

THE MASSAWA MIRACLE

By BIDDLE DORCY, as told to BARRETT C. KIESLING for *Collier's Magazine*

EARLY IN 1942 the British in Egypt were dangerously short of supplies, guns, ammunition, trucks, fuel. Rommel was battering at their lines. Axis air fleets based on Pantelleria practically cut off Allied shipping from England and America to Egyptian ports. The Suez Canal and parts of the Red Sea were within bomber range of the enemy and it was hazardous to use them.

So supplies for the Allied armies had to go around the Cape of Good Hope, and then up to Djibouti or Massawa. Massawa, in Eritrea, was by far the most vital. It was a short land passage from the port over a paved highway to Asmara; from there there was a British military road up to Khartoum and then up the Nile Valley to Cairo.

War cargoes couldn't, with any chance of success, be taken farther north than Massawa—and at Massawa nine sunken ships blocked the way. They were sunk, bow to stern, in the south harbour entrance, the tops of their masts, rigging, and stacks sticking out a few feet above the surface of the hot, oily swells. The retreating Italians had bomb-blasted them from inside when the British drove them from the port—and what got by these ships and up to the docks was a trickle.

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The British had been trying to get some of the ships up, but they couldn't get the proper equipment or the skilled divers. They had been working on one ship for seven months—and she was still on the bottom. Rommel was getting his supplies across the Mediterranean, and the British weren't getting any supplies to amount to much from anywhere.

Meanwhile Rommel was advancing eastward, and the prophets were predicting he would soon overrun the Middle East, join with the Japs—and the war might be lost.

A look at the facts of the case seemed to make the prophets right, for once.

At this interesting moment I got a call from one of the big hotels in Los Angeles to meet a representative of the contracting firm of Johnson, Drake, and Piper—and before long I found myself with a deep-sea diving contract. I thought: Well, probably it's in Central or South America somewhere; it won't take long. But no one would tell me where the job was; all I learned was that my boss would be Captain Edison D. Brown, a veteran salvager. He'd just got back from raising the sunken German steamer "Eisenach" at Puntarenas, Costa Rica.

I didn't know then that the British had sent in a hurry call to the United States to get those sunken ships at Massawa out of the way in jig time—or else. I didn't know, either, that I'd been hired because Captain Brown had insisted to my employers that, although I was a "movie actor," I was no cream puff.

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After I left Stanford University at Palo Alto, California, I did some commercial diving in the Philippines; coming back home I made a living as a stunt man in the movies. I swam the rapids in "North-west Passage"; I fought a giant squid for Ray Milland in "Reap the Wild Wind"; I dived endlessly off masts and cliffs.

Well, Captain Brown had been a "movie actor," too. He'd skippered tugs in "Mutiny on the Bounty" and "Captains Courageous"—in between putting in twenty-five years of salvage work all over the world.

When the British SOS came in there was no salvage vessel available anywhere in the United States. So one was built at Port Arthur, Texas, in twenty-six days. She was a steel tug, 97 ft. long, Diesel-electric driven and equipped with all the diving and salvage gadgets anyone could think of. She had been completed and run her trials only a few days before her crew piled aboard—