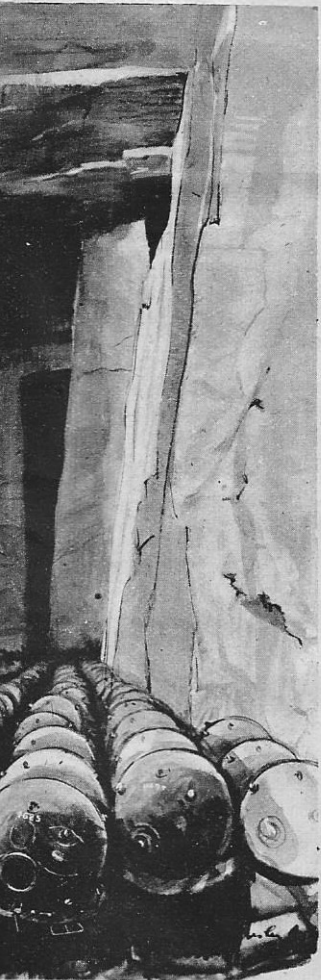


Leslie Cole



BRIGADIER DE LA BERE (MALTA)

Leslie Cole



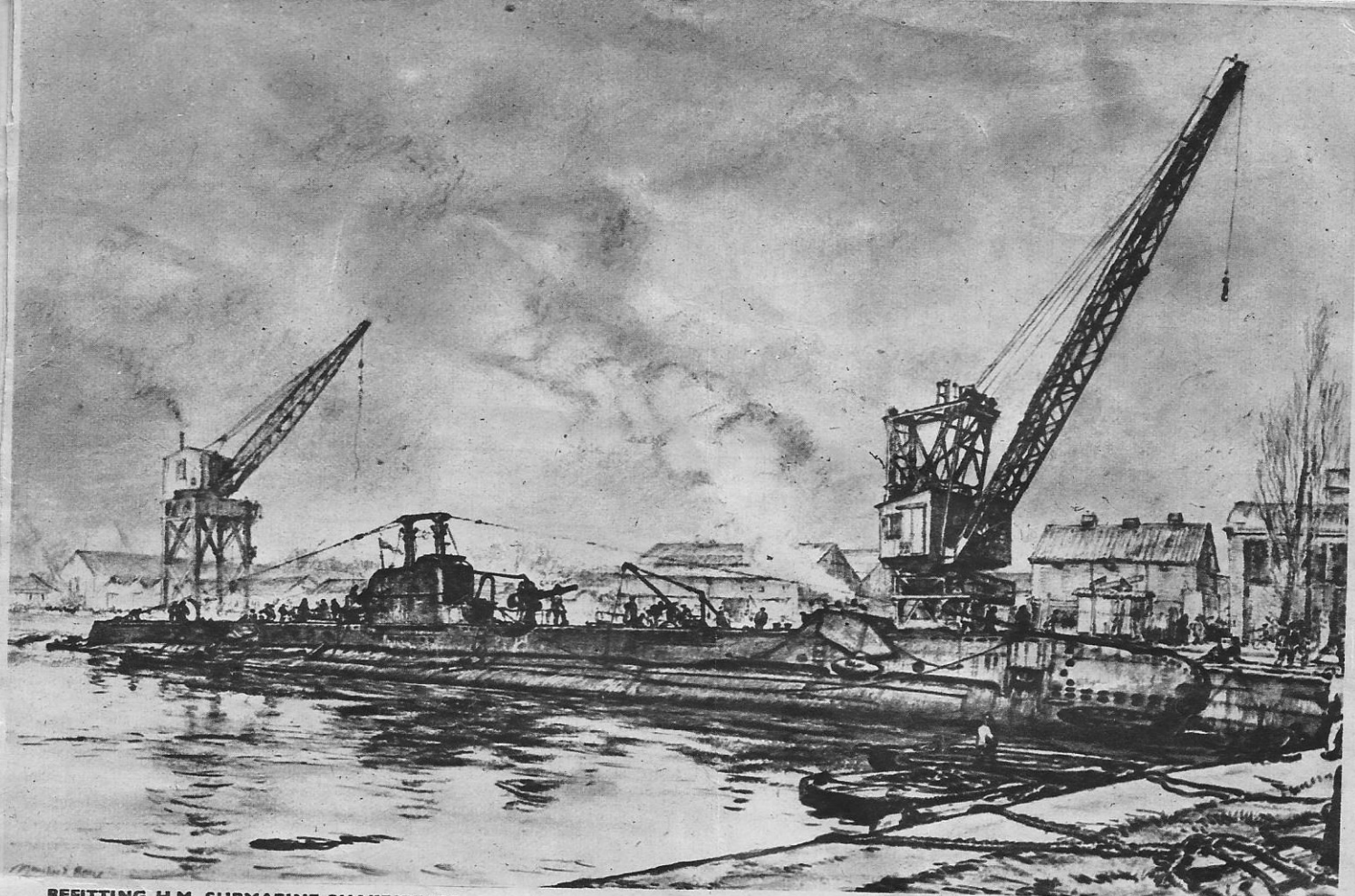
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John Worsley



WOOLWICH ARSENAL, 1943

Robert Austin



REFITTING H.M. SUBMARINE SHAKESPEARE

Sir Muirhead Bone



CHAS. PEARS

THE SINKING OF THE SCHARNHORST

Exhibited at The National Gallery, London, Spring 1944. Crown copyright reserved.

Charles Pears

VIEWS & REVIEWS Of Vital War Books

by Hamilton Fyfe

WHY is the Eighth Army famous beyond any other army in the war? What gave it the bold spirit, the unflagging energy, the dogged determination to go through, which its commander praised so warmly when he left it? Why, when we see a book called *I Was an Eighth Army Soldier* (Gollancz, 4s. 6d.), do we feel sure there will be something in it that isn't in 'other war books?

Well, if you are in doubt as to the answers to those questions, you will find yourself wiser when you have read the account Driver R. J. Crawford, of the R.A.S.C., gives of his experiences in the Desert. He did not write them himself. He narrated them to a R.A.S.C. major, who used to be on the *Daily Express*, and knew how to put them into the right words and sentences. The result couldn't be improved on. No collaboration was ever more successful. The pages from beginning to end tingle with life. They bring the sand and the brassy sun and the hot blue sky and the pests and the perils so vividly before us that even the most stay-at-home readers will feel they have been there. The nature of the fighting is not described so much as shown in the clear little pictures that emerge from the narrator's memory.

BUT first let us see why the Eighth Army was different (is still, perhaps—I don't know). Was it General Montgomery's doing? In large part, yes. His name became known as the names of Bonaparte and Garibaldi were known to their troops; it had the sound of a bugle-call; it made every man feel as if he were under the eye of the commander himself. He is, as I have said before on this page, an unusual man to be a general in any army—and most unusual to be one of the supreme leaders of our British forces. Plumer was popular, Allenby was popular, but to nothing like the same extent. Montgomery is admired and loved and trusted ("loved" is not too strong a word) because he is utterly unlike the ordinary British general, because he has a personality which compels respect as well as affection, because he seems to the troops to be always among them—in spirit, if not in body; always inspiring, encouraging them, not as a far-off brass hat, but as one of themselves.

You may call that "legend." But no legend ever grew up without some foundation on fact; as a rule legends have a pretty solid foundation. The idea the soldiers have of Montgomery is the right one. It couldn't be otherwise. An army does not make a hero of its commander without good reason. But that is not the whole story. We must go behind the popularity of the General and ask what it is founded on. Quite certainly, I think, it is founded on his being different, and on the difference being specially attractive to the troops. "Only a 'human general' could succeed in the Desert." Australians and South Africans took to him from the start. Indians, who are commended as the best night fighters ever, saw in him a man after their own hearts.

We British arrived in the Desert rather timorous and a little worried. We were very much "Hollywood" in our ideas. We pictured harems, swaying-robed Arabs on sleek Arabian horses, long lines of British soldiers tramping endlessly through the waterless sand, dropping by the wayside as thirst weakened and finally halted their faltering steps! It was all very *Beau Geste* and *Foreign Legion*!

But all that quickly wore off. They got to know the Desert. They "settled down to it with a sense of humour. They made the best of every bad situation." They were not, like the Italians, frightened of it. They did not even dislike it, as the Germans did,

Revelations of an 8th Army Soldier

never feeling sure of themselves, never comfortable. They grinned and bore it. They made a joke of its discomforts. They said it wasn't such a bad old Desert after all. At Tobruk, when Crawford was drafted in there, after it had been battered by the enemy for more than half a year, they found nothing but "a shambles of stone and ironwork. Our job was to make a home for ourselves." They did it too. They found old bedsteads. A derelict rubber horse once used by sea-bathers was converted into a "li-lo." A camel skin served for a bedspread. On an ancient kitchen range they cooked. From a dump of German car batteries they rigged up their electric light.

FOOD abounded in certain "caches" stocked by the garrison as reserves. "We dug up cases of beer, Italian cheeses, tins of fruit, bottles of whisky, and hundreds of other luxury items." They built a dance hall. They gave dinner parties. "Invitations would be carried out with style and dignity, the host visiting his guests in their dug-outs and ceremoniously requesting their presence at, say, 7.30 p.m. It was this kind

of play-acting and humour that saved us from going mad." What drove them nearly crazy were the pests of the Desert rather than the attentions of the Hun.

At least the human enemy did have to rest occasionally. The flea was the torturer supreme and never rested. No matter what we did, it was always with us.

SOME relief was obtained by keeping tame mice. The fleas seemed to prefer them. The mice "became great companions and, apart from their flea-collecting propensities, we trained them into doing all kinds of tricks." Lizards they liked because they made war on flies, "easily the most dangerous of all our enemies."

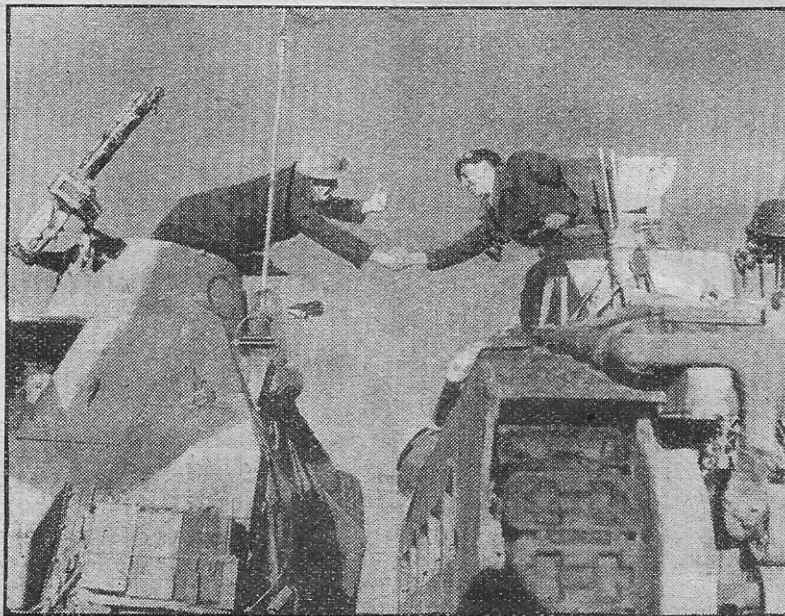
Beetles were amusing. Scorpions and centipedes were not. They produced more casualties than the Germans. Most of us ate meals with a handkerchief or piece of paper in one hand and our food in the other. While we tried to get the food to our mouths free from flies, we waved the other hand about wildly; even so we ate many hundreds of flies. They settled on food like a cloud and no amount of waving disturbed them. They could clean jam and butter from a slice of bread much quicker than we could eat it. . . . Several men actually lost their reason because of flies. Their unending presence was nerve-racking to the strongest of us.

Kites had a maddening trick of swooping down and snatching up food, but you had to laugh at them sometimes. At first mysterious disappearances of dinners caused puzzlement and alarm. Theft was suspected, practical joking, ill-will. Then the birds, "vultures of the Desert," were caught dropping swiftly and picking up food which they ate, as they flew away, in the air.

One day I saw one of our drivers smack another under the jaw for stealing his dinner, as he thought. Some of us had seen the kites pick up the dinner and the affair was amicably settled after our explanations.

As for sandstorms, well, no one who has been in one will think Crawford exaggerates when he says "words can hardly describe the experience." It is bad enough when you can keep inside a house or when you are on a train (on the line from Atbara to Khartoum I was once in a very thick one): when you have to keep on driving a lorry through it, the misery is trebled. Pace was reduced to a crawl. Visibility was often only two or three yards. Not only were eyes filled with sand, but it got through clothes and, as the heat caused violent perspiration, it entered the pores of the skin. If it was not scrubbed out soon, it brought on boils or eczema. As for making tea for the mid-day meal in a sandstorm, it generally ended as half tea and half sand. "Every mess-tin had at least a quarter of an inch in the bottom of it when the remnants were poured away."

Yet, even when they had to retreat before Rommel's advance, there was no feeling that they were beaten, that they had better chuck it. "Never once did I hear a man want to give in." Sometimes they were stunned and lifeless after heavy defeat, but "there was never a whimper, no one bemoaned his fate." Those are not mere heartening phrases. Crawford is always genuine. That is the value of the book. Revealing how the 8th Army was moulded (as the Foreword says) into the finest fighting machine in the world, through the eyes of this one soldier is mirrored the soul of that great army.



8th ARMY TANK COMMANDERS exchange good luck wishes as they set out from besieged Tobruk in November 1941 to make contact with Imperial troops at Sidi Rezegh, where quantity of British tanks brought victory. When quality was added to quantity, as at El Alamein and Mareh, the German panzers were finally defeated. An 8th Army soldier makes absorbingly interesting disclosures in the book reviewed in this page.

Manstein is Sacked from South Russian Front



LOSS OF TEN DIVISIONS in the Korsun "pocket" and several more north-west of Nikolayev, led to Field Marshal von Manstein being replaced as Supreme Commander of the German armies on the southern Russian front by Field Marshal von Kleist. Manstein, whose name is linked with retreats—he was beaten at Stalingrad and on the Don—inspects his troops (1) before handing over.

German tanks hastily abandoned will doubtless be employed by the Russians against their former owners, for these tanks (3) are in thoroughly sound condition. Ten-barrelled rocket guns (2) are being used by the Nazi army. Swift-moving motor-sleighs (4) carry Russian shock-troops over frozen marsh-land to attack enemy positions at Pskov, on the northern front. See map in p. 677.

Photos, Planet News, Associated Press, Pictorial Press