

COMPLETE 63-PAGE ACTION STORY

No.4798

Commando

THE SILVER COLLECTION

DESERT
WAR

1940-43



SHIELD OF TRUTH

COMMANDO - THE SILVER COLLECTION

Title

SHIELD OF TRUTH

Subject

Our eponymous "Shield Of Truth" is an example of what film director Alfred Hitchcock famously called a "MacGuffin"—a plot device: something that motivates a character or propels a story forward. Here, though, it plays second fiddle to the characters themselves and rightly so.

However, in my opinion, the most interesting character here isn't one of the leads (although they're all great) — he's a rather eccentric French Foreign Legionnaire called Jules, who seemingly appears out of nowhere. He reminds me of Ben Gunn from Robert Louis Stevenson's classic swashbuckling tale *Treasure Island* and is every bit as memorable.

Scott Montgomery, Deputy Editor

Issue Number

Shield of Truth, originally Commando No 1064
(September 1976), re-issued as No 2364 (April 1990)



SHIELD of TRUTH

IN THE NORTH AFRICAN DESERT, THE R.A.F. WAS FLYING ROUND-THE-CLOCK PATROLS, TANGLING WITH ME109S FLUNG INTO THE SKY BY A GRIMLY-DETERMINED LUFTWAFFE. ON THE GROUND, BOTH SIDES WERE PAUSING TO GATHER STRENGTH FOR THE FINAL AND DECISIVE BATTLE OF OF THE SANDS.

AS THEY BANKED THEIR SNARLING SPITFIRE ABOUT THAT CHARRED SKY, TONY SMYTHE AND SAM PERRY LITTLE REALISED THAT SOON A BATTLE FOUGHT MANY CENTURIES BEFORE WOULD REACH OUT FROM THE MISTS OF TIME TO PLAY ITS OWN VITAL PART IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR!



THE YEAR WAS 320 B.C. A FORCE DESPATCHED BY ALEXANDER THE GREAT WAS SENT TO CRUSH A CULT OF WARRIOR PRIESTS ON THE WADI RUQ, A DISTRICT IN THE NORTH AFRICAN DESERT.



THE CHIEF PRIEST OF THE CULT, SEEING HIS FORCES DESTROYED, SCRAMBLED AWAY, CARRYING WITH HIM THE GREAT SHIELD THAT WAS THE HOLY SYMBOL OF HIS PEOPLE.



THE ANCIENTS HAD CALLED IT THE "SHIELD OF TRUTH". ANY MAN WHO GAZED INTO ITS BRILLIANT SURFACE SAW HIMSELF AS HE REALLY WAS — HE COULD NOT HIDE HIS STRENGTHS OR HIS WEAKNESSES.

DESPERATELY HE STAGGERED AWAY WITH THE HOLY SHIELD, SEEKING A PLACE OF SAFETY.



HE REACHED A HOLLOW SET AMID THE ROCKS.



BEHIND HIM THE BATTLE RAGED ON. HE KNEW THE INVADERS WOULD FOLLOW HIM, SEEK HIM OUT, KILL HIM.

THE SHIELD WAS MADE OF HIGHLY-POLISHED BRONZE, A THING OF DAZZLING BEAUTY IN THAT BRIGHT SUN.



HE STARED INTO THAT GLEAMING FACE FOR A FEW MORE RAPTUROUS SECONDS, THEN RE-WRAPPED THE SHIELD OF TRUTH IN ITS HIDE COVERING.

THEN HE MADE OFF, FORCING HIS AGED LEGS OVER THE SHARP ROCKS. BUT TOO LATE. HE WAS SEEN...



TOGETHER,
THEN! LET'S GIVE
HIM A TASTE OF
ALEXANDER'S
FURY!



THE TWO SOLDIERS THREW THEIR SHARP SPEARS
IN TWIN ARCS THROUGH THE SUN-DAZZLED AIR.

THEIR AIM WAS TRUE. THE OLD PRIEST GASPED, FELL, AS TWO SPEARS SANK INTO HIS BACK.

UUURGH!



WHEN THE SOLDIERS CAME UP TO THE DEAD PRIEST, THE SHIELD WAS HIDDEN BEHIND THE DUST AND ROCKS.

HE WAS CARRYING SOMETHING OFF. VALUABLE, YOU THINK?



THE GREAT SHIELD OF TRUTH FLEW FROM HIS HANDS, SPUN AMONG THE ROCKS, ITS HEAVY WEIGHT TOPPLING THE STONES, CRASHING THEM DOWN UPON IT.

LAUGHING, THEY TURNED, AND HURRIED BACK TO MOP UP THE FEW SURVIVORS OF THE CULT. AND BEHIND THEM ONLY A LITTLE OF THE SHIELD WAS VISIBLE THROUGH ITS SHROUD OF STONE AND DUST.



ITS POLISHED, GLEAMING SURFACE WAS WELL PROTECTED BY THAT STOUT HIDE COVERING. YEARS PASSED, THEN THE CENTURIES ROLLED OVER IT, LIKE A SILENT TIDE. AND THE SHIELD WAITED...WAITED.

1942. THE DESERT WAR, A FEW HUNDRED MILES WEST OF THE WADI RUQ. FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT TONY SMYTHE, D.F.C. AND BAR, ONE OF THE SQUADRON'S FIGHTER ACES, COULDN'T WAIT TO GET BACK INTO COMBAT.



LOVELY DAY
FOR FLYING, SAM!
I RECKON WE'LL GET
A GOOD BAG TODAY.
WHAT D'YOU
SAY?

EVERYTHING, ALL THROUGH HIS LIFE, HAD GONE EASILY AND WELL FOR TONY. THE SON OF WEALTHY PARENTS, A BRILLIANT RECORD AT SCHOOL, NOW A HIGHLY-SKILLED FIGHTER PILOT, HE DIDN'T SEEM TO KNOW THE MEANING OF FEAR. NO WONDER THEY NICK-NAMED HIM "THE GOLDEN BOY".

NOT SO FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT SAM PERRY. HIS LIFE HAD ALWAYS BEEN A STRUGGLE...AND NOW, AFTER YEARS OF AIR COMBAT, HIS NERVES WERE SHOT. HE HAD REACHED THE POINT WHERE HE THOUGHT EVERY FLIGHT WOULD BE HIS LAST.



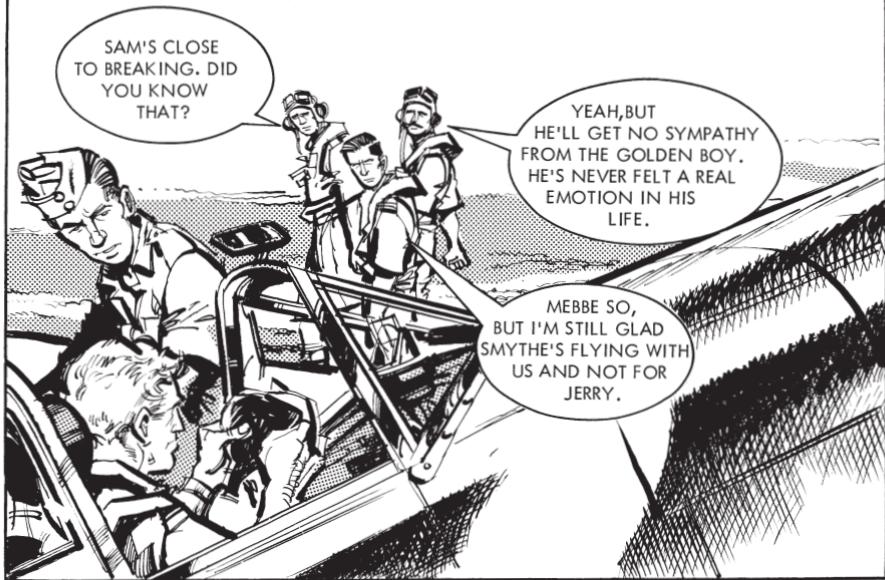
HE TRIED TO DISGUISE HIS TENSION, HIS FEAR, BUT THEY WERE MARKED CLEARLY ON HIS PALE, SET FACE FOR ALL TO SEE.

TONY SAW IT AND RECKONED HE WAS YELLOW. THERE WAS MORE THAN A TOUCH OF SARCASM IN HIS TONE AS HE JOKED WITH SAM.



BUT HIS SYMPATHY WAS FAR FROM SINCERE. IN HIS BOOK, IF A BLOKE WAS YELLOW, HE WAS YELLOW – AND THAT WAS THAT.

THERE WASN'T A PILOT ON THE SQUADRON WHO HADN'T FELT THE EDGE OF TONY'S TONGUE, AT SOME TIME. THEY KNEW THE SCORE —



SO THE SPITS TOOK OFF —



MINUTES LATER THEY WERE STREAKING THROUGH THE CLEAR BLUE SKY, AND SAM HAD HIS WRETCHED GNAWING WORRIES TO KEEP HIM COMPANY.



BUT SAM KNEW HE'D NEVER DO THAT. HE COULDN'T FACE THE SCORN THAT TONY WOULD POUR ON HIM FOR SUCH AN ACT OF COWARDICE. THEN TONY'S VOICE INTERRUPTED HIS MOROSE THOUGHTS.



THE GERMANS HAD SEEN THE TINY DOTS, AND KNEW ONLY TOO WELL WHAT THEY MEANT.

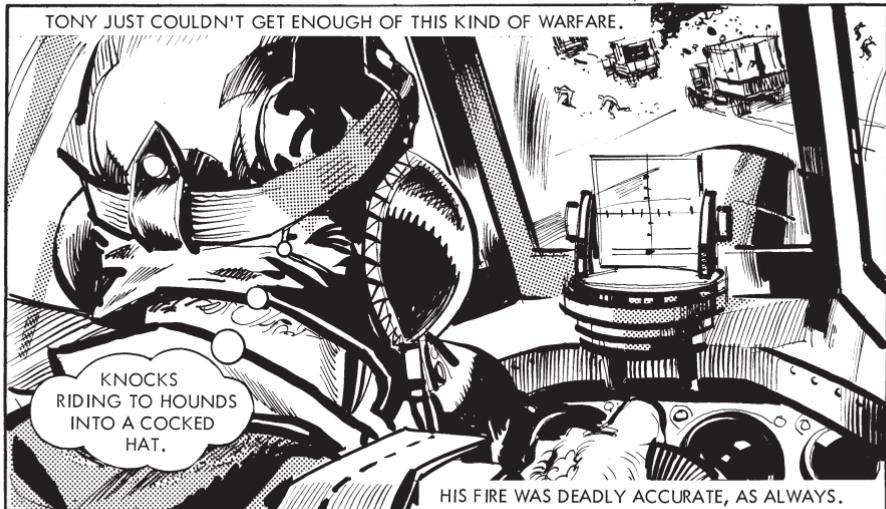


IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME THESE LONG-RANGE DESERT PATROLS HAD FELT THE STING OF A SPITFIRE ATTACK. THE DRIVERS, ALL SEASONED VETERANS OF THE AFRIKA KORPS, FANNED OUT, WHILST THE GUNNERS CROUCHED BEHIND THEIR SPANDAUS, READY TO HURL FIRE BACK AT THE SNARLING PLANES.

THE OFFICER DIED IN THE FIRST ATTACK AS THE SPITFIRES ROARED IN, THEIR GUNS SPEWING FIERY DEATH.



TONY JUST COULDN'T GET ENOUGH OF THIS KIND OF WARFARE.



FIND
MORE
FREE
MAGAZINES

FREEMAGS.CC

AND NEAR HIM IN THE FORMATION, SAM FELT THE OLD FEAR RISING IN HIM LIKE A KNOT.



AND IN THE CLEAR BLUE SKY ABOVE,
THE SPITFIRES REFORMED.



MINUTES LATER, THAT NAZI COLUMN
WAS A FLAMING PYRE... NOT ONE MAN
SURVIVING TO TELL THE GRISLY TALE.



A LITTLE EARLIER THAT SAME DAY A FEW HUNDRED MILES AWAY, THE NAZIS WERE BUSY AT WADI RUQ. ONCE MORE THOSE ANCIENT ROCKS HEARD THE CURSES OF FIGHTING MEN AS A CONVOY OF TRUCKS UNLOADED MASSES OF WAR SUPPLIES INTO A VAST NATURAL CAVE THAT HAD BEEN FORMED OVER THE CENTURIES.



UNPOPULAR HE MIGHT BE, BUT LIEUTENANT GERHARDT SCHMITT OF THE SUPPLY CORPS KNEW THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF THIS ARMS AND FUEL DUMP. ROMMEL WAS PLANNING A FINAL AND MIGHTY PUSH TO THE NORTH AND HIS PANZERS AND MEN WOULD NEED THESE SUPPLIES URGENTLY AS THEY ADVANCED FROM A POINT TO THE SOUTH.

JA, WITHOUT THEM
THE FIELD MARSHAL COULD
WELL FAIL IN HIS ADVANCE.
WITHOUT THE SUPPLIES WATCHED
OVER AND ORGANISED BY ME!
JA... THERE COULD WELL BE
A MEDAL IN THIS, IF I CAN
LET THE RIGHT PEOPLE
KNOW MY PART
IN IT.

HE PAUSED TO DAY-DREAM OF WALKING THROUGH BERLIN WITH AN IRON CROSS ON HIS BREAST. BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT — THEN HE WAS BACK URGING HIS SWEATING MEN TO GREATER EFFORTS.

DESPITE ALL HIS URGINGS, IT WAS THREE HOURS LATER THAT THE UNLOADING WAS COMPLETED AND THE TRUCKS ROLLED SOUTH ACROSS THE DESERT, BACK TO THE NAZI LINES.

ANYWAY, THE
R.A.F. DID NOT COME!
YOU MAY MAKE CAMP NOW.
OUR PERSONAL SUPPLIES
ARE IN THE BOXES
MARKED 'GUARDS'.

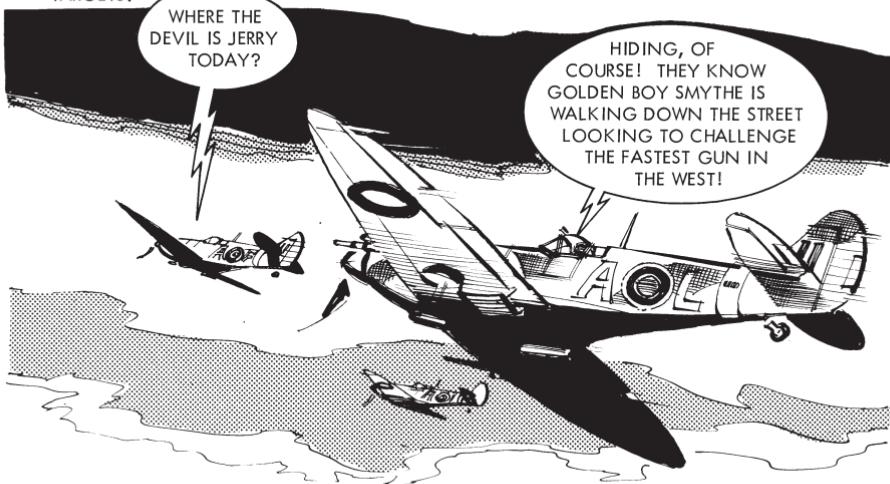
SCHMITT AND HIS HALF-DOZEN MEN WERE TO STAND GUARD OVER THE SUPPLIES, ENSURING THEY WOULD BE IN PERFECT CONDITION WHEN THE ADVANCING PANZERS WANTED THEM. THERE WAS NO NEED FOR ANY MORE MEN IN SUCH A SECRET AND TINY CORNER OF THE MASSIVE DESERT.

WADI RUQ HAD CHANGED A GREAT DEAL SINCE THAT LONG-AGO DAY WHEN ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S MEN HAD SLAUGHTERED THE PRIESTLY CULT. BUT THE GREAT SHIELD OF TRUTH STILL LAY UNDER ITS COVER OF ROCK...



...THE VIBRATIONS OF THOSE HEAVY TRUCKS HAD DISTURBED THE STONES. SOME SHIFTED, AND FELL. SAND TRICKLED OUT OF THE GAPS, ALTERING STRESSES AND STRAINS, CAUSING OTHER STONES TO TILT, TO FALL. BUT OF THE SHIELD THERE WAS, AS YET, NO SIGN...

LATER TONY AND SAM FLEW WITH THEIR SQUADRON TOWARDS WADI RUQ, LOOKING FOR TARGETS.



TONY NEVER TOOK OFFENCE AT THEIR REMARKS. HE KNEW HOW GOOD HE WAS. INSTEAD HE SPOKE INTO HIS MIKE...



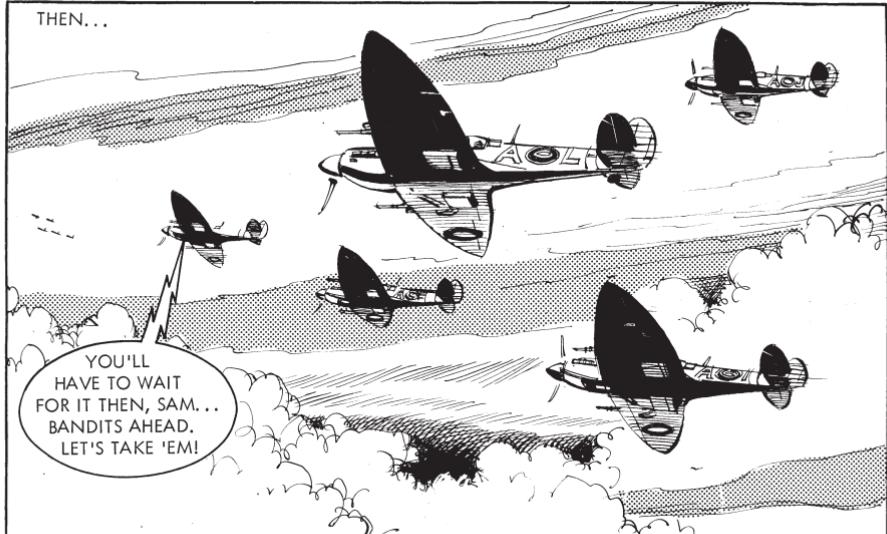
IT WAS A CRUEL DIG THAT SILENCED THE CHATTER OF THE PILOTS.

AFTER A PAUSE SAM CAME UP...

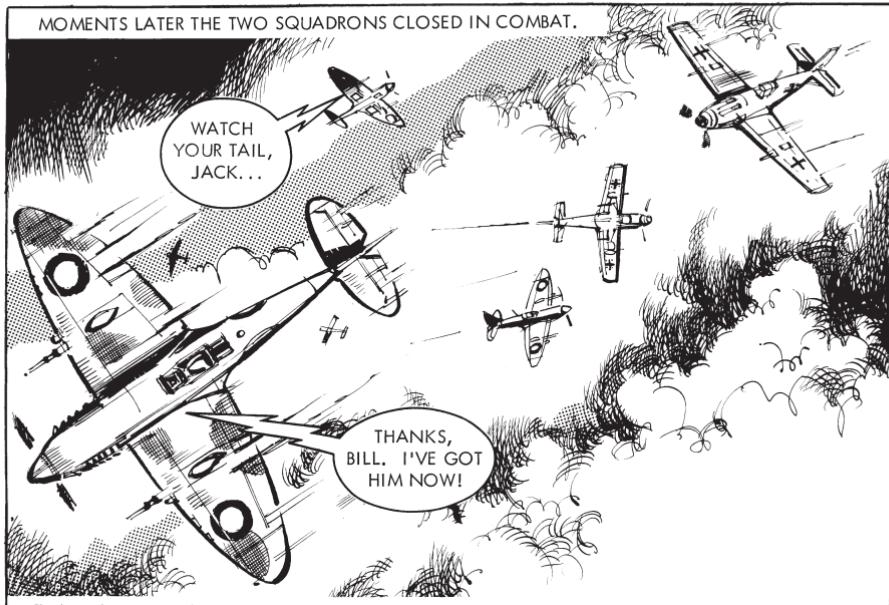


HE COULDN'T FEEL ANGER AT TONY'S BARBED REMARK. IT WAS TRUE... AND IT CAME FROM A MAN WHO WAS A HERO. SAM JUST FELT TIRED, WANTING ONLY TO FEEL THE GROUND BENEATH HIS FEET.

THEN...



MOMENTS LATER THE TWO SQUADRONS CLOSED IN COMBAT.

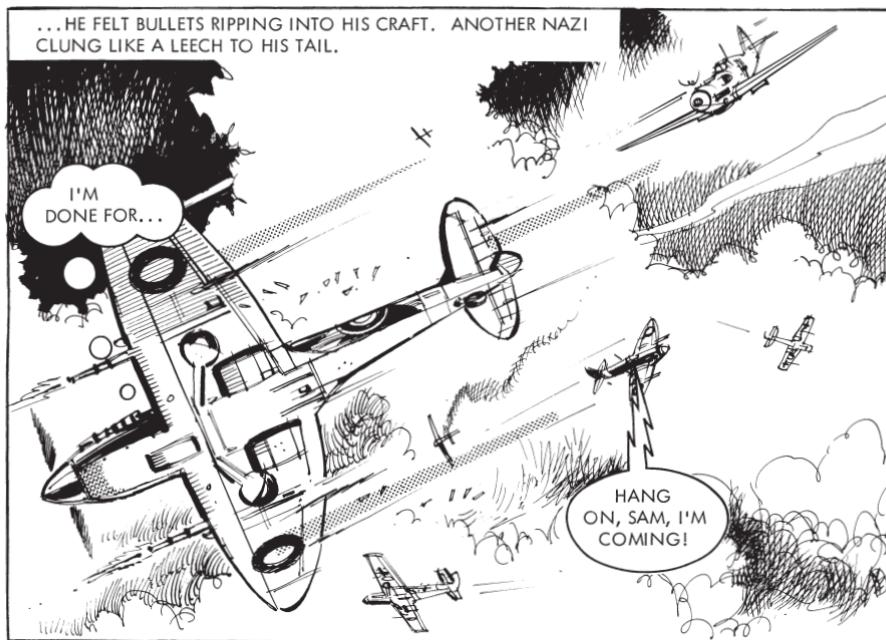


THAT DAZZLING AIR WAS SPLINTERED BY RED STARS OF FIRE AS THE PLANES SNARLED ACROSS THE SKY, FIGHTING FOR POSITION, JOCKEYING FOR ADVANTAGE.

AND SAM HAD A FUNNY FEELING...



HE FOUGHT MECHANICALLY AND WELL, FOR HE WAS A SKILLED, EXPERIENCED PILOT. HE SHOT DOWN ONE GERMAN, WAS ON ANOTHER'S TAIL, WHEN...



THEN TONY'S SPIT STARTED TO COUGH BLACK SMOKE.

HELLO, MUST
HAVE TAKEN SOME
STEEL IN IT! DIDN'T SEE
THE BLIGHTER WHO
DID IT.

YOU'LL HAVE
TO CRASH-LAND HER,
TONY. I'LL WATCH
YOU DOWN.

THE SQUADRON-LEADER'S VOICE WAS COOL, REASSURING. TONY WASN'T IN THE LEAST
PUT OUT.

THANKS,
SKIPPER! IT'S NOT
A LONG WALK BACK
TO BASE, IS IT?

COUUPLE OF
HUNDRED MILES!
NOTHING TO A BRIGHT
BOY LIKE YOU. WITH
YOUR LUCK YOU'LL
PROBABLY HITCH
A RIDE.

UP ABOVE, SAM WATCHED TONY PREPARE FOR A CRASH-LANDING.

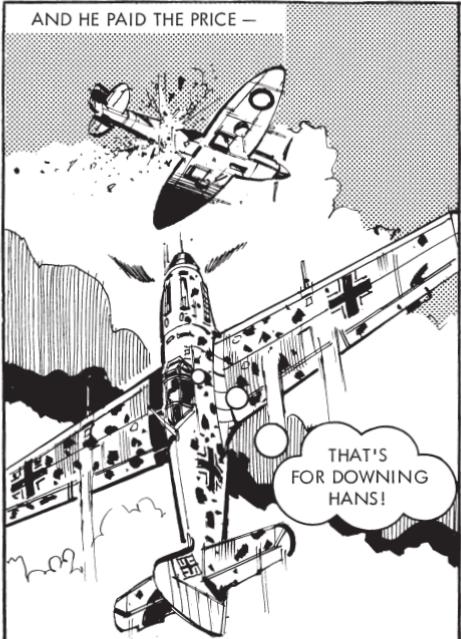
HE PROBABLY GOT HIT SAVING ME.
I'M A JONAH TO EVERYONE...



AND HE WAS SO SICK WITH HIMSELF HE COMMITTED THE WORST SIN OF ALL... HE TOOK HIS EYES OFF THE FIGHT.

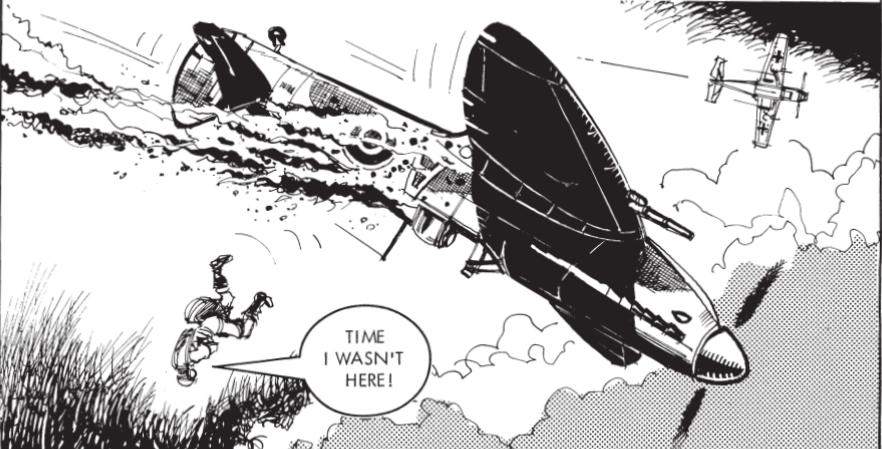
AND HE PAID THE PRICE —

THAT'S FOR DOWNING HANS!

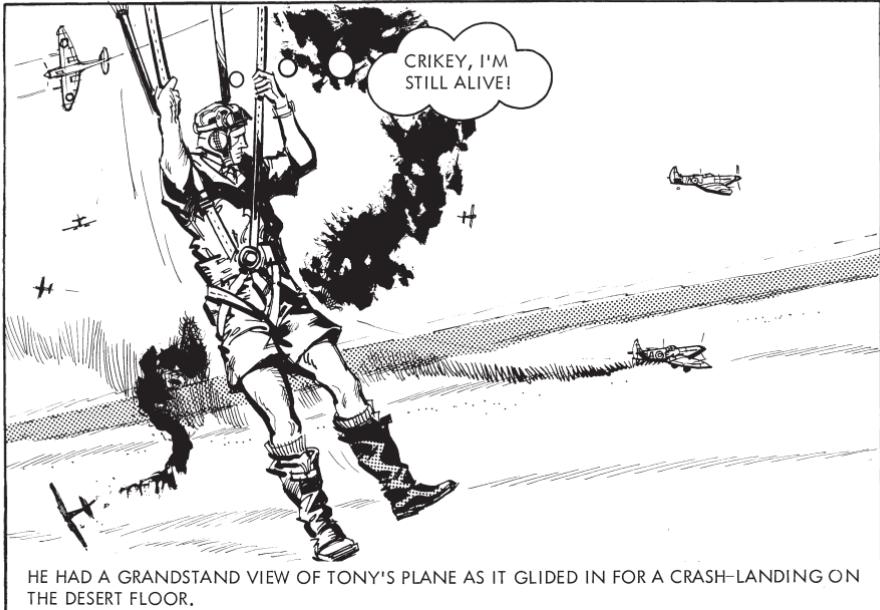


MOMENTS LATER HIS SPITFIRE WAS A MASS OF LICKING FLAME. HE GOT OUT... FAST.

TIME
I WASN'T
HERE!



AND HE FELT THE SCORCHING BREATH OF HIS EXPLODING CRAFT AS HE TUMBLED THROUGH THE SKY.



HE HAD A GRANDSTAND VIEW OF TONY'S PLANE AS IT GLIDED IN FOR A CRASH-LANDING ON THE DESERT FLOOR.

TONY HIT SAND, BUT KEPT HIS SPIT IN A SKILLED, CONTROLLED SKID.



HIS GOOD LUCK HELD. THE SPITFIRE SHUDDERED TO A HALT, EVERY RIVET GROANING. ONCE OUT, HE WAVED TO THE WATCHING SQUADRON-LEADER.



HE ROARED BACK TOWARDS THE FIGHT, GIVING SAM A CHEERFUL WAVE EN ROUTE.



SAM MADE A SHOCKING LANDING, AS TONY WAS QUICK TO POINT OUT.



SUDDENLY ALL WAS SILENT ABOUT THEM AS THEY STOOD AND WATCHED THE AIR BATTLE MOVE OFF TO THE WEST.



SAM STARED SOLEMNLY AT THE HOSTILE DESERT. THAT'S WHY HE DIDN'T SPOT THE SUDDEN FLARE OF FEAR IN TONY'S EYES.



THIRST... THE THOUGHT MADE TONY SHIVER. SO DID THE PROSPECT OF EMPTINESS STRETCHING FOR MILES AND MILES.

I CAN'T GET HAND-TO-HAND WITH IT. IF I COULD, IT WOULD BE DIFFERENT...BUT THERE'S NOTHING TO GRASP.



HE KNEW SUDDENLY THAT THIS LIMITLESS EMPTINESS WAS SOMETHING HE COULD NOT BEAT. NEVER BEFORE IN HIS LIFE HAD HE FELT SO SMALL, SO HELPLESS, SO TERRIBLY AFRAID.

SAM, TOO, FELT FEAR. BUT NOT THAT SUDDEN CRUSHING TERROR EXPERIENCED BY TONY. FOR SAM HAD BEEN BEATEN OFTEN IN HIS LIFE, AND WAS NO STRANGER TO HOPELESSNESS.

WE'D BEST GET STARTED, TONY.

GUESS SO. KEEP YOUR EYES SKINNED FOR AN ICE-CREAM CART, EH?

HE FORCED OUT THE QUIP, TRYING TO MAINTAIN HIS IMAGE.



AS THEY PLODDED ON, SAM PUT HIS THOUGHTS INTO WORDS.

TONY, WE'RE
NOT GOING TO MAKE
THIS. NOT WITH THE LITTLE
WATER WE'VE GOT.
NO CHANCE.



STOP
TALKING LIKE A
FOOL! OF COURSE WE'LL
MAKE IT. WE'VE GOT TO.
GOT TO, DO YOU
HEAR?



SAM FROWNED AT TONY, HEARING THE EDGE OF SHRILL PANIC BENEATH HIS WORDS. BUT WHAT TONY DID NEXT WAS WORSE...FAR WORSE.

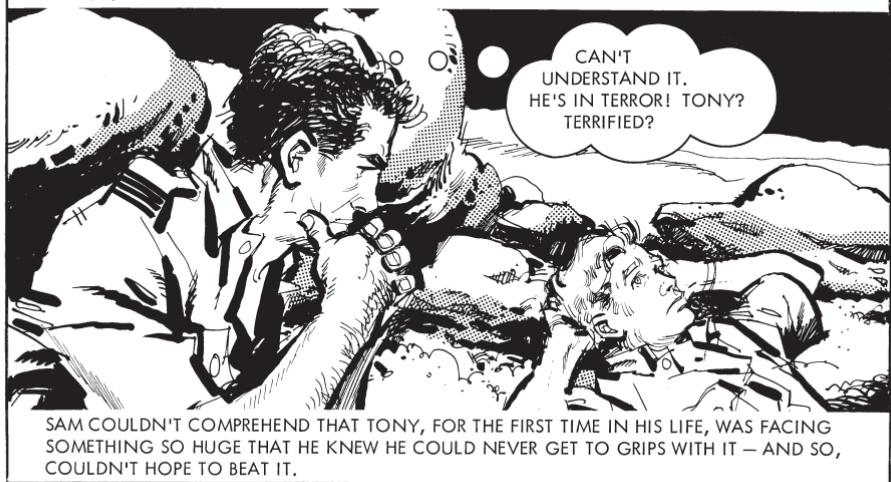
WATCH IT!
THAT'S GOT TO LAST
US BOTH A LOT OF MILES,
AND WE'VE ONLY JUST
STARTED.



TONY ROUNDED ON HIM SAVAGELY, FEAR PROMPTING THE MALICE IN HIS ANSWER.



DURING THE REST OF THAT FIRST DAY, SAM WITNESSED THE DISINTEGRATION OF A HUMAN BEING. FROM GOLDEN BOY OF THE AIR, TONY RAPIDLY CRUMPLED INTO A CRINGING WRECK.



SUDDENLY, OFF TO ONE FLANK, CAME THE SCRAPING OF FEET ON SAND. SAM LEAPED TO HIS FEET —



IT WAS A SCARECROW FIGURE, DRESSED IN THE RAGGED REMNANTS OF A FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION UNIFORM. THE STRANGER SPOKE THROUGH CRACKED LIPS IN HARSHLY ACCENTED FRENCH.



TONY STARED — BUT SAM WAS THINKING HARD. A CONSIDERABLE SKILL WITH LANGUAGES HAD BEEN HIS ONE CLAIM TO FAME AT SCHOOL, AND NOW IT ENABLED HIM TO UNDERSTAND THE MAD FIGURE'S WORDS.

TONY WAS LESS IMPRESSED —



THE WEIRD NEWCOMER SPOKE AGAIN, RAISING HIS CLAW-LIKE HAND TO HIS BATTERED KEPI.



THEN HE WAS STRUCK BY A FANTASTIC THOUGHT. GRIMLY HE PULLED THE GOLDEN BOY ASIDE.



TONY NODDED DULLY. NORMALLY HE WOULD SHRINK FROM ANYONE AS HIGH-SMELLING AND OBVIOUSLY MAD AS THE LEGIONNAIRE. BUT NOT TODAY. FOR A MOMENT A WILD HOPE FLARED... PERHAPS THE MADMAN COULD GUIDE THEM QUICKLY AWAY FROM THIS LAND THAT AFFECTED HIM SO SAVAGELY. COACHED BY SAM, HE RAPPED OUT AN ORDER IN FRENCH.



THEY HAD STRUCK LUCKY AND CLEARLY TONY WAS REMEMBERING HIS SCHOOL FRENCH. NOW SAM WHISPERED TO THE GOLDEN BOY TO KEEP ALL THEIR CONVERSATION IN FRENCH SO AS NOT TO FRIGHTEN OFF THEIR MAD FRIEND.

JULES LED THEM TO A ROCK UNDER WHICH TRICKLED A THIN STREAM OF WATER.



THEY DRANK THEIR FILL, REPLENISHED THEIR WATER-BOTTLE AND JULES' BATTERED OLD LEGION CANTEEN. THEN, AT THE LEGIONNAIRE'S SUGGESTION, STARTED OFF ACROSS THE DESERT.



SAM HAD PUT HIS FINGER RIGHT ON TONY'S TERROR, AND IT MADE THE GOLDEN BOY POUR OUT HIS FEAR, CARELESS NOW OF HIS IMAGE.



SAM, I CAN'T . . .
SAM, HELP ME. TELL ME
IT'LL BE OKAY. I MEAN . . .
IT'S THE EMPTINESS
I CAN'T TAKE . . .

STEADY
ON, TONY. BETTER
EMPTY THAN FILLED
WITH GERMANS.

THE GOLDEN BOY'S VOICE ROSE TO A
SHRILL SCREAM.



DON'T YOU
UNDERSTAND, YOU FOOL?
I WISH THE GERMANS WERE HERE,
IN THEIR THOUSANDS. IT'S THE
EMPTINESS — NOTHING THERE.
FOOL, CAN'T YOU
SEE THAT?

IN AN INSTANT THE LEGIONNAIRE WAS
THERE, HIS VOICE SOOTHING.



MON COLONEL...
COURAGE! IT IS YOUR
WOUND THAT MAKES YOU
SPEAK SO. JUST WATCH THE
SPACE BEFORE YOUR FEET.
IT WILL MAKE IT GO
EASIER.

THEY STARTED ONWARD AND SAM QUESTIONED JULES. BY NOW HE HAD EXPLAINED HOW HE CAME TO BE WITH "THE COLONEL" AND IT SEEMED THE WILD MAN ACCEPTED HIM.



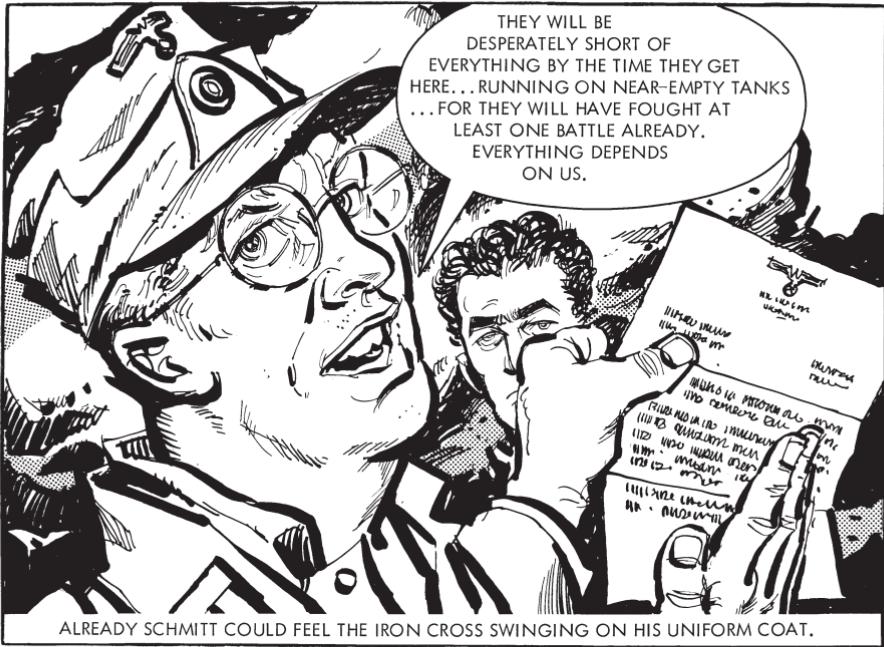
WHAT'S WRONG
WITH HIM? BEFORE
TODAY HE HAD NO
NERVES
AT ALL...

I HAVE SEEN IT
BEFORE. OFTEN THE
STRONGEST, THE BRAVEST
CRACK FIRST. THEY CAN FIGHT
MEN, EVEN TANKS — AND THEY
WILL LAUGH. BUT NOT EMPTY
SPACE. THEY FEEL THE
THING THEY FEAR MOST—
LONELINESS.

SOME TIME LATER, AT WADI RUQ,
LEUTNANT GERHARDT SCHMITT GOT
A RADIO MESSAGE THAT BRIGHTENED
HIS LONELY VIGIL.



GUT! A
MASSIVE COLUMN OF
TANKS AND MEN IS HEADING
FOR THIS SUPPLY DUMP TO TAKE
THE AMMUNITION AND FUEL.
WE MUST BE READY
FOR THEM.



ALREADY SCHMITT COULD FEEL THE IRON CROSS SWINGING ON HIS UNIFORM COAT.

AND CLOSE BY, MORE DUST TRICKLED FREE AS THE STONES SHIFTED, MOVED, REVEALING A CORNER OF THAT HIDE-COVERED SHIELD...SEEING THE LIGHT OF DAY AFTER MANY CENTURIES...



MEANTIME SAM AND JULES HELPED TONY AS THEY MOVED CLOSER TO WADI RUQ. THEY WERE TOO THIRSTY TO TALK, BUT EACH MAN WAS BUSY WITH HIS OWN THOUGHTS.

AND HE CALLED
ME YELLOW! CRIES,
WHAT A WRECK HE'S
TURNED INTO.

THE COLONEL
MUST DIE IF WE DO
NOT REACH HELP SOON.
HE IS NEAR THE
END.

I'M GOING
TO DIE . . . OUT HERE
IN THE EMPTINESS . . . I'M
GOING TO DIE AND
NOBODY WILL
EVER KNOW.

THEN AS THEY BREASTED A RISE, SAM
SAW THE GREAT MASS OF WADI RUQ
SHIMMERING IN THE DISTANCE.

THOSE
HEIGHTS . . . MAYBE
SOME OF YOUR MAGICAL
WATER ROCKS THERE,
JULES . . . COME
ON!

OUI,
WE MUST
TRY.

MILES AWAY, THE NAZI COLUMN WAS MAKING FAST TIME FOR WADI RUQ. THE GIANT TANKS LUMBERED ALONG, THEIR STEEL INSIDES INFERNAL PITS OF HEAT FOR THE SWEATING CREWS.

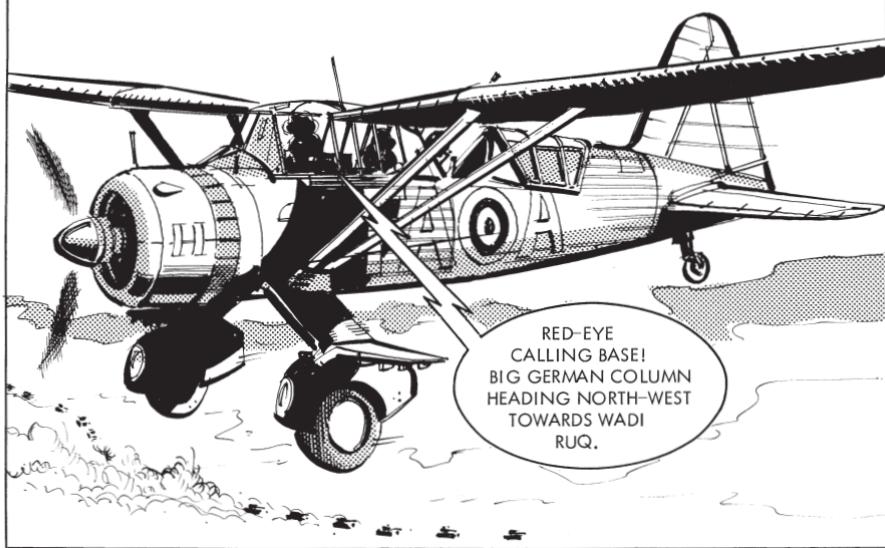


COLONEL ROLF VANDERMAYER PUSHED BACK HIS GOGGLES AND SIGHED.



HERR
OBERST! BRITISH
SCOUT PLANE!

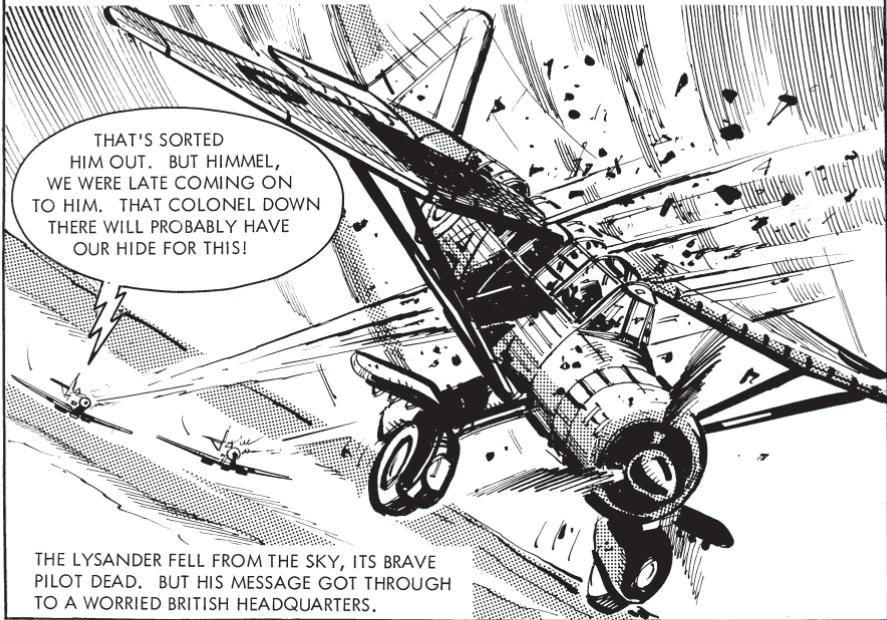
IT WAS A BRITISH LYSANDER OUT ON PATROL.



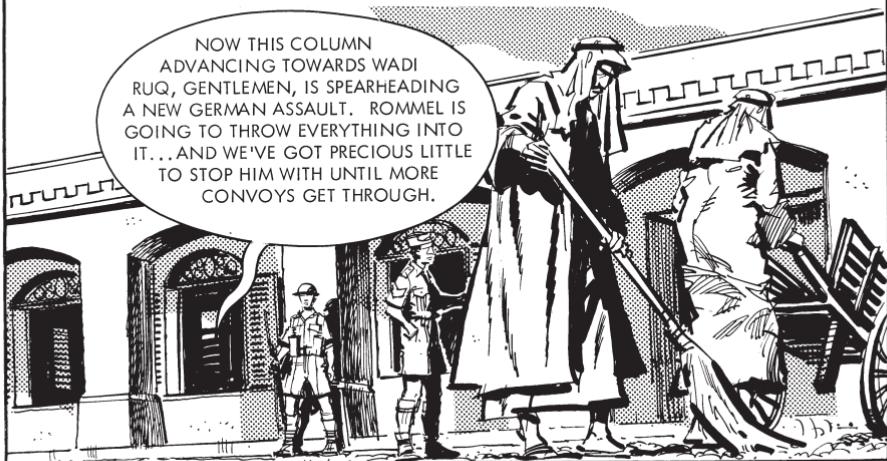
THE HEAT, THE DUST, THE WEARY EYES
AND BONES – ALL WERE FORGOTTEN
AS VANDERMAYER RAGED SAVAGELY.



THE TWO MESSERSCHMITS STREAKED IN LIKE SHARKS, THEIR GUNS CHATTERING FIRE.



WORRIED BECAUSE THE U-BOAT PACKS HAD PLAYED HAVOC WITH ALLIED CONVOYS. TONS OF VITAL WAR SUPPLIES WERE BEING SENT TO THE BOTTOM OF THE MEDITERRANEAN. AS A RESULT, THE LAND FORCES WERE DESPERATELY SHORT OF SUPPLIES.





HIS OFFICERS SPED AWAY TO ISSUE THEIR ORDERS. EACH ONE KNEW THE ALLIES WERE TAKING A BIG GAMBLE IN STRIPPING THE REST OF THE FRONT TO HANDLE THE WADI RUQ BATTLE — BUT THAT WAS A RISK THEY HAD TO TAKE.



MINUTES LATER...

NOTICE ALL
THAT STUFF PILED
ABOUT THE CAVE, TONY?
THIS MUST BE A JERRY
SUPPLY DUMP.

OH?
OH... YEAH...

TONY'S VOICE, LIKE HIS EYES, WAS DULLED AND EMPTY. HE WAS ONLY A POOR SHADOW OF THE MAN THEY HAD CALLED THE GOLDEN BOY.

AND JULES WAS STILL IN HIS OWN CRACKED WORLD —

THE
COLONEL NEEDS
MEDICAL ATTENTION.
WITHOUT IT
HE...

QUIET — LET
ME LISTEN IN ON
THE GERMANS.

HE HEARD SCHMITT AGAIN TELLING HIS MEN OF THE COLUMN'S IMMINENT ARRIVAL AND THE VITAL PART IT WAS SCHEDULED TO PLAY IN THE ASSAULT.



TONY'S VOICE WAS A WHINE, AND IT GOADED SAM TO ACTION. QUICKLY HE SPOKE TO THE OLD LEGIONNAIRE.



THE COLONEL
IS NOT WELL, JULES. HE'S
SUFFERING FROM THE WEIGHT OF
A FAT YELLOW STREAK RIGHT DOWN
HIS SPINE. WHATEVER IS TO BE
DONE, WE MUST DO, EH,
MON AMI?

HE WAS FED UP TO THE BACK TEETH WITH TONY'S BROKEN SPIRIT AND HE LET HIS CONTEMPT SHOW IN HIS VOICE.

EVEN AS SAM SPOKE, THE LEGIONNAIRE'S MADNESS GLITTERED IN HIS EYES. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH HIS SPIRIT.



THERE IS A
TRICK I DID ONCE
BEFORE . . . WHEN I WAS
LOCKED IN A LEGION
PRISON CELL. WE
COULD TRY, SAM.
COME, WE TRY!

ALL THIS TIME THAT NAZI COLUMN WAS STILL CRASHING ITS WAY TO WADI RUQ. AND EVERY EYE WAS WATCHING FUEL GAUGES THAT FLICKERED DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO EMPTY.

ANOTHER HOUR, HERR OBERST. I THINK WE'LL MAKE IT.



BACK AT WADI RUQ, SAM AND JULES PUT THEIR ACT INTO MOTION. JULES PRETENDED TO BE WRITHING IN A TERRIBLE FIT ON THE FLOOR OF THE CELL.



THEY UNLOCKED THE CELL, BROUGHT WATER — AND THUS FELL FOR ONE OF THE OLDEST TRICKS IN THE BOOK.



SAM JUMPED FOR HIS MAN, IGNORING THE RIFLE, THRUSTING IT ASIDE. AT THE SAME TIME JULES DROPPED HIS ACT AND LUNGED UPRIGHT, CLAWED FINGERS GRABBING FOR HIS MAN'S THROAT.



SAM HADN'T HIT ANYBODY IN ANGER SINCE HIS SCHOOLDAYS, BUT HE PUT EVERYTHING INTO ONE SAVAGE RIGHT CROSS. HE SAW HIS MAN'S EYES TURN UP AND KNEW HE'D SCORED A LUCKY KNOCK-OUT.



JULES, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS ON FAMILIAR TERRITORY —



GULPING, HE TURNED TO TONY.

TONY, WE'VE
GOT WORK TO DO.
COMING?



HE SHOOK HIS HEAD HOPELESSLY.

I CAN'T! WHAT
DO YOU THINK THAT
COLUMN WILL DO TO US
WHEN THEY FIND THESE DEAD
GERMANS? IF WE JUST SIT
QUIETLY THEY'LL TAKE
US OUT OF THIS
CURSED DESERT...



EVEN THE FAITHFUL JULES, STILL BELIEVING TONY TO BE HIS LOST COLONEL, COULD NOT HIDE HIS BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT AT HIS OFFICER'S COWARDICE.



THEY MOVED OUT AND CREPT CAUTIOUSLY PAST THE VAST PILES OF ASSEMBLED SUPPLIES. SAM WAS NO SOLDIER, SO HE WASN'T SURE HOW BEST TO HANDLE THE SITUATION.



THEN SUDDENLY THE GERMAN TURNED —

HIMMEL,
THE PRISONERS
ARE LOOSE!



HIS VOICE ECHOED ROUND THAT CAVE.

JULES THREW UP HIS RIFLE AND SHOT THE MAN ON THE SPOT. BUT THE OTHERS WERE WARNED.

THIS WAY,
JULES!

AAARGH!



SCHMITT HIMSELF LED THE OPERATION TO RECAPTURE THE FUGITIVES.

KILL THEM,
FOOLS! QUICKLY!
HIMMEL, NOTHING MUST GO
WRONG WITH THAT COLUMN
NEARLY HERE. KILL
THEM!



HIS FEAR OF FAILURE, OF DISGRACE, SHOWED IN HIS SHRILL VOICE.



SAM FOUND THE RIFLE HARD TO USE...BUT JULES PROVED THAT HIS DESERT-MADNESS HADN'T
AFFECTED HIS SHOOTING. GERMANS CRUMPLED BENEATH HIS FIRE...INCLUDING SCHMITT.



THE SIX GERMANS FROM THE SUPPLY CORPS DIDN'T LAST LONG — AND SO ENDED SCHMITT'S HOPES OF MILITARY GLORY, OF AN IRON CROSS RECEIVED FROM THE HANDS OF HIS LEADER.



TONY APPEARED AT THAT MOMENT, SHUFFLING LIKE A WALKING CORPSE FROM THE DARK RECESSES OF THE CAVE. SAM LOOKED AT HIM IN SORROW.



BUT EVEN HIS STAMMERED APOLOGY LACKED CONVICTION. BRISKLY SAM TURNED TO OTHER MATTERS.



JULES WOULD NOT BELIEVE THAT HIS COLONEL HAD FINALLY TURNED COWARD. NEVER! HE INTENDED TALKING TO HIM OF THE GLORIOUS DAYS OF THE LEGION, AND THUS CAST OUT THE WEAKENING DESERT SICKNESS.

BUT UNKNOWN TO THEM, A WILD GERMAN BULLET HAD TORN A RAGGED HOLE IN ONE OF THE FUEL DRUMS SET FAR BACK IN THE CAVE. FUEL DRIBBLED OUT IN A TRICKLE, PUDDLING ON THE SAND, FILLING THE AIR OF THAT HOT, CONFINED SPACE WITH FUMES...



MEANTIME FROM THE NORTH, THE HASTILY ASSEMBLED BRITISH FORCE HEADED TOWARDS WADI RUQ.

MUST SAY,
NOT MUCH OF A
FORCE TO TAKE ON JERRY!
WAY I HEARD IT, THEY'RE
STIFF WITH MARK
FOURS.

BEST WE
COULD DO IN THE
TIME, SIR. ARE WE GOING
RIGHT UP TO THE WADI
HEIGHTS?

BETTER NOT.
THE NAZIS WON'T WASTE
STRENGTH CLIMBING UP AND
DOWN THAT DIFFICULT TERRAIN.
THEY'LL APPROACH US
ON THE LEVEL.

AND EVEN AS THE SCRATCH FORCE BUMPED ITS WAY FORWARDS, JULES HAD DISCOVERED A CURIOUS OBJECT PROTRUDING FROM THE ROCKS.

FUNNY
THING... LOOKS
LIKE A HAND-SEWN HIDE
COVER ON IT. WONDER
WHAT IT IS?

TREASURE,
PERHAPS? I HAVE
HEARD THAT MANY MEN
HAVE COME OUT HERE
TO HIDE STOLEN
GOLD.

TONY SAID NOTHING. BUT IN HIS EYES FLICKERED A STRANGE ASSORTMENT OF EMOTIONS —
GUILT, ANGER, SHAME, FEAR...

SAM STRIPPED OFF THE HIDE... AND THERE, REVEALED AFTER CENTURIES, WAS THE GLEAMING BRONZE SHIELD, AS BRILLIANT AS THE DAY IT WAS ENTOMBED.



SAM STARED INTO THE SHIELD AND SAW HIS REFLECTION, THE FIRM SET OF HIS EYES AND MOUTH. YES, HE THOUGHT, HE HADN'T DONE BADLY.



THE GREAT SHIELD OF TRUTH REFLECTED BACK TO SAM THE MAN HE WAS. HE TURNED AWAY, SUDDENLY STRENGTHENED AND UPLIFTED.



TONY ALSO SAW HIMSELF IN THE SHIELD... SAW WHAT HE HAD BECOME. A SHRINKING, CRINGING FIGURE, DIRTY, WITHOUT DIGNITY, WITHOUT RESPECT, LACKING COURAGE.





THEN SAM SAW THE BRITISH FORCE WAS NOT HEADING TOWARDS THE HEIGHTS OF WADI RUQ, BUT WAS CUTTING OFF TO A FLANK.



MEANTIME TONY WAS STILL STARING AT THE GLITTERING SHIELD.



FOR THE SHIELD HAD SHOWN HIM MORE THAN HIS PRESENT SORRY REFLECTION, IT HAD SHOWN HIS WHOLE LIFE. THE PEOPLE HE HAD HUMILIATED, HURT, BECAUSE THEY WERE LESS ABLE THAN HE. GOLDEN BOY HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN... BUT THAT GOLD WAS PRETTY TARNISHED NOW THROUGH WHAT HE HAD DONE.

OUT ON THE CRAG, SAM AND JULES WATCHED THE OPPONING FORCES, POWERLESS TO INTERVENE.



A VOICE BEHIND HIM ANSWERED THE QUESTION.



THE WORDS WERE SPOKEN IN TONY'S OLD VOICE — CRISP, ALIVE... YET NOT TONY'S OLD VOICE, FOR THE ARROGANT TONE WAS GONE.

THE FRENCHMAN WAS THE FIRST TO SPEAK.



OFF HE BOUNDED, JUST AS THE OLD TONY WOULD HAVE DONE.

SAM STIFLED HIS PERPLEXITY, AND HELPED TONY LINE UP THE SHIELD. THE BRITISH FORCE WAS ABOUT TEN MILES AWAY... BUT THERE WAS NO AIMING DEVICE ON THE SHIELD.



JULES CHUCKLED
IN DELIGHT.

YOU SEE
HOW CLEVER MON
COLONEL IS? NEVER WOULD
I HAVE THOUGHT OF
THAT.

OKAY, STEP
ASIDE, SAM. WE'RE
READY TO TRANSMIT. I
HOPE THEY CAN READ
THIS ROPEY
MORSE.

SAM, STANDING BATHED IN GOLDEN LIGHT, GAPED AT TONY. WHAT THE DEVIL HAD
HAPPENED TO CHANGE HIM SO QUICKLY? MAYBE DESERT SICKNESS DID SUDDENLY
VANISH LIKE THAT.

BY WHIPPING THE TARPAULIN ON AND OFF THE SHIELD, TONY MANAGED TO SEND HIS
MESSAGE.

TONY,
WHAT HAPPENED
TO YOU?

THE SHIELD,
SAM. IT SHOWED ME
WHAT I HAD BECOME, SHOWED
ME THE...ER...ERRORS
OF MY LIFE.

THE LIGHT WAS SEEN.



HIGH ON THE WADI THEY SAW THE COLUMN TURN.

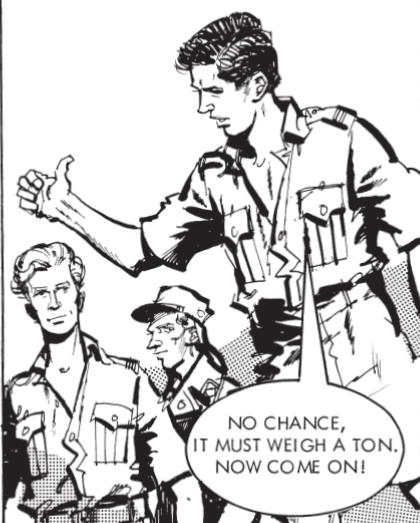


THE GERMANS TOO SAW THE MESSAGE — AND THEY SAW THE DUST CLOUD RAISED BY THE FAST-COMING BRITISH FORCE.



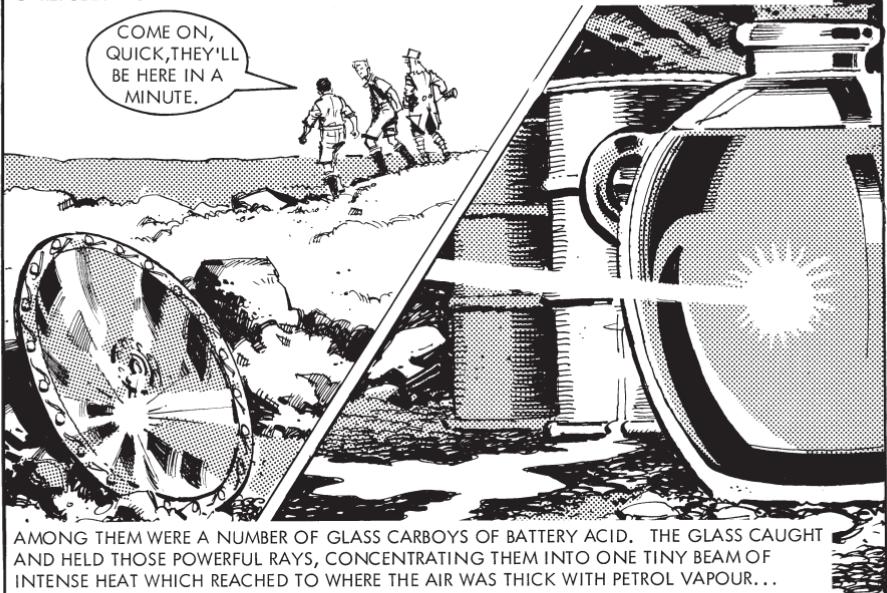
AND ON THE WADI RUQ, IT WAS TIME TO MOVE.

BUT SAM SHOOK HIS HEAD.



AS THEY STRODE QUICKLY AWAY, THE SUN'S RAYS STRUCK FULL ON THAT SHIELD AND WERE REFLECTED BACK OFF THAT POLISHED SURFACE INTO THE VAST CAVE WHERE THE NAZIS' CAREFULLY HOARDED SUPPLIES LAY WAITING.

COME ON,
QUICK, THEY'LL
BE HERE IN A
MINUTE.



AMONG THEM WERE A NUMBER OF GLASS CARBOYS OF BATTERY ACID. THE GLASS CAUGHT AND HELD THOSE POWERFUL RAYS, CONCENTRATING THEM INTO ONE TINY BEAM OF INTENSE HEAT WHICH REACHED TO WHERE THE AIR WAS THICK WITH PETROL VAPOUR...

THE VAPOUR IGNITED, EXPLODED... THEN EVERYTHING WENT UP — ENORMOUS QUANTITIES OF AMMUNITION, FUEL, EXPLOSIVES. THERE WAS A GIANT ROAR, A VIVID SHEET OF FLAME... AND WADI RUQ SIMPLY CEASED TO EXIST.



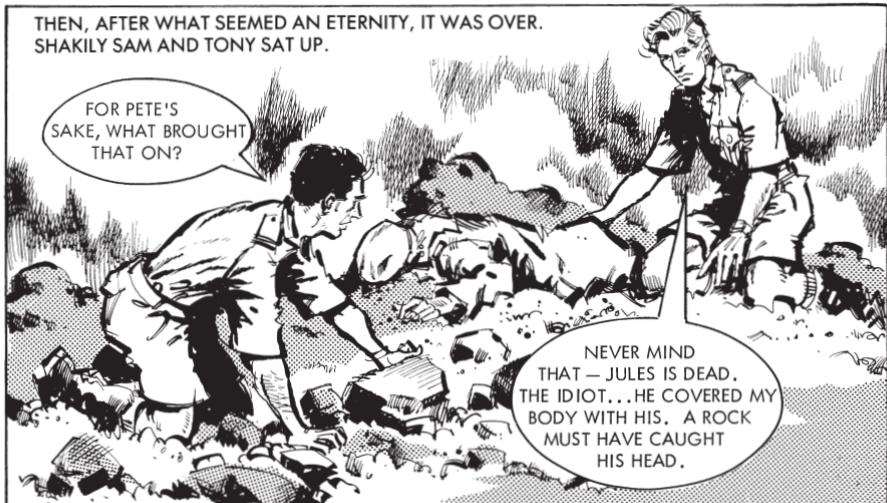
SAM, TONY AND JULES, DESCENDING THE SLOPES, WERE CAUGHT IN THAT MAMMOTH CONCUSSION. THE BLAST HAMMERED INTO THEIR BACKS LIKE A GIANT FIST.



JULES TURNED TO SEE THE ROCKS RAINING DOWN UPON THEM. HE THREW HIMSELF OVER THE SPRAWLED TONY.



THEN, AFTER WHAT SEEMED AN ETERNITY, IT WAS OVER.
SHAKILY SAM AND TONY SAT UP.



GENTLY HE CRADLED THE DEAD LEGIONNAIRE.



AND THEY MARKED THE SIMPLE GRAVE OF JULES TABLO, LEGIONNAIRE, AMONG THE ROCKS THAT HAD AGAIN SWALLOWED UP THE SHIELD WHICH HAD LET SAM SEE HE HAD REGAINED HIS NERVE... AND HAD CHANGED TONY SO MUCH FOR THE BETTER.

THE NAZIS HAD BEEN BARELY A MILE AWAY WHEN THE EXPLOSION CAME.



THE COLONEL GAVE THE ORDER TO RETIRE. BUT HE KNEW THE BRITISH WOULD BE ON HIM WITHIN THE HOUR... HIS COLUMN WAS FINISHED.

THE BRITISH, ON THE OTHER HAND, GAZED WITH DELIGHT AS THE WADI WENT UP.



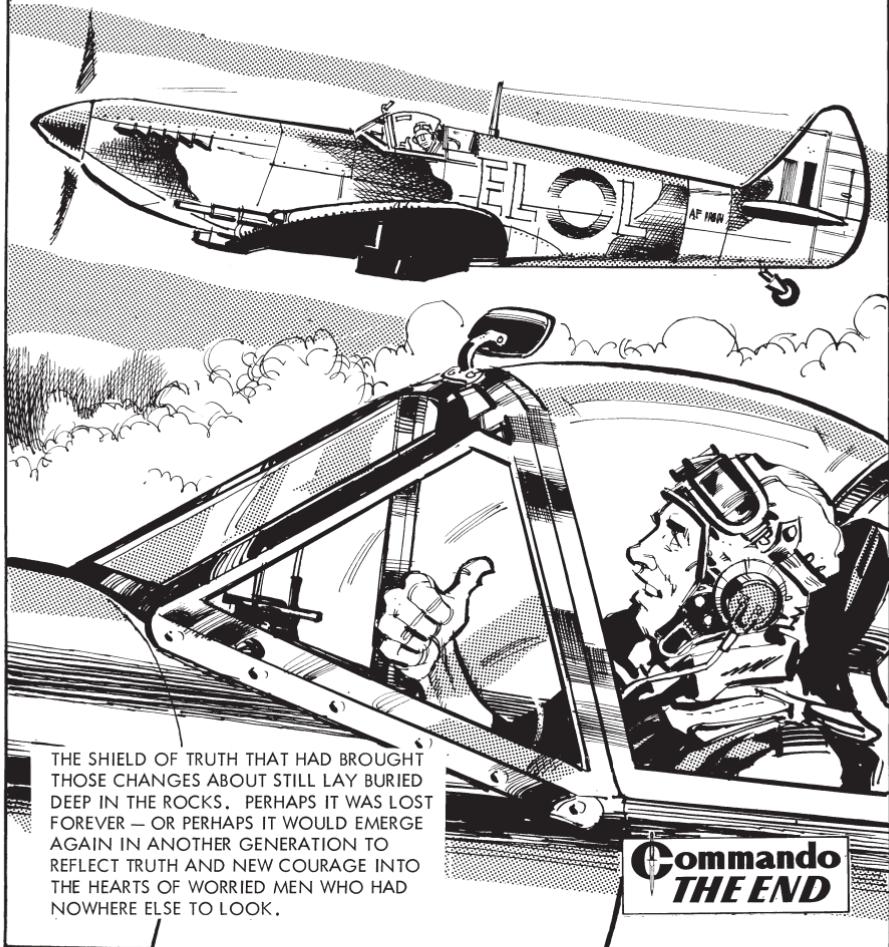
AS THEY ROARED PAST THE STARING SAM AND TONY THE COLONEL SNAPPED UP A SALUTE.



SAM LOOKED DOWN AT HIS FRIEND.



LATER, WITH THE DUST OF WADI RUQ AT LAST SCOURED FROM THEIR SKINS, SAM AND TONY TOOK TO THE AIR AGAIN, PROBING FOR TARGETS. BUT A DIFFERENT SAM, A DIFFERENT TONY.



THE SHIELD OF TRUTH THAT HAD BROUGHT THOSE CHANGES ABOUT STILL LAY BURIED DEEP IN THE ROCKS. PERHAPS IT WAS LOST FOREVER — OR PERHAPS IT WOULD EMERGE AGAIN IN ANOTHER GENERATION TO REFLECT TRUTH AND NEW COURAGE INTO THE HEARTS OF WORRIED MEN WHO HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO LOOK.

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THE END**

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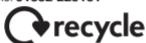
CIRCULATION

circulation@dcthomson.co.uk

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Distributed by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building,
110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU.

Tel: +44 (0) 20 3148 3300
Fax: +44 (0) 203 148 8108
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Published in Great Britain by D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd.,
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in the North African Desert
lay the Shield Of Truth. Made
of bronze, highly polished, it
revealed the truth about any
man who looked into its mirror
surface.*

*Hidden for over two
thousand years, it was found
by two British pilots who had
staggered mile after mile
across the merciless sands.
When they stared at their
reflections in it, one saw his
bravery dissolve into fear...and
the other saw his fear change
to bravery.*

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