

## Chapter 8 African and Life on the Indian Continent A.B.Guise 1944

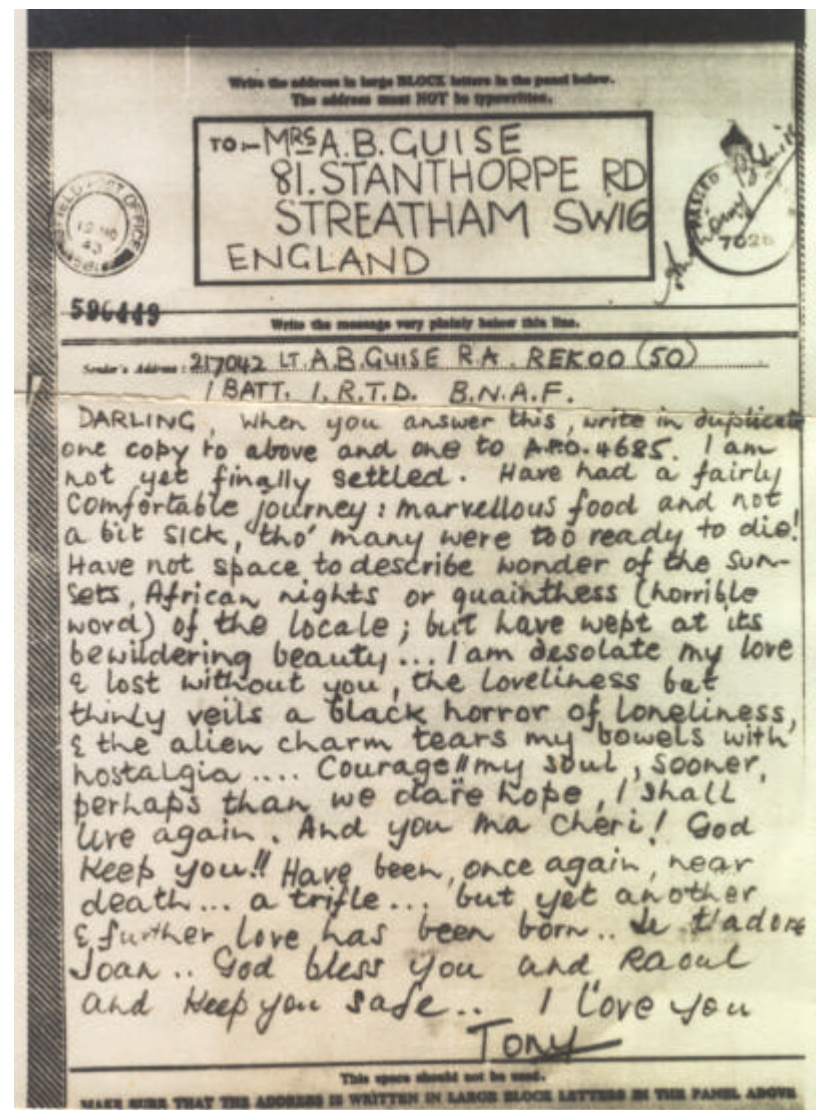
It was occasionally mentioned within the family that Tony's ship to India sunk on the journey but details were limited. Study of letters now gives a clue as to the course of events.

The first communication after the event was from British North Africa in the form of an Airgraph.  
All letters and Airgraphs with transcripts are in Appendix 5.

This was the first of four photographed letters which were written on forms and then sent as film by airplane. Once the film arrived in England the film was processed and the letter printed and delivered to its destination. Kodak had the contract for running this process for the British Government.

The first was written on 19<sup>th</sup> Nov 1943, or a little earlier, in which he mentions not only the beauty of North Africa but also a close encounter with death.  
"Have been, once again near death... a trifle ... but yet another and further love has been born."  
The exact ship that he was sailing in is still unknown but, by date, it was not the Rohna or Birmingham.  
After a short time in North Africa, either Morocco, Algeria or more likely Tunisia, (because of the reference to French speaking and by this time England had taken possession of much of North Africa) some details of which are included in the four airgraphs, he travelled on to India arriving there just before Christmas 1943.

A few more details about the sinking are given in Tony's first airmail letter from India to Joan in which he described how he managed.



Letter From India - 26th December 1943

“Was not allowed to date letters on board ship. The first letters I wrote I left on the ship when we were torpedoed !! = Between Phillpeville and India I think I wrote about 7 letters and sent one cable = Phillpeville is the place we stayed at in B.N.A. ( British North Africa). Managed to get a little kit there to replace the lost articles but am taking great care not to amass any items of value .. It broken my heart to leave behind my field boots and breeches and all those carefully selected pieces of kit , I did not think I could swim with field boots very well!! Anyway am not risking losing kit of any value again ... Incidentally I was a lot luckier than any of the other lads ... or more provident .. because after we were hit I knew it would be some time before we had to abandon ship so I changed into S. dress and put my Sam Browne on ( I was the only officer to save his belt and have been ragged mercilessly about it ) .. I then spent a nightmarish ten minutes trying to select articles of use that I thought I should be able to swim with ... do you remember that awful BBC game “ What records or books would you choose to have on a desert island , limited to 8 or something ‘Well my limit was weight’ My choice was the following:  
Wallet, Penknife, Razor blades – 1 dozen, cig. case, watch, shaving soap, handkerchief, Pencil, hair comb, 3 toothbrushes, toothpaste, Brandy flask, razor, 1/4 lb baccy in a sealed tin and a pipe, I chose my favourite pair of shoes – Shetland socks and a new collar and tie and clean underwear – put all this on with my Sam Browne S.O. Cap and life belt ... and was ready!!

And that is all I have left of my original kit. ... But I can still go on parade dressed as I would at Woolwich, in fact ½ hour after we were picked up, I had had a bath, shaved found somebody to clean my buttons and belt and was asked by a Colonel if I was a bloody survivor, because I did not look like one !! A pretty compliment but oh !! for all that kit. Ah me !!”

Sadly the only way that those in England will have got reports of this time in Africa, and the details of the troops ship sinking or being damaged, would have been from those who returned to England. Under no circumstances would letters have included any such details.

See letter 26th December 1943 Appendix 5

We do get a little more detail in a letter of the 7<sup>th</sup> Feb 1944 in which there is the following comment in response to a question from Joan in one of her letters

“ 3. I did not forget toilet rolls! Did I not tell you I was assigned to a raft and that means swimming!! Soap would soon melt – the raft was like those heavy things you saw in the Noel Coward film “In Which We Serve” fortunately at the last moment a boat came and took us off but it had no oars or anything – the propeller choked with wreckage – so we just drifted until a little 14 footer came and fetched us- actually that was one of the exciting moments jumping across several feet of deep, deep sea from a 20 foot life boat to a 14 footer , the swell was so terrific that the relative movement of the boats was about 10 feet – one being so much smaller than the other. So we waited until the lifeboat was on top then jumped down – almost as easy as that!! What wasn’t so easy was jumping from a 14 foot boat on to a 23000 tonner of course the little craft was at times nearly under the keel of the ship and the next moment 20 foot above up to the port holes. When it came to my turn to jump, I just managed the bottom rung of the iron ladder .. a poor do. Several men were lost by being crushed between the boats and the ship. But enough of this - am wasting paper.”

Tony sent a Christmas Greeting Airgraph from the Mediterranean and arrived in India on Christmas Eve. On the 26<sup>th</sup> Dec. he wrote home to Joan, and having giving some of his impressions of the country, recognising that he was about to embark on the “Story of My Indian Experience”

As already mentioned, Tony gave some details of his ship being torpedoed in the Mediterranean and how he carefully selected certain items to take when he abandoned ship.

In his first letter to Joan, Tony obviously planned to share as much of India as possible with his wife and love and so, having given some details of his survival in the Mediterranean he continued in a very pragmatic way:

“Before I start on the “Story of India and my Indian Experiences” etc , I had better give you some slang darling and the rates of exchange .. am busily learning Hindustani which is what most English people say when they speak on URDU, which is the proper name – There is another sort of dialect known as HINDI.

£1 = 13 ruppees and 5 annas

1 rupee = 16 annas

1 anna is about 1 1/8 pence

The purchasing power one rupee is about 1 shilling, but even at that computation things are dashed expensive.

Chitapeg = small whisky

Dhoby = laundry man

Char = tea

Wallah = boy

Charboy = sort of bed made of wood and string

Chattie = earthen ware bowl or basin

Tiffin = luncheon

Par-tree = water

Bearer = House servant

26<sup>th</sup> Dec 1943 from India

At first he was stationed under canvas near Bombay on the North West coast of India.

It is in the only letter to his mother from India dated 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1944 that Tony referred to the poem “Digit of the Moon”

*“Oh thou lovely incarnation of the Nectar-dropping moon,  
come down from heavens to lighten our darkness:  
Delight of the race of man: retaining in thy womanhood the  
dancing play of the waves of that sea of milk out of which thou  
were originally chosen by the Gods:*

*We the three worlds (ie of Childhood, Manhood and Age) do  
worship the orb of thy bosom that possesses for us a threefold  
mystical feminine energy, being a pitcher of milk for us when we  
are born, a pillow for us, in the middle of the path of life and a  
shrine in which we take refuge to die at the last”*

This poem has been found written out in full in a 1938 diary copied by Tony, probably from a book called A Digit of the Moon – A Hindu Love Story Translation by F.W.Bain The exact version from the book is in the Appendix10.

Appendix 10 – Digit of the Moon

He went on to describe a number of venues in Bombay and gave a detailed account of his meal at the Taj Mahal Hotel. He also planned to visit Calcutta while on leave.

2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1944 from India to Mater.

The short Airgraph on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan to Joan gives a vivid feel for the countryside presumably near Bombay, now called Mumbai and Tony was obviously touched by the visual beauty and the sounds at night.

By the 9<sup>th</sup> of January he had given himself a hangover on local hooch, been shopping in Calcutta which is on the other side of India from Bombay and had settled for a while in a tent the details of which he drew and described.



“The enclosed is not brilliant or even good but I have conceived the notion of sending to you little sketches of my life and so on; so you are a little more in the picture as it were and perhaps with practice ... if I have the time... I shall get some of the old

cunning back – it must be nearly 10 years since I ever so seriously put pencil to paper and of course pencil or crayon were not my forté.”

He wrote about how, in a discussion about the drawing: “Just had rather an amusing experience. Showed the enclosed sketch to a man who dabbles a bit and fancies himself .. he praised the drawing and started to give me some advice!! He is the merest dauber and I hate putting him “out of face”... so I told him as kindly as possible that I was a genius !!”

It is fascinating how Tony gave Joan the details of how to smooth out the folded picture by wetting it.

While at this camp Tony was given the responsibility of censoring his men’s letters home. In the following remark to Joan he demonstrates his feelings and concern for his men.

“When I censor the men’s letters here I realise how lonely everybody is .. and what trouble some of them have!! Fully 50% have faithless wives .. a percentage with other men’s children too – yet they are very forgiving – I suppose I should be in their place – It must be a long wait for the women – curiously enough all the men I went to Calcutta with remained absolutely faithful. I found with something of a shock that there were many determine men like myself who were going to remain celibate .. that was something of an eye opener and is I am sure quite a modern notion – in that state of unanimity – I always thought that man regarded himself as polygamous. It has taken war to prove it otherwise. Perhaps the world is a little more refined – less course - -- or more decadent.!!!”

He had arranged a number of gifts to be sent from Calcutta to Joan.

**From Joan's 1944 Special Diary**

“Had a parcel from Tony in morning lovely things – 2 bone storks (1 broken), 2 ebony elephants, ivory necklace and bracelet - money bracelet - ivory figure- ash tray, brass cigarette box and carved wood cigarette box.”

These did arrive and many of these items are still in family possession.

It is probable that Tony sent over other items including a large carved desk although her parents did have Indian items sent to them in the 1920s. I was brought up with the impression that the desk came from Tony.



He was only three or so months in India, moving to Ceylon early in March, and by the 15<sup>th</sup> January he had “the smell” of a “Transit Camp” in India miles from anywhere but with his own personal transport, a 15 cwt Chevrolet. Here he was to be involved in running the camp.

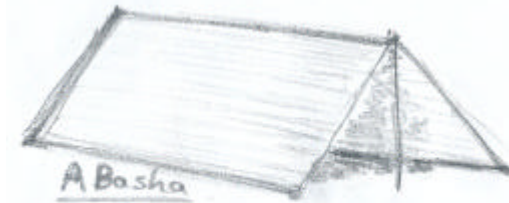
In a letter of the 15<sup>th</sup> January, Tony gives us an inkling of life with Indian servants and some of the fun derived from the language problems.



It is not absolutely clear but assumed that in late January, Tony moved from his first camp near Bombay to the Transit camp where the suggestion is that he was, to a large extent, responsible for running it.

He explains that he is going to have to manage an influx of 1000 Indian Soldiers and 100 British as well as some officers.

He has an officers mess tent made from an 18 foot by 12 foot basha, bought tables and curtains etc for it and decorated it with pictures of dancing girls – upsetting the Muslims.



A Basha. 12ft x 18 ft. A simple structure made from canvas or basketwork.

The letter of the 23<sup>rd</sup> January explains how he had a badminton court built by the coolies.

Life was obviously busy. He had to kick his cook for stealing eggs, and nearly killed a sacred cow on the road with his ghani (presumably some sort of vehicle – maybe the Chevrolet). Ever the artist, he found a lot of mud that turned out to be clay so he got 6 coolies to grind it and mix it with water so that he could do sculpture. Again the Hindus and Muslims were not impressed with his naked ladies.

This camp was somewhere in the region of Madras near the South East Coast of India, about two hundred miles from Ceylon now called Sri Lanka. It is surprising to observe how settled he seemed at this camp, not only building a bungalow but also having a garden and a pond and keeping geese and ducks. Strong images of British Raj shine through many of his letters from India and he seemed, in such a short time, to fit into the culture, although at the same time missing his home and family intensely.

He describes the Indian Hill crafts in silver and gives a wonderful description of being helped by a number of Indians with a hammer when his vehicle broke down:

“My car broke down in the village yesterday and in a trice I had a Sepoy, a Havildon, a Sikh, a Jungle-walla and a village boy all trying to put it right – within ½ hour they had my car in pieces all over the road. I did not think that they would be able to get it together again. However with repeated “Thie hari’s” ( That’s ok) and much hitting with large hammers the whole thing was blown and cleared and shaken until it fell together again – then came the great moment “ the Sahib will start the Gari” I got in very imperiously and of course nothing happened. – The disappointment on their faces was pathetic, so mercilessly caning the starter I pushed and pulled and pumped everything .. until with a hideous roar the thing broke into life – Gosh the smile and congratulations “Bahnet Achhahha” (very good ) “Thie hari” and the whole works !! Then came the great moment “Bachsheesh” .{Baksheesh = gratuity}.....”

By the time of writing on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb,Tony somehow had made a pond on which lived geese and ducks.

He is settled, doing gardening, with a determination to produce a green lawn, and having again further experience of the unusual behaviour of the Indians. On one occasion his bearer decided that Tony needed a more interesting meal and so served up roast duck. Once he realised what he was eating, he had to severely question his bearer, dealing with political responses that allowed the truth, (that he was eating one of his own egg laying ducks,) to emerge only slowly. When dealing with a coy miserable Bearer, also called Goffer, and occasionally referred to as a slave, it was difficult not to find the situation funny.

5<sup>th</sup> Feb from India

In his next letter he touched on the mysteriousness of India and how strange things can appear to happen to an individual, perhaps because of the moonlight, the hot nights and the electric tension in the air associated with clouds. He was pleased to have found out the true details of the Bengal Famine of 1943 in which up to 4 million people died and which was probably exacerbated by the war and poor British administration.

7<sup>th</sup> Feb from India

By late February he had the bungalow built in a position to suit himself and there is a wonderful description of how he had numerous “coolies” removing the top of a hill to give a flat area for the base. He continued to have domestic troubles with staff, minor theft and managing his geese.





It seems, as one would expect in war, that there were problems with postal deliveries, and letters came through in blocks and often very late. Tony and Joan set up a numbering system but this is difficult to follow as many letters are missing. It is fortunate that Tony did put dates on many of his letters. We have about 12 letters from India and Ceylon and copies of 2 from Joan to Tony.

In early March 1944 he was moving to Ceylon, having decided to stay with the Royal Artillery. Because of his good work at the transit camp, he had been offered a Captain posting with a Majority in six months in "Ordinance" and was torn between this and staying with his Gunners. However the order to move arrived and so off to Ceylon with the Royal Artillery. Here he worked on headquarters staff for the next few months, stationed somewhere near Columbo.

In his first letter from Ceylon, Tony referred to a gift for Joan bought in Madras and then listed the clubs that he now knows well on the Indian Continent.

The letters give little detail about the work that Tony was doing but we get the impression that he was extremely busy helping to manage a number of army personnel including a large number of Indians at a time when, of course, India was still part of the British Empire and so the British Army will have felt that it "owned" the place.

This colonial attitude does come through in Tony's letters from time to time but there are reports later about how well he was respected by the Indians, as well as other soldiers, and how important that this was.

In Ceylon, instruction on the 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun



Apart from the occasional after effect of too much alcohol or the strange hooch that was available over there, he was not ill except from the minor ailments of tummy trouble and prickly



heat caused by the very high temperature. Once in Ceylon the heat was tremendous, such that working long hours in the hot humid climate was exhausting. In Ceylon he was working at Headquarters and obviously very busy but at what is not clear. I suppose it must have been associated with the business of keeping an army up to scratch and in readiness for an invasion of Malaya or Burma. These countries had been occupied by the Japanese a few years before and Malaya was where, as it so happens, Joan's cousin, John Davis, was operating with SOE and the Malaysian Communists, in the jungle behind the lines.



Ceylon 1943

There was no reference in Tony's letters regarding the risks of invasion in Ceylon. As far as he reported, he was there only in transit to Malaya. Ceylon was in fact invaded by the

Japanese on Easter Sunday 5th April 1942. It was an air raid and their objective was to destroy the British Eastern Fleet in Columbo harbour. The result was quite a mess but the defence by the British was sustained by the RAF and the Heavy Anti-aircraft Artillery and there was not a second attack.

The ambience and scenery of the Indian continent had a powerful effect on Tony and some of his letters are worth reading for the descriptions of both India and Ceylon. The frustration and sadness that he experienced, of enjoying the places and yet not being able to share them with Joan, comes though and there is a determination that they should travel there in better times.



A Photograph of Mount Lavinia Hotel which was use as an Army Depot and Hospital throughout the war  
In a letter written on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1944 we see the tension; he so much enjoys the life out in Ceylon and would love to share with

Joan the pleasant aspects of the place, and yet is worrying about the dangers experienced by those at home during the 2<sup>nd</sup> blitz.

“Afraid that the atmosphere is so devitalising and the wonders around are with one, night and day, that I am becoming blasé”  
“Maurice Callow told me about some of the calamities to his friends at home ... it is simply appalling, the number of private houses that have been demolished.”

Also he has to fully take on the role of supporter and advisor in difficult issues from thousands of miles away, as is described later, as well as in the day to day life of his wife. “I do not know what to advise about the Theodolite – it might be dashed useful after the war if we ever go surveying or if Raoul decides to become an architect. – I rather think he will. Both his Grandfathers were sufficiently clever to. I think he will be quite a good engineer or architect.

.... Your music and painting will almost certainly not bear fruition... Though even in the music he may be influenced by both his grandmothers.”

It is unclear whether this last sentence is to be read as an indictment on Joan’s drawing and musical skills, which in fact were considerable, or whether he felt that now that she was married with a child there was going to be little time to develop her talents.

After the war Joan did in fact return to the piano and qualify and later took up painting. However it maybe that whereas she was highly skilled in both fields, Tony had picked up on her difficulty with allowing the true “artist within” to emerge.

The letters from Ceylon are less detailed about his activities than those from India and it seems that he is living a very busy

routine life in a settled environment. He is in charge of a number of Madras Indians within the British Army, Ceylon Command. Occasionally his letters give a flavour of life in Ceylon, particularly the heat, which is not surprising since the country is only about 500mile north of the Equator. Tony is mesmerised by the intensity of the colour and the mystery of the Indian Continent.

There is no doubt that despite his ability to throw himself wholeheartedly into his work and general life style out there, including swimming in the sea and sailing, he is seriously missing home. He was aware of the blitz occurring in London and the major cities of England, and that Joan had evacuated with their son to the Midlands and later to Meols.

“Thanks you so much darling for the photographs. As I opened your letter the envelope released a tiny puff of your scent and I nearly cried – The photographs and the scent and suddenly you were here !! I felt terribly lonely – Life is such a hell at times – it is now nine months.”



And yet in the same letter  
“Oh I almost forgot . My yacht is finished at last . She is a trim little craft and I have quite a lot of relaxation rigging her and so on... Have not raced her yet as I am having trouble with the luff of the jib. It’s been an awful scrounge getting sail cloth etc. and so many of the fittings have to be improvised. ...”

22 July 1944 from Ceylon

“..... You know how fond of golf I am – well after immense difficulty I managed to get some clubs and balls .. the club is 2 miles up the road .. BUT during a period of 4 months I have not mustered sufficient energy to achieve the target of walking up for a game !! That’s Ceylon.”

The term is synchronicity:

At about the age of about 23 for a few years I possess an old sailing boat of similar size although a gaff rig, soon after getting married. It had never been mentioned that Tony had a boat and record of this only appeared when the condolence letters were found in the archive.

## Comment

From Tony’s letters back to England and from Joan’s diaries we have been able to piece together some of the first seven months of 1944 of life as seen by Tony.

The letters give us so much insight into India and Ceylon that these have been transcribed in Appendix 5 as accurately as possible.

Reading these letters is a surreal experience. From them, one gleams the normal emotions of someone away from home and the wonder and pleasure derived from seeing a new and exciting country. But bearing in mind that he was in the middle of a devastating war, with the Japanese knocking on India’s doorstep in Burma and Malaya, so much of his life seems to be on a gently routine army nature. In fact, apart the work on Anti-Aircraft guns in Scotland and being sunk by a torpedo in the Mediterranean, Tony saw no action. Having said that the episode in the Mediterranean had been traumatic, not because of what happened to him but because of seeing men lost at sea. One can make comparison with the life of his Father-in-law in the trenches in WW1 as a Royal Engineer or Joan’s cousin John Davis in the Jungle in Malaya. To us, sixty years later, it seems the whole British Empire attitude is astounding, and it is not surprising that, two years after the war ended, India demanded and achieved independence.

Tony seemed absolutely at ease with the lifestyle demanded by his position as an Officer in the Indian Army and writes about his experiences with those around him in true colonial style although, as will be reported later, he took his responsibilities and the requirements of care for those under him very seriously.