

"G O O D B Y E T O A L L T H A T."

says a sergeant seven months
in Tobruk.

Tobruk relieved! It doesn't seem possible'. Seven months of bombs and boredom, dust and fleas, 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 heightfinder. Out of range. Slowly they swing inwards and I take a height on them.

"Twelve, five hundred," orders the G.P.O. 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 lookout shouts his warning the whoosh of falling bombs tells us what has happened. A second squadron of Stukas has come in behind and is diving on us out of that blinding sun. "Craash" go the bombs like the splittin 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 gunpits stagger tattered grimy gunners carrying limp, bloodstained forms. A blackened figure stumbles towards us, its clothes hanging in ribbons. It is my buddy Phil W. shouting that his gunpit 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 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

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 countermarch 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 forward to our periodic "day off" by the sea. Even if we had to keep an eye open for bombers and dive in to 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 dugouts 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 mostly 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.