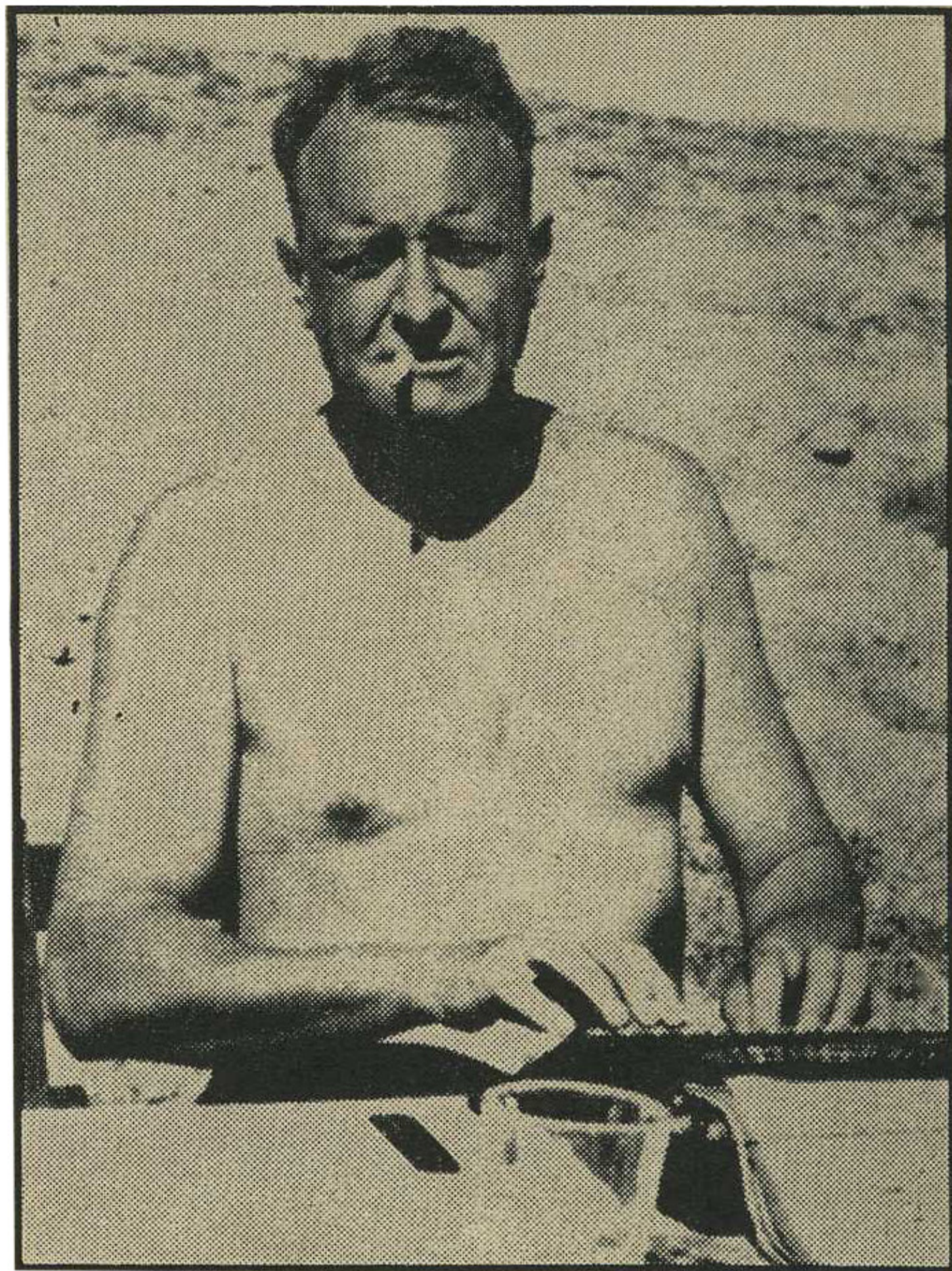


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The Mediterranean Story



McMillan: Desert chronicler

There are several reasons for recommending Richard McMillan's new book, "Mediterranean Assignment." For one, it is easily the most complete and detailed narrative yet written about the war in North Africa. It contains a superb profile of Gen. Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, the "desert Cromwell," and an excellent study of his methods of waging desert war. The book is well put together, rich in the revealing anecdotes and the stories of individual exploits which give humanity and reality to military history. Lastly, although the account is entirely eyewitness, the author keeps himself and his personality in the background as much as possible. This is a very refreshing trait in a war correspondent's book and one that is strongly commended as a model.

McMillan, who was the first accredited correspondent with the BEF in France, was sent by the United Press from London to Gibraltar in November 1940 on what he thought would be a routine assignment. He expected to be back in England in two days. Instead, he stayed in the Mediterranean two years. He went to Albania, where he saw the early battles of the Greek-Italian war; from there he crossed over to Libya and watched General Wavell lead a shoestring army of 5,000 men to victory over Graziani's 150,000 "invincibles." He returned with the Balkan BEF to Greece and saw that nation's tragic debacle from uncomfortably close quarters; he was in on the

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BEF's "little Dunkerque" and made his way to Crete just before its fall.

Back in Africa, McMillan was with the British during the siege of Tobruk and in the disastrous flight into Egypt. Finally, he had the satisfaction of seeing the crushed Eighth Army, marvelously revitalized under "Monty of El Alamein," force the strutting Rommel, who had advanced farther and faster than any other military leader in history, to turn tail, thus earning the added distinction of being the military leader who retreated faster than any other in history.

Restrained Bite: McMillan is a Scotsman and a loyal son of the empire. His writing is nonpolitical, and he is sparing of criticism of the British military conduct of the war in the Mediterranean arena. He believes it was Hitler who made the mistake of going into the Balkans, that if the Nazis had not felt obliged to help the stumble-bum Italian Army out of its embarrassing difficulties with the Greeks but had instead concentrated on the feeble British forces in Libya, Hitler could have cleaned up North Africa, joy-ridden through Suez and joined hands with his Far Eastern partner.

When the author does indulge in critical remarks about his countrymen, however, his words have added sting by virtue of his habitual restraint. He is bitter about the MacDonald-Baldwin-Chamberlain policies which led the British people into a war and "gave them bows and arrows to fight with." There are also some extremely caustic passages about the polo-playing staff officers who led a café-society life around British G.H.Q. in Cairo, while the boys of the Eighth Army were battling for their existence out in the desert. McMillan says that often Montgomery's "desert rats" would stagger back to base after a bloody skirmish in the sands, to be greeted by a communiqué from G.H.Q. telling how Cairo had that day been victorious over Suez—at cricket.

Like many correspondents in this war, McMillan has been under fire—not just under general bombardment but personally shot at—and has had more than his share of hackle-raising brushes with death. Last week, just as his book was about to be released, UP wires carried the news that their correspondent had been wounded in the face and hands by a powder blast at the front in Sicily. The next day, McMillan covered that story himself. It was typical of him that his dispatch carried not a word of his own pain or the extent of his wounds; it was a reporter's account—and a good one, too—of what life is like in a field dressing station. (MEDITERRANEAN ASSIGNMENT. *By Richard McMillan*. 322 pages. Doubleday, Doran. \$3.)