

BEHIND THE LINES IN NORTH AFRICA

IN the last few days, I have travelled by road to Algiers and back, a total distance of a thousand miles. My small Citroen, carrying three passengers and luggage, covered over half the distance at an average speed of nearly 38 miles an hour, including stops, and the remainder at about 32, crossing several mountain ranges on the way.

There could not be a better testimony for the astonishing efficiency with which the Royal Engineers have carried out their immense tasks of maintaining our road communications. Roads here, like everything else from cars to plumbing, have been neglected since June, 1940.

The First Army arrived to find that troops and supplies must be carried forward a distance of 500 miles over an inadequate road system, badly maintained. Choked ditches had to be cleared, for nothing undermines roads like faulty drainage. Bridges never designed for huge modern military vehicles had to be repaired or strengthened. Scores of miles of road surface had to be relaid. Bomb or shell craters had to be filled up. Much widening had to be done, for the roads were seldom big enough to take more

Why Events Have Dragged In Tunisia

MOST people have wondered why our armies in Tunisia have taken so long to move. Perhaps they will cease wondering after they have read this article by E. A. MONTAGUE from a recent issue of the "Manchester Guardian."

than two lines of traffic, and not always that. Bridges were almost always single-line-traffic width, and therefore many duplicate bridges and approaches were built. Elsewhere fords were constructed. In our November advance, bridges blown up by the enemy had to be repaired.

Suits As Wages

All sorts of subsidiary problems arose. Quarries had to be opened or reopened to supply the huge quantities of stone needed. Extra labour had to be found, and the use of Arab labour provided fresh headaches. Money wages were of little use to the Arabs, who had nothing to spend it on. What they needed was clothes, and cloth is almost unobtainable in this country. So arrangements

are now being made to provide Arab road labourers with dyed suits of battle dress. It is also necessary to find tents or other shelter for them and for French or British workers.

The French Department of Bridges and Roads has given us all the help it could, but the main burden of all this has fallen on the sappers. Almost every mile of my journey provided evidence of how well they and their devoted collaborators the Pioneers have carried out their tasks. A remembered stretch of badly pitted road surface had been patched and rendered safe. Another had been entirely relaid. Narrow hairpin bends had been blunted and widened. Here a gang of Arabs worked under the supervision of a single

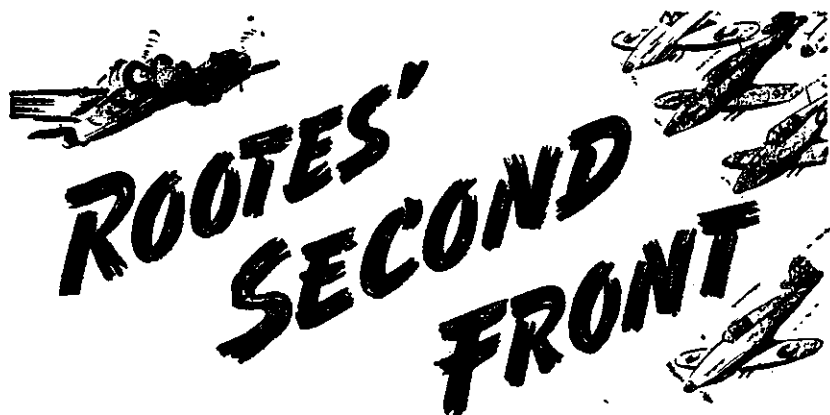
British corporal or private. There a party of sappers worked with feverish haste to repair a weakened bridge so that the lines of army vehicles waiting each side to cross it should be delayed as little as possible.

Sight for Sore Eyes

The way these sappers and Pioneers attack an urgent job is a sight for sore eyes. They built one bridge over the River Medjerda, together with its two approach roads, in four days, and the Medjerda River bed is as wide as the Thames at Oxford. When we took Medjez-el-Bab in November and the Germans blew up the bridge there our sappers put in a hundred-foot span which was capable of bearing any traffic in a few hours at night.

All this is only part of the sappers' duties here. They also have to maintain the aerodromes and construct new ones. Everybody now knows how the lack of aerodromes close behind the front has made difficult the problem of close air support. The chief trouble is unsuitability of the prevailing soil, which swells when wet and cracks when it dries. But the sappers are overcoming

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