

## FROM A SOUTH PACIFIC NOTEBOOK

BY IRA WOLFERT

THE airplane fights a very good kind of war. If I could choose whether to fight in the air, on the ground or on the sea, it's the air I would pick. For in the air it's over very quickly, one way or the other.

If you're a fighter pilot, you're in it for about three seconds at a time. The decision is made and delivered, the appeal taken, judgment rendered and collected in somewhere between two and a half and three seconds. If you're in a bomber, it takes a little longer — an average of something like ten minutes.

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The biggest battles our warships have fought thus far have all lasted about thirty minutes. One I watched went thirty-one minutes and another went twenty-nine. Two others finished in half an hour on the dot.

Submarines are different. They're in it like the infantry — over their

ears. One of our submarines this summer was depth-bombed for thirty-six hours without intermission. The men sat around listening. Sometimes it was like sitting in a barrel that was being broken into with a sledge hammer. Sometimes it was like sitting in a barrel that was going over Niagara Falls.

Early in the action, the storekeeper broke out the ship's stores and divided all the candy on board equally among officers and men. Nobody saved any. From the old man down, they all decided there was no longer any point in being frugal. "Pogie bait" wasn't something you could take with you.

And what the men remembered most acutely of their sufferings when they returned was thirty days at sea after the attack without any candy.

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According to the infantry, a thirty-six-hour battle is a half-

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IRA WOLFERT was awarded a Pulitzer prize for outstanding foreign correspondence in 1943. He is the author of three books, *Battle for the Solomons*, *Torpedo 8* and *Tucker's People*, the latter a novel.

holiday. I rather got their attitude when I went into New Georgia with them. We used to lie in holes and take a breather when the airplanes came over. The Japs didn't shoot at us or give us anything to shoot at while the airplanes were in action. The orneriest infantryman will admit the airplane does at least that much.

Almost 300 Jap planes were shot down out of the bowl of air over our heads in the first two weeks in July and the troops had seats on the fifty-yard line. But they weren't very curious. The Japs were throwing at us \$150,000,000 worth of planes, more than \$20,000,000 worth of training in manpower and, say, \$25,000,000 more in bombs and this and that — altogether about a \$200,000,000 ball game — and our air force was up there saying no to them for us. But the troops would just lie there peacefully and listen to the noise.

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All I saw of the whole show those two weeks was one plane burning and a fellow streaking down out of another one under a parachute that had failed to open. The parachute had pulled out of its pack all right and was fluttering high and white over his head, but it lay folded flat and wouldn't billow at all. The wind rippled along the sides of the

flattened parachute and you could see it there, like fingers plucking and pulling. But the parachute wouldn't open and never did open, and all the way down you could see the fellow under it — a Jap he was, I found out later — looking small and black and all huddled up. For what seemed a long minute but what actually could not have been more than a fragment of a second, when the fellow got real close, just before he fell behind the trees, I could see that his head was lifted straight up and he was looking away from the ground and into the parachute. His knees seemed to be pulled up against him as if kneeling and his face was lifted as if in prayer and that's the way he fell into his grave, kneeling in the air and praying there.

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Although we didn't see much of the air fight, we heard a great deal. The soft, muttered put-put of the machine guns and the grind of motors being gunned or diving. The machine guns sound like little puffs of wind dribbling over wetted, blubbery lips. The planes going into their git-or-git-got dives — or, as they say, "making a pass" — sound like metal spears hurtling through a great wind into your ears.

Then, in ten minutes or so, it would be all over and we could hear

the planes pulling out on us, the sound of them seeming actually to go away over the horizon, and the men of the infantry would stir sluggishly and move their tired bones to the position required for prone firing.

"Hey, union! Go home, union!" an infantryman once called after the planes that were going away with flicking tails like horses cake-walking towards the feedbox. The taunt caught on. "Hey, union! The whistle's blown. Don't stick around for overtime."

Everybody would like to fight at least union hours in a war. Yes, the air force has the best of it with a ten-minute war and next comes the navy with its sparkling clean, swept-down fore and aft, pressed and polished, warmly fed, warmly shaved, hotly washed and cozily slept thirty-minute war.

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Or so the infantry is convinced. But the bombers I have flown with flew four hours to their ten-minute war and then four hours home. When the fliers got home, they were tired. Their nerves were beat up and banging in them like worn-out old drums. They were so tired, liquor often had no effect on them. The doctor would dole them out some and they took it obediently, but it didn't relax them at all. It

was just watering a desert with a sprinkler can.

Then the fellows would go to the movies and sit there. It didn't make any difference what the movie was. They'd just sit there listlessly. One time a squadron camp ran out of new movies on Guadalcanal during a prolonged aerial campaign. The men in the squadron could have got a change of bill by moving down the road a ways to another camp, but they didn't. They were too tired.

They just sat listlessly night after night for three nights in front of the same movie — a "B" business called something like *Priorities on Parade*, although there were not many in the audience who could have told you even that much about the picture. There was singing in it and a blonde who had delicately-shaped meat on her bones and floated around like a golden, bosomy, luminous cloud. Everybody just sat there listless and silent and when it was over got up silently and went silently to bed, feeling relaxed enough at last to sleep.

Some said the movies were more restful even than sleep because when you slept you had to do your own dreaming while the movies did the dreaming for you. But even they were quick enough to get into their sacks once they felt they could

sleep. The entertainment that rates highest with the air force at war — begging the pardon of Joe E. Brown, Bob Hope, Martha Raye and all the others — is sleeping time in the sack. The entertainment that comes second — again, begging the USO's pardon — is mail from home.

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Generals are finding it increasingly difficult in this war to die in bed and staff officers are no longer the dandies they once were, but . . . . Actually, I have very small reason to butter up the "but." Only General Leonard F. Wing's candy-striped pyjamas hung luridly from his mosquito bar in New Georgia day after day and from his large frame night after night. When I went into his tent to talk with him, I rested my eyes on his pyjamas. They were nice to see, reminders of home.

As for the staff officers, well, one of General Wing's is a Philadelphia society lad who had the forethought to bring an extra pair of gray cotton socks into the jungle. On the eleventh day of the campaign he changed into them. The socks peeped out of his shoe tops with a strange, rare glitter. Above them and below them, he was as muddy as the rest, but wherever he went that day he was followed by shouts

of "Woo-woo" and "Look at the socks!" It was the first pair of clean socks or clean anything anybody had seen in ten days.

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We have a democracy in our army that the fascists, who say they are trying to "democratize" theirs, will not ever achieve.

Just behind the front line one afternoon, General Wing came upon a Boston lad who was lying stomach down on a stretcher awaiting transportation to the rear. "Is there anything I can do to help you?" the general asked, after inquiring into how the boy had won his purple heart. "Yes," the lad said, not in a surly tone but in the frank way of one man to another, "you can put somebody up there who knows how to run a war." The general did not even look startled. "What are they doing wrong?" he asked. "Hell, they're moving too slow," the boy said. "They ought to go in there and bite those Japs in half like this." He thereupon sketched out a whole plan of action. The boy was no military genius, unfortunately for the story. As a matter of fact, he didn't know what he was talking about. When we left, the general said to me, "You know what I like about that boy? His sass."

Occasionally, there is dancing in

the South Pacific. That happens in Numea, New Caledonia, about a thousand miles from the nearest shot fired in anger but as close as they will let the girls get to men at war. And even in Numea only the Marines are brave enough to throw a dance. I found out how brave one has to be when I managed by involved circumstances to corral a quite pretty Tahitian belle and squire her to Camp Goettge. There were two kinds of dances going on — "Tag" and "No Tag" dances, with a large sign on the bandstand to identify each. When the sign read "Tag" one was allowed to cut in. Otherwise, according to the ground rules, your girl was your own for the duration.

Naturally, I waited for the "No Tag" sign to appear. The first thing that happened after that was somebody switched the sign. The next thing, fourteen or sixteen hands descended simultaneously and without marked gentleness upon my shoulders. A large argument then began as to who had tagged me first. Army, Navy and Marines were embroiled in the argument. While they were arguing, others arrived. One put his arm around the girl's waist and began to dance off with her, another took her by one arm, a third took her by her

other arm, a fourth wrestled with the masculine arm around her waist. The last I saw of her was a flash in which her dark, oval, glowing face was poised piteously. Then she disintegrated before my eyes and I have not seen her since and do not expect ever to see her again.

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Soldiers do not waste words in idle talk during a campaign, but one very tired afternoon in the jungles of New Georgia with sporadic shooting going on about us, Major Martin Clemens of the British Solomon Islands defense force and myself chanced upon an odd topic of conversation and bobbled along with it quite a while. I asked him what poppycock notion had induced a man of his intelligence to waste so many of his years as a government administrator in these wretched, pestilential, God-and-man-and-woman-forsaken islands. I reminded him that life in the Solomons, whatever attractions it offered for passing the time, deprived him of the sense of being in the mainstream of the life of our times. "You, my dear major," I remember remarking as cannon grumbled, "are living as an anachronism, although the accident of war does give you the chance of dying like a man of the modern world."

The major did not take his designation as an anachronism quietly. He is a Cambridge man and will become ultimately, barring mischances, a colonel. He tut-tutted brusquely and stated the case for the colonial life as follows:

The beginnings of civilization can be found in the Solomons and, in fact, the growth of man toward the civilization that exists in cities and populated farm lands can be found and studied there. If a man wants to understand civilization thoroughly let him first see its beginnings and its struggles to grow in the Solomons and in other anachronistic lands.

"For instance, the natives were all isolationist here before the war came to them," he said. "The Savo Islander thought of himself as a Savo patriot and not a Guadalcanal patriot. On Malaita Island, the salt water natives regarded the natives in the bush as foreigners and enemies.

"At the beginning of the war, each tried to help the fight for his own island. Now, with the war more than a year old to them, Malaita boys are on Guadalcanal and realize that our success on Guadalcanal saved Malaita. Guadalcanal boys are on New Georgia and realize that success there is necessary to Guadalcanal. Guadal-

canal Firsters have learned their lesson."

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A letter from Lt. (j.g.) Herbert Salzman, once of Norwalk, Connecticut, touches lightly on the difficulties involved in answering a call of nature in the Aleutian Islands. You are lying in bed in six suits of underwear under eight blankets with your luggage piled on top of the blankets, he discloses, when nature calls. You dress under the blankets in three pairs of pants, sweaters, mufflers and light and heavy overcoats. You then shudder shiveringly across yards of icy tundra to the open-faced latrine and begin the task of uncovering yourself as little as possible. At a strategic moment, a williwaw wind blows up. The williwaw is a gust of wind peculiar to the Aleutians and its habit is to blow in all directions at once. As it blows, you discover that you might just as well have stood in bed.

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The British and the Australians of the planter class are very much exercised about the way Americans treat natives. They think our boys are spoiling them by being overly generous and are creating a postwar problem by doing so. Our boys, on the other hand, have no need for money, are not concerned about

postwar problems and cannot get into their heads the fact that clothing they have no use for and rations they cannot eat have any value.

So they throw or give away their battered clothing and excess rations and the planters are convinced that the natives have hoarded a lifetime supply of GI garments and food, as well as more money than they ever dreamed existed.

"There will be no work done in the Solomons by natives," the colonials declare grimly, "until that is all used up."

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War aims among our troops, I know, are a delicate subject. The last time I wrote about the lack of them on Guadalcanal, I was denounced in a leading editorial in

the New York *Times* as some kind of agitator stirring up discontent among our troops. That was last winter when the fighting was hot on Guadalcanal and the only war aim the troops believed in was the one they could see at the end of their gun sights.

But I can write without trepidation about the war aims that have taken hold this summer on Guadalcanal. Now that life is infinitely quieter on the island and there is more time for thought, there is no longer a lack of a war aim. A number of men on Guadalcanal told me with deep conviction they are fighting to make sure that, when the peace is signed, the Japanese get Guadalcanal *and are made to live on it.*



## Summing Up

THE main of life is composed of small incidents and petty occurrences; of wishes for objects not remote, and grief for disappointments of no fatal consequence; of insect vexations which sting us and fly away, impertinences which buzz a while about us, and are heard no more; of meteorous pleasures which dance before us and are dissipated; of compliments which glide off the soul like other music, and are forgotten by him that gave and him that received them.

— SAMUEL JOHNSON

## THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

### Music

#### OPERA FOR THE MILLIONS

BY ARTHUR BRONSON

ONE of the strangest sights of our times — when a war-torn economy has limited hotel, theater, train and labor accommodations — is the flock of opera companies now touring the land. It is a comparatively new phenomenon. We have had touring opera troupes before, of course. One of the current companies, in fact, the San Carlo Opera Company, has been at it steadily for some thirty years. But what is unusual is the present wholesale quantity of these operatic purveyors, and what is noteworthy is a new style of operatic fare that has been added by some of them, to attract an utterly new kind of audience. Between the two styles, old and new, opera has not only been brought to towns and areas that never had it before, but certain communities have even been encouraged to set up their own opera seasons or festivals. It is an

amazing tribute to an art-form that was once considered high-brow and effete. Opera in America is becoming as familiar as *pie à la mode* and as popular as gin rummy. The signs are unmistakable.

Almost every nook of the country, during last season or this, will have been visited by the San Carlo Opera Company, the Philadelphia-La Scala Opera Company, the Philadelphia Opera Company (a quite distinct group from the preceding), the Charles L. Wagner troupes, the Nine O'Clock Opera Company, or the Salvatore Baccaloni troupe. Lima, Ohio; Greensboro, North Carolina; and LaPorte, Indiana, will have had their opera, no less than Boston or St. Paul. College girls from Lansing, Michigan, and canning workers from Raleigh, North Carolina, will have flocked to the revitalized, streamlined type of opera in English done by the Nine O'Clock and Philadelphia Opera companies,

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ARTHUR BRONSON has been assistant drama and music editor of the *Philadelphia Record* for the last seven years. He was graduated from Harvard in 1924 and for the next thirteen years was engaged in business, which he quit to enter journalism.