Excerpts from the Memoirs

of

Werner Mork

"Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)"

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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Werner Mork volunteered for the army just days after the outbreak of the war. By the Fall of 1942 he had been in the German army for two full years, but his assignments were in Germany and occupied France.

Since childhood he had always dreamed of going to Africa. The Afrika Korps gave him the chance to go.

Up to this point he has not head a single shot fired or bomb explosion. All that was to change very suddenly as he received his 'Baptism of Fire' in the desert.

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On September 29, 1942 we were loaded with provisions that were to go back to Mersa Matruh. We arrived there on the evening of September 29, 1942 and obtained quarters in the new camp.

Now in my 'soldier's life' I was to become acquainted with the real war. Up until now my life as a solder was still fresh, happy and carefree. Now I would experience the war in all its brutal reality.

On the trip from Tobruk to Mersa Matruh I lived through my first low-level air attack. We were driving near Fort Capuzzo over the border toward Egypt. I might mention that the fort wasn't much of a fort any more. There was nothing left but some doorway arches as remains of what was once an Italian border fort. The name Fort Capuzzo, however, had become legendary for the old Afrikaners in the Afrika Korps. This was the site of a hard, costly battle, that was not a legend but a bloody reality, with many, many casualties on both sides.

The trucks in our column maintained a wide distance from each other so as not to present a massed target to the enemy aircraft. The co-driver sat outside on the right fender of the truck to serve as an observer. He would watch the skies for enemy planes, but also watch for the road markers in order to keep from going astray, which was very possible. It was also important, in spite of the desert sand, dust and poor visibility, not to lose sight of the next truck in line ahead of you. In addition you had to watch for potholes and signal to the driver to avoid possibly losing a trailer in one of the holes or having it tip over. The primary task, however, was to watch the heavens but that was problematic. I had learned that the fighter-bombers always came out of the sun and usually could only be spotted at the very last second. Then it could be too late to stop the truck and take cover on the side of the road.

So, it was necessary to be on the highest alert, there, perched on the hot fender, totally exposed to the sun and the desert sand. Eyes and ears wide open ready to sound an alarm. From the cab of the truck the driver couldn't observe anything very well and was dependent upon the spotter on the fender. If an alarm sounded then there was nothing for it but to leave the truck and run into the desert flats and hurriedly look for some kind of cover, out there where there was only sand and stones.

And then it happened. Suddenly they were there, the Jabos [Jagdbomber = Fighter-bombers]. Truly, they simply materialized out of the clear skies. The co-driver hardly had time to shout, “Get out!” and the bombs were crashing everywhere and the machine guns were hammering us with tracer rounds, the “Standard-Munition” of fighter-bombers on both sides.

Already in front of us a truck was ablaze. The crew of our truck, was out and running as fast as we could into the wastes of the desert. Me, poor idiot that I was, I thought I could find cover behind a rock, that somehow the pilots flying high above the ground would not be able to see me behind my

little rock. I quickly realized how wrong I was. The Jabos hunted down every individual and everyone was easily seen from above. But not every one of us was hit, and as suddenly as they came, they were gone. Our crew was very lucky, none of us were hit and our truck and both trailers were untouched. But there were many casualties in the column, particularly personnel. There was total chaos on the highway, and it was difficult to pull ourselves out of the confusion and get the column back in motion. We took on two wounded after they were hastily bandaged.

The attack only lasted a few minutes, the Jabos disappeared, but what they left behind was burning, smoking wrecks, many wounded and also several dead.

This first attack, and thank God one I survived, is what people always stupidly refer to as a "Baptism of Fire." That was my first acquaintance with the reality of war along with its bombs, machine guns and cannons.

My knees were shaking as I returned to the truck, I felt miserable and beaten up. In contrast to me there were the old Afrikaner, the experienced old-hands who kept their heads and took care that the prevailing confusion did not degenerate into chaos. These old dogs, who had seen so much, brought some order to this disaster and saw to it they we got back under way, at least those who still could. That included clearing the roadway as well as they could, towing trucks and trailers out of the way using the working vehicles. They took care of the wounded, who had to do without a doctor's care until we reached Mersa Matruh, and placed the injured where they could among the crews of the working vehicles.

They also collected the dead, this sad burden, that the supply column also had to transport back to Mersa Matruh. They were to be buried there and not in the filthy wasteland along the side of the roadway. But unfortunately, there was not enough room for all of them on the trucks. The trucks now belonged to the living who had to take precedence. So, bitter though it was, it was more important to transport the living wounded instead of a pile of corpses. The dead no longer counted for anything, they were unneeded ballast. It sounds brutal, but that was the horrible reality.

I could no longer look forward to a fresh, blithesome baptism of fire. It was an appalling experience, my first of this sort. Now it was there, the WAR, in its full ferocity, in its full horror, and it would be with me for ever more.

For the first time I had felt true fear and it too would never leave me. It would get even greater as I lived through even worse experiences. I could only take comfort that I lived through it. I now knew fear for my life and also fear for the coming dangers for which this was just the beginning.

But there was no going back to my ideal world, I was in the real war now and could only hope to perhaps get out of this schlammassel [mess] with my skin intact. I had finally achieved what I had freely sought after, I was in the war, and now I had to weather through it in the hope that somehow things would work out for me.

Now I was in for it, and all due to my own choosing of the soldier's life. I could only hope that my choices didn't get me killed, or possibly worse, leave me horribly wounded as I had now seen for the first time in this first attack with all its terror. Now I was deployed in the field, not with a weapon in my hand, and not actually on the front lines, but nevertheless in the field where the danger wasn't any the less. The worst part was the feeling that I was helpless and defenseless before the danger. There was no enemy 'over there' confronting me, only the enemies from above, coming from the sky and

against whom we had no protection whatsoever. During an air attack you can only try to get out of the direct line of fire of the fighters. But that was a pretty feeble try that could just as well lead you into the line of fire. You could only run away. It was a sort of self-deception with just the thread of hope that you could somehow escape the enemy planes.

After our arrival in Mersa Matruh we went to the new camp on October 1, 1942 for vehicle maintenance. They would be checked out, serviced and overhauled as best as possible considering our limited resources. In my notebook I wrote: "Molto lavorare" [A lot of work] and also the "Rainy Season" has started. The Winter in the wasteland has begun.

On October 2, 1942 we were off on another mission: Mersa Matruh – Tobruk (Munitions Dump) – Derna.

On October 3, 1942 I made note that driving a Hanomag monster, in spite of the war, can be fun, but the miserable condition of the roads takes some of the fun away. This note was due to the fact that I was no longer a co-driver, but the actual driver of a Hamomag 7.5 ton tractor with its double trailers.

On October 5, 1942 I am again at the battalion headquarters at Mersa Matruh. My note states: "Broken springs are the Order of the Day." Such breakdowns were very disruptive. If they happened while on convoy you simply had to continue on with the crippled trailer, but at a much slower speed. The accompanying cursing did nothing to repair the damage, but it was good for the soul.

On the day after our arrival in Mersa Matruh I noted, "After 12 weeks finally a letter from my mother."

On the 7th of October the notebook says that we are headed back to Tobruk. We leave during a heavy rain storm.

October 8, 1942 "Arrival in Tobruk. Hopefully, we will get some decent lodgings.

For the 9th and 10th it reads: We are getting a station assignment for Tobruk and that means harbor assignment. We were all glad to hear this because it meant we would be transporting foodstuffs. When transporting food a lot would 'fall off the truck.' We soldiers understood the implications. We would be eating well during this assignment.

We enjoyed the station assignment because it meant very little travel in the desert. This was particularly welcome during the rainy season. On the 10th of October the rainy season had begun and quite suddenly. Overnight out of the clear skies it began to pour. As the rain fell in powerful storms, it claimed the first victims in the wadis. Wadis are broad lateral valleys in the hilly areas of the desert. These valleys can suddenly fill with rainwater and become raging rivers submerging anything in their way. There were many units that pitched their tents and parked their vehicles in the wadis during the dry months. They felt themselves better protected there from sandstorms and possibly air attack. In particular the vehicle maintenance groups set up their repair stations there. Normally that was fine, but not during the rainy months. Everyone was warned and everybody knew that they were supposed to quit the shelter of the wadis, but there were always those who failed to take the warnings as seriously as they should.

Then it would happen that the time to dismantle the repair shacks would run out and so would the time to flee the waters. So not only vehicles and equipment would be drowned, but also many soldiers. Especially when the storms rolled in during the night, then there was no escape and instead of a dry,

dusty waterless waste, one could drown in a fast running wadi just as you could in the open sea. Often in the rainy season whole units would be lost along with their equipment.

As long as we were in Tobruk the rains would not affect us much except for the unpleasant dampness. The drive from the harbor to the supply dumps around Tobruk was over fairly good roads. Also during this period there was an added benefit in that the operations of the Jabos was hindered due to the few good flying days. However, when there was a break in the clouds they came back in droves and caused us a lot of trouble and worries. Then the attacks came without any breaks, and we asked ourselves where our fighters were. There were none to be seen anywhere. The skies belonged entirely to the English.

In spite of Tobruk, we still had problems with the rain. They could come up when we had to travel to a supply dump outside of town in the desert. Many of them were built by the English and taken over by us. Most were fuel dumps in the middle of the desert. We had to go there with full loads of gasoline barrels. You would get an uneasy feeling seeing trucks on the side of the road that strayed from the roadway, got stuck and couldn't free themselves. It was very unfortunate when we had to drive on a stretch of salt flats because the road was too damaged to travel. We could only hope that we would get through all right. It was a very bad feeling you got when you felt the ground move under the weight of the vehicle. The spongy ground was almost like a swamp.

Weather has its perils in every season such as the very unpleasant sandstorms. If a sandstorm descends on you, then the column had to stop. Any attempt to continue in the blinding sand would always end in disaster. But staying in the cab of the truck was not possible due to the intense heat in the closed driver compartment. So the only thing left was to get out of the truck with your neckerchief or handkerchief in front of your face and your nose in the dirt, that is to say flat on the ground while the storm sweeps over you. That sounds simple and easy, but it was an extremely dangerous and uncomfortable event. Many men were totally buried in sand and could only be extracted with difficulty.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-785-0290-14
Foto: Koch | 1942 ca.

On all trips, regardless of the weather or winds, the co-driver always had to take the uncomfortable position on the right fender of the truck. That included during the rainy season, because then it was especially important to watch the road. The driver could see even less than usual and was even more dependent upon the co-driver to pilot the truck. So a tarpaulin would be erected over the truck fender. This still did not make for a first class seat, and it increased the possibility that the co-driver might fall off his perch.

In many missions that we had to do the distances could be over 2,000 kilometers, round-trip, and must be completed in spite of all problems and hardships. But there were many other experiences that were free from the usual bleakness of the desert. We also came into towns like Benghazi, Derna and others that were untouched by the war and in which a brisk, varied life and society thrived. In the casbahs goods were bought and sold just like in peace time. The German soldiers for the most part had a very good relationship with the native born peoples. On the other hand the Libyans did not get along well with the Italians. Italy was the hated colonial power, that had dealt with them very disreputably. The Italian colonization of Libya, the settlement of Italian citizens in Cyrenaica [Eastern Libya] , the forceful subjugation and thoughtless exercise of power through the military under the past Governor did not lead to a good relationship, but rather to a permanent hatred of the oppressor.

But they had no problem with the German soldiers. With them they make deals and bargain in “the most respectful manner” at least by Libyan standards. We traded a lot of things with them, but above all was the sugar trading. It was in very short supply among the Arabs, but we had access to captured stores. The natives needed sugar for their peppermint tea which wasn't drinkable without it. We traded sugar for eggs which were a welcome addition to our menus which normally consisted of canned goods that came from both German and English sources.

During our trips in the desert in the so called hinterlands, we would often meet caravans. They evoked images in our mind's eye from the books we read in our childhood by Gerhard Rohlfs and Karl May. Meeting these caravans was a real experience that carried a hint of adventure with it. The meetings always began with a friendly greeting that would lead to an invitation from the Bedouin caravan chief to have peppermint tea with him in his tent. With the tea came the obligatory trading session.

Another special experience was when we would come upon an oasis in the desert. It was always a strange wonder to see these green islands in the middle of the empty wastelands.

One can also have the impression of arriving at an oasis, but be tricked to find that it is only a mirage. This is a trick of heat and atmosphere in the salt flats. I had this experience and it was weird to see an oasis appear on the horizon with everything you would expect to see at an oasis. It seemed so near that you felt as though you would arrive there any minute. Then I remembered stories that I read as a child where the adventurer would follow the mirage deeper and deeper into the desert searching for food and water only to find death as a result of his mistaken quest.

For our provisioning the biggest problem was drinking water, namely freshwater. There were only a few spots like Benghazi and Derna were we could be sure to find freshwater. Whenever we were near these places we would fill every available container with water to keep us supplied with this priceless commodity. These watering places were always sites of intense activity and termoil. It cost us a lot of time waiting to get provisioned and we did not always have the time to spare. Freshwater was highly valued, a special treat that could hardly be paralleled. Our 'normal' water was salty and tasted horrible. But water was a necessity of life, even salty water. Often we would use this water to make tea. With a lot of sugar added it would almost be drinkable. Drink and keep drinking, that was the alpha and

omega of our life in the desert. There are a lot of things you can skip in the desert, but not water. Whenever we had freshwater on hand there would be sort of an orgy of water drinking.

At the watering places, in spite of the turmoil, there was no hassling. Libyans, Italians and Germans stood together patiently waiting their turn at the 'trough.' Even the ever-present camels were cared for without problem. Everyone knew the importance of water and everyone behaved themselves at the spring. However, when we ran out of time while waiting, it would make all of us very unhappy. Sometimes, though, it would happen that others would step aside and let us go to the front of the line. The time problem would come from us having delays en route and the supplies would be urgently needed in camp. We would be advised by field telephone and scheduled for loading or unloading.

Foremost was the transport of gasoline and munitions, everything else took second place. There was very little fuel coming from Italy to Africa, but the English, though unwillingly, had left tens of thousands of full gasoline drums behind when they pulled out. The German trucks and tanks ran just as well on English gasoline as any other kind. Bringing this fuel to the front was a major function of the supply columns. The good old Tommy's didn't leave just gasoline behind, they left quite a lot of food stores that we helped ourselves to. The English had made possible the continued operations of the German-Italian armored divisions. Without those provisions we would have been done for. The enemy helped his enemy in this 'chivalrous war.' Wasn't that nice? We refreshed our supplies with what the enemy left behind.

We liked it when we had food supplies to transport especially meals that could also be considered 'take out.' During these runs there were always 'transport losses,' particularly among the meals that came out of the English supply dumps. Treasured items were sardines in oil, corned beef, but also strong drinks like gin and the best whiskeys from Scotland. Not to be forgotten was also the fine chocolate and very good English cigarettes. The most exquisite items out of these captured goods were, of course, reserved for the officers of the German Afrika Korps. Such things did not belong in the hands (or stomachs) of regular soldiers, except that they belonged to the supply column who took care of supplying itself in its own way with such luxuries. What happened to the onetime highly valued Volks community and comradeship? Somewhere, sometime that got totally lost, particularly when there were good delivery contingencies to manipulate.

These 'transport losses' were not something that we could pull off by ourselves because what was loaded and what was unloaded was detailed in the accompanying paperwork. But soldiers are resourceful people especially when it came to food and drink. So when comradeship was not enough to get the job done, we would resort to cronyism. So the men who were responsible for checking the truck unloading would be greased. This was never a problem because these men were already waiting for their cut. We just had to watch that there wasn't a paymaster nearby that didn't participate in the game and was trying to see that everything was done properly.

Besides the desire of the higher-ups to get at least a small share, there was also the desire of the German army to supply the soldiers with some variety in their diets.

When I think about what I was taught when I was in training to operate a field kitchen compared to what I saw and experienced as provisions in Africa, I can only wonder what the army quartermasters were thinking when they wrote requisitions. The Afrika Korps was issued the same provisions as all the other units on the other fronts. We received the same famous/infamous canned lentils, beans, peas, and cabbage as well as other excellent delicacies transformed into junk food with fatty meat. The perfect food for this climate, in this heat. Moreover, we usually had to eat these canned goods cold

because we couldn't always heat them up. These 'good' conserves had already been heated by the desert sun, which wasn't always very healthy. It will surprise no one that many soldiers got sick after eating such foods, mostly with stomach and intestinal colic, resulting in a frightful diarrhea. All that was managed without good sense or understanding by those idiots in Berlin. We did have Esbit-Kocher stoves that, with the use of solid fuel tablets, we would have been able to warm up the food, but the fuel tablets were rarely available, probably not planned for by the assiduous planners in Berlin.

Esbit-Kocher

But when we did have the means to heat our food, the most beloved food out of the British stores was hot sardines in oil! Unimaginable , but true. That it later gave everyone stomach and intestinal problems is no wonder, but nevertheless this was always the way we prepared them.

Of all the transport runs that we had to make there was one tour that was particularly favored and looked forward to, and that was the trip to Derna, Libya. First because of the fresh water there which was of the highest quality, but also the beauty of the city that captivated us the moment we saw it as we came over the high plateau of the desert through the Halfaya Pass and saw it below us lying by the sea. We descended several serpentine curves into the town through palm groves and on to the panoramic view of the endless, shining sea. Everything was still peaceful here, so that one could forget the war. But it would not be long before the war found this quiet city.


Derna as it appears today

Derna had already been fought over, but the fighting took place in the high pass. Both sides suffered many casualties, but that was in the past. The people in the city thought that would not happen again. The colonial masters thought so also and lounged about peacefully and lived the good life. The town was still filled with a busy coming and going and a lifestyle that seemed improbable during wartime.

The frontlines were far away, or so we thought at the time, but the front would very soon return to Derna. I saw Derna once more, this time from the air just a few hours before it was taken by the British.

There was one thing in Derna that we found to be very unpleasant and that was the carryings-on of the Italian rear echelon bastards. The appearance of these overblown, cock of the walk, proud officers, were a crude contrast to the Italian brothers-in-arms that fought beside the Germans in the front lines. The showy arrogant, haughtiness of these rear echelon types was even offensive to the Italian civilians who had settled there. The Libyans had nothing but scorn and ridicule for these types. The relationship with the Germans was very tense even up to Rommel's staff itself. This tension was so intense that cooperation between the German and Italian staffs was hardly possible anymore. There were many rumors of sabotage and betrayal carried out by the Italian staff in this echelon.

There were differing opinions on the combat units of the Italians. Certainly the very arrogant German haughtiness played a role, fed by the negative assessment of the Italians in the First World War. But there were several incidents that justified these low opinions, because there were several Italian units that went over to the British without putting up any fight whatsoever. This was something the German soldiers couldn't understand, and it made them really angry that they were risking their necks for these cowards. Given their viewpoint in those times, unfortunately it was understandable that they would think only of themselves. It was particularly understandable when one considers the performance of the Italian officers which was abysmal. The worst reputation belonged to the Kings Grenadiers, that is to say the King's troops. In contrast were Mussolini's Black Shirts and the elite units of the tank divisions, who were under the leadership of young Fascist officers. These included the Bersaglieries and Alpinis and the Fascist volunteers of the Ariete tank division.

One must add to that that the King's Troops were in a pitiful position in regard to equipment, clothing and weapons. It was only the officers of these troops that looked sharp and spruced up, even in the areas where they should have been ready for combat. These gentlemen were the first ones to take off and leave their men when things got dicey. The King's soldiers were poor devils that we should have felt sorry for. It wasn't right to call them cowards. In my time in Africa I knew many Italian soldiers as good comrades who would share their last drop of water or their last cigarette with you. I also owe my life to an Italian as I will describe later.

The humanistic qualities were no worse, and sometimes better, and often more humane than my own comrades who with typical German haughtiness characterized the Italians as cowards. Humanism stood in contrast to a “Germanic Valor” that was not learned, but inherent. That is something I would see very often later on the European mainland.

In order to maintain valor and fighting ability the army in Africa also took care to establish official army bordellos. This way any possible sexual frustration could be relieved and eliminated. Even in Africa the German army took care to prevent their soldiers from being down and out, as least from the point of view of sex. The support of the army truly had no bounds and it stopped at nothing to care for its men. The use of these establishments was even open to our brothers in arms. The 'ladies' came from the land of our allies. The 'forward bordello' was not far from the front lines in Mersa Matruh. But also in the rear, for example, Tobruk these worthy establishments were also to be found. These institutions were well appreciated and well used. On those occasions when women were in short supply it was not unusual to see lines form outside the buildings.

In Mersa Matruh the bordello was located in one of the few, passably well kept houses. It boasted a rather striking staff of personnel. Since it consisted of only two women they had to work very hard to meet the wishes and needs of their customers. It was there that one could see the patient lines of fellow warriors standing outside braving the blazing African sun until their turn came. If suddenly the air raid alarm sounded, and that happened fairly often, everyone would scatter until the 'all clear' sounded. Then they returned true and brave to wait anew, usually taking care to reestablish everyone's place in the line. By a great stroke of luck the brothel was never hit during the attacks. The fighter-bombers never had it in their sights.

Here in Africa the supervision of the brothels was assigned to the German medical service. In Tobruk although much more damaged by the war, there was nevertheless a similar establishment that had a great deal of traffic. Before we got here we heard stories about the army brothels, but nobody believed them. Now that we were here we could see for ourselves how good the army cared for its soldiers in Africa! And back home the German wives, mothers and brides worried about the welfare of 'their' men!

Our supply group was still stationed in Tobruk. The quarters were located outside of the city and harbor in what used to be a British camp. Nearby was a prison camp made up mostly of Australian and New Zealanders. These prisoners and also some black South African prisoners were detailed to unload ships in the harbor. In spite of the high losses freighters still kept coming in. The English POW's, on the other hand, refused to cooperate or do any work for the enemy, feeling that it was contrary to the Geneva convention.

So it was that in spite of all of the difficulties and without the benefit of escorts, some ships managed to get through to Tobruk harbor. For the Afrika Korps this harbor was the most important supply point, given the short distance from it to the front lines. Benghazi and Derna were too far away, to say nothing of Tripoli which was the main port in the early days of the Afrika Korps. In Tobruk everything was held at the ready for any incoming ship. They had to be unloaded immediately, not only to get the material to the front line, but even more due to the very real danger of air attack. Even when ships made it through the cargo was still not safe. The Tommies 'visited' the city and harbor more and more with abundant 'blessings from above.'

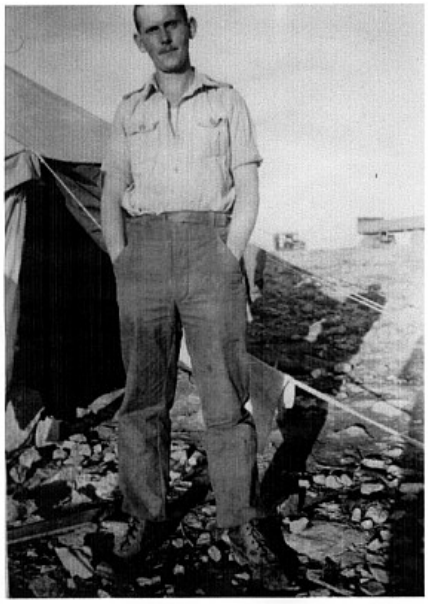
On Sunday October 11, 1942 I wrote in my notebook: “21:00 hours air raid alarm in Tobruk, we stayed in the truck and slept some more.”

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. 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 were 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.



Werner Mork in Africa - 1942

[...to be continued...]

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