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Three Days to Calcutta

By H. E. Bates

English Short Story Writer Who During the War Served With Britain's Royal Air Force

Remoteness has been one of India's problems. Until the advent of the airplane, its distance from the Western world stood as an obstacle to its economic and cultural development. Today that is changed. Space has been annihilated, and the plane has brought the voyage of several weeks down to three days. This change may have more significance than is at first apparent. Time will tell. The trip is now a matter of hops. What the journey is like from England to India and Burma is described by a writer who has just covered the route by air.



Flyingboat Taking Off From the Nile

FLYING southward toward France on a morning in late winter; I looked down and was aware, as never before, of the green uniformity of England. The green was very soft and low in tone and had not yet come awake. In less than half an hour it broke like the sides of a crusty brown loaf where the



British Official Photos

LODESTAR AIRCRAFT IS SEEN HERE FLYING LOW PAST THE FAMOUS CITADEL IN CAIRO

parallels of Sardinian fields, the high, snowy mountains rosy in the distance, the sea deep indigo below.

And in about an hour and a half we were over Malta—which from the air does not look at all like that battered island of rock of which you read in popular descriptions. It has the look, with its white and sunny stones, of being a fragment of some Caesarian empire thrown away. We, the British, have taken good care of it—always, of course, as a base in naval strategy and power. Now as you come down over it from the north you realize that it has begun a new life.

Malta is, and will become even more so in the future, the first big outward staging post on the air route east: at the moment a night stop, where the traveler who saw the hoar frost of England thawing from the snowdrops at breakfast-time may pick himself a carnation in the warm afternoon, but soon only a lunch stop, and then in the future just beyond that only a breakfast stop—an egg, an orange, and an island marking off, before you can read your paper, the first 1,200 miles.

As we went southeast from Malta, across the southern Mediterranean into the brown and arid distances of the desert about Benghazi, I realized that

taken incredibly far south, by way of Lagos and equatorial Africa, before it reached even the comparative calm of the Red Sea. It then still had half the journey to do, and the Japs had anyway reached the fringes of Assam.

The immense flights over the southern Atlantic and then over the vast African interior made hard days for Transport Command. But they were harder still, perhaps, for the armies on the Burmese frontier—armies that knew they were at the thin and precarious end of a supply route that was being heavily drained halfway before it ever reached them. That supply route was long, hard and a bad shape. The dangers of war pushed it out into vast bulges, doubling its essential distances. Many of the things the armies of Burma needed were a long time getting there.

Now you are out over the Rubh el Khali, the vast and hideously brown desert of Saudi Arabia, on the right of the second day. And as dawn comes you fly out of this incredible wasteland, where solitary caravans below you come to life only because of the dark elongation of their shadows on the bright and bitter sand and where a round bunch of goats thins out like a line of black beetles at the noise of aircraft, into the blue-green

sun. You begin to see it beating with powerful transparency on the Indian Ocean, and all along the astonishing coast of Baluchistan.

It brought home to me, more than anything, the violent and rapid contrasts of this route by which Transport Command now feeds the armies that go down to Rangoon.

For the day before yesterday you were in England, where the first crocus was a symbol of the rising strength of sunlight, and tomorrow you will be in India, on the fringes of the tropical heat, and even on the same day in Burma, where sun, with dust, will become your constant enemy.

You will be going into Asia by way of a sub-continent, where states are larger than France and provinces make pre-conquered Germany look small. You will come down to land at a city, Calcutta, that is as large in population as Berlin and larger than any city in the whole of the Western hemisphere with the single exception of New York.

You will have come, in three days, out of the cool final enactments of one war into the violent and uneasy clash of another. You will have come out of a modern into a largely medieval world. And you will have come on a route that

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FLYING southward toward France on a morning in late winter; I looked down and was aware, as never before, of the green uniformity of England. The green was very soft and low in tone and had not yet come awake. In less than half an hour it broke like the edges of a crusty brown loaf where the misty cliffs of the middle southern shore came down to the white edge of rocky sea.

In about another half hour the coast of France came from beyond the sea with scarcely any difference of character or tone. We flew in over yellow sand dunes, dark woods and light river estuaries, and so out over France, on the first stage of that transcontinental air route that Royal Air Force Transport Command has struck out for itself between England and the boundaries of the tropics and the Burma battle-line.

We had sandwiches somewhere over the Mediterranean and a little later looked down on the deep green and russet

parallels of Sardinian fields, the high, snowy mountains rosy in the distance, the sea deep indigo below.

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As we went southeast from Malta, across the southern Mediterranean into the brown and arid distances of the desert about Benghazi, I realized that we had done little but fly over battle-grounds: England, Northern France, Toulon, Sardinia, Malta, and now the sandy strip that runs back to El Alamein. And it struck me that only a couple of years ago these had been impassable blocks on a route that is now smoother, and a good deal less crowded, than a suburban railway.

Less than two years has changed the face of every country in Europe and the Mediterranean, and not least they have seen Transport Command grow up. Two years ago neither Malta nor the North African coast were places for the placid arrival of passenger transport, and air supply for the Indian theater had to be

taken incredibly far south, by way of Lagos and equatorial Africa, before it reached even the comparative calm of the Red Sea. It then still had half the journey to do, and the Japs had anyway reached the fringes of Assam.

The immense flights over the southern Atlantic and then over the vast African interior made hard days for Transport Command, but they were harder still, perhaps, for the armies on the Burmese frontier—armies that knew they were at the thin and precarious end of a supply route that was being heavily drained halfway before it ever reached them. That supply route was long, hard and a bad shape. The dangers of war pushed it out into vast bulges, doubling its essential distances. Many of the things the armies of Burma needed were a long time getting there.

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On the Persian coast, the dust of the East blows with ferocity. It rattles against palm-leaf barricades of the compounds and flies up in mountainous dunes whenever aircraft move. Down narrow and nameless streets it whisks silent, solitary, black-veiled women suddenly out of sight.

And on that day, your third day out from England, you become aware of the

sun. You begin to see it beating with powerful transience on the Indian Ocean, and all along the astonishing coast of Baluchistan.

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You will have come, in three days, out of the cool final enactments of one war into the violent and uneasy clash of another. You will have come out of a modern into a largely medieval world. And you will have come on a route that has now become pretty well as fixed and certain as if 7,000 miles of aerial track had been laid between London and the mouths of the Brahmaputra.

Which is what, in fact, Transport Command has done. It has laid down a transcontinental railway of the air. And it has laid it not only in the face of the purely physical difficulties of geography and climate and the hazards of war, but in spite of a policy which determined, with inflexible and now wholly justified foresight, that what Britain needed for the defeat of Germany was not transport planes, but fighters and bombers.

To do this it has had to carve out air
(Continued on page 18)

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.. Three Days to Calcutta

(Continued from Page 7)

fields in most of these hazardous places I have described—in Malta, in the Egyptian desert, in the windy Persian Gulf, on the edges of the Sind Desert at Karachi, on the banks of the Hooghli in Calcutta. Hardly any peacetime framework existed in these places for the reception of modern trans-

ports and their passengers. What the RAF has really done is to cut out a pioneer route to the Far East and to feed at the same time a war that was far off, difficult, and wholly unique in that it could never have been fought without air supply.

This all-British route will now take you from England to Calcutta in the normal schedule of three days. But a York aircraft of the Royal Air Force has just given a hint of the timetable of the future by flying the round trip, London-Calcutta-London, in four and a half days, almost at the same time as another British aircraft flew the London-New Zealand route in 51 hours. The Mosquito has, of course, already made these times look as out of date as M. Bleriot, but unfortunately a Mosquito puts its only passenger in a strait jacket.

Undoubtedly the time is coming, and coming quite quickly, when this all-British route will take you from the cool uniformity of England's freshness into Calcutta's harsh and brilliant sunlight in less than 48 hours.

Until that time, the route will

fight Japan. It extends, now that Rangoon has fallen, for another thousand miles. As the end of the war in Germany releases transports, it will add to its already astonishing picture of the earth's surface by taking in the mouths



"I Can Take a Teeny One"

of the Irrawaddy, the many temples of Bangkok. It will become a regular supply route of practically 10,000 miles. It will become very important, as part of the means of transmitting, from Britain, the power of British industry that will increasingly be turned against Japan.



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