

Excerpts from the Memoirs
of
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”
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The original German text can be found
on the website of the German Historical Museum:
[“Als LKW-Fahrer in Nordafrika 1942”](#)

Translation by Daniel H. Setzer
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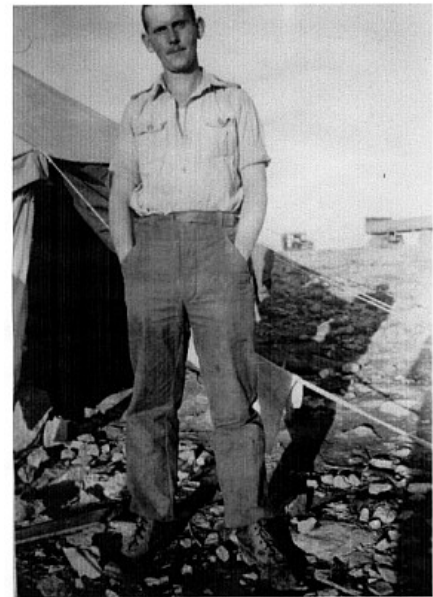
On Sunday October 11, 1942 I wrote in my notebook: “21:00 hours air raid alarm in Tobruk, we stayed in the truck and slept some more.”

That was the first alarm we heard in our new camp. It was announced by three shots from the Flak batteries located in Tobruk. It meant to take cover immediately. Between the warning shots and the first bombs there was only a very short interval. At this particular alarm we still thought that we were far enough away from Tobruk so as not to be a target. At this time we did not know about the 'situation' developing around Tobruk. So we stayed in our trucks and tried to get some more shut-eye. Then suddenly we got an awakening, the usual quiet was broken for good and things came in thick from on high. I noted in my book: “I was really scared, six bombs fell very close and we had no cover in the open desert. It rained shrapnel!”

My feeling of fear here was much greater than my fear during the dive bomber attack. [See *Driving Trucks in Africa – 1942 Part II* on this web site] Perhaps, because here we couldn't even maintain the illusion of being able to run to safety. Helplessness before these events, shaking with fear, not knowing what would come next was really beginning to get to me. But it would get even worse in just a very short time. This night, however, fate was good to us in the camp where our quarters were. In the neighboring camp where the English prisoners were, they were not so lucky. The English bombs had hit their own people. There were many dead and wounded in the camp. Those who had survived combat and found themselves in relative safety now had to die under a hail of English bombs, or were 'only' wounded. But nevertheless in Africa, one says, the war was conducted in a chivalrous manner, right?

In my photo album there are several photos that I took in Africa. They are not very sharp, but many details can still be picked out such as the “Anthony Eden mustache” that I let grow out. The model for this mustache was the English foreign minister [Anthony Eden](#). This could probably have been considered high treason, but I thought myself quite chic with this mustache.

While stationed in Tobruk I got to know the city better, especially the area around the harbor. Much of this acquaintance was not of my own choice. I developed a very unpleasant ulcer on my butt and had to go to the medical station several times that was located in the upper part of the city. It was in the neighborhood of the “Wehrmachtsbetreuungsstelle” [Army Care Station], that is to say the army brothel. It was on those occasions that I was able to determine that the army was maintaining a bordello in Tobruk. With this problem on my bottom there were several days when I could not sit down to drive. I used the time to finally catch up on my letter writing. Eventually the painful booboo on my popo healed and it was time to get back to driving the supply trucks.



Werner Mork in Africa - 1942

Now we were driving without a break. It was no longer just from the harbor to the supply dumps, but now after taking on a load we were going to Mersa Matruh. We were carrying ammunition almost exclusively. It was an uneasy feeling knowing that you had tons of ammo just a few feet behind you in the trailers. However, ammunition had the utmost importance now because on October 23, 1942 the British launched an offensive against El Alamein in the hope of turning the tide in Africa. From this

day on the names El Alamein and the Qattara Depression would become terms of horror that eventually led to the end of this lunatic adventure in Africa.

Now we had to also run missions at night, a particular horror, because maintaining your orientation at night is extremely critical. Add to that the more forceful air attacks by the Tommys, not only with fighter-bombers, but now with carpet bombing coming from high-altitude bomber formations. We had many casualties in the supply columns and many more total losses among the vehicles.

On November 1, 1942 my truck broke down and had to be towed because it took several hits and could not pull the trailers. In camp it was very quickly put back into service. On November 2, 1942 I went to the harbor in Tobruk to take on a load of munitions that had just arrived by ship. Speed is critical in the unloading and loading. It had to be done as quickly as possible.

Since the October 23, 1942 offensive the situation on the front lines had become very critical. A previously unknown feeling of uncertainty began to spread, even out in the hinterlands.

The English had undisputed air superiority. They came at us with ever bigger bomber formations. The Jabos [fighter-bombers] kept up an unrelenting attack on every byway and pathway, even to the most out of the way trail and oasis. The meaning of all this was that our efforts to drive the English into Egypt and beyond had come to an end. A powerful superior force had come on the scene to make the expulsion of the Germans and Italians a reality. A superior force that stood in opposition to an Afrika Korps that had been weakened by the siege, that was lacking supplies, an army that could hardly be called an army anymore. The men were exhausted, the tanks and vehicles were barely usable, and when they were used there were only bits and pieces able to be brought to the fore. The lack of fuel and munitions was devastating. The problem of supply became greater every day because the bombers and the Jabos destroyed a large part of it. Rommel did not make use of the stalemate on the El Alamein front, but for the British it was a gift from heaven. They had the opportunity to bring in reinforcements and supplies without being hindered, and to prepare for the counterattack. There may have been a time when they thought of Egypt as being lost, but they managed to stabilize the situation and they had Montgomery as a general who was eager to take on the feared Rommel and cook his goose.

Although the German aircraft were still flying sorties into southern Egypt and elsewhere, they were not a serious threat to the rebuilding of the English 8th Army. The English now had superiority in many areas, they had access to nearly inexhaustible reserves and secure supply lines.

The battle at the front wasn't the only thing that caused us anguish and fear, there were more and more British commandos operating behind our lines, and in the vast wastes of the desert we could not control them. Often they operated in German uniforms. They came in quickly, completed their missions, then disappeared just as quickly. We were constantly warned about these troops who we could come across at any time during our supply runs over the desert. The British commandos ran a great risk when they donned German uniforms, because if they were captured they could be immediately stood up and shot as spies.

Such exploits were not only a specialty of the English, the Germans could also do just as well. On the German side there was a tale about a German officer who grew up in South Africa and who was a master of such raids. There were also tales about another German officer, a captain who was head of an intelligence unit. After training in Baumholder he quickly went to Africa. This particular intelligence unit, which would have belonged to my regiment, was known to have pulled off some impressive exploits. This captain was killed at El Alamein. Much later I learned that the name of this captain was

Seebohm. This was the same Seebohm who headed the Hitler Youth Communications Troop back in Aumund, and got me started with that troop because of my interest in building radios. It was said that he volunteered for the army because the plans to build a signal corp unit in Germany had failed and he didn't get the job of Reich Youth Leader. I wished that I had known that he was in Baumholder when I was there. But who knows what would have happened to me if I had managed to join his unit. Still it was too bad we did not meet.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-785-0293-17
Foto: Tannenberg | Juni 1942 ca.

Tobruk in June of 1942

Back to Tobruk, where the repairs to my truck had been completed. I was once again ready to roll. In the harbor there was more freight to unload and to transport. It was a dry and hot day when I reported to the loading officer for my assignment. He told me not to line up here, he was not going to load me with munitions, but rather flour for the field kitchens. I had to wait even longer and go back to the far side of the harbor at the end of the line of waiting trucks. In spite of it being the rainy season it was very warm so I opened both doors of my truck and stretched out on the bank seat to dose off and perhaps get a little sleep while I waited for my turn. The other drivers were doing the same thing including a friend of mine from my column. He was a PFC from Vienna.

It was the 2nd of November, 1942 around 17:00 hours when the harbor of Tobruk erupted into an inferno. I had been waiting up to this time without an order to move up. It looked like things were not going smoothly unloading the ship, so we continued to lay about in our trucks. Then it happened, suddenly bombs were falling from the heavens. The flak batteries had not seen the enemy planes and of course we didn't either. There were no air raid warning shots from the flak guns, because they had

not seen the threat. What followed was a truly infernal bombing attack on the harbor and on the people who were helpless and totally without cover. What played out next was horrible. From an altitude that was beyond the range of the flak cannons, flew a group of British Bristol-Blenheim aircraft on their first attack on Tobruk harbor. These bombers carried a new bombsight that was able to sight targets from high altitude with absolute precision. There was no real air defense because the flak could not reach the high-flying aircraft. I heard these details over the next few days. [Translator's Note: The author had been misinformed on this point. The raid was actually carried out by five American B-17's of the Ninth Army Air Force, 376th Bomb Group. They claimed the destruction of two merchant vessels and half of the jetty alongside them and a fuel installation nearby. Fires were seen burning for two days after the raid. See: [North African Campaigns \(page 39\)](#) and [376th Bomb Group Mission History](#)]

What I lived through in those few minutes following the raid was utter hell. This was an air raid of a scope that was unknown up to this time. The bombs fell not only on the harbor, but also on the transport ships anchored in the harbor. I, in contrast to the men caught in the harbor, was very, very lucky. My great good luck was that I had both doors of my truck cab open to let the air circulate while I waited in the queue. A bomb landing nearby blew me out of the truck in a high arc and I landed on the ground several meters from the truck. The open truck doors were my salvation. Now I lay on the ground in a hail of bombs with shrapnel raining down on me, but I was only a few steps away from the entrance of an air raid shelter.

I did not see the shelter in that moment, but what I did see were two Italian soldiers, who, at great risk to themselves, rushed out and rescued me by pushing and dragging me into the shelter. I owe my life to these two stout-hearted Italians whose courage and bravery saved me from death or serious injury, for that would certainly have been my fate if I were left out in that inferno.

I don't know how long I lay out there on the ground, nor how long I was in the shelter. It took quite a while before I came to. The hail of bombs was long over, but the air was still full of exploding munitions. The British [Americans] had hit a ship that was full of ammunition. It was the same ship that I was originally assigned to receive a load from before they sent me to the back of the queue to wait for a load of flour. Sometimes fate takes odd paths.

I also have to thank the transport officer who gave me the job of unloading flour instead of munitions. However, nothing more would get unloaded that day. For hours after the air raid shells kept flying through the harbor area. After the initial shock of the air raid I had not expected there to be any additional damage, but continuing explosions were very evident and made us all very uncomfortable, especially since there was still risk of more air attacks. For many years after this experience I could not stand fireworks displays. They caused me to shake with fear and anxiety. When I finally climbed out of the shelter I found my truck. It was riddled with shrapnel holes, but still drivable. My attempt to get out of the town that day did not work. There was too much confusion and danger. I did not get back to the supply column until the next day. My buddies had given me up for lost. I learned that my comrade from Vienna had a total nervous breakdown and had gone insane. After they got him to the hospital he had to be restrained in a strait jacket and flown out of Africa. The hospital informed us of his situation. It was a great shock to me when I heard this. My comrade, Binder, was a great pal and now fate had dealt him this blow. I could not help but ask myself if death would have been better than this misery that had befallen him.

The next day the gruesome scope of the raid's aftermath started to become known. The ammunition ship was fully loaded with munitions of every sort and caliber. It was totally destroyed. Debris from

the ship was scattered all over the city much of it fell near the church. It exploded with unbelievable power and force that shook the city and harbor of Tobruk for hours. These explosions caused more damage than the bombs themselves. The explosion of the munitions ship was the apex of the frightful inferno. The worst part was that in addition to countless wounded there were hundreds of dead also. The majority were black prisoners of war who were being used to unload the ammunition ship. The harbor was a scene of total horror. This is also when we learned that the air raid was carried out by planes flying at very high altitude beyond the reach of our Flak cannons. Indeed, the planes were flying so high that they were barely visible to the naked eye. At that altitude no one on the ground thought of an attack, it was thought that they were on route over the sea for a possible attack on a supply convoy. That is how it happened that there was no air raid alarm sounded. Of course an alarm would have done nothing to hinder the attack since the aircraft were well above the range of the flak. They might have fired but they were not likely to hit anything. They could also do nothing to hinder the highly precise accuracy of the new bomb sights.

Another result of the shock I suffered that day was that for years after I could not stand the sound of airplanes flying over me nor the sounds of battle. I was overcome with shaking and a terrible anxiety. All my efforts to fight against these irrational fears were unsuccessful. Whether on the front lines or back home; be it bomber formations, low-level attacks, or just 'normal' air traffic, my nerves gave way and I was overcome with panic and fear. And every time it happened I believed that I could escape the danger by running away. In the course of the following war years that often led to irrational behavior on my part that my comrades did not understand and often took for cowardice. Even when peace finally came I still could not hear the sound of airplanes without getting a very uneasy feeling.

It could have been a lot worse for me and I must be thankful to fate that I came through it all. In particular I am thankful to the two Italians who took it upon themselves to rescue me without regard to their own lives. Two unknown Italian soldiers rescued an unknown German soldier.

After this disaster I had yet another assignment that took me in the direction of the front lines. Like the original assignment at the harbor this involved the transport of munitions, but this time the freight would be picked up from a supply depot not the harbor. On this mission I found that I couldn't get rid of my trailer load. No one wanted it, I could not find any authority to authorize a drop and I could not find the unit it was intended for. The front was in disarray and my load of anti-aircraft shells was something that nobody wanted. So I wandered aimlessly through the desert without a set destination and without managing to find an anti-aircraft battery.

I stumbled upon a Fallschirmjäger [paratrooper] outfit that was part of the [Ramcke Brigade](#). They had been pushed out of the Qattara Depression by the English and were now trying to connect up with their own lines again. The Captain of this troop told me that I must immediately turn around and go back to Mersa Matruh because the English had broken through the German lines on a broad front and I, along with my truck and cargo, could quickly find myself behind their lines like the paratroopers had already been. This was not good to hear and it gave me a very bad feeling. Although far and wide there were no Tommys to be seen, in this wasteland nothing was impossible. Already there had been many skirmishes where the combatants totally lost track of where their friends and foe were. Since the paratroopers and I both were headed in the same direction, if we could find the right direction, they all loaded themselves on the trailers and we set out. Without further incident we finally got to a place where they could be dropped. We had no incidents and we did not encounter any Tommys.

The Captain of the Fallschirmjäger [paratroopers] made a note of my name, rank and regiment with the comment that he would nominate me for the Iron Cross 2nd Class. I wasn't sure if I deserved such a great honor, but it came to nothing. In the prevailing mad confusion I questioned whether the Captain could carry through with it since he had all he could do to extract his men from the impending disaster. The retreat from the El Alamein front took place in a mad tempo as the English pressed forward with their advance. It is worth noting that I was quite willing to accept an Iron Cross 2nd Class, in contrast to a later event wherein I declined to accept it. I will describe that event later.



*Iron Cross
2nd Class*

After this interlude I managed to rejoin my column in Tobruk. I had managed, in spite of everything, to get back to the Balbo Road and back to Tobruk. I had broken through with my Hanomag and my trailers.

Once I reported back to camp and handed over my rig, I had to go to the clinic. I had developed a frightful nausea and collapsed. I was transported to the clinic and diagnosed with jaundice. It wasn't a 'normal' jaundice, it was the worst possible type of jaundice, Hepatitis B.

Jaundice was a rampant illness in Africa, but Hepatitis B was very serious and nothing to joke about. I thought nothing worse could befall me, but only a short time later I learned that things could get a lot worse if you had really bad luck.

As I lay in the clinic in Tobruk, I heard that the Americans had landed in Morocco and Algeria. That was very bad news. What was happening now was something that no one in Greater-Germany had expected to arise from the crazy declaration of war against the USA. No one expected that, apart from the air raids by the Amis [Americans] on the Reich, there would be a direct confrontation of troops on the battlefield. However, for now it was 'only' Africa and not the European continent, but they were there now, German and American soldiers facing one another.

On November 7, 1942 I made an entry in my notebook: The Americans landed in Morocco, now we have two fronts in Africa. The camp is inconsolable, everything is backwards.

On November 8, 1942 it reads: Everything is going haywire, the clinic is overflowing.

On November 9, 1942: (Calendar entry – Memorial Day for the Fallen) Transferred to Derna by “Hitchhiker Railway.” So, I had to get to Derna and get there on my own by hitchhiking as though it were around the corner. I managed it and wrote: “Transferred to the hospital in Derna on November 10, 1942.”

And there I thought they were going to cure me of the jaundice. No way!

The retreat from the El Alamein front was in full flight in an almost uncontrolled manner. It took place not only over the Balbo Road, but straight through the desert wastelands. There was no longer any talk of a German front, nor any talk of trying to reestablish one. If there was any chance to set up defenses it would be have been in the heights of the Halfaya Pass, that is to say, above Derna. And it was at Derna that I hoped to be cured of my jaundice!

But leading up to the Pass at Derna the desert was free and open to the British and their tanks. This land held no protection for the Germans and for the Italians that were left. The English only had to roll

on, and they had plenty of fuel and ammunition to do so. The retreating remains of the once proud Afrika Korps were harried and hunted by dive bombers and the relentless onslaught of the tanks of the British 8th Army.

Many German and Italian soldiers were captured and traveled the unpleasant road toward Egypt. From there they took a 'cruise' to Canada to get a chance to become "lumberjacks in Canada" as we so sneeringly said to ourselves when we thought and talked of the danger of being captured.

The unstoppable advance of the Tommys was the reason that the field hospital in Tobruk would only take the severely wounded. The less serious cases and the walking wounded were transferred to Derna. They had to make room for even more wounded who would eventually be given over to the care of the English because evacuation of the wounded was no longer possible. This was the 'normal' procedure practiced by both sides. Was this chivalry or only an practical necessity?

For the actual transfer to another clinic one had to fend for oneself. One received a written pass that identified him as wounded or sick and it carried the name of the destination hospital. In my case it was Derna.

In the field hospital in Tobruk I picked up some very unpleasant roommates that I carried with me to Derna. They were sand fleas, a very large relative of regular fleas. The sand fleas were bloodthirsty beasts that tormented us a great deal. Just like in the Insassen Hospital I tried to evict these creatures who had made themselves very much at home. But this advance by this enemy, just like the one on the battlefield, was not to be stopped. We did not have fleas, they had us.

For me the result of the invasion of sand fleas was that in addition to jaundice I developed an inflammation that evolved into open wounds. A stench of corruption arose from them that was unbearable.

On November 11, 1942 I noted in my notebook that I had been betrothed to Ilse for one year.

Under the entry for November 12, 1942 I wrote: Transferred by air to Europe in a hospital in Piraeus, Greece.

Once again luck was on my side. Truly, very good luck.

My condition in the Derna hospital had quickly worsened. I was beset not only with jaundice, but also with the inflammation. I did not take the inflammation as being very serious, except for the foul smell.

As a consequence of the deteriorating conditions and the impossibility of reestablishing a front, the hospital in Derna hardly had the capability of giving comprehensive care to sick or wounded. The hospital was overwhelmed and proper care could no longer be guaranteed. After only two days stay in Derna, the order came down to evacuate the hospital as soon as possible so as to make room for the severely wounded. That meant that it was to be given over to the English and new defensive positions on the pass were out of the question.

Now it was down to save whatever there was left to save. This included patients that might be cured and returned to service. This meant immediate transport to Europe. No one knew when the English might arrive in Derna. The rumors said that the first British tanks were already to be seen at the Halfaya Pass. We only took that for a baseless rumor because the Tommys couldn't be so close this

soon, or so we told ourselves in the hospital.

As I stated above, on November 12, 1942 I was loaded into a JU-52. It was one of only three that were still flight-worthy. After we hunkered down in the aircraft for our flight and had just gotten off the ground we witnessed a sad sight. From the window of the plane we got to watch the destruction of the airfield at Derna. The engineers had rigged it with explosives intended to make it unusable to the British for taking off and landing, at least for while. On the plane we couldn't understand why they had blown up the airfield, we thought the British were still quite a ways away from Derna. Why were they being so quick to blow up the runways?

As we gained altitude we looked down on the Halfaya Pass overlooking Derna and saw that there were indeed British tanks on the Pass. It wasn't just a few, it was hoards of tanks. They had come directly out of the desert where no one expected them. Everyone had expected them to use the Balbo Road for their advance, and "everyone" had expected for us to be able to halt their advance along the road. Now, like a lightning bolt out of the desert, they suddenly appeared on the Pass. The Tommys had made a wide arc skirting the retreating German and Italian troops and now the tanks seemed to materialize out of thin air right where we were going to build the new defensive front. The pass was the perfect place to mount our defenses, so thought the crafty strategists of the German Army staff. There was nothing to be done now. This was a very successful surprise that Montgomery had served up to the German commanders. The situation was that the British



*Halfaya Pass (Original located at:
<http://www.constable.ca/caah/edwards.htm>)*

had taken Sollum, Fort Capuzzo and Bardia, then found themselves before Tobruk and retook the city on November 13, 1942.

For me it was, "Adieu Africa!" But the parting was not painful, what was painful was what was to come next and it became very painful very quickly.

My great good luck was that I was loaded into the very last aircraft to leave Derna. After us no plane got out, and no one else in the hospital could be evacuated. The Tommys were quickly in the city. All of the German and Italian soldiers in the city and in the hospital were taken prisoner. I was one of the very few soldiers who got to the airport and got into the air on one of the brave little JU-52's. We took off and headed to Crete without incident. Once again my very good luck held.

The flight in the brave little JU-52 went smoothly, something that was not necessarily the norm in these times. We crossed the Mediterranean to Crete. We landed there and sat for a very long time while it was decided if we should stay there or be sent on to Greece. Finally, we were sent on to Athens and from there by ground transport to Piraeus, the famous port. Because of the lack of beds in the wards, we new arrivals in the army hospital were placed in the ward for sexually transmitted diseases, or what in army jargon we referred to as "Ritterburg." It wasn't very nice there but it much better than what we would have experienced in Derna. The main thing for us was that we managed to get out of Africa; we didn't give a damn about anything else.

[...to be continued...]