is now out of hospital and, having had yet another leave, has joined 152 Battery at a very cushy site. I do not know whether he will rejoin me or not; shame we cannot share the parcel but I have let him know the contents. Anyhow believe me, my needs are greater than his. As a matter of fact he sent me a parcel last month. Heard from Irene Brenner last week.

Fondest love

Henry



Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 HAA Bty RA  
MEF  
18/12/41

Dear Mother,

As you can see, we are within a week of Xmas. We had hopes very recently that we might be spending it in rather more congenial surroundings than the Western Desert, where as you know we have been for about a year. As usual, however, something seems to have gone wrong and I fear that your second tin of Barnzone will be eaten in surroundings all too familiar. The desert, as the Americans say, kinda gets yer; it has certainly got us, and it won't let go.

The Barnzone incidentally was a great surprise. I thought it must be something like Nutter or Rokeach's and was very astonished to find a Xmas pudding when I opened a tin. Four of us on night duty last week boiled it up and burnt our rum issue on it when it was cooked. After that, it was all we could do to keep awake. It was certainly very good indeed and I am gloating over the second tin which I am keeping until next week.

The weather is quite cold now, especially at night. I have been in the water the last two days, but the pleasure is greatest viewed retrospectively. I had had no mail at all for about two or three weeks, either from you or Alec. For some reason, letters are more infrequent now than they were earlier in the year.

By the way, could you send me a back number of Picture Post, September 20<sup>th</sup> please. There is rather an interesting article in it.

Regards to all  
Best wishes for New Year  
Henry

Gnr. H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 H.A.A. Battery R.A.  
M.E.F.  
26/12/41

My dear Viviane,

Thank you so much for your letter of the 29<sup>th</sup> October which came in record time for sea-mail, probably because you paid twice the regulation postage fee. You can have no idea how much mail means to us here, especially, for some reason, letters with an Amersham post-mark. I was very amused by your riding experience. The only thing we can ride out here is a camel, but judging from what you say I doubt it you would ever get on it.

I suppose you spent your usual good Xmas dancing etc. As none of us has seen a female creature of any sort for twelve months, it was certainly rather difficult to arrange a dance here. As a matter of fact, we spent Xmas morning unloading petrol, but someone took pity on us, and we knocked off at midday. At 5 o'clock we had our long awaited Xmas dinner – bully beef patty, tinned spinach, two pieces of tinned peach and a cup of cocoa. Fortunately, some of our best scroungers had been on the prowl for a week, and in the evening thirteen of us crowded into a dugout and let loose on sausages, stew, tinned fruit, Xmas pudding and coffee. Someone had borrowed an accordion, and we made a great deal of noise until very early this morning. Half way through, we

marched around the camp singing carols and other songs, and waking everyone else up, meeting with variable receptions. I suppose it all sounds rather schoolboyish, but it takes some effort to rouse any joie de vivre out here.

Alec by the way, is at Base living on the fleshpots of Egypt and going on his third lot of leave. The Xmas puddings came out of a parcel which mother sent him and I received! I think our need was greater than his.

I am still shaped like this:- *[picture of pinman bent at waist and neck]* because while I have changed my home, I am now in a hole some five feet deep and covered with corrugated iron and sand. What wouldn't I give for a bed with sheets and a hot bath!

By the way, a Jerry Michaelson has recently joined us. He claims to have observed the phenomenon of your growing up and says you know his sister. He sends his best wishes.

Alec by the way has sent you a parcel of tea, sugar and stockings for Xmas. I do not know what size stockings he has sent, but knowing him you will probably be able to put both legs into one, which I suppose is economical.

Incidentally, I must congratulate you on the letter. Seven pages is I believe your record, but not I hope for long.

Look after yourself  
All the best  
Henry

Gunner H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 H.A.A. Bty. R.A.,  
M.E.F.  
26/12/41

Dear Mother,

Many thanks for your Airgraphs of 4<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> November which arrived in a bunch this week, also Alfred's of the 4<sup>th</sup>. After a famine of mail for about two months I have received a considerable amount this week; 2 Guardians, 2 Punches, 2 World Books, 1 Readers Digest & 10 Economists; 120 cigarettes from Hampstead Synagogue (for Rosh Hoshana!), a cable from the N.P.I. and a good many letters. I hear from quite a number of my friends at home. I had one from Tommy Evans this week; he is with my old Battery now, in the far north of Scotland. Nightingale has married and is a first Lieut. in the Navy. I also heard from Patey, whom you may remember on one leave train at Kings Cross, with a porter carrying his kit. We left him behind in England. I heard from Viviane Maisel; they are still in Amersham and do not seem very affected by the War. I do not think you know any of the other people who wrote me. I forgot: Louis Hirschsohn sent me a Xmas parcel from Cape Town, which I thought was very charming.

I must say we needed all the consolation of mail and parcels that we could receive this Xmas. Alec is in pretty comfortable and civilised surroundings, but I am still in the same place in the desert. At one time it looked as though we would be back at Base for Xmas; but arrangements fell through, although as a preparatory measure we were withdrawn from our jobs. Therefore, having nothing else to do, we have been stevedoring at the docks for some days, including Xmas morning! You need hardly guess that little work was in fact done yesterday, and we were withdrawn round about

midday. We spent the afternoon asleep, and woke up for Xmas dinner at 5 o'clock; bully beef patty, spinach and a couple of pieces of tinned peaches (the last having been swiped). Fortunately, some of our chaps had kept their eyes open and had illicitly procured a host of tinned fruit. We had also found a South African YMCA, and at 8.30 13 of us squeezed into a dugout and made merry on sausages, stew, fruit, Alec's two Xmas puddings, coffee and two cans of beer each. I thought the party would be rather dull, but someone had borrowed an accordion, and we made a great deal of noise until about 2 a.m., and probably having as good a time as anyone could here. This morning we have sunk back into our usual slough of despondency due to a shocking sandstorm which has covered everything in my hole with about 2 inches of sand. By the way, I opened Alec's parcel and shared it out, as our need is far greater than his. I believe he is just starting his third stretch of leave!

By the way, a Jewish chap Michaelson has just joined us. He comes from Finchley Road, is a relation of the Actuary, and has relatives in Joburg called Hart. Do you know him? Not a bad chap.

Fondest love  
Henry

P.S. Awaiting details of your business transaction with interest.  
Where are your friends the Greens going now?

AIRGRAPH

[*Note by Mother*] "Received Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> 1942"

Gunner H.H. Kassman  
1474509  
153 H.A.A. Battery R.A.  
M.E.F.

30/12/41

Dear Alfred,

Very many thanks for your Airgraph of the 7<sup>th</sup> November which I was delighted to receive. I am afraid that there is absolutely no further news since I wrote to Mother last week. This unit is still in the same place, and there are no signs at all of our moving in anything like the near future. The prospect of New Year's Eve is just about as bright as was that of Xmas Eve which is not saying very much. I had a letter from Alec in Egypt, dated the 17<sup>th</sup> December. He seems to be fit again and has just about recovered from his previous leave sufficiently to enjoy a further week that his unit is receiving. I also am very fit, but thoroughly resigned to staying in the Western Desert until the end of the War, and even after that, unless they suddenly remember us. Love to Mother

Kindest regards

Henry