

A Soldier and his Diary - by Harris Green

My late father, Solomon Charles Green, served as a Sapper in the Third Field Engineers of the South African Army during World War II. His service took him “up north” through Africa – from his home in Cape Town to Gazala in Libya where he was injured.

My dad kept a hand-written diary spanning the period January 1, 1942 through May 30, 1942 – two days before he was seriously injured while detonating a minefield. Although I knew this diary existed, I had never, until relatively recently, read it from cover to cover. For me, it was an eye-opener.

What makes the entries so fascinating is that they were written in real time. This is not a memoir. The entries haven't been re-written to make punch lines more dramatic. They are written as my dad witnessed the events using his own brand of slang and in his own unique way of describing his experiences. He wrote this diary for himself. He had no intention of turning it into a best-seller. That’s what makes it so authentic.

The entries were written with low grade writing materials - most of them, I suspect, in candle light. Perhaps, on his lap. Editing wasn’t an option. Once the words landed on the page, they were there to stay.

The diary relates requests from senior officers seeking volunteers for "suicide missions", of having to say goodbye to friends who volunteered for these missions and my dad’s "farewell letter" to his sister on the eve of such a mission.

I wasn’t there. I never experienced the oppressive heat, the freezing cold or the blinding sand storms. I wasn't subjected to food and water rations. I never had to contend with rats or swarms of flies and mosquitoes. I never had to dig holes to lay thousands of land mines and then dig them up to create escape routes for retreating forces. I never had to seek shelter from air strikes and artillery shelling. I wasn't subjected to the dangers, the despair and the drudgery these soldiers faced on a daily basis for months, even years, on end. Even the most vivid imagination cannot begin to conceive the routines and realities these soldiers were subjected to.

Reading the diary helped me understand just why volunteering for a "suicide mission" was always a viable option. What else did these soldiers have to live for? To me, dying a hero’s death for something you believe in, is a better proposition than near certain death in an enemy air strike or artillery attack.

Considering these soldiers were volunteers, makes the overall picture even more complex and intriguing. They were soldiers, not career officers. They risked their lives to make our

world a better place. Their battlefield was thousands of miles from where they lived, in the heart of one the world's most arid and desolate regions.

These volunteers had no idea what they were volunteering for. They never knew where they were going, or for how long. Would it be for a few months, a year or a few years?

What motivated them to volunteer? Was it fear of the German dictator and the threat he posed to the existing world order? Was it their sense of duty to defend their country in its hour of need? Or were they seeking some illusionary adventure to satisfy a lust for action?

What thoughts passed through their minds when they hugged and said good-bye to their nearest and dearest? Where did their minds roam in those moments of solitude, lying in their dug-outs or standing in the freezing cold, manning road blocks and observation posts?

So many died. Nobody ever called them Dad. They never experienced the joys of life. Their unshared dreams and ambitions simply dissipated. They died without a wrinkle on their faces.

Thousands more suffered physical and mental injuries condemning them to lives of pain, anguish and unrealized dreams. For them, the war never ended. Life became one long, lonely, sleepless night after another.

Others were taken prisoner. Often humiliated and tortured, they were robbed of some of the best years of their lives and denied the opportunity to pursue their passions.

And there were those who did make it home after six long years of unforgettable experiences along with sad memories of dear friends who were less fortunate.

These heroes gave our generation a much better life than the ones they experienced. We are duty bound to remember them, to recall their bravery and document their stories.

World War II was the deadliest military conflict in history. An estimated 70–85 million people perished in the war – around 3% of the world's population in 1940.

As Laurence Binyon wrote in his poem for the Fallen:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning.

We will remember them.

I, for one, will always remember them – each and every one of them.

My book focuses on the transcribed diary. To fully appreciate the contents of the diary, understanding the historical, political, social and economic contexts is essential. To this end,

I have added sections on my father's humble background, the diary and its journey, the battlefield, the Battle of Gazala in which my dad was injured and some personal observations and thoughts.

I was 36 years old when my father died. We were very close. I never saw him flustered. He never complained. He was always so patient and tolerant. In the diary, there are a few entries in which his frustrations got the better of him. This can even be seen in a change in his handwriting on those days. These entries are so out of character with the father I knew. Those days must have been especially tough.

For me, writing a book around my father's handwritten war diary has been an inspirational and emotional experience. I finally got to reading it from cover to cover. It opened my eyes and filled them with tears on more than one occasion. The diary made me aware of the realities of war and the dangers these heroes voluntarily exposed themselves to – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We owe them so much. It made me ask myself so many questions. The what-ifs are too numerous to list. I've enjoyed the search for answers and speculating the potential outcomes. Thanks, Dad, for the wonderful legacy you left us. You are really a difficult act to follow.

Written by Harris Green in 2023.

A Word About Me:

I was born in Cape Town in 1946. I matriculated from Wynberg Boys High School and graduated from the University of Cape Town with a B. Com. degree. I made Aliya in 1970. I retired some years ago and enjoy spending quality time with my wife, my children and their spouses, my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren.

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