

WHERE REAL THINGS LOOK UNREAL

Russell Clark Returns From The Tropics

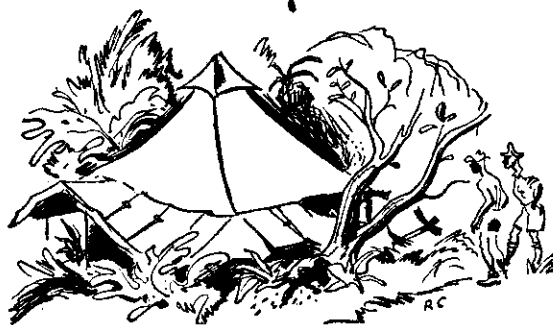
BEFORE Rommel attacked us in Africa he put his Afrika Korps through superheated barracks and artificial sand-storms. No such preparation was given to *The Listener's* artist, Russell Clark, before he left New Zealand for the Solomons nine or ten months ago. It was windy (and quite cold) Wellington one week; burning New Caledonia next



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week, since the month was February; and then for weeks and weeks the steam baths of Guadalcanal and Bougainville and Treasury Island and Florida and the Russells and Santa Isabel and Malaita. Time of course brought some relief, and experience some tricks, but at first it seemed almost impossible either to work or to think. And it remained almost impossible to work in water-colours to a finish, since the paper mildewed as fast as it was used, and it was necessary to be content with half-finished sketches and copious notes unless there were supplies of cardboard and formalin-treated paste. Contrary to all his experience with paper and paste-board, he found that paper on cardboard was usable, paper by itself useless.

Another trouble was the incessant rain, which made it impossible to finish jobs in the open and difficult to do so in the shelter of tents. For the purpose of most tents was to keep out light as well as



"Most tents were not of that type"

rain. If they were oblong, with openings at both ends, it was possible to close the direct light end and have something like studio conditions. But most tents were not of that type. They were square, with only one opening, and it was very difficult indeed to work in one of those.

A Continual Excitement

But in spite of such drawbacks, and a hundred others, Russell Clark found his work in the Islands a continual excitement. The colour was exciting, the light, the fantastic shapes. It was exciting to move about so much, see so many people, so many ways of life. It was exciting to reconstruct the battle scenes—to get the exact position of a fox-hole into which a dead Japanese slid upright one night, or a beach on which a barge landed under fire. For that kind of information he was deeply indebted to the men in the field, who thought nothing too much trouble for historical accuracy. And it was also exciting, because so unexpected and so encouraging, to discover how welcome an artist is among the fighting men themselves. Before he reached the forward areas Russell Clark had been subjected to some banter and been aware of some jealousy. What was the use of artists at war? But when he really began to work all that disappeared. It was now difficult to sketch without a gallery. Men followed him round, asked him questions, made suggestions, and often gave invaluable information. Then as they got to know him better they would produce little sketches of their own—scenes painted on letters or envelopes to send home, or illustrated pages in private diaries.

"It was a really astonishing experience," he told us. "Instead of a man here and there, there were hundreds doing such things."

"Men with some training, of course?" "Yes, but more with none at all. The great majority had never used a brush or a pencil in their lives, or even thought of using them. Now they were all trying to express what they had seen or been through."

"The novelty of their environment, perhaps?"

"Yes, that would have something to do with it, but I think the chief fact was that they had time to find themselves. In civilian life they had not found a need for art. Here they had hours and hours with nothing to do, and began making things or representing them. It was most curious to see so many at it—all seeking new ways of expression."

Never Cold

That was one strange experience, and another was living in a world in which it was never cold,

day or night. The humidity was of course incredible; especially at night.

"You would be working on a sheet of paper that was dry enough to crackle when you turned out your light. In the morning it would be so limp that it could not hold itself up in your hand."

Fortunately, drying out was just as rapid and thorough, or life would be quite intolerable in the Solomons for six or eight months in the year. But it was never cold. He had felt a little chilly in New Caledonia when he returned there from Guadalcanal—it was one of the few occasions when he had put on battle dress—but it was roughly true that he had not once felt cold all the time he was away.

Not a Picnic

One of the results of his journey would be, he hoped, proof that the Third Division had not been on a glorified picnic. If he had fewer battle scenes to present than artists in Egypt and Italy, the living and training conditions in the tropics were generally appalling.



"... In the best manner of white politicians"

"It was mud and rain, rain and mud, usually for weeks on end."

"And mosquitoes all the way, no doubt?"

"Yes, mosquitoes by the million. But not where you expected them."

They were worst in New Caledonia, where they were not malarious. Further north, they were under control. Everywhere we went in the Solomons jungle we met anti-malaria squads—natives under the control of a negro soldier. The result was that the farther you penetrated into the forward areas the fewer insects you saw."

"If the natives are as tough as they look the negroes must have a difficult job."

"They do look tough, don't they? And they can be, too. But in general they are no trouble at all."

"Do they ever smile?"

"They smile all right. You should see them when we do something stupid—opening a coconut with a bayonet, for example, or slipping off a stone into a creek."

"How did they live before the troops arrived?"

"Very comfortably. A little fishing, a little gardening, a great deal of loafing."

"Did they build anything that we would call houses?"

"Well, you might call them huts, but they are very comfortable and very clean. One of their most interesting efforts is the provision of separate accommodation for the sick and the dying—houses on stilts in the water in which the sick remain until



"Opening a coconut with a bayonet"

they recover or die. The odd thing is that those who have to go there go quite cheerfully."

"They have no fear of death, then?"

"Apparently not. If they have it is well concealed."

"Have any of them been educated—by our standards, that is?"

"Yes, some of them speak quite good English. They have been to mission schools, and they have served on ships. Many have been to Australia. But in general they are not educated except in their own tribal ways. They have special skills that make us look foolish, but they can't read or write or speak our language. Why should they?"

"But are they not adopting our ways now—including our vices?"

"Well, I saw a lad of two or three pull a packet of American cigarettes from his belt, light up with an American lighter, and then strut off with a beautiful exhibition of swank. That may have been vice, but it was very amusing."

"As a commentary on civilisation, you mean?"

"Yes, and in other ways. When that urchin sported that lighter it was impossible for us to get one for love or money... I also remember arriving at an island during what was expected to be the fatal illness of the ruling chief. And what were the would-be chiefs doing? Going round patting the babies' heads in the best manner of white politicians!"

"Some of the photographs of events as they happened were lost or damaged. The painted reconstructions are the only record in many cases now existing. It is natural that those who took part in these events should want the story of them."

"The story, and the background too, we should think."

"Certainly the colour. It is not possible to tell a tropical story in black and white. The reality looks always like unreality."