

Field Marshal Lord Harding of Petherton (1896-1989)

Lord Harding prepared the following autobiographical notes in instalments in 1974, which he sent to Hanna Nicholas

1939-40	Training battalion in India - more and more frustrating as general view was that war could not last more than 6 months for financial reasons. Tried to persuade my battalion that they'd have more than enough of it before it ended.
Winter 1939-1940	Operations on North West Frontier - covering building a road in Waziristan - a useful experience. Selected for a staff job in India but managed to get out of it by good luck as feared would be stuck in India for rest of war - instead in Sept 1940 sent to Middle East for staff appointment -very sorry to say goodbye to Battalion - commanding a battalion of your own Regiment is the best experience any infantry officer can have - I was very lucky as I'd been adjutant of the 2nd Battalion and had commanded the 1st Battalion.
Sept 1940	Arrived in Cairo and found no definite job there - did odd jobs for a few weeks at GHQ and then was sent to the Western Desert as liaison officer at HQ Western Desert Force then commanded by General Dick O'Connor who had also been a teacher - and a very good one -at Camberley Staff College when I was a student - so into the war and in good company - just in time as the offensive against the Italians was about to begin. Left Bombay for Egypt in troopship carrying Australian troops for Middle East - fine men but poor discipline - ship joined convoy off Aden and convoy attacked by Italian aircraft in Red Sea but no damage - first experience of air attacks - not very impressed. Views changed later. Arrived in Cairo and reported to GHQ Middle East but found job for which had been sent from India non-existent. Did temporary jobs at GHQ and HQs British Troops in Egypt - while at latter became involved in plans for offensive against Italian forces which had invaded Egypt, and with General O'Connor then commanding Western Desert Force - who had been a teacher at Camberley Staff College when I was a student. Appointed liaison officer between General Wilson commanding British Troops in Egypt and General O'Connor commanding Western Desert Force. Thus was involved in the offensive from the start and after about a week was appointed Brigadier General Staff (what would not be called Chief of Staff) and promoted to rank of Brigadier. Worked in very close association with General O'Connor throughout this campaign which ended in complete defeat of Italian forces - and left us in occupation of greater part of Libya ie Cyrenaica. An exciting, exhilarating and invaluable experience - General O'Connor paid me the great compliment of describing me as "an officer of outstanding ability, and I have never met a better Staff Officer". I learnt a great deal about command in battle from him and we have remained close friends ever since. General O'Connor whose health was none too good was succeeded in command in Cyrenaica by General Wilson who in turn was succeeded by General Warne. I remained as Chief of Staff.
Feb/March 1941	German counter-offensive led by Rommel, a brilliant tactical opportunist – British forces greatly reduced by transfer to Greece - German armour superior - British forces driven back to Tobruk - Generals O'Connor and Warne captured. Narrowly escaped capture myself - very frightened and anxious but too busy

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	organising defence of Tobruk mainly with Australian troops to worry too much!!! John Laverack an Australian General put in command - stayed as Chief of Staff to him.
1941-42	Second British offensive - and second German counter offensive - two more Generals - Got to know the desert really well.
Jan 1942	<p>After 18 months in the desert - Chief of Staff to seven Generals in succession - never slept out of clothes or without a telephone by head - exhilarated, frightened, frustrated in turn - but fortunately fit and well. Was ordered to report to GHQ Middle East in Cairo with responsibility for training throughout Middle East command. Promoted Major-General.</p> <p>Embarked on new job full of enthusiasm and anxiety to ensure lessons of past 18 months desert warfare - air and armour - passed on - set up training establishment in Palestine. Visited Iraq - met Field Marshal Bill Slim for first time.</p>
Aug 1942	<p>Appointed Deputy Chief of Staff Middle East with responsibility for training, organisation and equipment.</p> <p>Meantime German third counter-offensive had driven British forces back to Alamein position -and most critical situation yet in Middle East had arisen.</p> <p>Prime Minister (Churchill) visited Cairo, dismissed Auchinleck and appointed Alexander Commander in Chief. Montgomery to command 8th Army. I remained as Deputy Chief of Staff. Sent for by Monty. Met Alex for first time - asked for run-down on all commanders and formations - prolonged quiz by Monty who was teacher at Staff College when I was a student.</p> <p>Very strenuous time trying [to] meet Monty's demands for re-organisation and equipment for 8th Army - also detailed [to] show Alex round the desert.</p>
Sept 1942	<p>Sent for by Alex and told was to go back to desert to command 7th Armoured Division (the original "Desert Rats") - delighted but very anxious if able compete.</p> <p>Reported to Monty. Took over 7th Armed Dis. Had warm welcome from many old friends. Mike Carver (now Field Marshal Sir Michael Carver Chief of the General Staff) Chief of Staff - a great tower of strength - preparations for attacks in full progress - a very busy - and exciting - time all round.</p>
Oct 1942	BATTLE OF ALAMEIN - on left flank at first - task to contain enemy forces there without crippling losses - very frightened and anxious - pulled through by staff and troops. Move to right flank and held in readiness for pursuit - broke through at last and hunt began. Previous knowledge invaluable - after a series of fights against German and Italian rearguards - some pauses for logistic reasons - 7 Armd. Div always in front reached last rearguard position
Jan 1943	Germans could hold before evacuating Tripoli - in a great hurry - but severely wounded and nearly died - thanks to marvellous medical attention - particularly blood transfusions - survived and was evacuated to hospital in Cairo. Can't remember much about next few weeks except greatly disappointed having spent 2 and a half years trying to get to Tripoli to be put of action only a few miles off!! and a great longing to get home.
Jan-July 1943	In hospital in Cairo - various operations - wonderful care and attention -

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1943	evacuated to UK - difficult journey by sea plane via Sudan - Congo - West Africa - Portugal. In and out of aircraft two or three times daily - had to do own dressings (of wounds) but on the way home so any problems worthwhile.
July-Oct 1943	In and out of hospital - graded unfit for further active employment but eventually sent to Wingfield-Morris hospital, Oxford (now Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre). In hands of Professor Seddon (now Sir Herbert Seddon) - restored movement to left arm and right leg - upgraded medically and
Nov 1943	appointed to command 8th Corps, a formation allotted to "overlord" - invasion of Europe - delighted and excited - visited and talked to all units and formations - intent on ensuring lessons learnt applied to future operations.
Christmas 1943-1944	Home with family in Dorset - surprised by summons to proceed to Italy to be Chief of Staff to Alexander. To Algiers - then Naples - then Brindisi in search of Alexander - caught up with him in Tunis - very worried about plans for Anzio landing - also general conduct of Italian companion. MARRAKESH conference with Prime Minister - more worried than ever - ignorance of combined operations. BATTLE FOR ROME - problems of Anglo-American relationships - land and air - need for concentration - see Shepherd's history of the Italian Campaign
1944-45	Final stages of the war - arguments with London and Washington about diversion from Italy to South of France - Victory in Italy - advance to Trieste - contact with Yugoslav resistance forces - problems of
1945-47	Italians - Yugoslav relationships and frontiers - formation of police forces - experiences of communist methods and philosophies. War crime trials - all mixed up with the interests and beauties of Italian scenery, history and antiquities. At Castello Duino - a new and different world - where Latin-Teuton and Slav races meet and have mingled. A very interesting, instructive and at times enjoyable interlude.