ERNIE PYLE

G. I. JOE

OVERSEAS EDITIONS, INC.

G. I. JOE

OVERSEAS EDITIONS, Inc.

New York

Published originally by
Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
New York

This book is a compilation from *Here is Your War* and *Brave Men.*

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

NORTH AFRICA: November, 1942–June, 1943

SICILY: June–September, 1943

ITALY: December, 1943–April, 1944

ENGLAND: April–May, 1944

FRANCE: June–September, 1944

1. CONVOY TO AFRICA

A TRIP by troop transport in convoy is a remarkable experience. I came to Africa that way.

Convoys are of three types: slow ones, made up of freighters carrying only supplies; medium-fast troop convoys, which run with heavy naval escort; and small convoys of swift ocean liners, carrying vast numbers of troops and depending for safety mainly on their speed. Our convoy from England to Africa was the second type. We were fairly fast; we carried an enormous number of troops; and we had a heavy escort, although no matter how much escort there is, it never seems enough. The ships in our convoy were both British and American, but the escort was entirely Royal Navy.

At noon one late October day, I got the word we were to leave London that night. There were scores of last-minute things to do: I'd sent my laundry off that morning and there was no hope of getting it back, so I had to rush out and buy extra socks and underwear. The army was to pick up my bedroll at 2:00 P.M. to take it somewhere for its mysterious convoy labelings.

Everything else I had to pack in a canvas bag and my army musette bag. Four friends came and had a last diner with me. At leaving I put on my army uniform for the first time, and said goodbye to civilian clothes for God knew how long. My old brown suit, my dirty hat, my letters—all the little personal things went into a trunk to remain in London, and I would probably never see it again. I felt self-conscious and ridiculous and old in army uniform.

It was nighttime. I took a taxi to the designated meeting place; other correspondents were there when I arrived. Our British papers were taken away for safekeeping by the army and we were told to take off our correspondents' arm bands, for they might identify us to lurking spies, if any, as a convoy party. Then an army car picked us up and drove clear across London through the blackout; I lost

all track of where we were. Finally we stopped at a little-used suburban station and were informed we'd have two hours to wait before the troop train came. We paced the station platform, trying to keep warm. It was very dark and it seemed the train would never come. When it finally did, we piled into two compartments and I fell asleep immediately.

We sat up all night on the train, sleeping a little, as I had at first, but not much because it was too cold. We hadn't known what port we were going to, but on the way somebody told us the embarkation point. We were all surprised, and some of the boys had never even heard of the place.

Just after daylight our train pulled up alongside a huge ship. We checked in at an army desk in the pier shed, gathered our baggage, and climbed aboard, feeling grubby and cold but very curious. Our party was assigned to two cabins, four men in each. The staterooms were nice, better than any of us had expected, and much the same as in peacetime, except for an extra bunk built in over each bed. Many officers were in cabins far more crowded than ours.

We all expected to sail shortly after getting aboard, but we had forgotten that the ship had to be loaded first. Actually we didn't sail for forty-eight hours. All during that time one long troop train after another, day and night, pulled alongside and unloaded its human cargo. Time dragged on. We stood at the rails and watched the troops marching aboard. They came through the rain, heavily laden—in steel helmets, in overcoats, carrying rifles and huge packs on their backs. It was a thrilling sight, and a sad sight too, in a way, to see them marching in endless numbers up the steep gangway to be swallowed into the great ship.

They came on silently, most of them. Now and then one would catch sight of somebody he knew at the rail, and there would be a shout. For men who were going off to war, they carried odd things aboard. Some had books in their hands, some carried violin or banjo cases. One soldier led a big black dog. And one, I found later, carried two little puppies under his shirt. Like the Spartan boy in the story, he was almost scratched to death, but he had paid $32 for the pups and he treasured them.

The British (ours was a British ship) are finicky about allowing

dogs on troop transports. The officers ordered all dogs turned in. They said they'd be sent ashore, and promised that good homes would be found for them. Somehow the dogs disappeared and were never located by the officers. But the morning we filed off the boat in North Africa and began the long march to our quarters, a black dog and two little puppies from England marched with us up the strange African road.

After two days of loading American soldiers aboard our troopship, and of hoisting aboard thousands of bedrolls and barracks bags, we sailed at last. It was a miserable English day, cold, with a driving rain; too miserable to be out on deck to watch the pier slide away. Most of us just lay in our bunks, indifferent even to the traditional last glance at land. Now it was all up to God—and the British Navy.

Our ship carried thousands of officers and men and a number of army nurses. I felt a little kinship with our vessel, for I'd seen her tied up in Panama two years before. I never dreamed then that someday I'd be sailing to Africa on her.

The officers and nurses were assigned to the regular cabins used by passengers in peacetime. The soldiers were quartered below decks, in the holds. The ship had once been a refrigerator ship, but all the large produce-carrying compartments had been cleared out, and there the men were packed in. Each compartment was filled with long wooden tables, with benches at each side. The men ate at those tables, and at night slept in white canvas hammocks slung from hooks just above.

It seemed terribly crowded, and some of the men complained bitterly of the food, and didn't eat for days. Yet many of the boys said it was swell compared to the way they had come over from home to Britain. Sometimes I ate below with the troops, and I'll have to say that their food was as good as ours in the officers' mess, and I thought that was excellent. On any troop transport, some crowding is unavoidable. It's bad, but I don't know how else enough men could be shipped anywhere fast enough.

The worst trouble aboard was a lack of hot water. The water for washing dishes was only tepid, and there was no soap. As a result

the dishes got greasy, and some troops got a mild dysentery from it. In our cabins we had water only twice a day—7:00 to 9:00 in the morning and 5:30 to 6:30 in the evening. It was unheated, so we shaved in cold water. The troops took lukewarm salt-water showers, by army orders, every three days.

The enlisted men were allowed to go anywhere on deck they wished, except for a small portion of one deck set aside for officers. Theoretically the officers weren't permitted on the enlisted men's deck, but that regulation soon broke down. We correspondents could go anywhere we pleased, being gifted and chosen characters.

Instructions for "battle stations" in case of attack were issued. All officers were to stay in their cabins, all soldiers must remain below. Troops in the two bottom decks, down by the water line, were to move up to the next two decks above. Only we correspondents were to be allowed on deck during an attack. Being useless as well as gifted, we were honored with the divine right of getting ourselves shot if that was what we wanted.

American gunners manned all the ship's guns, but they never had to fire a serious shot. On our first morning out, all the ships in the convoy tested their guns, and for a while it was a vivid and noisy display of shooting all over the place.

We correspondents knew where we were going. Some of the officers knew too, and the rest could guess. But an amazing number of soldiers had no idea where they were bound. Some of them thought we were going to Russia over the Murmansk route, others thought our destination was Norway, and still others thought it was Iceland. A few sincerely believed we were returning to America. It wasn't until the fifth day out, when advice booklets were distributed on how to conduct ourselves in North Africa, that everybody knew where we were bound.

The first couple of days at sea our ship seemed to mill around without purpose. Then we stopped completely, and lay at anchor for a day. But finally we made our rendezvous with other ships and at dusk—five days after leaving London—we steamed slowly into a prearranged formation, like floating pieces of a puzzle drifting together to form a picture. By dark we were rolling, and the first weak ones were getting sick.

The sea was fairly rough for a couple of days, and there was

considerable seasickness. Especially below, among the troops. But they handled themselves well, and the holds didn't get into the frightful condition they do on some voyages.

After a while the sea calmed, and it was in the main a happy voyage. The soldiers were routed out at 6:30 A.M., and at 10:00 A.M. every day they had to stand muster and have boat drill for an hour. Outside of that they had little to do, and passed the time just standing around on deck, or lying down below reading, or playing cards. There wasn't any saluting on board during the whole trip. Lots of the soldiers started growing beards.

It's a terrific task to organize a shipful of troops. It was not until our convoy had been at sea nearly a week that everything got settled down and running smoothly. An Air Force colonel was appointed commanding officer of troops on board. An orderly room was set up, aides were picked, deck officers appointed, and ship's regulations mimeographed and distributed. The troops were warned about smoking or using flashlights on deck at night, and against throwing cigarettes or orange peels overboard. A submarine commander can spot a convoy, hours after it has passed, by such floating debris.

The warning didn't seem to make much impression at first. Soldiers threw stuff overboard, and one night a nurse came on deck with a brilliant flashlight guiding her. An officer near me screamed at her. He yelled so loudly and so viciously that I thought at first he was doing it in fun.

"Put out that light, you blankety blank-blank! Haven't you got any sense at all?"

Then suddenly I realized he meant every word of it, and her one little light might have killed us all.

The ship, of course, was entirely blacked out. All entrances to the deck were shielded with two sets of heavy black curtains. All ports were painted black and ordered kept closed, but some people did open them in the daytime. In the holds below, the ports were opened for short periods each day, to air out the ship. If a torpedo hit when many of the ports were open, however, enough water might rush in to sink her immediately if she listed.

Everybody had a life preserver, and had to carry it constantly.

These were of a new type, rather like two small pillows tied together. They went on over the head, were pulled down over the shoulders and chest, and then tied there. We merely slung them over our shoulders for carrying. They were immediately nicknamed "sandbags."

After the second day we were ordered to wear our web pistol belt, with water canteen attached. Even going to the dining room, we had to take our life preserver and our water canteen.

There were nine members of our special little group. We were officially assigned together, and we stuck together throughout the trip. We were: Bill Lang, of *Time* and *Life;* Red Mueller, of *Newsweek;* Joe Liebling, of the *New Yorker;* Gault Macgowan, of the New York *Sun;* Ollie Stewart, of the Baltimore *Afro-American;* Sergeant Bob Neville, correspondent for the Army papers *Yank* and *Stars and Stripes;* two army censors, Lieutenants Henry Meyer and Cortland Gillet; and myself.

Sergeant Neville, being an enlisted man, wasn't permitted to share cabin space with us, but had to go to general quarters in the hold and sleep in a hammock. We did manage to get him up to better quarters after a couple of days. Neville was probably the most experienced and traveled of all of us—he spoke three languages, was foreign news editor of *Time* for three years, had worked for the *Herald Tribune* and *PM,* was in Spain for that war, in Poland for that one, in Cairo for the first Wavell push, and in India and China and Australia. But he turned down a commission and went into the ranks, and consequently he had to sleep on floors, stand for hours in mess line, and stay off certain decks.

Ollie Stewart was a Negro, the only American Negro correspondent then accredited to the European theater. He was well-educated, conducted himself well, and had traveled quite a bit in foreign countries. We all grew to like him very much on the trip. He lived in one of the two cabins with us, ate with us, played handball on deck with the officers, everybody was friendly to him, and there was no "problem."

We correspondents already knew a lot of the officers and men aboard, so we roamed the ship continuously and had many friends.

Bill Lang and I shared a cabin with two lieutenants. We'd get out the regulations about correspondents, which said that we must be treated with "courtesy and consideration" by the army. We'd read those rules aloud to Lieutenants Meyer and Gillett, and then order them to light our cigarettes, and shine our shoes. Humor runs pretty thin on a long convoy trip.

Our troopship had a large hospital, and it was filled most of the time. The long train rides in unheated cars across England seemed to have given everybody a cold, and it was a poor man indeed who couldn't sport a deathlike cough aboard ship. We even had two pneumonia cases, both of whom pulled through. I myself came down with one of the Ten Best Colds of 1942 the day after we got aboard, and spent the next five days in bed, feigning seasickness. But the ship was lousy with army doctors, so I had lozenges, injections and consultations, all without charge.

The ship had never carried American troops before, and the British waiters were somewhat shocked by the appetites and the dining-room manners of the younger officers. Second lieutenants, muscular and still growing, would order a complete second dinner after finishing the first. And betweentimes they'd get up and serve themselves with bread, carry off their own plates, play loud tunes on their glasses with their forks, make rude jokes about the food, and generally conduct themselves in a manner unbecoming to the dignity of a British cruise-ship waiter. Also, smoking was prohibited in the dining room. The poor waiters had a terrible time enforcing it, but finally succeeded. I must say, in behalf of the British, that they finally broke down and entered into the spirit of the thing. Eventually, I think, they enjoyed the wild West camaraderie as much as the Americans did.

Those of us in the cabins were awakened at seven each morning by the cabin steward, bearing cups of hot tea. Meals were in two sittings, an hour apart. The headwaiter wore a tuxedo at dinnertime and, as I have said, the food was excellent. We had fried eggs and real bacon for breakfast every morning—the first real eggs I'd tasted in four months. There was also tea in the afternoon, and sandwiches at night.

Once under way, two canteens were opened for the troops. One

sold cigarettes, chocolates, and so forth; the other, called a "wet canteen," sold hot tea. There was a constant long queue at each one. Soldiers often had to stand in line for three hours.

There was a bar in the evening for soft drinks, but no liquor was sold. Some officers brought whiskey aboard, but it was all gone after a day or two, and from then on it was probably the driest ocean voyage ever made. As someone observed, "We catch it both ways. We can't smoke in the dining room because it's a British ship, and we can't buy liquor because it's an American trooper."

Of all the spots on earth where rumors run wild, I think a convoy trooper must lead, hands down. Scores of rumors a day floated about the ship. We got so we believed them all, or didn't believe any.

It was rumored we would rendezvous with a big convoy from America; that an aircraft carrier had joined us; that we'd hit Gibraltar in six hours, twenty-four hours, two days; that the ship behind us was the *West Point,* the *Mount Vernon,* the *Monterery;* that we were eighty miles off Portugal, and two hundred miles off Bermuda. None of these turned out to be true.

The rumormongering got so rife that one officer made up a rumor to the effect that we were going to Casablanca, and timed it to see just how long it would take to encircle the ship. It came back to him, as cold fact right from the bridge, in just half an hour.

The trip had no sooner started than rehearsals for an enlisted men's variety show began. I believe you could take any thousand soldiers in our army, and out of them create a good orchestra. From our troops they dug up an accordionist, saxophonist, trumpeter, violinist, two banjo players, a dancer, a tenor, a cowboy singer and several pianists—all professionals. They rehearsed every afternoon. The big night came a couple of evenings before we got to Gibraltar. They put on two shows that night, for the enlisted men only. It was a burlesque, and I mean burlesque. Word got around, and the officers and nurses wanted to see it. So the night we were approaching Gibraltar they put it on again. They cleaned it up some, by the colonel's request, but it still sparkled.

The show went over terrifically. There was genuine talent in it, and serious music, as well as the whiz-bang stuff. But the hero of the evening was a hairy corporal—Joe Comita of Brooklyn—who did a strip-tease burlesque of Gypsy Rose Lee. His movements were pure genius. Gypsy herself couldn't have been more sensuous. Joe twirled and stripped, twirled and stripped. And then when he was down to his long heavy GI underwear he swung to the front of the stage, lifted his veil, and kissed a front-row colonel on top of his bald head!

The whole show was marvelously good, but there was something more to it than just that. There was the knowledge, deep in everybody's mind, that this was our night of danger. The radio had just brought word that Germany's entire U-boat pack was concentrated in the approaches to Gibraltar. More than fifty submarines were said to be waiting for us. I doubt there was a soul on board who expected the night to pass without an attack.

It was a perfect night for romance or for death. The air was warm and the moon laid a brilliant sheen across the water. By its very gentleness, the night seemed in collusion with the evil that lay beneath the waters. And in that environment the boys went buoyantly through their performances. We sat with life preservers on and water canteens at our belts. We laughed and cheered against a background of semiconscious listening for other sounds.

As the show ended a major whom I did not know turned to me and said, "That's wonderful, those boys doing that when they're being taken to war like galley slaves down there in the hold. When you think of people at home squawking their heads off because they can have only twenty gallons of gasoline, it makes my blood boil."

Our ship had two funnels, or smokestacks. The forward one was a dummy—empty inside. About three feet from its top a steel platform had been built. It was reached by a steel ladder. The army kept a lieutenant and three enlisted men up there all the time, on lookout with binoculars.

It was a grandstand seat and I went up almost every afternoon. Lieutenant Winfield Channing, who had charge of an antiaircraft

battery, usually had the afternoon watch up there, and we'd chat for hours about his job before the war, and of our chances for the future, and of what we'd do when it was over. The sun was bright, the funnel sides cut off the wind, there were deck chairs, and it was really like a few square feet of Miami Beach. We called our little post "The Funnel Club." From our perch we could get a perfect view of the convoy's zigzagging maneuvers. Once we saw three rainbows at once, one of them making a horseshoe right over the ship. Occasionally on the horizon we could dimly sight a sailing sloop or a fishing vessel.

My special hangout down below was in a section where I ran onto a bunch of soldiers from New Mexico, where my home is now. One of them was Sergeant Cheedle Caviness, a nephew of Senator Hatch. Cheedle had grown a blond mustache and goatee, and looked like a duke.

There was no trouble at all among the troops during the voyage but we did have a couple of small "incidents" in the officers' section of the ship. One officer, monkeying with his revolver in his cabin, "didn't know it was loaded" and shot a nice hole through the wardrobe, thoughtfully missing his cabinmates. Another officer was arrested for taking pictures of the convoy.

The troop commander issued orders that no movies were to be shown during the trip and that electric razors were not to be used. He was afraid the enemy could pick up our position from the current, but we found out later this precaution had been unnecessary.

We got radio news broadcasts twice a day from BBC. It was rumored they would be discontinued after we were a couple of days at sea, but they weren't. They were piped over the ship by loud-speakers so that the troops could hear the news.

Chaplains aboard ship said that church attendance among the troops went up noticeably after we sailed, and continued to rise as we approached submarine waters.

The nurses and doctors aboard were mainly from Roosevelt Hospital in New York. There were two other detachments of nurses on other ships in the convoy, we learned later. The nurses teamed up with the officers and together they played cards, walked the decks,

sat in the lounge. That moonlight was pretty enchanting, and I wouldn't be surprised if some romances got started.

As time wore on, acquaintanceships grew broader and broader, just as they do on a peacetime cruise. The days were purposeless and without duties, yet they seemed to speed by. For many of us the trip was a grand rest. Toward the end some of us even hated to have it over—we felt the sad sense of parting from new friends and of returning to old toils, and we were reluctant. But war doesn't humor such whims.

I had often wondered in just what sort of formation a big convoy moved, and whether a person could see the whole thing all the time or not, and how the escort vessels acted.

Well, ours was a medium-big convoy. The day we left, we counted a certain maximum number of ships. We were never able to count the same number again until we got almost to port. Not because they were out of eye range, but because they were lined up in rows and we couldn't see those behind other ships. Usually our convoy was wider than it was long, which surprised me.

The convoy seemed to use three or four different geometric patterns. Every little while the entire formation changed from one pattern to another, like a football team shifting after a huddle. It was fascinating to watch some ships speed up, others drop back, and the new pattern take shape. In addition, the entire convoy, moving in unison, zigzagged constantly. The turns were sudden, and so sharp that the ships would heel over. These zigzags were made at frequent intervals—very frequent when we were in suspicious waters.

British corvettes and warships were ahead and on all sides of us. They didn't do much dashing about, but seemed to keep their positions just as steadily as we kept ours. In the daytime we ran half a mile or so apart, and at night the entire convoy tightened up. Then we could distinguish two or three dark shapes close around us. I do not know whether it was true, but they said we had additional escorts out of sight over the horizon.

So far as we know, the convoy had only one "incident" during the entire trip. Our ship was on the outside. The corvette on out

beyond us and the transport running aft of us both signaled that a torpedo had passed just behind us and just ahead of the other transport.

The corvettes dashed around and dropped depth charges, and that was all there was to it. Nobody on our ship saw the torpedo, and nobody at all saw the submarine.

As we progressed southward, the weather became downright heavenly—softly warm and so calm that there was no roll whatever in the ship. Often the voyage seemed like a peacetime tropical cruise, instead of a packed trooper going dangerously to war. Many soldiers slept on deck those last few nights, and for the last three we were all ordered to sleep in our clothes. It would be wrong to deny that people were tense those days, but it also would be wrong to say that fear was shown by anybody.

Dawn and dusk were the crucial times, and the last two mornings I managed to get awake and on deck just before daylight. I never saw any submarines, but I saw two of the most thrilling sunrises I've ever known.

As we drew closer and closer to journey's end, we acquired a feeling something akin to family love for our team of ships. We had come so far together, had so perfectly consummated our endless shifting of formation, our eternal zigzagging. We somehow became like an enormous oceanic machine, engaged in a giant rhythmic rotation, our ability to go on and on forever ensured by the perfection of our own discipline.

Hour after hour I stood at the rail looking out over that armada of marching ships—they did really seem to march across the ocean—and an almost choking sense of its beauty and power enveloped me.

At last we came to the Strait of Gibraltar—to lights on both sides of us—and then on into the calmness of the Mediterranean. We still sailed a long time, still in danger waters, but a pleasant relief took hold of us.

We started to pack. We were issued our desert gear of dust masks, water purifiers, and so on. We tipped our stewards, returned borrowed books, traded our money for the new American issue, and took down outfit numbers, for looking up new army friends.