ANITA LESLIE

TRAIN TO NOWHERE

'Stands the test of time: precise and compelling'
Kate Adie

One Woman's War
Ambulance Driver, Reporter, Liberator

BLOOMSBURY

PRAISE FOR *TRAIN TO NOWHERE*

'If Evelyn Waugh's Mrs Algernon Stitch had been possessed of a heart, a sense of humour, and a glorious prose style, it could be said that she was a dead ringer for Anita Leslie. *Train to Nowhere* is a glorious book, brought back to vivid life'

John Banville, *The Sea*

'*Train to Nowhere* speaks of another mood, a different time and a grittier generation ... this, surely, is the second world war we want to rediscover in print'

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'*Train To Nowhere* is the most gripping piece of war reportage I have ever read: particularly affecting is her account of the Battle of Colmar, where her descriptions are almost too unbearable to take in. What a writer! Her observations, mixed with dry humour and compassion, place her at the heart of the conflict and somehow apart from it, as a good historian should be. Remarkable'

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'A vivid memoir, beautifully crafted, by a remarkable woman at a unique period in modern history. A young cousin of Winston Churchill, she operated as an ambulance driver from 1940-1945 on the front lines in Africa, Arabia and Europe enduring with humour all the hardships and privations entailed in war by service personnel without rank. Her skills of observation are penetrating and make this book a marvellously accessible account of WWII. Unputdownable'

Mary S. Lovell, *The Mitford Girls*

'A triumph of a memoir. Anita Leslie bears testament to the many courageous women who lived and fought in World War II'

Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*

'Anita Leslie's dispassionate account of her own extraordinary role in World War II is a rediscovered gem, and her harrowing description of the fighting in Alsace particularly stands out as one of the finest pieces of war reporting to come out of that or any other conflict.... This is a remarkable book'

Ray Moseley, *Reporting War: How Foreign Correspondents Risked Capture, Torture and Death to Cover World War II*

'As a front line Red Cross ambulance driver to the 1st French Armored division and later as a war correspondent in Africa and the Middle East during WWII, Anita Leslie was a lionhearted heroine of the first order, whose extraordinary bravery and sangfroid knew no bounds. She seems to have been too busy providing vital service to country, and relishing life's more perilous adventures to have entertained a moment's trepidation. An astonishing life and a fascinating book'

Anjelica Huston

'A vivid reminder that a woman can experience and write about a war, and seventy years on, her words stand the test of time: precise and compelling'

Kate Adie, BBC broadcaster

'It's glorious! Had me utterly gripped, I couldn't put it down. I wish I'd been able to meet her and ask her a thousand questions about the war'

Caroline Wyatt, BBC war correspondent

'The emotional truths of front-line war revealed – a charming writer, bold, female and brave'

Fay Weldon, *Death of a She Devil*

'A sharply observed account of one woman's unique war. Surreal, funny, dark, and profoundly moving. Gold dust'

Rick Stroud, *Lonely Courage*

'I loved *Train to Nowhere*. Anita Leslie's voice is highly distinctive - arch, witty, sometimes detached and utterly of her era. As the extraordinary and often appalling scenes of war progress, she draws you in with eagle-eyed observations and her astonishing bravery - always mentioned with modesty. Gripping'

Sofka Zinovieff, *The Mad Boy, Lord Berners, My Grandmother and Me*

'For every distressing episode there is the leavening effect of Anita Leslie's indomitable spirit, her canny observations and wry sense of humour in the face of unimaginable adversity, all of which turned the book into something quite unexpected and extraordinary'

Lynne Hatwell, *Dove Grey Reader*

Train to Nowhere

ONE WOMAN'S WAR
AMBULANCE DRIVER, REPORTER, LIBERATOR

BY ANITA LESLIE

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This book is dedicated to
Jeanne de l'Espée
and her *ambulancières* of the 1st Armoured Division

and to the memory of
Lucette and Odette Lecoq
who were killed near the Danube
24 April 1945

TRAIN TO NOWHERE

At the station near my Irish home the porter used to walk up and down the platform shouting: 'This train goes Nowhere'. He meant of course 'All change'. And that is the point we seem to have reached today. We are not really going Nowhere, we have just got to shoulder our luggage and continue the journey on a new line. Thus far I have held a first class ticket.

ANITA LESLIE

Glaslough,

Co. Monaghan, Ireland.

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Introduction
by Penny Perrick

Anita Leslie was not the sort of person usually found on a battlefield. During the first winter of the Second World War, when both her brothers and most of her friends were active in the fight against Hitler, Anita was cubbing in Northamptonshire. She wrote to her friend Rose Burgh: 'I feel I am "helping the war effort" by having as pleasant a time as possible which is just what he [Hitler] doesn't want.' Later, from London, she wrote to her mother, Marjorie, in Ireland: 'You can't imagine how bored people are with the war here. No one wants to listen to fancy speeches.' The fancy speeches were made by Anita's cousin, Winston Churchill, and inspired a nation.

What persuaded Anita to volunteer for active service was a need to escape from an exhaustingly tangled personal life, circumstances not referred to in her searing war memoir, *Train to Nowhere*. She enlisted as a driver in the mechanized transport corps (MTC), a voluntary organization much favoured by upper class young women such as Anita, who could afford to pay for their own chic uniform designed by the couturier Hardy Amies. As she sailed to Pretoria on the *Arundel Castle* through U-boat infested waters, she revelled in the novelty of freedom, writing to Rose: 'Never again am I going to live a dull domesticated existence – I'm just going to

be naughtier and naughtier! He he.' She may sound shallow but she came from a class that required its young girls to be light-headed and giddy. 'Smile dear, it costs nothing,' Anita's grandmother, Lady Leonie Leslie, often admonished her. Marjorie's advice to her daughter, about to head off to the Desert War, was 'Don't get sunburned in Africa – men hate it.'

In Cairo, the MTC tended the wounded in intense heat, hot winds and 'maddening discomfort' before being incorporated into the auxiliary territorial service (ATS) when the unit reached Alexandria. Anita, sensing correctly that it would be stuck in Egypt when the war moved elsewhere, manoeuvred herself into more adventurous roles – editing a newspaper, the *Eastern Times*, joining the Transjordan Frontier Force, where she delivered supplies to isolated field hospitals in Lebanon and Syria with her friend Pamela Wavell, who made these hazardous trips wearing a white dress and picture hat.

In 1944, after three years in the Middle East, she asked the Red Cross for a transfer to Italy, wanting to be in 'the fight that lies ahead in Europe.' In Naples, feeding the casualties from Anzio and Cassino was 'like trying to run a canteen in Dante's *Inferno*.' She remarked of the British Tommies: 'Somehow it is their humour and courage that no one else seems to have when blown to bits.' It was dauntingly rewarding work but Anita wanted even more involvement. In *Train to Nowhere* she wrote: 'I had a faint selfish hope that the war would not end before I had time for some startling achievement.' For that hope to be achieved, she had to join the French Forces which, unlike the British Army, allowed women on the front line. And now what might be called Anita's real war, the one that gave her the reputation of *une Anglaise formidable* began. On 15 August, the day of the allied landings in southern France, the Red Cross handed Anita over to

the French Forces. Dossiers were demanded, including 'a certificate stating that the British Government did not mind what was done to me … there were unpleasant clauses about deserters getting shot.' In October, Anita landed at Marseilles. She was now *un simple soldat de 2ème classe*.

They did things differently in France. *Train to Nowhere* is dedicated to Anita's commanding officer, Jeanne de l'Espée. Her first command to the new recruit was 'Whatever happens, remember to use lipstick because it cheers the wounded.' In England, the iconic blonde bombshell recruiting poster designed by Abram Games for the ATS was rejected as being too glamorous. Amid the sound of gunfire, kitted out in American soldiers' outfits, including 'comic underwear' – a far cry from Hardy Amies couture – eating tinned beans off tin plates, Anita was a front-line ambulance driver in the 1st French Armoured Division and played a vital part in the liberation of France. Driving in the pitch-dark through woods full of Germans, Anita wrote to Marjorie that she had never enjoyed life more. The fighting went on for months as the allies drove north-eastwards towards the Rhine, with heavy casualties on both sides. How sharply, and horrifyingly, Anita describes the battlefields: 'In all directions, men advancing through the fields were suddenly blown up in a fountain of scarlet snow.'

The story told in *Train to Nowhere* is one of dancing among the skulls. The *ambulancières* splash about joyfully in Marshal Pétain's bathtub and drink his delicious wines just hours after he has been hastily evacuated. Then two of the girls, sisters Lucette and Odette Lecoq, are ambushed and murdered by retreating Germans. Lucette's body is 'still warm' when found; the Red Cross flag is still flying on their ambulance. Anita's final war work is as sombre. She is sent to bring back to France the survivors of the Nordhausen labour camp. These 'shivering, exhausted wretches' were scarcely

alive. Anita wrote: 'Better if the whole earth remained desolate as the moon if this is all mankind can make of it.' On 15 August 1945, in Wittlich, the Rhineland city on the Moselle, Anita in a freshly ironed skirt cut out of a GI's trousers, polished boots, neatly-turned down white socks and white gloves had the *Croix de guerre* pinned on her shirt as the band played the Marseillaise. In September she was demobilized.

Train to Nowhere, subtitled 'An ambulance driver's adventures on four fronts' was first published in August 1948 and was widely considered to be the best book about the war to have been written by a woman – a dubious compliment. Reviewers recognized Anita's 'impersonal integrity' and her unique point of view, 'a terse, keen reticence and the summing up of deadly situations in a line or two' *The Times*. The book sold out quickly, was reprinted twice and then forgotten. In the early post-war years, women were under pressure to revert to their pre-war role of angel in the house. Nobody wanted to hear about their exploits in bombed out villages or rescuing the dying in fields of blood. Anita herself didn't write or talk about the war until 1983 when she wrote a lighter version of her wartime life. By that time, she had become well known for her gossipy biographies of her Churchill and Leslie relations.

How gratifying that *Train to Nowhere*, the most heartfelt and absorbing of her books, is being revived for a new readership.

Penny Perrick 2017
author of *Telling Tales: The Fabulous Lives of Anita Leslie*

PART I

Middle East

1

Mechanized Transport Corps

Any girl in England could have applied for that job and so few did. It was a sultry evening in August, 1940, when picking up a London newspaper I read the advertisement for women drivers ready to go to Africa. A shiver of excitement went up my spine and as sometimes happens I knew by instinct that I would go. But the clipping did not summon an eager crowd. When I applied at the headquarters of the mechanized transport corps in Chelsea only a handful of fidgeting girls stood asking each other if such a plunge-off might be a 'good thing'. Good or bad? Fate would take her time in giving an answer to each. Speculations ended when a red-headed, red-nailed girl in khaki arrived with a notebook to brusquely ask, 'Special talents?'

A murmur went up. We all knew 'something' about engines. One by one we were led off to be interviewed by a matronly Major, whose tactful enquiries were presumably intended to plumb our morality. Then, before we could gather our scattered senses, we were given sheafs of forms to fill up and led to a trestle-table to face an intelligence test. Faces grew long at this prospect but the ordeal proved bearable. Only a few showed signs of jitters when given a handful of screws and bits of wire to convert into bicycle bells, clothes pegs, sparking plugs, and distributors while the clock counted ten minutes.

Then we were marshalled outside to have driving tests in the oldest car in the world.

Two days later I was among eighty selected for camp and my kit list arrived by post. Camp-training was to take ten days, the list of clothes and accessories needed covered two typewritten pages. I set about borrowing from friends.

Laden with canvas basins, rolls of bedding, and suitcases of new uniforms we travelled to a beautiful beech grove at Hertfordshire which had been lent to the MTC. Here we were sorted into platoons and harassed corporals hung coloured labels around our necks. A band of girl guides had been peeling potatoes and boiling cauldrons since dawn. All we had to do was pull luggage out of the lorries and put up the tents. A call went around for anyone who had put up a tent before. None answered. Dusk fell while the sergeants shouted inexpert advice to bands of struggling girls who were hammering fingers and pegs alternately, and tripping over guy ropes while poles crashed down on their heads. For two hours hubbub arose to the moonless sky. Happily the first aid tent had been the first to get hoisted; it was soon buzzing with clients who had to be bandaged and plastered by candlelight. A few girls, instead of helping the distraught brown owls and guide captains who had come to instruct in camp life, retired from the danger zone and had hysterics in the dark woods. These were classed, 'not the sort of girls we want'.

Every dawn we rose up from the coppery beech leaves to drill and make camp fires in the moss and construct twig furniture that might be useful when stranded in the jungle. We learnt about Corps Spirit and, better still, we learnt about the Magnetic North. Set free with compasses we floundered across ploughed fields trying to work out where we were on the map and each night we slept blissfully under the stars. We could stare up at the dark sky

across which searchlights waved like white arms and aircraft hummed. We did not know that the Battle of Britain was beginning over our heads.

It was a strangely carefree time. One afternoon a group of German bombers, having plastered Luton, roared over the camp and whistles blew – which meant we had to run like rabbits and take cover in some low holly trees. Everything seemed funny in those days, even those humming, gilded bees that had shed death in a town eleven miles away.

On the last afternoon we were given a lecture about Virtue in Tropical Lands. Then a list was read of names passed for the Africa unit. Twenty gigglers were left out. These had 'blotted their copy books' but could redeem their faults later. Then the Bishop of St. Albans came in brocade robes to bless us, and we marched past swinging our arms like the guards brigade and gave him a bun for tea.

Press representatives from every big paper swarmed over the camp and we spread dummy wounded about the daisy fields, gathered them and bore them away triumphantly in our new ambulances while cameras clicked. They asked us to ditch a lorry and pull it out with a rope. 'Hold it! Hold it!' cried the press men. 'And now three girls waving spanners . . . big smiles . . . very nice.' Next day papers had headlines: 'Tough girls train for Africa' and 'Off to the Desert' and our photographs appeared on and under engines.

The camp broke up on 2 September and we all returned to London on the day the first blitz began. Bombing might be novel but it interfered with the next month's training.

A moustachioed sergeant major of the guards brigade drilled us in Chelsea Square.

'By the right . . .' he would yell.

'To the left *salute* . . .'

'Pick 'em up. Pick 'em up,' squeaked an obnoxious small boy marching beside the squad.

The 'as you weres' of the sergeant major silenced gigglers into sullen apathy, and we would sigh with relief when the drone of German bombers sounded and the shriek of guns and sirens gave us release.

God knows what we learnt in those sunny autumn, invasion-expecting days but the MTC certainly tried. An insect professor gave us a lecture on how to foil a fly on its frolic from the latrine (illustrated) to sugar basin (illustrated). While he talked and used chalk neatly on the blackboard we watched the window lit by a golden sunset from which bombs fell on Chelsea Barracks.

We were aware of the drama. Like children we ran to the windows to watch the ack-ack throwing orange stars into the sky, and my father stood entranced in the middle of Hyde Park composing a sonnet about the German plane being shot down over Victoria station. It was a good kind of war for a bit, interesting and gay.

It had not yet become a drab old story.

In October we were reviewed by Lord Lloyd, the colonial secretary, and the South African military attaché. As usual, press representatives appeared. We stood to attention in Chelsea Square while Vs of enemy bombers sailed like wild geese across the sky and the South African colonel started a charming speech of which we heard fragments through the crackle of guns . . . 'splendid gesture . . . brave girls . . . warm welcome awaits you in Africa.' . . . A piece of shrapnel landed on the bonnet of a car parked beside us and the parade broke up. But a reporter sheltering in a doorway got his story and more headlines blazed: 'Girls stand to attention under shell-fire.' We started to keep albums of clippings about ourselves.

My last day in London was rendered hideous because my tailor's 'button-holding-machine' had been destroyed by a bomb leaving my new uniforms incomplete. At 5 p.m. we had to report with kit, and two lorry-loads of girls drove off through the wet dusk to Euston station, where the lines had just been hit and trains were hours late. 'In two ranks get on parade' yelled our sergeants and we shuffled into line in the dark, deserted station. The dim blue lights shed an eerie glow on the row of girls standing to attention in tin hats, their backs humped by gasmasks and knapsacks. A thunder-storm added its voice to the gunfire as the charming lady major-general of the MTC appeared to make a farewell speech and give us a pep talk in public-school-leaving tradition. Against the roar of the raid outside we heard 'Cover yourselves with laurels . . . do your bit . . . bring credit to the corps . . . no longer raw recruits you are now the polished product . . .' She shook us each by the hand and then drove off in that dreary night where bomb after bomb was falling. At midnight, a single track having been cleared, our train rolled out.

2

Step Off

Embarkation on the troopship was slow and cold. We stood about the decks for hours staring at Glasgow dockland, unable to ask when we sailed or where to. Next day we felt the engines throb, and stamping our feet with cold we watched the last of Britain slip away as the *Stirling Castle* steamed down Clydeside . . . grey water and grey sea, grey buildings and grey funnels, and an icy wind and a sea-gull turned to gold for one moment in a brief ray of sunshine as the ship moved into a darkening Atlantic. We joined a convoy headed for America until, after three days, our ship swung southwards alone and passed through the floating wreckage of the *Empress of Britain*, whose SOS we had been too late to answer.

The captain of this ship that took us zigzagging through the South Atlantic was a character indeed. None of us ever met him face to face, he saw to that, but we knew him from remarks that drifted down to us. 'Soldiers must realize they are but soldiers' he said. 'No exceptions! Women cease to be women on a troopship!' Reading in orders, 'Other ranks will be confined to the lower deck' we pouted, for this meant we could not use the swimming pool or speak to officers in the first class. After all we had been newspaper headlines for a month! But what the captain of a ship says goes.

So we ceased circulating requests upwards through channels proper or improper, and enjoyed winds that grew balmier each day, and made friends with the squadrons of the Free French Air Force who were our fellow-travellers. Every morning we had our odd little parades on deck, and the Frenchmen watched us with solemn admiration, whispering :'*Qu' elles sont jolies!*' '*Qu' elles sont disciplinées!*' '*C'est formidable!*'

These Frenchmen were a bitter, broken-hearted little band who had either been in England when their country fell or had escaped there in diverse ways. '*Le cafard*' which had lain heavy on them at Glasgow, melted in the sunshine, but though they had personal courage they had lost belief in their country and wanted to be killed which, indeed, in the end they nearly all were. They brooded over their families in France with whom they now had no possibility of communicating for an indefinite period, but not so sorely that they could not fall in love, and engagements began to be announced. One dizzy-headed girl pulled a crumpled white satin wedding-dress out of her kitbag and said she wanted the cross captain to marry her to a small ardent navigator. The marriage was 'postponed' by fussed OCs. And what poems those Frenchmen wrote. All day they scribbled gallant rhymes to their lady loves or to the unit as a whole . . . One of these in fifteen stanzas began:

'*Amazones blondes et pures . . .*'

Meanwhile our three officers descended from the first class to inflict what parades and lectures they could devise. We recited Swahili verbs, the Latin names for every bone in the body and bound and unbound each other with bandages in the sweltering zones of the Equator.

When dismissed from these activities we lay about the deck or walked with Lord Dunsany, the Irish poet, who, giving

himself a civilian's privilege of mixing with all ranks, would stroll the decks watching for that magic green light of sunset, or reading his short stories aloud, or even adding to our store of poetry. He was on his way to Greece to cheer and charm that brave people.

When darkness came the black-out made our cabins uncomfortably hot, and the entire unit would creep out with blankets and hide beside the funnels. Owing to the strict black-out our officers could search in vain and we silently laughed while our persecutors stumbled around calling 'Brown, Smith, where are you? Has anyone seen driver Wills?' all of which mystified the foreign legionnaires who had been at Narvik and were travelling out on this boat. They were a dour little party who kept to themselves, and the only one I got to know fairly well was a German, a short, stocky, unimaginative fellow who had fought through years of Moroccan tribal wars, in France, and at Narvik. He was pleasant enough in a dull way, typical of his race, very blond, and only interested in war.

He had no feeling about Nazi Germany although his mother and aunts lived there. The most professional of soldiers, he flared up at passing remarks of mine about the legionnaires being cut-throats, and gave a long lecture about his companions. 'I am afraid *Mademoiselle* has false ideas of the legion . . . You go too much to the American cinemas.' Despite this snub I invited him to the MTC concert which we gave one very hot night. The French airmen sat enrapt and appreciative throughout the charming little songs and sketches at which our girls had laboured. The legionnaires watched expressionless, then, not knowing I understood French, one of them turned and whispered, '*Dieu* how boring these *anglaises* are. Do you think we can slip out?'

Among the French Air Force officers were two brothers, the du Boisrouvreys, and their cousin Jean whom I had known in London. Owing to the captain's restrictions we could only speak after dark when their badges of rank did not show and they dared descend to the lower deck. These meetings gave us a thrill of doing wrong only experienced in the nursery and the army. The officers were less impressed than their men at the first sixty girls they had seen in uniform. 'What drives them to this folly?' they asked, 'Broken hearts or dull husbands?'

A fortnight after leaving Glasgow we woke to see the coast of West Africa lying gilded under the scarlet dawn sky and the French went ashore in little boats to make their way to Chad. Jean was posted missing almost immediately. The Boisrouvreys, who were both bomber-pilots, I was to meet again in Egypt.

In November we reached Cape Town and plunged into a new world, for it was spring. After the sombre, war-racked land we had left, the beauty of Cape Town with its weird mountain background and shimmering lights enchanted us.

Our unit was met by a Ladies' Committee for Entertaining Troops in Transit who seemed relieved at seeing only sixty girls. We drove off in fine cars to eat cream buns in old Boer farmhouses, and apparently we were a great success. The previous week several thousand Australian soldiers had been let loose for twenty-four hours in Cape Town and the committees had been ignored while Aussies swarmed the streets and found their own entertainment. Meeting a truck of beer they emptied every barrel within ten minutes singing that obnoxious song, 'Roll out the barrel . . .' They purchased ladies' underwear and dressed the policemen on point duty in scanties; then forced them by revolver pressure to continue directing the traffic.

Sixty well-mannered English girls were a great relief.

After a day at the races we were ordered to catch a train to Pretoria. 'Why?' asked the girls; but it was ours not to question why, ours but to do or die, and so after a long journey across a desert of weirdly-shaped rocks and hills we reached the capital of Transvaal and were informed that we must sign on as privates in the South African Army. This had not been in our London contracts, but we remonstrated in vain. Until we signed on the dotted line we could not be issued with shoes or socks or even a breakfast. Being hungry we gave in.

3

Cape to Cairo

From November, 1940, until February, 1941, we lived in barracks in Roberts Heights Camp near Pretoria, and the spring weather made life delightful. The troops lived in huts grouped around a swimming pool. Every weekend we drove into the veldt and slept out under the unclouded stars. The Transvaal is a high plateau with exhilaratingly dry air. Frequent thunder-storms, in which no rain falls but lightning flashes across the sky, give tense expectancy to the atmosphere. We took over the motor pool so the hard-worked South African women drivers could get leave, and this work enabled us to see the Rand country. We drove troops across the stony veldt on manoeuvres and rumbled in lorries to the gold mines of this strange, newly-rich strip of upland. At first we were thrilled by the wide spaces of Transvaal but after three months we pined to move to Kenya, where the East African campaign was in full swing.

General Smuts came to open the YMCA canteen beside our swimming pool. He had kind words for us all and some of our girls visited his home. We knew, however, that several thousand South African service women had sent him a petition that the 'sixty English girls' should not be sent to Kenya where their South African men were. This jealousy was understandable. The WAAS, as they were called who had enlisted, were treated differently from their men in every way and had not been allowed overseas. These

South African girls were splendid, healthy, outdoor creatures who beat us hollow at sports, but they seemed to be given little respect because they were women. Their superiors – whose minds were impenetrable Victorian jungles – insinuated that women, working near any fighting front, would hinder the war effort. Perhaps I misuse the word 'Victorian', for during the Boer War my English great-aunts ran front-line hospitals in areas that today would be stamped 'war zones unfit for women'.

When we arrived in Pretoria the jacaranda trees made a mauve canopy overhead and a mauve carpet on the pavements. But there was no stimulus in this old Dutch town; no theatre, no art, no intellectual life of any kind. And it was the same in Johannesburg, the mining millionaire city of sky-scrapers, thirty miles away.

Occasionally we were confined to barracks because pro-German Boers were constantly beating-up soldiers in British uniform. Many of these were Boers who could speak only Afrikaans and it was against them that the violence of the bearded anti-Britishers was chiefly directed. One hunter-farmer, called Willy, dared not return to his family at long leave for they were still bitter against the British. He tried to explain his family's bitterness. 'They live with thoughts that are forty years old. Understand? They hate Queen Victoria . . . understand? They think I am a traitor to Boer grandfathers who died fighting against British . . . understand?'

The English girls were puzzled. Their surprise turned to resentment when a Dutch Nazi threw a brick at one of them as she walked through Pretoria. She had twelve stitches and a lasting scar on her cheek. South Africa had declared war on Germany and her sons attacked each other with violence; my country had remained neutral and ten per cent of her populations served in the British Forces and were feted as heroes on their visits home. It was an oddly different atmosphere. The Irish are quick with their fists, but

no one in Ireland would ever throw a stone at a girl and then run away fast to hide in a side street. The last I had heard of our local IRA leader was that he had been arrested after two days' violent intoxication, to celebrate his daughter winning a George Cross in the bombing of Coventry.

The South African women with whom we shared barracks were a charming, friendly lot. One of them said to me, laughing, 'We won't write any more petitions against you, but it would have been too much if you had gone north to drive our soldiers when we are all kept here.' Later on, when I saw South African wounded lying in forward casualty clearing-stations unwashed and untended I thought of their women, who would gladly have risked their lives to be there helping.

In February, orders came that our unit was to proceed to Crete or Egypt. We trained to Durban and set sail immediately. Our ship, the *Nieuw Holland*, loaded up with Cape Town Highlanders, stalwart South Africans surprisingly dressed in kilts. There were no poets, Irish or French, on this ship, and only the Dutch captain wrote a verse 'To the brave girls of the MTC.' With the Highland band playing we steamed out of Durban past a troopship packed with cheering Australians.

The heat increased as we passed between the windless shores of East Africa and Madagascar. I knew nothing about Madagascar except that before the war, on the Atlantic, the famous American financier, Bernard Baruch, had said to me, 'I'm going to chuck this turbulent world and settle in Madagascar. I've heard you get two fish for one cent there, and two women for one fish.'

We sailed due north through the flat, indigo-blue Indian ocean, till the Southern Cross disappeared in the night skies behind us. Two weeks of unbearable heat brought us to the Red Sea. We had lectures each day on the vile diseases we might catch. Swahili was

now replaced by Arabic. We were fantastically clad in collars, ties, and hot, corduroy trousers. The only tropical kit that had been issued to us consisted of jungle outfits, mosquito veils and mittens, and anti-insect gaiters. None of this could be used except the topees, in which it was so difficult to salute.

The corporals made a sort of Gestapo with 'black books' in which to record bad marks every time they saw a driver 'slacking'. All this took place as we steamed up the Red Sea with the thermometer over 100 degrees.

On 3 March we woke to find the convoy steaming up the narrow Gulf of Suez. Before dusk we managed to anchor outside the harbour along with some two hundred other ships that were silhouetted in all directions with native sailing-boats travelling among them.

The canal had been blocked by a mine.

At last the port cleared enough for the *Nieuw Holland* to draw near and we stepped ashore. Our officers marched us, with swinging arms, down the docks. 'By the right' bawled our sergeant major. The native workers gabbled and pointed, while two officers of the 7th Hussars, sent to check troops arriving, doubled up with laughter and retreated behind a crate.

In a desert camp we found our famous ambulances; the gift of generous Americans, which had arrived straight from the USA and were waiting, lined up in the sand, guarded by Australian soldiers. One of these looked at us all frosted with sand and asked, 'British complexions underneath?' We climbed into our new vehicles and drove towards Cairo. Soon after midday we approached the Nile Valley and an escort of MPs on motor-bicycles came to meet us. They gasped 'Girls?' and wheeled.

Now the wide green ribbon of Egypt stretched below us. Beyond Cairo lay the great Pyramids, and beyond them the

wilderness where General Wavell's Western desert force, consisting of little more than the 7th Armoured Division (later famous as the Desert Rats) and the 6th Australian Infantry Division had just destroyed Graziani's army of eight divisions in Cyrenaica.

Of the quarter-million Italian troops sent to Libya more than half had been wiped out in the two months' brilliant fighting. After the heartbreak of Dunkirk and the inquietude of the Battle of Britain it was a proud moment to arrive. Soon we shared the outlook of the men we met – 11th Hussars, 8th Hussars, 7th Hussars, riflemen, Aussies, New Zealanders, and some enthusiastic young fellows who were the beginning of the commandos.

No sooner had we arrived at Helmiah Camp – a horrible entanglement of barbed wire and petrol tins in the sand some miles from Cairo – than the air began to thicken with sand and the sky to darken.

Before we had time to clean the engines – which had stood so long at Suez awaiting us – we were needed to meet a hospital train from the Western Desert. For two nights, until we could organize quarters in the camp, we were billeted in a large hotel in Heliopolis. The male officers greeted us with amazement, followed by sour looks and complaints that our boots clattered in the corridors, but our ambulances were in great demand. We started work within four hours of reaching Helmiah Camp. March, 1941, was the month in which British Forces were pouring from Egypt into Greece, and on the day after our arrival we were called by our commandant to a meeting in which we were put on our honour not to say that our unit was going to Greece the following week. Until then we would continue to meet ambulance trains and serve the hospitals.

Any hour we expected to leave with the Australian and New Zealand infantry and British gunners who were sailing from

Alexandria and Port Said, but the days went on and we did not sail; indeed we wondered how we could, for who would there be to meet the trains of wounded that kept us busy day and night. We were less than sixty drivers, and we had replaced a hundred men who with their vehicles had gone to Greece. In the first week of April Benghazi fell. How much Benghazi and Tobruk, which we had hardly heard of before, meant now. A month of driving wounded men and listening to their talk made the desert battles live before our eyes; we shared the maddening discomfort with them, the heat, the sand, the flies, and from the very beginning we felt the pride of that little army of the Nile.

Through the soldiers we got an idea of General Wavell's personality. They liked him as a man and trusted him as a general. The Tommies said, 'The Wops have the planes and the guns, we just got the guts and the general, and it's us sees the blighters off.'

Nearly two years later – when Auchinleck had gone and Strafer Gott had been killed and for the first time British Forces knew they had the guns and the new army commander – Montgomery came from England amidst unprecedented publicity. I listened with amusement to a couple of soldiers disagreeing. One held the press campaign to be 'too much of a good thing'. The other argued staunchly that Montgomery, having obviously read General Wavell's lectures on the 'Relationship of the Army Commanders to the Politicians,' was the first general to act on them. 'Monty knows what he's up to . . . you'll see. He does it deliberately. He'll get himself built up until he can play the tune and it'll be him – not the politicians – that says how many troops does this and that and where the guns go. And if there is disagreement it won't be Monty that goes. You'll see.' In time we did.

Before we had been in Egypt two weeks we were meeting wounded who came back from Greece instead of from the desert,

and then one day we got loads, not of soldiers, but of military nurses from the British hospital at Athens. They were unwounded but collapsing from exhaustion, after terrifying trips across the Mediterranean in cruisers which were bombed all the way. We lifted them into our ambulances and they fell asleep in heaps on the floor. We realized that our forces were evacuating and we would never get to Greece.

Nearly all the army vehicles which landed in Greece had to be abandoned. This made the strain on our forty odd ambulances heavy, we worked like troopers and used troopers' language too.

During hours off we fled anywhere to escape the sickening heat of our huts. A few miles from the camp lived Aziz al-Masri, who had travelled to Arabia with Lawrence on his first expedition. I had met Aziz in London and now he opened his luxuriant green garden near our camp to me and my friends. Whenever we got free evenings we drove there in some ramshackle Egyptian taxi and his Arab servants brought us meals and cool drinks. Aziz was born a noble of Arabia; he had been brought up in Turkey and had distinguished himself as a young officer in the Turkish-Italian war. He was a strange, smouldering, little man, strong of intellect and sincere of purpose, who felt that he had just missed greatness. 'When I finished the Turkish cadet school,' he told me, 'the commanding officer gave me a farewell talk. He said, "You will achieve great things, Aziz," and then as I left the room he added "if you have luck," and a cold chill went through my heart at those words. I knew then, by intuition, I would never succeed.'

He might have been a big man in Turkey but he quarrelled with Djemal Pasha and was imprisoned and fled. In 1915 he set sail with Lawrence and Ronald Storrs for Arabia, where he was to raise and lead the Arab officers for desert rebellion, but he learned of the secret treaty which promised Syria to the French and Palestine to

the Jews, so forsook the venture. He talked a lot about honour, and later when I met many Arabs of all kinds the inevitable verdict on Aziz was, 'How could he achieve anything! He is the only straight man in the East,' and the more cynical said, 'He is mad.'

Aziz had later commanded the Egyptian Army and supervised the education of Farouk before he became king. In England he had tried to induce the fifteen-year-old prince to learn to ride and practise sports. 'At his age,' said Aziz, 'I loved the sound of bullets. I thought war the only profession for a man – perhaps I was in love even then with death.'

Now he was out of favour and he lived in seclusion within his beautiful walled garden. No one except the MTC visited him. He was tough and wiry but exceptionally short, and as I appeared with one tall slim English girl after another Aziz would exclaim in admiration, 'What stock – but it is giraffe-stock!'

When I remarked on the dirty face of a passing woman, he said, 'Her face may be dirty, but she washes her body, according to Muslim law, which the peasants of Europe do not. Once,' he continued, 'I met a beautiful German peasant girl when I was on a walking tour. She had a face like a goddess and when she came to my hotel that evening and said she was ready to abandon herself to me I sang with joy, but never again. . . . She was so dirty, only her face was clean . . . *C'était ignoble*.' We were sitting at tea in his garden during this recital and we tried hard to keep our faces straight.

Aziz had married a cultivated American. 'I could not stand the lack of brain among our own women. She is living in California with our young son.'

'How did you bring up your child?' I asked, 'as a Christian or a Mohammedan?'

Aziz answered: 'When he was five or six years old I tried to tell him about God. I said, "look around at the trees and flowers. God

is the Creator, He made all that you see and He made you. You must try to copy Him. You must create not destroy." Later, I tried to teach him to love the earth. I told him, "We come of the earth, it feeds us and looks after us, we are made from the soil, and later we have to go back to soil." I did not want him to have any horror of the processes of decay, but to feel that, lovingly, one must give back one's body to the great Mother; so I took him out to the grass and said, "Look, when I die they will lie me there underneath the green. Won't that be nice?"

'But the child's face fell. "No " he said, "it would make a bump on the lawn."'

Aziz spoke English, French, and German fluently but could not read much English. I occasionally translated bits of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to him and he would say: 'No, no; it was not like that – but how well he writes, that Lawrence.' In return he attempted to translate a few bits of the Koran for me. 'The poetry is lost in translation,' he would say; 'you cannot imagine how beautiful the imagery is.' He worked out for me the Muslim version of the story of Mary awaiting the Angel Gabriel, which he said contained the greatest poetry of the book. The Virgin Mary, waiting in the garden was described 'beautiful of body as a thoroughbred mare' – a curious simile to one accustomed to gentle Italian pictures of the Madonna.

'And what in the world,' said Aziz, 'is as perfect as a horse – Come, you must see the famous stud of the Egyptian Agricultural Society. They have the best Arab horses in the world – when you see their fire, their flowing manes and tails, then you will understand the poetry of the Koran which I cannot translate.'

Aziz regretted that break with the English when he fled from Lawrence at Jiddah. 'At the time I did not think them straight. Now I repent it. My luck has always failed me as I have always known it would. I have given up ventures which I did not feel