‘So Many Hundred Miles to London’

British Soldiers’ Remembrance of the North African Campaign, 1940s-2000s

Hans Magne Jaatun

University of Oslo

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History

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PREFACE

The prospect of doing a thesis centred on oral history, a historical field I've had little experience with before plunging into it in the course of this master's programme, have both been a challenging and rewarding experience. My deepest gratitude goes out to my academic supervisor, Patrick Bernhard for helping me navigate these uncharted academic waters with his invaluable feedback, and for guiding me towards the topic itself. Without the patience and kindness he has awarded me throughout my entire run of the MITRA programme, I am not certain I would have made it through. The both academic and personal advice offered me by fellow students like Lars Magne Tungland and Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn, have similarly been indispensable. Equally warm thanks goes out to all the friends and family members that made my stays as a student in Oslo and an intern in Beirut the wonderful experiences that they have been.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the so-called Desert War mythos, the idealised version of the North African Campaign of World War II as seen in the modern and contemporary popular consciousness, and how some of the conflict's low-rank British veterans' own post-war recollections relate to the conflict's established 'mythology'. The thesis begins by mapping the details and functions of the Desert War mythos, particularly from a British perspective, with emphasis put on why the idea and presence of a "war without hate" was nationally useful, especially in the post-war world. The subsequent main chapter is built around the veterans' own post war recollections of events - as featured in a series of post-war taped interviews housed in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Collection. These interviews are divided up into three thematic subchapters – relating to the veterans' ideas of their own role in the conflict as well as perceptions of the enemy and the region's local population - where points of convergence and divergence between the narrative sets of the public and the narrative sets of the veterans are contrasted and compared. Ultimately, this thesis shows that the persistence of the idea of the 'war without hate', while often having its roots in conditions 'on the ground', is only made possible with the omission of stories and contributions that complicate an otherwise uncomplicated narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Few if any theatres of the Second World War have been so wrapped in clichés as that of the North African Campaign. The famous Duel in the Desert between Erwin Rommel's *Afrikakorps* and Bernard Law Montgomery's 8th Army, quickly adopted near-mythological properties in the eyes of the general public; properties which - for various reasons that will be detailed below - would be encouraged by key military commanders on both sides of the conflict, high-ranking politicians, post-war chroniclers, and lower-rank participants. The language surrounding the campaign used both during and following the war would often be so infused with tropes such as fair play, chivalry, and honour that the images conjured in the reader's mind often resembled more a romanticised medieval jousting tournament, rather than an example of modern, industrial warfare, rife with civilian and military atrocities alike. Only in more recent years have historians set out to challenge many of the more fundamental and popular notions held about the theatre and its participants. Claims such as the Desert War having been a "clean" war, have been mostly debunked in recent literature focusing on Axis (and to some degree Allied) atrocities against civilians and enemy combatants, as well as systematic German-Italian attempts at targeting the region's local Jewish communities.[1] Additionally, the hero mythos surrounding the "Desert Fox" Rommel have been gradually deconstructed; replaced by a picture of a far more flawed and politically complex character, where especially his previously argued disconnectedness from Hitler and Nazism has been seriously challenged.[2]

Despite these efforts, the more mythologised version of the Desert War have proven difficult to dislodge from the public mind – even persisting within many academic circles[3] - which I

[1] See this thesis' subchapter "The Validity of the Myth", p. 7-9.

[2] Ralf Georg Reuth, *The End of a Legend* (London: Haus Publishing Limited, 2009).

[3] The Desert War mythos is still somewhat prevalent in academia, especially within the field of military history. Scholars like Jonathan Fennell, featured on p.7 of this thesis, represents a good example of this trend,

will argue to a large degree can be attributed to the old narrative's continued function. This thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarly work critically re-examining the Desert War mythos, through the utilisation of a series of post-war taped interviews housed in the Imperial War Museum's sound archive. By doing so, this thesis seeks to challenge many of the still-held popular notions surrounding the North African theatre. More specifically, the question of how the soldiers perceived and made sense of the enemy, their Italian and the German counterparts, will be a focal point of this thesis. How these perceptions related to the ideological framework of the greater Second World War will be addressed as well, with special focus paid to racial attitudes among the soldiers. By focusing on these sets of perceptions of the enemy, and by measuring them up against the established Desert War mythos, this thesis will hopefully contribute towards debunking some of the still prevailing myths and clichés surrounding the 'war without hate'.

Following the 'memory boom' of the early 1970s, countless interviews with former soldiers would be conducted, collected, and compiled, with archives such as the Imperial War Museum and the Liddle Collection in the UK, as well as the National World War II Museum in the US, housing thousands of oral testimonies from officers and common soldiers alike. While these sources have, to a limited degree, been utilised before in the academic study of the Desert War, this scholarly attention have traditionally been confined to military matters; either from above, by focusing on tactical and strategic aspects of the campaign, or from below, by focusing on the military achievements and combat experiences of individual soldiers. In addition, while these interviews have been studied in the past, they have often been so without the historiographical tools that oral historians have developed in more recent years, as the discipline slowly developed into a 'sophisticated theoretical field within its own right'[4], spearheaded by scholars such as Paul Thompson, and Alistair Thomson.

This thesis is informed predominately by the theoretical framework developed by the Birmingham Popular Memory Group in the early 1980s and developed further by scholars such as Alistair Thomson. The practice of oral history within the United Kingdom, has long been tied to revisionist, and even politically radical scholarly movements. When the Popular Memory Group published the seminal article 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method' in 1982, it set one of its mail goals as bringing to light narratives which had been either

[4] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2010), p. 8.

downplayed or neglected within more dominant interpretations of history, with a special emphasis on race, class, labour relations, and history from the perspective of minority groups.[5] By utilising this perspective in the context of the Desert War, through a focus on the remembrances of lower-rank participants, as opposed to either chroniclers or the men 'in charge' like officers and commanders, this thesis seeks to uncover perspectives on the conflict that are otherwise oft-neglected. Thomson, building on the perspectives offered by the Popular Memory Group, have offered up the theory of "memory composure" in order to provide a tool for how to better approach and understand the memories of interviewees, and how their remembrances of the past should be understood. He argues that, remembering often involves a process, or mental battle to 'compose' a past which one can live with in the present[6], meaning that the soldiers' testimonies featured in this thesis will be naturally prone to a conscious and subconscious selection of memories to be 'composed', and the ones to be left out of one's personal narrative, in order to come to terms with and understand one's own past and memories.

This theoretical framework will then be applied to the testimonies of seven lower-rank British soldiers that participated in the Desert War campaign, most of them in the period leading up to and immediately following the now-legendary battle of el-Alamein. The chosen interview objects were all working class men at the time of the eruption of World War II, and most had barely turned eighteen. It is however important to note that this thesis is by no means a comprehensive study of British soldiers' opinions at the time, given the anecdotal, and not statistical nature of the source material, as well as the limited number of interview objects featured. Rather, this work is intended to provide a snapshot into the lives of some of the soldiers who fought as part of Monty's 8th, their motivations and practices, and how these measure up against the established Desert War mythos. As this thesis will show, rather than being a motivated, patriotic, and noble fighting force, operating in an empty landscape free of hate, in reality the British soldiers part of Monty's 8th were surprisingly apolitical, with vague and conflicting understandings of both their role in the conflict and their opponents, operating

[5] Alistair Thomson, " 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method'", in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 43-53.

[6] Thomson, "Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice In", in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 244-54.

in a far from empty colonial context characterised by disdain and mistreatment of the local population.

The thesis itself is structured around two main chapters. In the first chapter, *A War Without Hate*, the importance, function, and evolution of the Desert War mythology is discussed from the perspective of public memory theory. Based mostly on secondary literature dealing with topics such as remembrance rituals, media portrayals, and politics, the first chapter will be focused on generating an image of the Desert War mythos in the British popular memory to which the individual narratives of the following chapter are contrasted to and compared. The second chapter, *Soldiers*, is based primarily on the interviews done with veterans of the Desert War, and is again structured into three sub-chapters: *(I) The Greatest Generation*, dealing with the reasons the soldiers enlisted, and their thoughts on the war's wider political context, *(II) The Enemy*, where British attitudes against their Italian and German counterparts are assessed, and finally *(III) The Locals*, where British attitudes and actions towards the oft-absent Arab locals are discussed, with special attention paid to racial perceptions.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by myth or mythos, and also discuss the reliability of oral testimonies as a source of history. The cultural historian Peter Burke states that "positivist historians often use the term 'myth' to refer to stories which are not true, in explicit contrast to their own stories, which they call 'history'"[7]. But within oral history memory, myths are not merely what is believed to be true, but can also represent processes in which personal experiences are assigned meaning within a historical context. Following this line of thinking, myths does not have to be wholesale fabrications, but merely represent an over-emphasis on a particular segment of someone's experience, at the expense of viewpoints that might complicate or even directly contradict the myth narrative. An example of this sort of selective myth-making in the British context during World War II, can be found during the London Blitz. Conventional myths surrounding the Blitz holds that it was a time of national unity, their 'finest hour', when common Britons, in the face of danger and adversity came together in solidarity, with a strong communal sense and willingness to assist others. However, while you'll find many stories illustrating the occurrence of such behaviour, few chroniclers of the Blitz are keen to point out that crime actually rose by an

[7] Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018). p. 112.

astonishing 57% during the Blitz[8], and that London had turned into what the notorious British gangster 'Mad' Frankie Frasier termed "a criminal's paradise"[9]. Similarly, when tackling the Desert War mythos, it is important to note that when veterans of the theatre are remembering the conflict in 'rose-tinted' terms, they are not necessarily committing a crime of fabrication, but rather one of omission. Running with Thomson's idea of memory composure, and Burke's idea of myths, this means that the privates' memories might be weighed differently, or modified with age, in order to produce memories that are more tolerable to the veterans, years after the conclusion of the war. Stories of cross-nations camaraderie and mutual respect were no doubt found in most theatres of the Second World War, but by focusing exclusively on these instances and interactions, one runs the risk of reducing a bloody and oftentimes cruel conflict into a stumped cliché.

Critics of oral history will often point to the entirely true fact, that memories are an unreliable source in regards to precision, and that details such as names, dates, and even the sequence of events often gets distorted, especially with the passing of time. However, the particular use of oral testimonies is seldom the uncovering of technical details, but rather tends to be focused on attitudes, emotions, and events that have stood out in the view of the interviewee. Much research has been done on the topic of the reliability of oral testimonies, demonstrating that for persons in good health, memory of important life events does not decline in a significant way over time.[10] Only seldomly will interviewees modify their stories in substantial ways, and most merely fall back on a rehearsed account that still preserve the core elements of their stories as first remembered.[11] In other words, while the technical details, dates, etc. featured within the veterans' testimonies in this thesis should not be taken at face value, this thesis assumes that the attitudes and perceptions espoused by the veterans in the decades following the war, in general, are still representative of the attitudes and perceptions the soldiers held at

[8] Peter Adey, David J Cox and Barry S Godfrey, *Crime, Regulation and Control During The Blitz* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017).

[9] Charles Glass, *The Deserters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 160.

[10] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.

[11] Abrams., p. 90-91.

the time of World War II, although said emotions and attitudes might be selectively promoted and neglected by the veterans themselves – be it consciously or subconsciously.

1. A War Without Hate

"In a global conflict often characterised by brutality, North Africa represents an oasis of chivalry and sanity, an environment where, in the main, war was contained away from innocent civilians. North Africa is different because it is uncomplicated by ideology and extermination."[12] These are the words which the renowned British military historian Jonathan Fennell used to describe the North African Campaign in a publication produced as late as 2011. While the statement's validity is questionable on a factual basis – especially the argued absence of ideology - it serves as a useful definition of the Desert War mythos itself. The Desert War, the proponents of this mythos holds, was an arena of battle where conventional warfare was allowed to play out in its purest form, the emptiness of the desert ensuring that innocent civilians were kept out of harm's way - a recent documentary even going as far as claiming that "this land was made for war"[13] - and the apolitical nature of the Axis commanders like Erwin Rommel similarly ensuring that the politics of Nazi Germany were kept out of the equation. In other words, to quote the title of Erwin Rommel's posthumous autobiography, it was a "war without hate", characterised by professionalism, cross-nation camaraderie, and acts of generosity. But what is the reason for this mythos' relevance within Britain specifically, and what are the mythos' uniquely British particularities?

[12] Jonathan Fennell, "'Steel My Soldiers' Hearts': El Alamein Reappraised", *Journal Of Military And Strategic Studies*, 14.1 (2011).

[13] Eva Kingsepp, "The Second World War, Imperial, And Colonial Nostalgia: The North Africa Campaign And Battlefields Of Memory", *Humanities*, 7.4 (2018), 113 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040113>., p. 7.

1.1 The Validity of the Myth

Before proceeding further it is necessary to again emphasise that this mythos' status within modern academia has been rather thoroughly challenged, if not partially debunked, by the time of the writing of this thesis, and that it is, in fact, a *mythos*; although it also does persist, especially within the realm of military history. Axis and even Allied atrocities in North Africa have in recent years been well mapped by a large and varied body of scholars. As any cursory glance at a map of North Africa would reveal, this region is far from uninhabited, and much scholarly effort has been directed at uncovering instances and systems of violence against civilians. The Italian command in North Africa, aided and encouraged by German forces, and also involving the fabled and 'chivalrous' Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, led brutal counter-insurgency actions against Arabs and Berbers in Libya and later Tunisia.[14] Concentration camps were erected by Axis forces to house thousands of native Arabs, Berbers, and Jews, and while the full brutality of the Holocaust never came into full effect in North Africa - owing more to temporal issues and a lack of ability, rather than any lack of desire - many more localised instances of anti-Semitic actions took place, spurred on by anti-Semitic propaganda issued from German and Italian hands.[15]

Work conducted on the treatment of prisoners of war (POWs), especially by the Italians, but in the latter stages of the Desert War also the Germans, reveal a widespread system of abuse, characterised by the systemic robbery of POWs, as well as violence and murder against Allied POWs, as well as frequent punitive measures, such as the intentional deprivation of food.[16] This abuse often had a racial character, with the non-White components of the Allied army in North Africa – mostly Africans and Indians – being far more prone to abuse in

[14] Patrick Bernhard, "Im Rücken Rommels. Kriegsverbrechen, Koloniale Massengewalt und Judenverfol- Gung in Nordafrika, 1940-1943", *Zeitschrift für Genozidforschung*, 17.1-2 (2019), 83-122.

[15] Jeffrey Herf, "Nazi Germany's Propaganda Aimed at Arabs And Muslims During World War II and The Holocaust: Old Themes, New Archival Findings", *Central European History*, 42.4 (2009), 709-736.

[16] Bernard, 83-122.

general, and more serious offences like summary executions, than their European counterparts.[17] The behaviour and actions of Allied troops, while less studied, appears similarly problematic, although instances of abuse, rape, and murder seems more limited to isolated incidents, compared to its more systematic occurrence on the Axis side. [18]

It is important to note that these aspects of the Desert War however, only represents a segment of the total image. Many other accounts of the events of the North African Campaign specifically mention the good conduct of, primarily German, but also Italian troops at various points in the campaign. However, the idea behind challenging the Desert War mythos is not about the elimination or discreditation of these more positivist stories, but rather the introduction of nuance into a debate, which for long has been the near exclusive domain of positivist tales. In other words, it should be clear that the Desert War mythos is a vast and misleading oversimplification, as it fails to take into account narratives which run contrary to the conflict's established wisdoms. But the question remains, of *why* this distortion has occurred, why it has occurred with the Desert War *specifically*, and what *purpose* such a distortion might serve for the nations involved.

[17] Bernard, 83-122.

[18] Bernard, 83-122.

1.2 The Importance of the Desert War

While there is still ongoing debate on the overall strategic significance of the Desert War and its outcome, and that the theatre of war is normally referred to as a secondary theatre of war today, it should be raised beyond doubt that the Desert War held a special place within the British contemporary and post-war public consciousness. The British Library in London, for example, holds 308 titles under the subject of the "North African Campaign of the Second World War"[19], meaning that since November 1942, on average, over four books on the topic have been produced every year. The reason for its importance within Britain is multifaceted. It was in North Africa that the British scored their first major victory against Axis forces following their humbling experiences in France during the spring of 1940, which served to redeem the British army in the eyes of both themselves and the general public, and the victory at el-Alamein, often together with the Battle for Britain, is frequently referred to as the war's turning point, where the fortunes of war for the first time shifted in Allied favour. Additionally, the Mediterranean theatre in general, and the North African one in particular, was for the first years of the war Britain's primary battleground, and at its peak, well over a million British military personnel would be active in area. Eva Kingsepp, in a study on the representation of the Desert War within modern media – mostly documentaries, but also including video games - noted that the majority of productions focusing on this theatre of war, on a global basis, were British productions. Crucially, the North African Campaign was a theatre of war were the British were the ones in charge of operations, unlike the later liberation of Europe, where the Americans, in the words of one British private, managed to "snatch most of the glory in victory".[20] But while these facts might help explain *why* the theatre of war itself was important to the British, it does not help explain the prevalence and importance of the mythos of the "war without hate".

[19] Ref. http://www.explore.bl.uk/

[20] Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWM) 31402, Walton, Frederick Leonard

1.3 The Function of the Desert War

To understand the persistence of the Desert War mythos, one has to properly understand its public function, a function which manifested itself differently within the different countries involved, although instanced of overlap occur as well. In Western Germany for example, during the immediate post-war years, a focus on the chivalrous and apolitical nature of the Desert War served as way rehabilitate and thus reintegrate returning Wehrmacht veterans to civil society, by drawing attention away from atrocities committed in Eastern Europe and presenting an alternate, more tolerable image of the conduct and ethics of the German soldier. In Britain on the other hand, where its soldiers were not tainted by a role as accomplices to genocide, the domestic function of the mythos was somewhat different, characterised by one more general dimension pertaining to the condition of war, a second to the post-war rebuilding of British-German relations, and a third to Britain's status as an imperial power.

In the words of Jay Winter, "In the aftermath of war, there is a tendency for those who create representations of the conflict to wear the mantle of consolation. Tolerable or sanitized images of combat and violence against civilians are seductive and politically useful, since they present observers with elements of hope. They make war thinkable, even in the aftermath of terrible carnage"[21]. The presence of a so-called "oasis of sanity" in a conflict otherwise often understood as 'insane', serves as an attractive positivist message, that speaks for humanity itself. In relation to the post-war international-diplomatic function of the Desert War, as Britain and Germany sought to re-establish friendly relations with each-other following the conclusion of World War II, the Desert War - more specifically the idea of British and German soldiers locked in honourable battle with each other, with the ideological aspect of the war absent – according to Patrick Bernhard "very much helped to overcome existing resentments on both sides of the Channel"[22]. Arguments have been made that this was a process that evolved a as "joint undertaking of British and German publishers"[23],

[21] Jay Winter, "The "Moral Witness" And the Two World Wars", *Ethnologie Française*, 37.3 (2007), 467.

[22] Bernard, 83-122.

[23] Bernard, 83-122.

representing a specifically transnational utilisation of the Desert War mythos in order to achieve specific political aims. By extension, the 'pollution' of this romantic narrative with nuance could have jeopardised or at the very least burdened reconciliatory efforts, although the extent to which is difficult to quantify.

The mythos' function related the Britain's imperial status is twofold. Firstly, it is spatial, related to where the conflict took place, namely on Italian, British, and later French colonial soil, and secondly, it is relevant in the context of Britain's post-war period of decolonisation and the loss of its imperial status. In 2012 Robert Fletcher introduced the concept of *imperialist amnesia*, where "agents of postcolonialism", either "ignore the history of colonial domination in their accounts or present a sanitised version of colonial domination from which evidence of exploitation, persecution, subjugation and genocide has been effectively effaced"[24]. A more tempered version of this imperialist amnesia is also suggested by Fletcher, namely *partial amnesia*, "in which colonialism is acknowledged but its distasteful aspects effaced".[25] While both partial and imperialist amnesia, as described by Fletcher, feature in popular renditions of the Desert War in the popular British memory, the colonial setting of the conflict tends for the most part to be wholly ignored, and if the local population feature, they do so mostly as exotic props, rather than individuals with meaningful interaction with British forces. By ignoring or downplaying the colonial setting and the inhabitants of the region, it is made possible to both

In short, in the British popular consciousness, the Desert War is imagined as an apolitical and chivalrous space in an otherwise highly political and unchivalrous war, where ideologically motivated and aware British soldiers, who came to fight because it was "the right thing to do", are confronted with a professional and respectable opponent, who operate outside the normal context of the Nazi political structure. The two sides slug it out in an empty landscape, in accordance with conventional rules of warfare, before the British finally manage to best their opponent through skill and perseverance, turning the tide of the war, and providing for posterity a moment where the British Empire, alone, proved its worth on the battlefield, and by extension, proved its worth as a nation. While this highly romanticised tale

[24] Robert Fletcher, "The Art of Forgetting: Imperialist Amnesia And Public Secrecy", *Third World Quarterly*, 33.3 (2012), p. 423.

[25] Ibid., p. 424.

is undoubtably inspired and influenced by actual events – many of the Axis-Allied encounters in North Africa *were* characterised by acts of professionalism, camaraderie, and compassion - it is only enabled by ignoring stories that contradict the mythos narrative. Stories of misconduct, hatred, and civilian and military abuse and atrocities runs the risk of complicating a narrative that served tangible purposes within the countries involved. Within Britain specifically, the Desert War mythos served as a consolatory diplomatic tool, a redemptive tale of humanity, and as a story of national greatness, supposedly proving to the world the worth not only of British soldiers, values, and leadership, but the nation as a whole, wherein the theatre's colonial setting has to be ignored or downplayed, as to not besmirch a heroic tale with details considered inconvenient in a post-colonial world.

2. Soldiers

With the nature and function of the Desert War mythos now in mind, it is time to assess how it is remembered in the post-war years by the British veterans that actually participated in the conflict. The use of officers' testimonies have been deliberately avoided, as the goal of the thesis is to map remembrance of Desert War 'from below' in accordance with the theories set forth by the Popular Memory Group, in order to give a voice to those whose voices have been otherwise drowned out. The inclusion of testimonies from what can be said to constitute a military-social elite, would run contrary to this intension. The relatively short list of interviewees featured comes as an unfortunate by-product of the limitations related to the practice of oral history itself, where oral testimonies are both lengthy to process, and lengthy to put on paper, given the nature of spoken word. It is therefore important to note that the following interviews are not intended as, nor can be, comprehensive tales of the conduct of all British soldiers at the time, but rather represents snapshot as to illustrate some of the attitudes that characterised the British soldiers of the North African Campaign, and how they measure up to the established Desert War mythos, in its particular British iteration.

2.1 The Greatest Generation

With the publishing of the book *The Greatest Generation* in 1998 by the American journalist Tom Brokaw, this now-common phrase was popularised to the describe the generation of young men and women who grew up during the Great Depression, and who would fight under Allied flags during the Second World War. In the book, Brokaw stated that "it is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced"[26] and would go on to argue that they fought not out of selfishness or a desire for glory, but simply because doing so was "the right thing to do"[27]. While this particular book addressed Americans specifically, the popular idea of the British soldier as a highly motivated and patriotic fighter, who left his home to fight Nazi tyranny, shares many similarities with the idea sketched out by Brokaw. But were the British soldiers who fought the Germans in North Africa simply doing so because it was "the right thing to do"? Each of the interviews featured in this thesis opened with questions about the interviewees' motivations for joining the war, as well their thoughts about the Germans. Somewhat surprisingly, these working-class soldiers show a tendency to consistently distance themselves from the war's wider ideological context. Given the British cultural reluctance to "toot one's own horn", one might expect the interviewees to somewhat downplay their ideological and patriotic commitment to the Allied 'cause', but the answers given to the interviewer's questions hint more towards a sort of general sense of political apathy. The young private Vernon Scannell, when asked about his reaction to the outbreak of war would reply:

> **Scannell**: It was one mainly of puerile excitement. It seemed to me an exciting adventurous thing. But I think that I should make it clear that I was singularly ignorant of the political realities. I knew nothing really. Of course, it is a long time ago, and memories aren't that reliable. Certainly, I recall a kind of excitement that I felt. I can remember my brother and I were thrilled, and in some way intended to get

[26] Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xxxviii.

[27] Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, xxxviii.

involved. But we weren't interested in any kind of moral or political cause. We knew nothing at all about it.

Interviewer: What were your attitudes towards the Germans and the German regime?

Scannell: As I say, it's quite difficult I suppose for people to realise just how ignorant we were. But I didn't have a particular attitude, except of course the attitude inherited from my father's generation. The Germans were the baddies, and we the goodies. I mean, yes they were the enemy, they seemed to me the traditional enemy. If anybody then had said to me 'ah, but the German militarism' and so on, compared with the recent thing, the traditional enemies in fact, of Britain and France – historically - I would have been quite astonished, and probably disbelieving.[28]

The lack of any particular interest in the war's wider political context seems to have been the norm among the working class veterans featured in this thesis. The gunner Bernard James Piddlesden's reasons for joining for example, seems to have been dictated primarily by a sense of pragmatism. He says that "when war seemed inevitable after the Munich accord" he volunteered, as he thought it better to volunteer early than merely to be drafted later.[29] Another such example comes in the form of Henry Foster, a young British private who volunteered for the army in June 1940. Foster seems to not have put any great importance in the either the political or ideological context of the war. When asked if the war, in any way, had affected him before he enlisted, he merely stated that it had not, and when asked about his reasons for volunteering, he replied with: "Oh, I don't know. Thousands of young fellas that time did volunteer"[30], before talking at length about the wave of excitement he was swept up in, where images of them parading in front of local girls featured frequently. In a similar vein, after war seemed "imminent but undeclared"[31] in 1939, Harry Garrett volunteered for the Royal Artillery together with his brother, saying that he thought it would be "fun" to work

[28] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

[29] IWM 4661, Piddlesden, Bernard James.

[30] IWM 19815, Foster, Henry.

[31] IWM 27303, Garrett, Harry.

as an anti-tank gunner. Garrett went on to state that before the outbreak of hostilities in the autumn of 1939 he "was looking forward to the war, funny enough"[32].

This sense of adventure, combined with more pragmatic concerns as well as basic patriotic sentiments, seems to have been the primary motivator for soldiers such as Piddlesden, Scannell, Garrett, and Foster. A desire to combat Nazism on political or moral grounds, seems wholly absent from the soldiers' recollections, which is especially puzzling considering that at the time of these interviews, the horrible crimes committed by the Nazi regime would have been common knowledge; and even still the soldiers make no attempt to retroactively apply ideas of ideological opposition or outrage to the Nazi regime. Rather the enemy is imagined in more generalised terms, almost as mere realpolitikal foes inherited from their father's generation, rather that something ideologically novel. In other words, while the idea of fighting an enemy seems to have excited the privates, it seemed to matter less *who* or even *why* they were fighting.

Another interesting observation made by Scannell, has to do with the conduct of the soldiers between themselves. Building on an earlier off-hand mention, Scannell was asked by the interviewer whether there occurred instances of theft between the British soldiers in Egypt and North Africa, and would reply:

> **Scannell:** Oh, there was a great deal of that. Yes, a lot of that. You had to watch what… it was understand that if you were short of an item of kit, you know they had regular kit inspections, and anything you were short of, you were either put on the chime, usually put on the chance for, and certainly you had to replace it. And the cost was deducted from your pay. So things like that were very important. And I mean, some of the more affluent of my comrades actually had padlocks on their kit bags to prevent this sort of thing. But that wouldn't stop them, because I've known [the bags] being actually opened up from the bottom with a bayonet. Sort of sliced open the kit bag, and stuff taken out; like socks and vests and spare shirts and things like that. So

[32] IWM 27303, Garrett, Harry.

> there was a great deal of that. It was almost understood that you were at fault if your kit was pinched.[33]

The idea of your fellow soldiers bayonetting their way into your personal kit bag on a regular basis, and robbing you of your belongings in order to either save their own skin or generate extra income, does not neatly fit into the image of the 'greatest generation' and the camaraderie and sense of righteousness which supposedly characterised them. According to Scannell, no item was off-limits either, and if it could be stolen, it would, no matter what type of sentimental value it might hold for the owner. Scannell, who was an avid amateur boxer was at one point robbed of a gold trophy he had won back in England, which he claimed would have been sold off at some Egyptian bazaar for cash.

In short, there is little to be found in the veterans' testimonies to support the idea that these working class soldiers were the kind of moral and ideological crusaders that they are often made out to be, both in contemporary and later accounts of the war, fighting the good fight because 'it was the right thing to do'. Rather, their motivations for joining the war seem to have been less defined than conventional stereotypes would hold, characterised by adventurism, patriotism, and even pragmatism rather than any deep moral or political opposition to Nazi Germany. Where animosity towards Germany is found, it appears to be informed more by the country's status as a traditional great power rival of Britain, building on inherited attitudes from the previous generation, rather than its newly adopted ideology of Nazism.

[33] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

2.2 The Enemy

Given the rather apolitical attitudes showcased regarding the question of why they joined the war in the first place, one could expect that the veterans would have a similarly politically detached view of their opponents in North Africa. But as we will see, these attitudes are rather varied, especially regarding the differences in perceptions that existed between the soldiers' German and Italian opponents.

The Germans

The German foe is the one that feature, nearly exclusively, in British popular depictions of the Desert War, and if the Desert War narrative is to be believed, they represented on whole, a respectable, skilled, fighting force, who treated and fought their foes in the same manner the British expected of themselves. And for the most part, these ideas are also assigned to the Germans by the British veterans' themselves, although there are addendums, which will be discussed further down. The following statement by Piddlesden, for example, was very much representative of the kind of attitudes displayed by the British veterans. When asked whether the Germans had treated them well upon capture, he answers:

> **Piddlesden**: Yeah, very fair! They seemed, the Afrika-Korps - what contact I had with them - they treated us very fairly. They were soldiers, good soldiers. And in the short time we were with them, before they handed us over to the Italians, they were very fair."[34]

Another soldier, Frederick Leonard Walton, also commenting upon his capture by German forces, said that "there was no putting our hands up, it was more like friends talking away. I'll give them their due". This sense of fairness and camaraderie permeates characterisations of the members of the Afrika Korps, often accompanied by depictions of the Germans as highly efficient soldiers. When asked whether his impression of the Germans had changed after they had encountered them in combat in North Africa, Vernon Scannell replies that:

> **Scannell**: Yes, I suppose it had. … I think that as far as one thought about them at all, it was in a curiously detached sort of way. They were the enemy, and they were almost an extension of their arms in a sense. I mean they were threatening. And there

[34] IWM 4661, Piddlesden, Bernard James.

was something of a bit frightening about the Germans too. Because, they all seemed to be, and still do looking back, they seemed to be more efficient as soldiers than the British. This might be private, a sort of projection. And I might be doing the British soldiers a grave injustice of assuming they were all like me, …. but [the German soldiers] seemed quite willing, they seemed prepared to die. Which to me is an astounding thing. I don't think that any cause is worth dying for.

Interviewer: But did that make you and your comrades respect them or?

Scannell: Respect them, and fear them I think. Yes, I think on the whole there was a good deal of respect and if perhaps, I don't know, if a dear friend or somebody had been… [pause]. Not even that, you see, because friends of mine were killed, and a particular friend of mine was killed, and I don't feel any special animosity towards the German. I think the hatred and animosity was towards the condition of war itself. I hated war. I don't know if I hated the Germans particularly. I feared them, certainly, and still do in a way. I think they're a frightening race. I think that curious mixture it seems to me, a particular Germanic thing, is a mixture of brutality and sentimentality. And also a sort of mad bravery too. … they just seemed to be exceptionally brave and efficient soldiers, and I am convinced that on equal terms, they'd have wiped the floor with us.[35]

What is interesting, is that this admiration, fear, or at the least sense of respect that many British soldiers awarded their German foes, seems to have been for the most part reciprocal. In the book *Soldaten* by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, which is based on a series of bugged recordings of captured German military personnel, German attitudes towards British soldiers were logged as overwhelmingly positive. The British were seen "as 'tough and brave opponents' who fought fairly. In Dunkirk and Greece, British troops had fought fantastically. They were 'excellent airmen' and 'tough guys' … 'like us'. 'Put a British soldier in a German uniform, and you won't notice the difference" one soldier for the Wehrmacht's Afrika Korps thought."[36]

[35] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

[36] Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 267.

However, it is important to note that this narrative of respect and even admiration for the Germans was far from the only one present within the lower British ranks. Harry Garrett, commenting on the sinking of a hospital ship by German planes in a Libyan harbour, thought the Germans to be brutes - as Scannell alluded to in the excerpt above - with a disregard for conventional ways of war. "It wouldn't make any difference to them" Garrett stated. "The Germans had no thought… shooting up ambulances… everything. It was a hundred percent war as far as they were concerned"[37]. Other soldiers talk at length about the perceived German arrogance, with Henry Foster exclaiming, after having been asked about his opinions on the German nation at the time of the interview, that could

> **Foster**: … never like a German. It's deep-seated really. Because I think the old arrogance – it might be wrong to say this – but I think the old arrogance is still there. And maybe it's just my nature, I don't know. No doubt they're a fine nation, but I don't think I could ever like Germans. Not now. [38]

While most of the soldiers fail to mention or answer questions about the racial attitudes they assigned their German foes, and perhaps more interestingly, what the British veterans personally though about any such attitudes, some snippets can be gathered here and there, often revealed almost accidentally. Foster for example, when asked if he hated the Germans he specifically encountered in North Africa, he gave somewhat vague "yes", before adding that he did not hate them "to the extent we hated the Japanese", a foe he had encountered on a later tour of duty to Burma. In another instance when asked if the Germans treated them well upon capture, William Thomas Smith, a signalman, responded that: "they might have been friendly to Whites"[39], but that they did not extend the same friendliness to the Indian troops fighting under the British flag. According to Smith, after having been captured in the same vicinity as an Indian army unit was present, he came across two barely breathing Indian soldiers who had been left to die in a ditch, with large gut wounds and their intestines hanging out. Although it is unclear from the interview what specifically the Germans had done to them, if they had been executed or merely abandoned, Smith made it clear that their

[37] IWM 27303, Garrett, Harry.

[38] IWM 19815, Foster, Henry.

[39] IWM 4785, Smith, William Thomas

fate was the result of some form of deliberate German action, that would not have been taken against White British troops.[40] The veterans' perceptions and remembrances of the Germans seem on a whole to be somewhat mixed, with some of the soldiers emphasising their perceived professionalism, fairness, battle prowess and even friendliness, whereas others paint a more gloomy picture, characterised by brutality, arrogance, and racial attitudes the soldiers' thought disturbing. Some of the soldiers, like Scannell,

[40] IWM 4785, Smith, William Thomas

The Italians

Whereas the British veterans' opinions of the Germans seemed to have been somewhat mixed, nearly all of the soldiers expressed disdain, pity, or even outright hatred of their Italian counterparts. One of the most outspoken of the British veterans on the topic of the Italians was Bernard Piddlesden, who, after being captured during the Axis push towards el-Alamein in the summer of 1942, would spend the rest of his war days in Italian and German captivity. Piddlesden, whose account of the war until the point of capture for the most part was positive, almost jovial, turns sour after the topic of the Italians is brought up:

> **Piddlesden:** "They [German soldiers] warned us, if we had any rings or watches, to hide them. They said 'we don't loot prisoners, but the Italians will'. And that turned out to be true. Signet rings were removed, because the Italians does not consider a signet ring as a wedding ring. The only jewellery they allowed us to keep was a plain gold band, which not many people wear. … Their treatment was really atrocious. They kept us in this cage outside Tobruk… no tents… no sanitation … I saw a man in the Highlanders infantry, who was shot in the back because he walked too close to the wire to relieve himself."[41]

After the interviewer carefully prods Piddlesden to continue his story of captivity, he recounts an incident that occurred before the transfer to the now infamous Italian prisoner of war camps outside Tripoli.

> **Piddlesden**: And a more or less a - could I say - a comic opera Italian officer came, all dolled up with his fancy boots gleaming away. And he started trying to take pictures of us all. Well, the reaction was: immediately he put his camera up, everybody'd give the 'v' for victory sign, and after a few attempts at taking the picture he lost his temper and pulled out a revolver, and threatened 'em, all of 'em. Once again, all our fingers went up, so he just let off three shots into the midst of us. One

[41] IWM 4661, Piddlesden, Bernard James.

> lad was wounded in the arm, and the other two, didn't hit anything. That was my introduction to the Italian army.[42]

Evident from the tales of the interviewees, there seems to have existed some type of internal debate within British ranks, whether the Italians could be truly 'blamed' for their behaviour or not. Piddlesden, who takes the most extreme position of the veterans in this regard, while acknowledging the Italians' more difficult socio-economic and logistical situation, seems hesitant to accept this as an adequate explanation for their perceived brutality and cruelty.

> **Piddlesden**: I've always attempted to play the game and say, well the Italians had nothing. You know, we couldn't expect anything from them. But I'm sorry that I can't. I've detested them ever since, and I've never dreamed of going back to Italy for a holiday. I want nothing whatever to do with them. You put a beggar on horseback, and he'll ride to the devil. Which reminds me of those. They were always down and out. And suddenly they find themselves the victors over the British, you know. They were all heroes to themselves, strutting around, which we found horrible.[43]

Foster on the other hand, who also would serve some time as an Italian and later German prisoner of war, after having acknowledged the same socio-economic and logistical situation of the Italians, merely states that "[his] feelings for the Italians, it never made much difference … even though their treatment of us was worse", implying a sense of pity on his Italian captors that he felt was not applicable to the Germans, who he viewed on more equal terms with the British. In both of these examples, it is clear that the Italians were considered unequal to the British in terms of character, means, and ability. It is difficult to know if these sentiments are rooted in perceptions of racial imparity between the British and the Italians, as the soldiers are quite silent in this regard, but there seems to be attitudes that are held against the Italians that

In summary, the British soldiers' attitudes towards the enemies they fought in North Africa were varied; perhaps more so than the Desert War mythos would indicate. Still it is possible to identify general trends. A general sense of respect for their German counterparts – particularly their abilities as soldiers - seems prevalent among the veterans, although not all

[42] IWM 4661, Piddlesden, Bernard James.

[43] IWM 4661, Piddlesden, Bernard James.

are equally impressed by their "chivalrous" nature. On the contrary, the German disregard for conventional ways of war (understood in a British sense) is often brought up by some soldiers, as is their perceived arrogance and the way in which they discriminated – and in some instances committed atrocities – against the non-White elements of captured Commonwealth army units, in ways which would not have befallen White troops. The oft-ignored German ally, Italy, fares far less well in British eyes, being nearly universally held in contempt, with the most important distinction the soldiers make between themselves, being whether the Italians' perceived cruelty and ineptitude could be explained by their less fortunate socio-economic situation or not, or perhaps even their lesser status as a people in the eyes of the British. So while elements of the Desert War mythos is mirrored in the British veterans' own remembrances, particularly the sense of soldierly, mutual respect that supposedly existed between British and German troops, these elements only represent fragments of a larger picture. Respect for the Germans' combat prowess was not mutually exclusive with perceptions of the German troops as brutal, scrupleless killers, and feelings of respect and cross-nation camaraderie only seem to have extended to the German 'half' of the Axis forces in North Africa, and never to the Italian one.

The Locals

One of the more common arguments used to argue for the 'cleanliness' of the Desert War mythos, has always been the 'purity' of the empty space that the desert provided. But as should be clear by now, there always was present a significant civilian population in most of the areas the British operated, especially within the densely settled Egyptian provinces, where British soldiers were stationed for training, garrison duties, rest and recuperation, as well as - in the west - combat missions. Most of the veterans, when reminiscing about their interactions with the locals, merely state that the relations were friendly, if they mention them at all. Harold Fitz-John, a trooper trained as a driver-mechanic in Egypt, speaks of his time in Egypt with fondness, reminiscing about his time spent at George's bar, who he believes to have been a Greek, and day trips by car to cafes. On the topic of the Arab Egyptians he has less to say, but when asked of his opinions on them, he merely stated that 'I had nothing against them, let's face it, most of them had nothing'. He then goes on to state that he got on well with the tailors close to the British compound, but that there were cases of petty theft, where local young boys would try to swig cash and valuables off soldiers on the trains[44]; although Fitz-John treats this more as a semi-humorous nuisance. Another theme in the interviews could be found in the soldiers occasional admittance that a few harmless pranks were played on the Egyptians every now and then, but that in these cases the pranks were 'kicking up' as one might say, against people in an arguably more privileged position than the British soldiers themselves, such as the Egyptian educated classes. Fitz-John gives an example of such an incidence:

> **Fitz-John:** …we used to go to the cinema, and there'd be ninety percent of the audience would be British troops, and the other ten percent the educated type of Egyptian, in their European suits with their red fez. And they'd play her Britannic Majesty's 'God Save the Queen', which everybody stood up-
>
> **Interviewer:** Including the Egyptians?

[44] IWM 12163, Fitz-John, Harold.

> **Fitz-John**: Yes. Then they'd use to play the Egyptian national anthem, which everyone *chuckles* - I don't repeat the words, but the soldiers used to sing about 'King Faruq, King Faruq, he's a dirty old crook' … there was one thing I was actually ashamed of that we- … we used to get on about singing verses about Queen Farida, his wife *chuckles*[45]

While not a particularly respectful manner of conduct, these sorts of stories are made easier to swallow and rationalise by the fact that the butt of the joke are normally members of the Egyptian upper classes, be they the suit-clad, fez-wearing gentlemen of the cinemas, or the luxurious royals of the Alawiyya dynasty. Jokes had at the expense of those worse off than the soldiers themselves are mostly absent. However, while most of the soldiers insist that the relations between the British soldiers and the locals were for the most part amicable, and that at worst a few harmless pranks were played, one soldier tells of a more sinister reality. Private Vernon Scanner of the 70th Highlanders, when asked about the British soldiers' attitudes to the local population, would say:

> **Scannell:** I do remember being very shocked by the attitude toward the Egyptians when we landed in Egypt. And this was general, all-through the army. They were simply called wogs. They were all wogs, and they were fair game for being kicked around, beaten up, reviled. And this attitude, I mean in recent years one has heard a lot about the behaviour of football hooligans abroad and so on. Well, it doesn't surprise me at all. That seemed to be the kind of behaviour that was absolutely constant in my service in Egypt and Northern Africa.[46]

When asked if there were any particular incidents he could remember, Scanner recounts an incident that occurred on a train journey where troops were being transported within Egypt.

> **Scannell:** …an Arab was selling eggs. They used to go around selling hardboiled eggs and bread, and food. And they [British soldiers] simply got hold of the whole lot, just took his entire sort of stock of stuff and threw him off the train. Just hurled him off and stole his wares. That type of thing was pretty common.

[45] IWM 12163, Fitz-John, Harold.

[46] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

Interviewer: What would happen if one tried to intervene?

Scannell: I don't really know. I don't think one could've done, 'cause, you know, you'd been a very lone voice I think. I would certainly not join in, I mean, I would remove myself from the situation, but one couldn't – there were too many. It was too general this sort of intolerance and brutality and stupidity. It was just common. … I mean, I hated it, and made it clear that I did hate it, but…

Interviewer: How would your comrades react when you said that?

Scannell: I don't know, I think they just thought I was a bit soft or eccentric. They didn't understand or take it very seriously.[47]

Scannell's narrative stands in stark contrast to the innocent recollections of men like Fitz-John, and while not as brutal as for example the Italian army's conduct within its own colony of Libya during the North African Campaign, the British army's relationship with the native Arab population seems to have been much more fraught with racism and abuse than the conventional Desert War narrative would hold, where the locals are either absent, or present as mere background props. Scanner, and his both astonishing and atypical testimony, can be said to equate to what scholars such as Avishai Margalit and Jay Winter terms a 'moral witness' to history.[48] The 'moral witness' often comes into play when more sanitised versions of a conflict that the witness observed or participated in become so widespread that they start to seriously conflict with the witness' own recollection of events. In the event of this, these moral witnesses often come forth, speaking with what Joan Scott has termed "the authority of direct experience",[49] seeking to do away with heroic or romanticised understandings of history. Out of the interviews visited during the research period of this thesis, Scannell's testimony was the only one to speak of the relationship between the British army and the Arab locals in such explicit terms, and the only one to mention cases of serious misconduct

[47] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

[48] Jay Winter, "The "Moral Witness" and the Two World Wars", *Ethnologie Française*, 37.3 (2007), p. 467.

[49] Winter, "The "Moral Witness" and the Two World Wars", p. 467.

from the British side. This might in part be related to Alistair Thomson's idea of memory composure, where

A reason for Scannell's perhaps more candid response, compared to his comrades, might be found in Scannell's difficult relationship with the British army itself. Scannell was court-martialled in the spring of 1943 after abandoning a forward position near Gabes, Tunisia, which he, by his own accord, did because of his disgust at seeing his fellow highlanders looting the bodies of slain combatants; both those of their own comrades, and those of the enemy.[50] During the interview he repeatedly states that he never quite felt at home in the army, that he 'hated the condition of war', and that he seemed quite disillusioned by how it was conducted, which puts him in opposition to many of his comrades, who seemed to feel more at home in army life, many even stating that they viewed it as 'fun'. It's therefore reasonable to assume that Scannell would have an easier time speaking out about the British army's more problematic aspects, as he appears to never have fully associated himself with it, at least not in the same way many other soldiers did. In this way, for Scannell, a critique of the British army would not carry the same element of self-

While stories of British abuse towards enemies and civilians in North Africa has never been completely absent within literature and media on the subject, it has traditionally been centred, unfairly, on the non-White components of the armed forces, such as the Indian, Arab, or African troops which fought as part of the Commonwealth forces in North Africa. This overemphasis on crimes committed by non-White members,

[50] *Arguments of Kings: An Autobiography* (Parkwest Pubns, 1990), pp. 105-106.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary Australian war correspondent Alan Moorehead referred to the Desert War as "a knight's tournament in empty space"[51]. But as should be clear from this thesis, neither was the theatre of war particularly chivalrous, nor was it fought in a vacuum. The Desert War was a conflict fought on and around colonial soil, containing a population that the British soldiers featured in this thesis looked down upon and pitied at best, and mistreated and abused at worst. Vernon Scannell compared the actions and attitudes of the British soldiers stationed in Egypt to those of thieving 'hooligans', and reveals that even though most of the British veterans have sanitised their stories of interaction with the locals over time, or merely reduced cases of abuse to cases of harmless mischief, that awareness and acknowledgement of the more problematic aspects of the British-native relations never were absent or went away with time. It is also telling, that the only soldier who would speak at length of the British Army's more problematic aspects, also was the only one of the interviewees who had 'broken' with the army, in the sense that he had stopped identifying as a part of it by the time of the interview. Building on Alistair Thomson's idea of memory composure, it is not unreasonable to assume, that for the soldiers that never had a similar 'break' with the army, it would be more difficult to incorporate memories of abuse and misconduct from the British side, as the levying of criticism against the army's conduct as a whole would complicate the positivist image and identity of themselves as veterans of World War II.

And while the soldiers' experiences with their German counterparts often were characterised by a sense of professionalism, generosity, and mutual respect, they were never exclusively so. Some soldiers' attitudes towards the Germans were dominated more by their perceptions of the Germans as arrogant and brutal killers who ignored or disregarded conventional rules of war, even though they in other cases would talk of friendly interactions with German troops upon capture. Italian troops on the other hand seem to have been universally looked down

[51] Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2011).

upon. Some soldiers would rationalise the perceived brutality, cruelty, and ineptitude of the Italian troops by pointing out their more difficult economic and logistical situation vis-à-vis the Germans and British, while others were far less forgiving, carrying their hatred on well into the 1980s. A vague sense of racial parity with the German soldiers, and one of imparity with the Italian ones, seems to also have been present among the soldiers, although it is never articulated clearly. Even interactions between British soldiers themselves were often far less than friendly. Theft from one's fellow soldiers appears to have been rampant within British army units, and no object, no matter the sentimental value it might have held, appears to have off-limits for those seeking to line their pockets with some extra, quick cash.

Somewhat curiously absent are reflections on the wider political context of the war among the British veterans, even though they often would be prodded by the interviewers on these questions. Most of the soldiers seems to have understood the enemy in rather abstract terms, one mentioning that the imagery of the German enemy merely had been inherited from their father's generation, who fought the Germans in World War I, or that the German soldiers figured more as mere 'extensions of their arms'[52] rather than individuals with agency. But the way in which these working-class veterans have detached the ideological component from the - especially German - soldiers they fought, and the war itself, might in part be related to how these British veterans entered into the conflict. Young, inexperienced, working class men, with an apparently limited interest in international affairs, would be less likely to view the conflict in ideological terms. The majority of the veterans appear to have enlisted, not out of outrage over the actions and conduct of the Nazis in Europe, or any articulated ideological opposition to the enemies they would be fighting, but rather seem to have been influenced by the prospect of adventure, a sense of vague patriotism, or merely by pragmatism.

In summary, while there are many half-truths to be found in the Desert War mythos with links to the soldiers' own remembrances – instances of compassion, respect, and 'honourable' conduct - these stories only represent pieces of a larger, and much more complex mosaic. Only by omitting the stories of hatred, racism, atrocities, mistreatment and abuse, is one able to maintain the mythologised image of the 'war without hate'. Stories like those of soldiers such as Piddlesden and Scannell bear little semblance to the popular national British narrative of the Desert War, and were stories like theirs to be weighted more in the public discussions

[52] IWM 10009, Scannell, Vernon.

surrounding the Desert War, the old myth narrative would be more difficult to maintain. While this thesis cannot, and is not intended to, make a generalised statement about the attitudes of all British soldiers present in the North African Campaign, it allows for a snapshot into the lives, memories, and opinions of some of the soldiers who fought as part of Monty's fabled 8th,

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