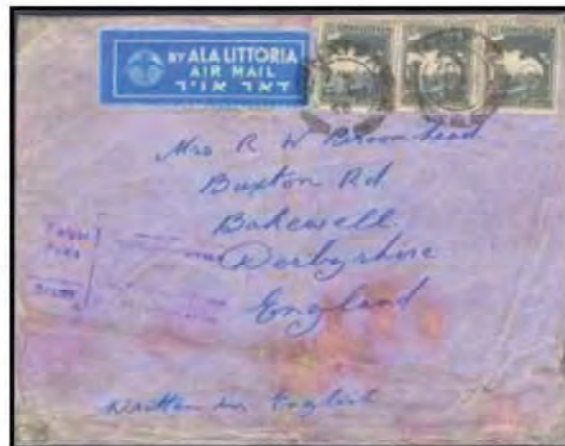


**One Man's War.**  
**The story of an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances.**

**John Wilson**

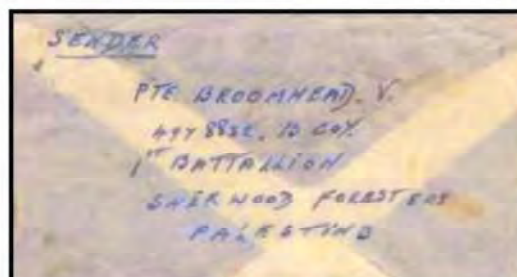
Victor Broomhead was just twenty years old and a trainee bus driver with the local transport company in Derbyshire when in October 1939 he was called up for military service. After basic training he was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Sherwood Foresters who were already based in Palestine, and it was to Haifa that Victor travelled by troop ship, arriving there in early 1940. Perhaps because of his driving experience Victor was assigned as a driver/batman to a staff officer of the Battalion.

Life in the Middle East was, at that time, fairly stress-free compared to the situation in mainland Europe as the German Armies swept through Czechoslovakia and Poland, although not yet into France, and Italy had not declared war on Britain. Letters from Victor to his family were being posted in the civilian post office in Haifa, Figure: 1, and were being carried by Ala Littoria on a three times weekly service from Basra to Rome which called at Haifa. At Rome the mail was transferred to the Imperial Airways (BOAC) flying boat services from India to UK and from South Africa to the UK.



**Figure : 1.** Cancelled HAIFA 17 March 1940

Although censorship regulations had been introduced at the outbreak of war, it was clearly not taken too seriously in Palestine as demonstrated by Victor putting his full military address on the back of his letters – and these were passing through Italian hands in Rome. Figure: 2.



**Figure: 2.**

Victor was then moved to Jerusalem as shown by his letters now being posted from Field Post Office 121 which had been established at 117 Jaffa Road on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1940. Letters were now being censored by officers, and a prohibition enforced on the use of senders' addresses, although letters were still being carried by Ala Littoria as shown in a letter from Victor sent to his brother from Jerusalem on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1940. Figure: 3.



Figure : 3.

The relaxed attitude ended in June 1940 when German forces occupied France and Italy entered the war on the side of Germany. This closed not only the Mediterranean airmail route but also the flying boat route across France to the United Kingdom. As luck would have it, Victor sent a letter from Jerusalem on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, which must have been carried on the last Ala Littoria flight to Rome. The BOAC flying boat service ended on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June and from that moment there was no airmail service from the Middle East to the UK.



Figure : 4.

BOAC had been operating a service between UK to Australia using “C” Class flying boats but this was now forced to terminate at Cairo. Mail was then transferred to the existing service to South Africa which had also been severed at Cairo, with the new terminus being at Durban. This new route from Australia to South Africa via Cairo was named the “Horseshoe” because of its shape when traced on a map. There was no air route available from Durban to the UK via West Africa and mail was shipped by sea between Durban and the UK. This meant that the convenient and fast airmail route between the Middle East and UK had been replaced by a service that could take several weeks in transit.

**The Horseshoe route.**



Figure : 5.

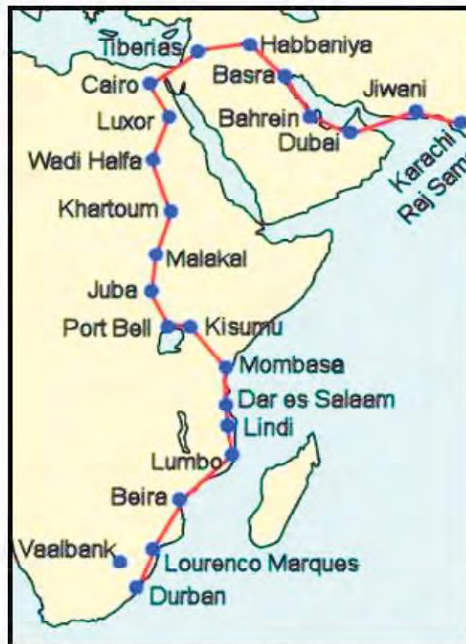


Figure : 6.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was posted to Cyprus on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1940 but Victor accompanied his staff officer to Cairo on detachment, and a letter from Egypt on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July shows the cancellation of Military Post Office E.608, recorded as located at Cairo-Abbassia between 4<sup>th</sup> June and 20<sup>th</sup> September 1940. Victor remained on detachment until September 1940, and a telegram to his parents dated 17<sup>th</sup> September confirms that he had returned to the Battalion.



Figure : 7.

Victor’s letters home were now sent from Cyprus via the “Horseshoe route” but the irony of all this for the troops in the Middle East was that the pre-war Imperial Airways “All-Up” airmail postage rate of 1½ d to anywhere in the Empire was raised by a factor of ten, and airmail postage was now 1/3d, even though the letters took weeks to travel rather than a couple of days. A private soldier at this time was paid two shillings a day before deductions, so 1/3d to post a letter was quite an outlay.



Figure : 8.

Note the use of the green “Honour” envelope which the sender signed to state that the contents referred only to family matters. Despite that, this letter was opened and examined by the military censorship at a base censor level. The reason for close scrutiny of the mail may be that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were in Cyprus to support offensive operations in the Mediterranean, and subsequent letters from Cyprus show the same censorship of even the “Honour” envelopes.

The first active operation, “Operation Abstention” against the Italian held island of Castelorizzo in February 1941 was a complete disaster. The battalion was to have been used to relieve the No. 50 (Middle East) Commando on Castelorizzo Island on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941. ‘B’ Company embarked for Castelorizzo Island on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Only fifty men of the company landed on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1941. The operation was described by Admiral Cunningham as “a rotten business and reflected little credit to anyone”.

The matter of the high airmail postage was addressed in early 1941 by reducing the charge for troops serving in the Middle East from 1/3d to 10d, and later that year a new lightweight air letter was introduced which cost only 3d to cover airmail carriage back to UK. This also coincided with a new air route from Khartoum across the Sahara to Lagos in Nigeria, but mail was still carried from there by sea, involving a 14 day transit from Lagos to Liverpool. These air letters were issued to troops on a one-per-week basis so as to limit the sheer weight of mail being generated. The concept of the light weight air letter was of course carried on after the war ended and became the familiar folded sheet used thereafter.

Figure : 9.

Lightweight air letter. Cyprus 27 October 1941.



Figure : 10. Cairo-Lagos-UK sent 13<sup>th</sup> May 1942. 10d reduced airmail rate.

However, Victor’s holiday in Mediterranean sunshine was about to take a dramatic turn for the worse when in January 1942 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion left Cyprus and returned to Egypt. Letters continued to flow from Cairo until the last letter sent on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1942 just before the Battalion was posted to Tobruk, and we all know what happened next....! Enter Rommel and the Afrika Korps.