

CHAPTER FOUR

The Suitcase Set

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Volume 2 of 8

G3SDS



G8SDS

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I went down to the bar at about seven, the room was well occupied and, to judge by their different uniforms, this was a very mixed bunch. The ranks ranged from Major down to those with no badges on their shoulders or sleeves. There were Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans in evidence as well as a variety of Regimental insignia from Britain. The majority were from the army; a few wore Naval uniforms. I couldn't see any from the RAF. It was difficult to estimate their ages; many were a deep mahogany colour due to long exposure to the sun. I would have guessed that most were in their twenties and thirties with a few much older, in fact, positively ancient. It was the first time I had seen commissioned and non-commissioned ranks socialising together.

I ordered a gin and tonic. When it arrived, I asked the cost. 'All drinks are on the house,' the barman said. Whilst I was still getting over my surprise, I was joined by Ron Simpson. 'Yes,' he said, 'from now on you will have no personal expenses. When you go operational, gold coins, dollars and local currency will be provided. I think the paper money, other than US Dollars, is printed in the UK, but this is very hush, hush.'

We took our drinks over to an unoccupied table and sat down. 'When we go into the dining room,' Simpson explained, 'you will see two large tables. We can sit at either of these. Our daily rations, with very restricted variety, are provided by the Army Catering Corps. So, dinner is always a choice of a meat dish or salad. Don't ask what sort of meat; it could be goat, sheep, camel or some other mysterious types, but not pork or beef. We have excellent cooks, who do what they can, but most of the meat is as tough as old boots. There's some compensation in that it can be washed down with a good South African wine.'

During the course of dinner and afterwards in the bar, over coffee and brandy, there were a number of questions directed at me by various people. These were fielded by Ron, who said, firmly, that when I returned from Palestine was the time for discussion. I excused myself at ten o'clock and had an early night.

At breakfast the next morning, I sat next to one of those whom I rather contemptuously described as 'ancient.' When we started to speak, I had difficulty in understanding his broad Scottish accent. 'How long have you been a member of MO4?' I asked. 'About nine months,' he said. 'I was recruited from my job as a mining engineer in Nigeria. I was told they

desperately needed people with experience in the use of explosives, and I've been using explosives in mining communities in Africa, for over thirty years. I arrived here just as the members from the LRDG joined us. They are very experienced in the use of explosives for blowing up planes, vehicles and oil installations so, being younger, they are preferred to me. As a result, I feel aggrieved. I've tried to get released back to my job but am constantly told to be patient.'

'I'm sorry to hear about your problem.' I responded. 'How old are you?' 'Fifty-two,' came the reply. 'I'm fit and healthy and don't believe there's anything in the work of MO4 that would be too much for me.'

'I think it was very good of you to volunteer. I hope you become part of a mission soon.' I said.

'How long is it since you have been back to Scotland?'

'I've never been back since I left over thirty years ago.' he said.

'I must say, I'm surprised you have retained such a broad accent.'

'Porridge every day for breakfast helps' he said with a smile.

Ron Simpson joined us at that moment and our conversation ceased. I said 'Cheerio' and we left the table.

The following morning, after breakfast, I was introduced to the other three people making up our party: Major Martin, Captain Henderson and Lieutenant Marshall. We were then taken, by one of the Conducting Officers, to Heliopolis, the RAF airfield for Cairo. We had quite a long wait before departure, during which time there was not much conversation, but I did learn that two of my companions were previously with the LRDG and the other, Lieutenant Marshall, the wireless operator, was from the Signals Corps. He told me that ten wireless operators from the Signals Corps, at present in the UK, would be joining MO4 but their arrival would be delayed. This was caused as it became necessary to take the long journey round the Cape of Good Hope while the Mediterranean was still controlled by the Italian fleet.

We eventually took off in a small De Havilland passenger plane. After a flight of nearly four hours, we arrived, cold and hungry, at an airfield near Haifa and thence, after bully beef, biscuits and a mug of tea, by truck, to Ramat David, where we arrived late in the afternoon. There were six American Harvard aircraft parked close to a hangar and plenty of activity, with trainees doing exercises and jumping off elevated platforms.

We were taken to the wood hut which was to be our billet for the next five days. The Chief Instructor told us that jumping was carried out in the

mornings. They made a 5 a.m. start, when the wind speed was usually at its lowest. In the morning, we would be taken to the dropping zone, to observe the procedure.

The following morning, we awoke to the sound of aircraft engines and planes taking off. Shortly after, we went to the dropping zone. Unfortunately, on that day, there was a 15/20 mph wind blowing, and this was considered to be a bit strong for those with little or no previous jumping experience. As a result, it presented a somewhat disorganised, if not chaotic, scene.

There were a number of groups of six, four and two, jumpers in the air and on the ground; individuals were being dragged along because they were unable to spill the wind from the canopy of the parachutes. A number of instructors were shouting through loud hailers to the descending jumpers. There were two ambulances picking up the injured, and one unfortunate individual, whose static line from the parachute had become entangled with his clothing, was swinging about under the aircraft, with the pilot circling the dropping zone, to give him time to take action. Eventually, the man became free and descended. We went to his assistance and found his face had been lacerated by the static line but otherwise he was uninjured. This was not a good introduction to parachuting for us but the situation was treated light-heartedly.

It certainly made us concentrate more when we commenced training.

CHAPTER FIVE

On the appointed day, at 4.30 a.m., we went to the packing shed and were issued with our parachutes. Then, joined by eight Paratroopers, to make up the full complement. This was also to be the first jump for them. We enplaned and, after attaching the clip of our static line, located at the back of the parachute, to a wire cable running the length of the fuselage, we sat, six on each side of the aircraft, on wood benches. The person in charge, the Dispatcher, told us we would be jumping in pairs, and after each pair had jumped out, the plane would make a circuit of the airfield before the next pair jumped. He explained that, when the red light by the door came on, we were to approach and stand by the door, one behind the other. When the red changed to green, he would shout 'Go' and the first person would jump, followed as soon as possible by the other. We would, as he put it, 'make the smartest left turn of our lives'. We would be jumping from 600 feet and, as soon as possible after the jump, we were to listen for instructions being

shouted from the ground. The aircraft then took off, all the trainees inwardly quaking and half afraid to look any of the others in the eye.

The red light came on; the first pair went to the door the light changed to green; both men leapt into space. Immediately, there was a thump, thump on the outside of the aircraft. 'They've hit the plane,' gasped one of the Paratroopers, and, to me, it sounded just like that. Unperturbed, the Dispatcher pulled in the two static lines, onto which were attached the fabric cases in which the parachutes had been packed. It was the noise of these striking the aircraft that we had heard. While waiting for my turn to jump - I was one of the fourth pair - I could not help thinking about that boozy old song: 'Ten green bottles, hanging on the wall.'

It came to my turn. I leapt through the door, my eyes firmly shut. I felt a tugging, then opened my eyes; my feet were above my head and my body had already starting a swinging motion. In a split second of panic, I wondered what they would put in the first telegram to my people back home. I took a grip on myself and began to assess the situation. Unfortunately, I had twists in my shroud lines so, not only was I oscillating from side to side and drifting but also twisting as the lines unravelled. Before I fully realised what was happening, I hit the ground while travelling backwards and was thankful for the heavy rubber headgear as the back of my head struck the ground. With the ordeal over, and 'ordeal' is the best word I can use for the experience, I rolled up my parachute in the manner we had been taught and returned it to the packing shed. We spent the remainder of the day doing more exercises.

We did two jumps on each of the two succeeding days. One minor casualty was Captain Henderson who, on the fourth jump, bruised his right ankle and was told that he would have to wait a few days to make the final training jump. On completion of the course, we had a party to celebrate the occasion. Next day I awoke with a sore head, an affliction made worse when Lieutenant Marshal and I travelled, in a truck, over bumpy roads to Mount Carmel. However, after a shower and an hour on my bed, I felt better but resolved to have nothing stronger to drink for a day or two, than fresh-pressed orange juice, of which there was a plentiful supply as the training school was located on the edge of an orange grove.

The following day, we met Major Rose, the Camp Commandant and Chief Instructor, with his staff of four. The school comprised a collection of eight wooden huts, in a delightful spot and, as we were now higher up, the day-time temperature was ideal. There were eight students being taught wireless

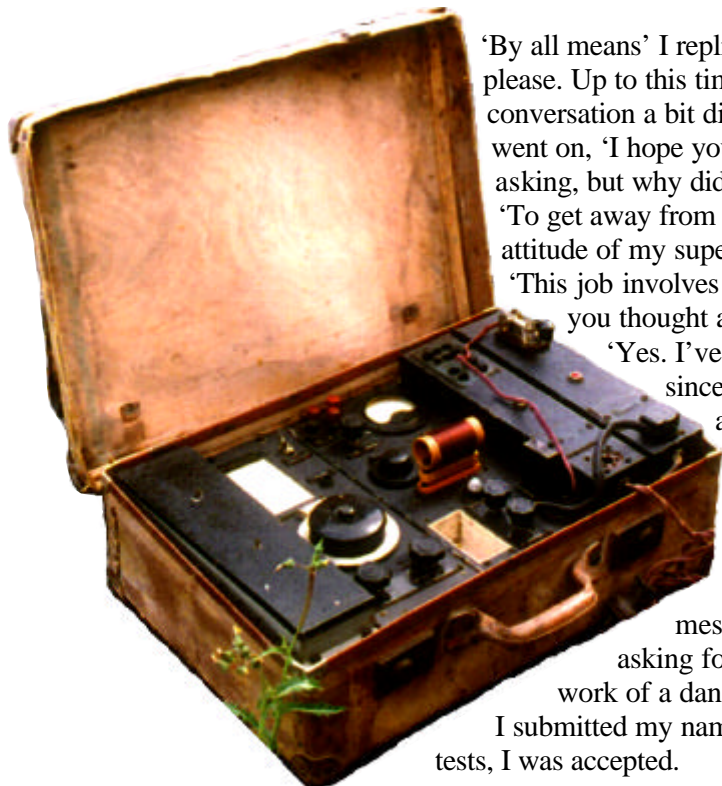
theory and practice together with Morse code. In addition, at a later date, they would be instructed in message coding.

In a hut devoted to wireless, Lt. Len Marshall and I were introduced by Sergeant Mason, the instructor to the wireless we would be taking with us when we were operational. It was contained in a medium-sized suitcase. I asked Sergeant Mason about the output power of the transmitter and told that it was between 9 and 12 watts. Since the power of the smallest set I had used before was 250 watts, I expressed my misgivings about the effectiveness of the small set in making regular contact.

'As you will know,' Mason explained, 'more output power means a bigger size and more weight. This set weighs 42 pounds and thought to be the maximum burden for one man to carry over rough country. The base station will be using a much more powerful transmitter, so receiving messages should be no problem. Transmitting messages from the field station to base and maintaining regular schedules is where skill and common sense are required. You will have the opportunity to try out your set' he added reassuringly. 'We have a regular, daily schedule with Cairo for up to one hour. I think you will be pleasantly surprised when you start operating.'

We then received instruction about the various components of the set. It could be operated using 110 volt or 240 volt mains supply, or from a 12 volt heavy duty car battery. We were provided with the various parts and then asked to assemble a set. There was not much involved in this as the component parts only required connecting together with external leads. When mine was complete, I switched on the receiver. The reception was good but there was much interference on the popular frequencies. I was happy with the result. The one remaining doubt was the transmitter. We had to wait for the next scheduled transmission time, 11.15 a.m. on the third day, to get an answer to our questions about this.

During the evening of the second day, Len Marshall asked me what I thought were our chances of making contact on the morrow. 'From the way Mason handled my query about the low power of the transmitter, I'm hopeful.' I replied. 'I've been in the Army since I was a boy,' Marshall said glumly. 'After training at the Signals School, I've only operated main station equipment and, since I gained my Commission, two years ago, I've become a pen pusher, on administrative work. My fist (the term used to describe the hand that operates the Morse key) will be a bit rusty. Do you think we could have a session of sending and receiving on a buzzer unit tomorrow?'



**A Suitcase Radio
Photographed at Blandford
Army Camp Dorset**

'By all means' I replied, anxious to please. Up to this time, I had found conversation a bit difficult with Len. I went on, 'I hope you don't mind my asking, but why did you join MO4?' 'To get away from the bureaucratic attitude of my superiors,' he said.

'This job involves personal risk. Have you thought about that?'

'Yes. I've been in the army since day one of the war and always working in some headquarters miles from any action, and hardly getting my hands dirty. When a

message was circulated asking for volunteers for work of a dangerous nature,

I submitted my name and, after various tests, I was accepted.

I'm looking forward to going on an operation and, if the going gets tough, I'll do my best to cope with the situation.' After a short pause he asked, 'Why did you join?'

'I really can't give you an answer. I suppose you could say it was because I was fed up with the delay in taking up on an another course and curiosity after discussion with Robins,' I told him.

'By the way, Len, do you have a second language?' 'No,' came the reply. 'How about you?'

'My French is passable because it was one of the subjects I liked at school and was improved by my being in France for the first nine months of the war. It might be useful.'

CHAPTER SIX

On the following day we received instruction in how to make contact with Cairo. The base station, at the appointed schedule time, would transmit a call sign for five minutes. The following five minutes was for us to transmit our call sign on a different frequency. The alternating five-minute sessions would continue for thirty minutes, or until contact was made, then messages would be passed. There would be two such scheduled times in every twenty-four hours.

At 11.15 we both switched on our sets and, without any trouble, the Cairo call sign was heard by both of us. Len made contact on the first transmission. Using different frequencies, I did not make contact until the third attempt. Signal strengths were exchanged and we each received a small coded message. Of course, at that time, we couldn't decode them. Mason ended the day's work by saying that we would spend the next two days receiving instruction on encoding and decoding.

Next morning found us back in the wireless training hut; Len and I seated at desks and Mason standing by a blackboard. 'Today we're going to deal with the method of coding and decoding messages. It's a simple idea and carried out without the use of a coding book that can be identified as such,' he began. 'This is the key to our method,' he continued, holding up a paperback novel and then handing each of us a copy of the same book. 'Before you go on operations, it will be your responsibility to go to a book shop in Cairo and buy two copies of the same paperback. One copy is to be given to the message coding section and you will retain the other. In addition to the book they will require from you a four-figure number that is known only to you, and it must be one you are unlikely to forget. Let us presume you were born on the 28th day of August, the 8th month, and you decide to use this as your secret number, it would be 2808. This is the number we will be using for our exercises.'

He tapped the blackboard and Len and I concentrated hard. 'We'll start by encoding the sort of message that could be sent to you by Cairo.'

Then turning again to the blackboard, he wrote in capital letters: EXPECT PLANE TONIGHT RIFLES AMMO COMMA TWO TWENTY MM CANNONS BOOTS AND CLOTHING FIRE PATTERN ARROW. 'No punctuation marks are used, unless essential for clarity. In which case they are spelt out. As you can see, I have introduced a comma after the word ammo. To encode a message, any page in the book, up to number 99 may be used. I've used page 34. Next, glance down the page and select any line that

has at least twelve letters in it. This time, we'll use line 14. As you can see, this reads:

Slipped quietly down the chimney and into the room a well-known Starting at the left, count the letters until you come to the twelfth. Then include any letters left in that word. As you can see, in our example, we have - *slipped quiet* plus *ly*. Take a piece of paper with ruled squares, you'll find some on your desk, and, starting at the top left hand corner, writing across the page, put one letter of the key words in each square.' On the blackboard, Mason wrote: S L I P P E D Q U I E T L Y

'Now, in the row underneath this, starting at the left, number off the letters according to their position in the alphabet. In our example 'D' is 1, the first 'E' 2, and the second 'E' 3, the first 'I' 4 and so on. The complete sequence is - 11 6 4 8 9 2 1 10 12 5 3 13 7 14. So, writing left to right, we have position in the alphabet. Are we OK so far?' 'Yes,' came our reply. 'Fine,' said Mason. 'The next thing to do is write our message into this grid but, before doing so, we insert eight or ten extraneous letters at the beginning and, later, at the end of the message. This is to make decoding more difficult if the message is intercepted by the enemy. So, we have: L E F A I B O C E X P E C T Next row - P L A N E T O N I G H T R I and so on. The additional letters I've used at the end are: C S A T D O A S T E G. The total number of letters must be divisible by 5. You will see the reason for this shortly.'

He waited while we filled in the grid. When we had finished, he said, 'The next two stages are the tricky bits but I'm sure you'll soon get the hang of it.'

Using the same piece of squared paper and leaving a few blank lines, copy the row of figures we have already used, 11 6 4 8 9 etc. Then start at column 1 in the first grid and read down the column, starts with the letters O O D W Write these into rows across the grid. After column 1 you follow on column 2 and so on. When you have done this, repeat the operation but this time, instead of writing the letters into a grid, write them on a piece of plain paper, in groups of five, across the page. This is why the total number of letters must be divisible by 5. Is this understood?

I was not too sure, so I asked him to repeat the two steps. This he did. 'Now,' he said, 'have a go at it. You may confer. While you are doing that I'll go and make us a cup of coffee.' When Mason returned, he allowed us to drink our coffee in peace before he asked how we had fared.

'Have you arrived at the finished message?' he asked. 'Yes,' said Len, our messages seem to be identical.' Mason then went to the blackboard and, copying from a card, chalked up:

5212 RSTOE LOTNY MRIRF ANAEA HAMDP ATTEM MFFWP
MNCOE ELOAI ISTLN TTEWH XORON CBOGC SGODG RTMAP

EOAON WNETB CINOF TTELA NCAIN ASCDS 5212

'The only difference between my version and yours should be the four figure numbers at the beginning and end of the message. These were obtained by adding the page and line numbers to the secret number. There is one difference between the way we do our addition and the normal method. No digits are carried if the total of the two numbers being added together is greater than 9. So, page and line 3414 plus secret number 2808 equals 5212. Can you see how the answer of 5212 comes about? do they compare?' After a bit of figuring, we said we were both happy about the method. 'Please swap papers,' he said. After comparison, all three messages were found to be identical.

Congratulations,' said Mason. 'I bet you found it easier than you thought. If the message is picked up by the enemy, the addition of the extraneous letters makes decoding more difficult, particularly if the message is split up and the parts sent at different times and on different frequencies. With a little practice, you will have no difficulty with encoding a message.'

He came and placed both hands on my desk. 'There's about an hour to go before lunch time. Will you both compose and encode a message. The content is not important. Then swap them, ready for decoding. We will deal with this aspect tomorrow.' We spent the afternoon profitably encoding a number of messages and discussing wireless procedures.

The following day, when we were once again assembled, Mason began with a summary of the previous work and then continued the lesson. 'As you may be aware, we have done the hard work. Decoding is just the reverse procedure of coding. Take the four-figure number in group one of the message and subtract from it the secret number. Again, in this case, if the lower figure is greater than the one above, do the subtraction without actually borrowing from the column on the left. Hence, $5212 - 2808 = 3414$ - our page and line number. Are you both happy about this?' 'Yes,' we replied. 'So,' he continued, 'we're back to SLIPPEDQUIETLY and the alphabetical numbering. Will you please carry out this operation.' When we had completed this, he continued - 'There is one more thing you'll need to know before you start decoding. When the message was encoded, you read down the columns and transposed the letters into rows across the grid. Now we do the reverse. Read across the rows and write down the columns. In order to put the letters in the columns, we need to know how many to put in each column. Do you agree?' We agreed.

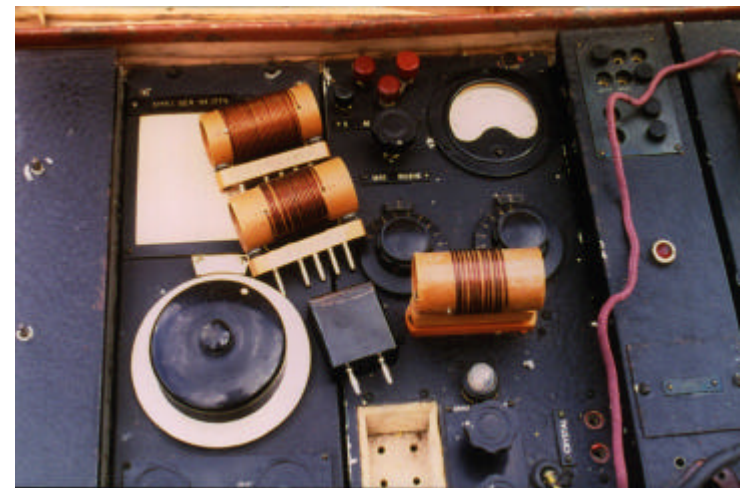
'In your wireless contact procedure you will have indicated to Cairo that you

have to send a message comprising of so many groups. We know each group is comprised of five letters, except the two containing the four figure numbers. So, if these two are deducted and the remaining figure multiplied by five, you then have the total number of squares that are required to accommodate the message. Rule off a line on the grid for this number of squares so that when entering letters in the column you know when to stop. I'll wait while you carry out this operation.' When we had finished he asked, again, 'Is everything OK?' 'Still with you,' I said. 'After transposing the letters for the first time, the procedure must be repeated to reveal the message.'

After we had reviewed the complete procedure, Mason asked us to decode the short messages received from Cairo on the previous day. 'The secret number and the paperback are the same as we have been using,' he assured us. This was accomplished without much difficulty. It was interesting to note that a different page and line had been used for each message and the content looked entirely dissimilar, but the decoded message was the same. He congratulated us in making contact at the first attempt.

'Well, that concludes the part of your training for which I'm responsible. I think you have made good progress,' Mason said. 'The method of coding is, as I said, simple and, who knows, at a later date, you may find it useful to use in your own private communications.' He gave us a knowing grin. 'Major Rose would like to see you now and I'll finish by wishing both of you good luck with your missions. Your wireless sets will be available tomorrow before you depart.'

We both thanked him for his assistance and said it had been a very interesting week. He then took us to Major Rose. When we had entered his office, Rose said jokingly to Mason, 'Were they carrot or stick students?' 'They worked well and soon understood the coding method,' Mason replied. Then, Rose turned to us and said, 'I know it's been a bit rushed, but Robins is like a cat on hot bricks at present because of the shortage of operators.' He picked up a piece of paper, read it swiftly and said, 'Ah, yes. Your plane is due to take off from Haifa at 10:15 tomorrow. Ron Simpson will meet you at Heliopolis (the airfield for Cairo). We hope you have a pleasant flight and happy landings when you go on the job.' We thanked them both and went to have a beer to celebrate another hurdle overcome.



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