

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

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Added TEI header

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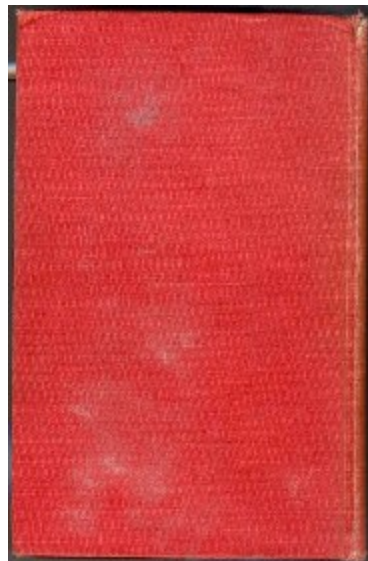
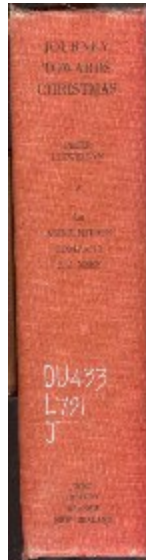
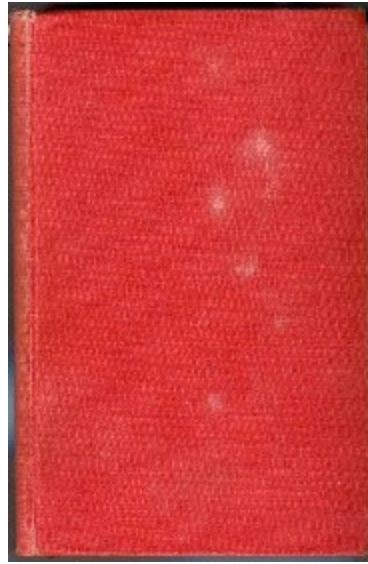
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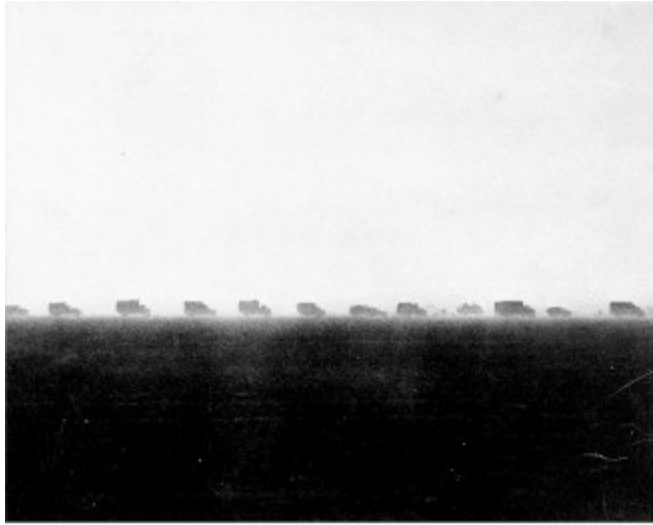
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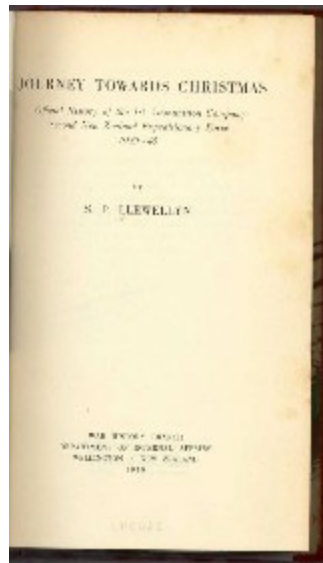


Convoy at Dusk

Convoy at Dusk

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

[TITLE PAGE]



JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force 1939-45

S. P. LLEWELLYN

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON: NEW ZEALAND 1949 SET UP, PRINTED AND BOUND IN NEW ZEALAND

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JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

[DEDICATION]

For help and encouragement in writing this history the author wishes to thank Lieutenant-Colonel W. A. T. McGuire, Majors P. E. Coutts, J. D. Fenton, R. C. Gibson, and S. A. Sampson, Captain B. J. Williams, WO I I. McBeth, WO II A. L. Salmond, Sergeants S. T. Midgley and G. McG. Mowat, Corporal G. J. McKay, and Drivers D. Falconer, G. W. Harte, and G. P. Laverick.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

FOREWORD

FOREWORD



By .

THE publication of this history gives me an opportunity, which I welcome, of paying a tribute to the work in the **Middle East** and **Italy** of one of our units, the 1st Ammunition Company.

This book is a record of their achievements. They were a 1st Echelon unit, and were one of the few of our Division that took part in General Wavell's Desert Campaign against the Italians in 1940. From then on they fought through the whole war *[sic: war]* and finished up their great service on VE Day near **Trieste**. In all they were six years overseas, fifty-three months of which were spent in active operations, which included the campaigns in the **Western Desert** and **Italy**.

I am inclined to think that the New Zealand Division's greatest contribution to the war effort was during the early years in North Africa.

It has been said that 'The Western Desert was a tactician's paradise, and a Quartermaster-General's nightmare'. The campaign in North Africa was certainly a war of movement. Mobility and administration played a decisive part. A motorised force was needed. New Zealanders were ideal men for this class of warfare. They found their way across the unmapped, featureless Desert by night as well as day with uncanny skill,

almost by instinct.

In this book is the story. It tells us of their formation, their work in training and in battle. It deals not only with our successes but also our disasters, such as **Greece**. It also tells the story of the men on leave and in the rear areas. It is a record of one of the most efficient and well trained units of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

When I said good-bye to the Division in **Italy** I said of the New Zealand Army Service Corps, of which they are a part, that throughout the whole war they had never failed us.

I would go further and say without their resource and skill we could never have attempted 'the turning movements' in North Africa at which this Division of ours was so formidable.

I hope many will buy this book and that military students to come will study it, and glean from the pages the lessons which abound therein.

Bernard Freyberg

GOVERNOR-GENERAL

One time General Officer Commanding,

Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

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JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 1 – DESIGN FOR A UNIT

CHAPTER 1

DESIGN FOR A UNIT

THE MAIN BODY of the **Divisional Ammunition Company** went into camp on 6 October 1939, ten days after the advanced party. ¹ We came from every walk of life—every walk, crawl, shuffle, and stampede. Most of us had our homes in **Auckland** or in the **Auckland** district, and after breakfast we assembled sixty-five strong at the Drill Hall, Rutland Street. The hall was cavernous and depressing and it smelt of damp mackintoshes. There was a good deal of shouting, and presently we were shepherded into a corner where there was a man with a Bible. He told us to place our hands on the Book, cut out the shoving, and repeat what he said. He read quickly from a small card and there was room on the Book for only a few hands, so most of us had to be content with gesturing towards it and moving our lips.

Soon we were marching down **Queen Street** in a blur of rain, a sergeant in uniform leading us. His name, we learned later, was Michael. ² It had been raining off and on since early morning and some of us had neither mackintoshes nor overcoats. Not everyone was quite sober and our civilian clothes hung damply about us. Most of us had sugar sacks on our backs and bottles in our pockets, and as we marched, heading for the railway station, we linked arms with girls, called out to friends, and took other steps to demonstrate our amateur status.

By the time they reached Hopuhopu some members of the party were in a mood to treat everything as a gigantic joke and the sight of a group of officers in front of an endless prospect of greyish-white bell tents, the former as smart and polished as the latter were dirty and dilapidated, did nothing to damp their spirits. When the roll-call started they answered their names as loudly, cheerfully, and incorrectly as possible. ‘Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!’ ‘That’s me!’ ‘Right here, Colonel!’ A minority—either they had served in the Territorial Army or they were already ambitious for stripes—came smartly to attention and snapped ‘Sir!’ Most of us, though, said ‘Here’ or ‘Yes’, and let it go at that. There were some—perhaps there

were many—who had been made so miserable by recent leave-takings, the dreariness of the day, and the general beastliness of what they seemed to have let themselves in for, that when their names were called they just grunted.

On the whole, Captain W. A. T. McGuire, who was now officer commanding the company, ³ was justified in his opinion. ‘You looked like a lot of tramps,’ he told us long afterwards. ‘My heart sank when I saw you.’

In the afternoon fifty-two others joined us, bringing our strength to about 156.

When you volunteer for the Army you make, as it were, a pact with the Devil. You surrender not quite your immortal soul but at least your immediate hopes and ambitions, your independence and freedom, and the kindly and familiar ways of home. But the Devil is notoriously a gentleman and he grants you something in return. He frees you from the trouble of earning a living and the responsibility of thinking for yourself. Not a very good bargain perhaps, but something. The new recruit feels as though he has gone back to school, or back even further than that—back to the nursery.

Most of us, if we search our memories, will find that we were happy at Hopuhopu in spite of the continual rain, the leaky tents, the monotonous parades, the appalling food. The meals, everyone will agree, descended to a level of greasy sogginess that was seldom touched at any other time in our Army life. The food itself was fairly good except in a few instances—an issue of fish is still spoken of with respect, and from what barren and scrubby fields our potatoes were wrested we should have been interested to discover—nor were the cooks, most of whom were learners, much to blame. Crowded cookhouses and lack of equipment were the cause of the trouble. The midday meal, though, was excellent: plenty of bread, jam, cheese, and good New Zealand butter. Most of us filled up on this, and in the evenings visited the canteen, to practise patience, to develop self-assertion and, on occasions, to make a

purchase.

It rained steadily at first and we spent a great deal of time in our tents. Daily our civilian clothes became damper and more disreputable and it was a relief when we were issued with serge uniforms and felt hats. By this time we had rifles and webbing as well, and the cleaning and laying-out of our kit (a performance that was subject to all the bewildering and terrifying taboos attendant on priestly ritual) presented us with an almost insoluble time problem between breakfast and company parade; but the old Army lore, much of which, no doubt, came down to us direct from the Peninsular campaigns, gained rapid currency, and after a few days it was seldom that anyone was unduly late for a parade or conspicuously badly turned-out, though the officers always found something to criticise. Once used to wearing uniform, we dropped quite swiftly into Army ways. It was easier to drill, easier to double when ordered to, and less of an affront to our native independence to stand to attention when addressing an officer, salute him, and call him 'Sir'.

Some civilian clothing still appeared in the ranks (a few figures proved too obstinate even for Company Quartermaster-Sergeant Robin Hood ⁴ and his assistant, neither of whom was exactly fussy about the fit of another man's coat), and 'Titch' Maybury's ⁵ green trilby continued for many days to be a joy to all. He wore it jauntily on ceremonial occasions as though it were freedom's flag streaming gallantly among khaki waves.

Our officers were all enthusiasts and within the limits of the little training manuals they carried about in their pockets they did their best to make things interesting for us. We were bossed about and continually interfered with ('You're in the Army now!'), but we were not driven and we were seldom shouted at individually except by Staff-Sergeant Wally Colton, ⁶ who was now our Company Sergeant-Major. Oddly enough he was popular. It was that kind of remote popularity tinged with hero-worship—a tribute to omnipotence, perhaps—that is bestowed on any absolute monarch or successful headmaster who is not always tyrannical and oppressive. We held him in far greater awe than we did any of the

officers.

No, we were not driven. Some of the NCOs, being new to authority, may have been guilty of minor pin-pricking, but on the whole the relation between the officers and NCOs and the common herd was one of friendliness tempered with caution. When was dignity endangered? At what point did cheerful obedience become servility? It was too early for people to feel quite certain of their position. Only the OC, with his kindly, unassuming smile, was at ease on **Olympus, remote and awful.**

The company was divided into its service components on 13 November, which gave us the nucleus of Company headquarters and Workshops Section and one complete transport section (A Section), and two days later all temporary and acting ranks were relinquished and appointments were made according to trade and other qualifications. As yet we had no transport of our own, and in spite of one or two lectures about ammunition points and the care of vehicles we had only the vaguest notion of what our real work would be. Some of us, no doubt, had schoolday memories of sumpter-mules at Hastings, of waggon trains loaded with luggage and laughing doxies at **Waterloo, and of scarlet London Generals rumbling through the darkness towards Delville Wood and Bapaume; and of course we all knew that ASC stood for 'All Safe and Comfortable', but of the part played by transport in a modern war we could gather little except that you were not allowed to climb into your cab until the officer in charge of the convoy made a mounting gesture or start your engine until he made a winding one.**

What else did we learn at this time? Little, one fears, that was of much practical use to us afterwards. No one showed us the quickest way to change a spring or the best way to make a **Benghazi burner. No one showed us a Bren gun or a sub-machine gun. This is not to suggest that the work of our officers and instructors was wasted. To them and to the exemplary patience with which we suffered them (at times they could be wearisome beyond words) we owed the difference between a company parade after six weeks' training and our exhibition on the day of the**

first roll-call. To them and to the life we were leading we owed our improved looks. Most young men are careless about getting teeth stopped and about finding boots and shoes that fit comfortably. The difference a month in the Army can make to a man's appearance and to the way he feels is quite wonderful.

Between reveille and tea-time we had scarcely a moment to ourselves. There were parades and lectures (hachures and re-entrants went round and round in our heads in company with charger guides and Section 40 of the Army Act), and there were route marches and fatigues. Each day's work ended with half an hour's physical training under Captain Bracegirdle ⁷ and it was the pleasantest period of all. This was when Bob Ward ⁸ ('Snake Gully') came into his own. Daily he provided us with one of the most warming spectacles imaginable: a fat man laughing at his own undignified convolutions. Even in those days 'Snake' was well on the way to becoming a Divisional character. On roll-calls he would answer his name with a hearty 'Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!' To him anyone below the rank of Major was 'mate'; majors and above were 'boss'. There is a story of his meeting **General Freyberg** later in the war. The General was wearing mufti. 'Cigarette, mate?' said 'Snake', and then, jerking his thumb towards the **NAAFI** ⁹ building, 'You work here, don't yer?' 'Snake' was no respecter of persons but he knew as much about carburettors as any man in the Division.

Fatigues. Burnt porridge to be scraped from dixies, congealed fat from baking pans. Great drums of slops to be carried gingerly towards the latrines first thing in the morning. Parades. Your collar biting into your neck and your jacket cutting you under the arms and Captain McGuire walking slowly between the ranks and remarking with deceptive gentleness, 'Growing a beard, soldier?' Route marches....

By the middle of November we were beginning to behave and look like soldiers. 'Titch' Maybury's green hat was only a delightful memory and it was unusual for an officer to be addressed (unless, of course, by 'Snake Gully') by any title except 'Sir'. The influenza epidemic, which had filled the camp hospital and converted some of our tents into sick-

bays, had abated, and so had the grey rain. The sun came out and dried the mud and the acres of wet canvas. It sparkled on burnished buttons; it hinted at far, hot lands half the world away. 'Perhaps we shall go to **India**,' we said. 'Or maybe Egypt.' The pessimists answered: 'No. We'll never leave New Zealand.' Usually the thought that this might be true was enough to fill us with anticipatory disappointment, but at other times, on dull evenings or on grey afternoons, some of us would feel secretly in our hearts: 'Well, I've made the gesture anyway. Hell, it would be nice back home!'

After six weeks at Hopuhopu we moved to the newly-constructed camp at **Papakura**. Here we were far more comfortable. There were proper beds instead of bed-boards and straw palliasses, and we had a watertight roof over us.

The weather was fine and we made rapid progress with our training and really rapid progress in friendships. We knew now that we should be going overseas as soon as shipping was available and the knowledge made everything, friendship included, twice as important. Previously we had been at liberty to regard our relation with the Army as a military liaison—a *chaise longue* affair. Now we realised that we were committed to a proper marriage, a marriage that had every chance of being consummated on the battlefield. It was a relief to know where we stood, and our morale bounded.

There had been comparatively little skylarking at Hopuhopu—we had been too busy for one thing and for another tents make indifferent playgrounds—but at **Papakura** soaring spirits found an outlet in physical exuberance. Tremendous battles were fought between rival huts, with a great upsetting of beds and scattering of equipment, and nightly the sergeants had to leave their cubicles to restore order.

The days hurried by to the slap and creak of marching files and the eternally reiterated three drum beats (one—pause—two: one—pause—two) to which we were learning to subdue the rhythm of our working hours; the evenings went by to the tune of 'South of the Border' and a churning

babble from the newly-opened wet canteen, the nights to the stealthy pacing of sentries and a grumble of soft snores from the long, darkened dormitories. December came and early in the month Company Quartermaster-Sergeant Robin Hood, Sergeant Athol Buckleigh,¹⁰ and Corporal Sam Mellows¹¹ vanished mysteriously (they were our advanced party), and on the 14th we were placed on active service and solemnly warned that sins that had been venial once were now inexcusable. As we saw it, the drama of our situation was doubled. On the same day final leave began.

Surrounded by mounds of gear—kitbags, sea kits, overcoats, packs, rifles, everything—we sat in a meadow outside **Papakura Camp** and waited. It was 4 January and we had been waiting since two in the afternoon. Now it was nearly six.

Company Sergeant-Major Colton stood talking to a group of officers. Without his peaked cap, tailored uniform, and Sam Browne he looked smaller, less impressive, more approachable. Like the rest of us he was wearing light khaki drill and a New Zealand felt hat. The officers seemed more approachable too. Their manner suggested a readiness to laugh, crack jokes, hand around cigarettes.

It was one of those pale, indeterminate summer evenings, neither bright nor dull, and the talk and laughter, after rising and falling in the still air hour after hour, had subsided to a low growl. Most of us were drained of energy, for the past three weeks had been extremely strenuous. First there had been final leave, then the wrench of leaving home again. New Year's Night for some of us—self-respect demanded it—had meant sneaking out of camp to take part in the celebrations. A ceremonial parade for **General Freyberg** had been followed by a rush of packing and a farewell parade in the Auckland Domain. The day had been very hot and we had sweated freely on the march to the railway station, but the people had cheered and cheered, and, on the whole, the majority of us had minded it a great deal less than we were prepared to admit. That evening the camp had been thrown open to the public and

the final goodbyes said. Mothers, wives, sisters, and sweethearts had worn their prettiest and gayest dresses. They sat on our beds and strolled in bright groups between the severe buildings, laughing and talking. But some of the laughter seemed forced and much of the talk was rather wide of the point. Indeed the occasion was something of an emotional strain and in a way it was a relief when the time came for the visitors to go home, in silence, and with sad hearts.

That had occurred yesterday evening, and now, surrounded by our belongings, we waited for the word to move.

‘Up on your feet,’ ordered the sergeant-major, and soon we were marching towards **Papakura** station, juggling feverishly with our too-heavy loads while the camp band played an encouraging quick-step.

We were exhausted when we reached the station and more exhausted after we had battled to find seats next to our friends and card partners. There was a small crowd of women and girls on the platform and when the engine gave three snorts and started to move they waved and called out to us. As soon as we felt the movement we settled down, after the immemorial custom of soldiers at the beginning of a long train journey, to empty our water bottles and eat all our rations.

We played poker, sang ‘South of the Border’, and, later in the night, tried to sleep. But the carriages were cold and uncomfortable and there was room on the floor for only a few people at a time. The train rushed through the flying darkness, saying *South of the Border, South of the Border, South of the Border, South of the Border*. Some of the soldiers were very young, and their faces, streaked with smuts, were childish and weary under the dim lights.

A night journey by rail is the perfect agency for removing military polish and it would be interesting to equate one train-hour with its capacity for cancelling out drill periods. By the time we reached **Wellington**, which we did at noon on the 5th, our sergeant-major must have been consumed with a desire to set to work on us then and there.

We were unshaven and crumpled and this alone encouraged us to be more than outspoken when, as we neared the wharves, NCOs were posted at the carriage doors and all the windows shut.

The train came to a halt alongside SS *Orion*. From then on events moved so quickly that by the time we had finished lunch—and an excellent lunch it was—our ship was anchored in the stream.

When we saw our quarters for the first time we jumped to the conclusion that a mistake had been made and we waited for it to be rectified with much shouting and recrimination and a vast shifting of gear. But nothing happened and we remained in our beautifully-appointed cabins, some of which contained only two berths. All were furnished with electric fires, fans, hot and cold water, white sheets, and fluffy blankets. It was a far cry from the austerities of Hopuhopu, and a slight tendency on the part of some of the officers to behave as though they had arranged the matter with the Orient Line was pardonable under the circumstances.

The *Orion* was the Commodore's ship, and at seven the next morning, followed by the *Strathaird*, the *Empress of Canada*, the *Rangitata*, and HMS *Ramillies*, she led the way out of the harbour. In Cook Strait we were joined by HMS *Leander* and the *South Island* contingent in the *Dunera* and the *Sobieski*. By nightfall the convoy was well out in the Tasman.

With almost empty decks the *Orion* trembled through the windy darkness, swishing and humming softly. She seemed barely to be whispering, but the loudest noises from below were quenched and smothered by that whisper. No sound, no chink of light, told of the quick traffic, the bright teeming city, enclosed and hidden. Nothing spoke of it but the currents of warm air that streamed from ventilators and tainted the salt wind with an odour of engine oil, warm bodies, hot pipes, cabbage water. Below the Plimsoll line a frilly whiteness bordered the ship's sides and her sharp forefoot divided the water into twin plumes. Otherwise she was part of the night, though once or twice she

gave a sly wink. None of the ships with her made any sign. They steamed in silence, going humbly through the long darkness.

There were 1428 troops in the *Orion* and of these 166 were members of the Ammunition Company: eight officers, ¹² one warrant officer, eight sergeants, and 149 other ranks.

After a day or two we felt as though she had been our home for months. The weather was cold at first but this mattered little as we had our comfortable cabins to retire to when work was finished. The training programme continued: lectures, route marches, physical training. We practised anti-aircraft drill on the promenade deck, pausing every now and then to snatch up guns and tripods and flatten ourselves against the bulkhead as marching troops lurched past to the tune of ‘Sussex** by the Sea’ or ‘Roll out the Barrel’ played by the ship's band, whose repertoire, though vigorously executed, was limited. The lectures, for the most part, took place in the first class lounge. It was furnished with deep easy chairs, and in these it was almost impossible to sit and listen for any length of time to Second-Lieutenant Radford's ¹³ extremely erudite talks on ammunition without dozing off. For the rest, we worked greasily in the galleys, did guard duty, spent weary hours searching for periscopes and torpedo tracks, visited the ship's cinema, gambled, and played housie-housie. (‘Eyes down for the foist numbah! And here she is. Sixty-six—all the sixes.’) From the canteen we bought tinned fruit, biscuits, and condensed milk, and at night we feasted in our cabins. There were wet canteens as well, and people of ordinary capacity were able to satisfy their thirst for rather less than a florin.**

In the **Great Australian Bight a cold wind blew and the seas tumbled. To the rattle of housie counters, the chanting of callers, the strains of ‘**Sussex** by the Sea’, and the now unnoticed hum and whisper from engines and rigging, we headed towards **Fremantle**, reaching it on 18 January. Those of us who were not on duty were given late leave.**

On the following morning the troops in the *Orion* paraded under Colonel Crump ¹⁴ for a 14-mile route march to **Perth. As we had been**

vaccinated a few days earlier the march was not compulsory, but the promise of leave at the end of it caused everyone who was not a cot-case to turn out. The column was to have left the wharf at eight in the morning, but there was an unfortunate delay, and by the time the march began the temperature had risen to more than 90 degrees.

The black bitumen stretched ahead of us in a tremor of heat, and Australian motorists, with mistaken kindness, drove up and down the column with iced drinks, which many of us—for the hospitality of the previous night had left burning thirsts—gulped at a draught. The result, of course, was stomach cramps. By the time we reached **Perth** about a third of us were in sorry case, though only ten men had dropped out. The people lining the streets gave us a tumultuous welcome, and when they understood that we had marched all the way from **Fremantle** they were loudly indignant and some began blackguarding our officers, which was all we needed to convince us that we had been badly used. They showed their sympathy by plying us with foaming glasses of Swan beer and by nightfall we were feeling fit enough to do the march all over again.

The convoy sailed the next day and shipboard life went on as before, only now we seemed to have more time on our hands: more time to lean over the rail (with the rather thrilling consciousness that if anyone fell overboard he would be likely to stay there); more time to watch the troubled marbles of the water and listen to their interminable swish-swishing against the ship's side, or to look up at night towards the Southern Cross, New Zealand's private constellation, and catch from the corner of an eye the sly progress of a comet, and wonder to see a whole world slipping from star to star as the flying-fish, all day long, had been slipping from wave to wave. And, after the custom of voyagers since the invention of ships, we spent long hours in exchanging preposterous information about dolphins and porpoises and the mysterious phosphorescence, the dancer's spangled shawl, that trailed after us through the darkness.

Colombo was our next landfall, and on 30 January we spent an afternoon in the East. It bewildered and astonished us. The whole scene

was in technicolour, with lamp-black shadows everywhere, plenty of flake white in the foreground, and a background of chrome yellow, emerald, and ultramarine. There was no haze at all and all the dimensions stood out hard and square like bricks. It was so much like something out of Hollywood (Super-Colossal! Next week at the Regal!! Better than GUNGA DIN!!!) that one half-expected to see the producer's name—Darryl F. Zanuck or David O. Selznick—blazing across Heaven.

It dazzled us and it made us thirsty, but ten rupees odd (with Japanese beer at two rupees the bottle) was insufficient for serious thirst-quenching, so most of us wandered around in the hot sun and stared and stared. It was all spread out in front of us: snake charmers—glossy bullocks—money changers—boys beautiful as Mowgli—hideous old wizards with lips and teeth scarlet from chewing areca-nut—vendors of cheap cheroots and expensive ivory or ebony elephants—Somerset Maugham Englishmen—performing mongooses—scampering rickshaws. A number of these were drawn by hot and excited Kiwis who had insisted on changing places with the rickshaw boys regardless of the heat. 'Fat' Davison ¹⁵ though, complete with cheroot, sat his rickshaw as to the manner born, and doubtless this impressive spectacle went a long way towards soothing the ruffled susceptibilities of many a sahib and memsahib.

We visited wonderful Buddhist temples, and while countless effigies of the Philosopher Prince, with crab-like arms and legs sprouting from improbable places, looked down on us from Nirvana—detached, charitable, ineffably bland—saffron-robed priests lectured us in Oxford English. Finally one would murmur, eyeing us with expectancy: 'It is the custom.... You pay what you like....' Our initiation, done in a very delicate and priestly way, to the system of *baksheesh*.

There was no leave for us the next day and we left for Aden on 1 February, reaching it on the 8th. We were allowed ashore there for a few hours but found little beyond narrow, goat-filled streets fit only for the swarming natives and desiccated white officials to whom Providence had

abandoned them.

The Red Sea, too, was a disappointment. It was opaque and unctuous, its appearance suggesting that the Israelites had not only crossed it but had washed up in it after a particularly greasy meal. A hot wind followed us and for two days we sweated and gasped for breath in an atmosphere that seemed to be centrally-heated.

We had known for some time that Egypt was our destination, and as the end of the voyage drew near senior officers lectured us on the customs and geography of the country and medical officers gave grisly little talks from which their audiences, after squirming uncomfortably for twenty minutes, arose dedicated to continence.

The *Orion* came into the Gulf of Suez late in the afternoon on the 12th. Over us was a brassy sky, around us bare, red hills. No decent covering of farm or field or forest clothed their nakedness. It was as though part of the world's skeleton had been picked clean by vultures.

That night the *Orion* rode at anchor opposite Port Tewfik and we slept in her for the last time. We had finished the first stage of our long journey. The war, which no one really believed in yet, which no one understood yet, least of all the drivers of the Ammunition Company, had been going on for 162 days. It was generally thought that Hitler was half-beaten already—by blockade, by dissension within, by the time element. Many of us thought it would be over by Christmas.

How wise we had been to come early!



Map of Egypt, 1940-41

¹ The advanced party consisted of Capt G. S. Forbes (OC), Capt O. Bracegirdle and Lt A. G. Hood (1st Composite Company, NZASC), Lt N. C. Moon (Reserve of Officers), Lt L. W. Roberts (9th Auckland Mounted Rifles). ² Lt L. A. Radford (ammunition officer attached, 2nd Medium Battery), S-Sgt W. E. Colton, Sgt C. M. Torbet (acting CSM), acting CQMS R. F. Hood, Sgts H. Crossley, G. P. Hallam, L. D. Jones, N. K. Michael, and J. F. Seymour, and twenty-four other ranks.

² Lt N. K. Michael, m.i.d.; driver-mechanic; **Auckland**; born **Fiji**, 25 Dec 1913.

³ Capt McGuire (1st Composite Company, NZASC) had been posted to the unit three days earlier, Capt Forbes having been transferred to the Divisional Supply Column.

Lt-Col W. A. T. McGuire, ED, m.i.d.; police officer and motor engineer; **Auckland**; born NZ, 22 Dec 1905; OC Div Amn Coy 3 Oct 1939-3 Oct 1941; OC NZ Base ASC 20 Oct 1941-1944 (incl AA and QMG, 6 NZ Div, 9 Mar-17 May 1943); returned to NZ 18 Sep 1944.

Maj G. S. Forbes, MBE, ED; insurance clerk; **Auckland**; born Christ-church, 29 Jul 1908.

⁴ Sgt R. F. Hood, EM and clasp; department manager; born **Auckland**, 6 Aug 1914; injured and p.w. April 1941.

⁵ Dvr C. G. Maybury; seaman; **Auckland**; born **Brisbane**, 15 Jun 1914.

⁶ Lt-Col W. E. Colton; Regular soldier; **Wellington**; born **London**, 22 May 1908; Director Supplies and Transport, Army HQ.

⁷ Lt-Col O. Bracegirdle, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; clerk; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 14 Aug 1911; 4 Inf Bde supply officer, Jan-Apr 1940; posted to HQ NZASC (Major) 16 Jun 1941; second-in-command HQ Comd NZASC 9 Nov 1943-15 Jun 1945.

⁸ Dvr R. D. Ward; mechanic; **Whangarei**; born **Kawhia**, 4 Oct 1907.

⁹ **Navy, Army, and Air Force Institutes.**

¹⁰ Lt A. J. Buckleigh; motor mechanic; **Taupo**; born **Palmerston North**, 11 Oct 1910.

¹¹ Sgt S. J. Mellows; commercial traveller; **Onehunga**; born **Dunedin**, 2 Dec 1910.

¹² Several changes had been made in our establishment of officers. Our OC was now a major and Capt Bracegirdle had been posted to the 4th Infantry Brigade and Lt Hood to HQ Divisional NZASC. Newcomers were 2 Lt Torbet (who had left us to gain a commission) and 2 Lt R. C. Aitken.

¹³ Capt L. A. Radford; machinist; **Maeroa**, **Hamilton**; born **Hamilton**, 19 Aug 1910.

¹⁴ Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; Regular soldier; **Lower**

Hutt; born NZ, 25 Jan 1889; in First World War commanded NZASC in Egypt; Commander Royal Army Service Corps, 2 NZ Division, 1940-5; commanded rear party organisation in Mediterranean, 1946-7; commanded 2 NZEF (Japan) 1947; on staff of HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in Japan 1948-9.

¹⁵ **Cpl N. A. Davison; barman-cook; Kohimarama, Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Oct 1906; wounded 27 Nov 1941; p.w. Bardia 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.**

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 2 – HOW TO SEE EGYPT ON A POUND A WEEK

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HOW TO SEE EGYPT ON A POUND A WEEK

WE were tired after our 90-mile train journey from Port Tewfik, and by the time we had marched from **Maadi** siding to our lines, sorted ourselves into tent groups, rushed through the cold air in lorries to an improvised meal of M&V, ¹ returned, assembled our bed-boards and made our beds, darkness had fallen. The greenish afterglow of sunset showed little except the outline of far escarpments, the towering pylons of the Marconi wireless station, the rugged contours of what was to be known later as Bludger's Hill. It was too dark to go exploring.

In places the surrounding darkness was pale with bell tents and the tops of the nearest ones glowed discreetly orange, but apart from the talk and laughter in our own lines **Maadi** seemed unnaturally hushed and shrouded for a great camp. The chill and silence and uncompromising solidity of the desert was strange after our long series of nights in the *Orion's* warm, quivering, and noisy bowels.

The orderly officer made his rounds; orange faded from the tent tops; silence flowed in from the escarpments. Soon we slept, but after a while the cold crept up through our bed-boards and into our very bones.

Although it was still cold when we breakfasted the next morning, by ten o'clock we had been ordered to wear hats and shirts as a protection against the sun. The day was a holiday and we spent it in settling down and generally taking our bearings. No leave to **Cairo** was granted that night but as soon as it was dusk 'C. Jay' O'Brien, ² Pat Wells, ³ and Percy Sanders ⁴ slipped away, returning in the small hours with news of a wonderful city of girls and music and bright lights. The beer, they said, was tolerable.

After a few days the allowance of leave was quite generous and before long our knowledge of **Cairo** rivalled our knowledge of **Auckland**. Its old treasures, its languorous and heavy-lidded charm, never fresh and clean except for one instant at daybreak, never really beautiful except

for one hour at sunset, made little impression on us. What we appreciated was the Stella beer and the fleshpots: whole chickens at a serving, omelets as big as chessboards, eggs by the dozen—they were small, though, and tasted as if the birds that laid them were addicted to taking snuff. The only trouble was that we were paid but 100 piastres a week; no—75, for the Major considered that we should save something against the day when longer leave would be granted.

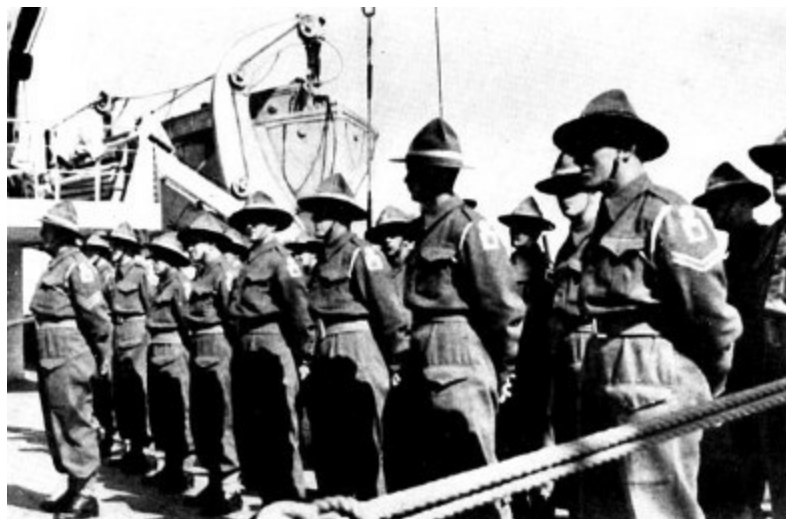
Just to walk through **Cairo**, however, was an education. Its streets were pure Vanity Fair, and Sharia Wagh el Birket was the prototype of all the Broad and Flowery Paths so beloved of nursery allegorists. What pluckings at khaki sleeves! What throaty whisperings, inviting the innocent soldier (at reduced rates for a party) to witness indecent exhibitions—which, to judge from certain oblique and tasteless references to the Young and the Old Obadiah, seemed to have enjoyed some measure of popularity with an earlier generation of New Zealanders! We were a mark, too, for the vendors of pornography. After the stolen watches, the imitation jewellery, and the fountain pens (hot from the Pasha's breast pocket) had been turned down, out came the postcards and the little smudged books. The latter found ready buyers, for they were often extremely funny, but not in the sense that the authors had intended them to be. In their grubby and ill-spelt pages the expressions and sentiments of the gutter were set forth in the kind of prose style one associates with Victorian lady novelists—Marie Corelli, for instance.

But the best entertainment of all was provided by the common people of Egypt, the great army of Georges, the street-corner boys, the fellahin: in short, the Wogs (wily oriental gentlemen). Unlike the pashas, beys, and big effendis, who usually went around in a great state of moisture and fuss, as though life were a large auction sale and the best bargain was just going under the hammer, the wog took his world easily. Our attitude towards him, adopted a few days after our arrival in Egypt, never altered. It was made up of amused tolerance, intense exasperation, and the respect due to a person capable of expressing a whole philosophy

of life in one word: *Maleesh*—never mind. In their bottomless cynicism (if ever you hear of a romantic wog give us news of him), their delight in a hard bargain, their imperturbable good nature, and their enormous splay feet—which seemed, as it were, to grin up at us, deliciously deflating human dignity, each root-like toe as comic and full of character as a Thurber drawing—we found sources of unending entertainment.



At Ngaruawahia, 1939
At Ngaruawahia, 1939



On the Orcades at Fremantle
On the Orcades at Fremantle



*Christmas parcels,
Liverpool, 1940*

Christmas parcels, Liverpool, 1940

Maudi from the Tura caves



Maudi from the Tura caves

Altogether, what with resisting or surrendering to temptation, eating large and indigestible meals, drinking the mild Stella or the raging zibbib, and carrying on interminable dialogues, compounded of banter and abuse, with our friends the wogs, an evening in **Cairo was not dull.**

The same cannot be said for the first few weeks of our training in **Maadi Camp. We had a growing conviction, common, probably, to all untried soldiers, that already we were trained to a frazzle. We began to count up the hours we had spent in route-marching and on the parade ground and to regret that we had not been able to spend them in learning, say, to play the saxophone or class wool. A sense of waste was**

heavy upon us.

The weather throughout February was unpredictable—it blew hot and it blew cold. Nevertheless we got through a good deal of training. On the 19th a month-long course in infantry work was started and there were special courses for NCOs, drivers, and motor-cyclists.

During March our training entered a more interesting phase. Using pool transport, we went into the desert on exercises that lasted several days at a time and gave us valuable experience in night driving and taught us a little about sleeping rough. Before that we had believed we were cold at nights! The Workshops' drivers were happier too. They had missed their tools as a man misses tobacco.

At last we were busy in what seemed to us a sensible way. There were camp driving duties, and parties were sent to **Port Said** and **Alexandria** to ferry new vehicles to Abbassia Garrison, in **Cairo**. This was a tremendously sought-after job, for it entailed a train journey, a night in an hotel, and the chance of a day's leave.

April was like March, but when May came we were issued with our full war establishment of vehicles, which included lorries for the two transport sections that were yet to join us—B and C. ⁵ There they were—brand-new Bedfords—lined up in our vehicle park. We oiled them and greased them; we checked them and polished them; we stood back and looked at them. We felt we could go a long way in those lorries.

The wiseacres who had once predicted that we should never leave New Zealand were now busy predicting that we should never see action. Already a 'Home-before-Christmas' clique was in existence. Probably every unit of every expeditionary force in history has possessed a branch of that hardy and pathetic society that annually dissolves itself on the approach of Christmas and as regularly reassembles on Boxing Day.

Extraordinary months! On 9 April **Hitler** invaded **Denmark** and **Norway** and everyone was delighted and with good reason—Mr Chamberlain himself assured us that **Hitler** had missed the bus. It was a

blow to our chances of seeing action, but still—home before Christmas! A few days later British troops landed in **Norway** and the sportsmen who had gambled on a long war (two years at least) began hedging. Then the British began to withdraw from **Norway**, but it didn't matter really, because, you see, **Hitler** had doubled his supply problem, and in a month a million mechanised divisions burn up a billion tons of oil, and production in **Germany** and Roumania—but you know the story. The Christmas Club, however, lost a few members that week. On 10 May **Holland**, **Belgium**, and Luxembourg were invaded by **Germany** and paratroops landed near **Rotterdam**. Mr Chamberlain said nothing about missing buses this time: he resigned. But there is no record of any general exodus from the Christmas Club. Winston was now in power, and the present situation, so the newspapers implied or explicitly stated, was the chance we had been waiting for. At last **Hitler** had been driven into the open. It would be over before we could get there.

We did take a few precautions, however. We established machine-gun posts in our part of the camp and leave was difficult to get for a day or two.

Holland stopped fighting; the Belgian Government moved to Ostend, and we looked at our new Bedfords. They were standing there in long lines, their blunt, business-like noses pointing towards the Egyptian border. We looked at them and wondered. Nearly everyone, including a few renegades from the Christmas Club, hoped that we should use them at least once.

During the third week of May, while the Germans were driving towards the Channel ports, we left **Maadi** for Abbassia Garrison, moving into self-contained quarters that had been specially designed for a transport unit. For the lorries there were covered bays and a petrol pump. For us there were cool, stone barrack-rooms, a **NAAFI**, a shower-house, a playing pitch, and tennis courts. A tailor, a barber, and a *dhobie* had been thrown in for good measure.

We were very comfortable but we were also very busy, for with our

fine quarters we had taken over the transport duties in Cairo Sub-area from the **Royal Army Service Corps**. In addition to supplying the Garrison with transport for its domestic needs and doing a hundred and one different jobs in and around **Cairo** itself, we assisted in clearing **Port Said** and Port Tewfik of what the newspapers would have described as an ever-increasing volume of war material. Almost every lorry was in use every day and there was only one driver for each. The A Section drivers drove their own and B Section's lorries and the forty-odd motor-cyclists in Company headquarters drove C Section's.

We worked from dawn till dusk. We delivered rations to British troops stationed in the Garrison; we ran a school bus for their children ('Hey, Mister, my daddy's a sergeant-major! Got any stamps, Mister? Got any small change?'); we carried army clerks from mess to office (this was in the days before Rommel had done away with most of the small amenities of Base life); we carted ammunition from **Tura** railway siding, five or six miles south of **Maadi**, to **Tura** caves, then the largest magazines in Egypt. This job meant getting up at half past three in the morning and working until dusk but we preferred it to driving for the Officer Cadet Training Unit at **Abbassia**. Senior British officers used to go there for refresher courses, which entailed their being driven into the desert to watch TEWTs, a pastime in which our drivers invariably declined to join, a TEWT being not, as the name suggests, a small sandpiper, but a tactical exercise without troops. Some of them were watched in extremely rough country and the care with which we negotiated it (with a trayful of senior officers bouncing at our backs) depended to a large extent on our treatment in the matter of soft drinks—these were carried in a special lorry—and the number of times we had been annoyed by unnecessary commands and gratuitous advice. A driver in his own cab likes to be treated with a little of the deference paid to a captain on his own bridge.

While the evacuation from **Dunkirk** was in progress we carried out a Passive Air Defence and Internal Security exercise, and from then on, whenever an alert was sounded, it was the duty of certain drivers to take

their lorries at once to given points in **Abbassia** and the city and stand by to evacuate the wives and children of British soldiers. We had an ack-ack post in the centre of our parade ground and this was manned day and night. Shooting over empty coverts was ever an ungrateful task, and one driver, whose alertness when game was plentiful was afterwards to become a byword, was found asleep on duty, a misfortune that resulted in his being the first of us to go to a detention camp.

Others were falling asleep too, for the long trips to the ports were a severe strain with only one driver to a lorry.

The road between **Cairo** and **Alexandria** was particularly conducive to sleep. Sticky in the great heat, it stretched ahead of us like a hundred miles of black adhesive tape, mesmerizing us as a chicken is mesmerized by a chalk line. After thirty or forty miles, with the engine humming high and sweet and acting as an additional soporific, the driver would begin to nod, and his eyes, for all his efforts, would keep closing automatically as though they were being pressed shut by tiny springs. Presently he would plunge off the road into soft sand, and, jerking wide awake, swerve desperately to avoid a telegraph post. After that fright, of course, there was no danger of falling asleep, and yet, five minutes later....

We were fortunate in being busy at this time. Spending hours on the parade ground practising the lying-load position would have been intolerable while the shadow of the long night, inexorable as the fulfilment of an old prophecy, was falling upon city after famous city, and **Britain**, watched by the whole world with pity, with wonder, or with gloating joy, was rousing herself like an old watchdog and straining cankered ears for the word that nearly everyone had believed she was too sick, too tired, too sunk in torpor, ever to hear again—the word and the drums.

No one told us, after the end of May, that we should be home before Christmas. We were promised different things: blood, toil, tears. Even the old oil story was in abeyance for a short while.

Mussolini declared war on Great Britain and **France** on 10 June. He said they had hindered the advance of the Italian people.

One of our earliest reactions was to tumble out of bed in the small hours and into a large air-raid trench, which we manned as a defensive position. Machine guns were posted at vital points and our Boys anti-tank rifle was taken from its canvas cover. For a day or two there was quite a *Vitai Lampada* atmosphere about the Garrison, but nothing came of it—neither jammed gatlings nor dead colonels. No Fascist-inspired mobs, crying on Islam, attempted our barricades, and on the 12th the Egyptian Government broke off diplomatic relations with **Italy**.

None the less the war had moved immeasurably nearer. The lion was right out of his cage now, and from time to time, among the thickets of conjecture and misinformation, one glimpsed an eye or the flickering of a tawny tail. **British Somaliland** was invaded and a large convoy of our lorries rushed from **Tura** to **Port Said** with ammunition. For two days the drivers waited for the order to unload, but it never came. Instead there was news of an evacuation, and our next task was to take ambulances to **Port Said** to collect wounded. Sick and wounded soldiers were also beginning to arrive at **Cairo** main station and we used to meet them at night and take them to **Helmieh** hospital. Some were suffering from bomb wounds, others from dysentery and desert sores. They came from the **Western Desert**.

There the Might of **Britain** (to employ a euphemism popular at that time) stood guard along the Libyan border, and its supplies (which we thought of as an endless stream until the loneliness of the coast road forced itself on our attention) were brought forward by rail and by motor transport. To assist with this work the Ammunition Company inaugurated a ferry service, and from the middle of July onwards convoys left regularly for **Maaten Baggush**, some 170 miles east of the frontier, with mechanical transport stores.

Turning west before they reached **Alexandria**, the drivers travelled the rest of the way by the coast road, every inch of which was to become

as familiar to them as the road between school and home. Later, the coast area was covered with tents and signposts, and parts of it resembled a used-car mart and parts a sandy slum, and the whole was cut and criss-crossed like a butcher's block. But at that time it was all virgin and we were seeing it with fresh eyes.

We saw with a shock the blueness of the **Mediterranean** (surely you could have dyed your shirt in it?) and how between road and sea the sand dunes were as white as sugar. On the other side the desert stretched away to the horizon, changing colour with the changing light and clouds. Rivers of vandyke brown divided continents of chrome yellow and spread evenly into far oceans of red ochre and burnt sienna. Shadows as big as armies brushed over them, travelling with the speed of trains and conquering the sunlight; and small shadows, no larger than country estates, swam singly.

We started long before dawn on these trips, rushing through sleeping **Cairo** and then through the cold, sweet desert. We took rations with us and our beds, and we revelled in this taste of freedom—sausages cooking over the primus, the tea stewing in the billy, bedrolls flopped out on the sand. At the end of the journey there was beer to look forward to in the Tommy mess, and perhaps —after we had unloaded the next morning—a whole day on the beach. Then home again, arriving at **Abbassia** in the evening with a three-day beard and a comfortable feeling of contempt for poor stay-at-homes who were ignorant of wide spaces.

The Western Desert! The magic syllables punctuated conversation in the **NAAFI**, clinched arguments, were spoken in sleep. Around them a cult crystallised and there was one of our number who reoriented his whole life in relation to **Maaten Baggush**, even going so far as to abandon washing.

The ferry service, Cairo Sub-area duties, guard and passive air defence duties, vehicle maintenance ... our days were full. Nevertheless, we had time for other matters besides work.

For weeks past the red flame trees bordering the playing-field had gazed down through long hot afternoons on our victorious cricket team. ⁶ Moon-soaked, they had seen us wandering home from late leave in **Cairo**, comfortably mellow and unbuttoned. Possibly they had witnessed idylls, for by now at least two of us had found time to become engaged. Certainly their slim branches, towards **NAAFI** closing-time, had trembled to Ted Schonau's ⁷ piano notes and to the voice of Tom Woodill ⁸ leading us in our favourite songs, the most popular of which concerned the confessions of a dying airman and the effect of Egypt on our morals and our good names.

Yes, it was all mixed and mixed. Much of it was hot desert, and mounting drowsiness, and endless adhesive tape, black and melting at noon. Much of it was long, sweaty waits outside **Cairo** station or in dusty, stinking streets, while one's eyes went again and again to the ever-handy buckets and barrowfuls of soft drinks— *boissons gazeuse*— and all the desire in the world centred around those cool bottles of colouring, **Nile** water, and animalcules. But much of it was breezy dashes down broad avenues, joyous swoopings round wide, well-cambered bends, and a streaming of scented night air beneath open windshields.

Much of it was flame trees drenched in sunlight, and a grittiness underfoot, and the yielding fusion of ball and cricket bat, and the smell, sweetish and persistent, of hot oil, hot engines, hot rubber— and flies buzzing, tirelessly important and importunate; and mosquito nets like gauzy wedding dresses misting a few sleepers in the long barrack-room; and skull-capped Abdul with white *galabieh* and red sash moving lazily along the verandahs and pausing now and then to intone mournfully and mockingly: 'Lemonë. Ver' g-o-o-d—ver' hygiene—ver' col'.'

And much of it was flame trees under the warm moon, and the **NAAFI**'s luminous blue windows marked with whorls and scratches of gold light, and a blast of song, hot and outrageous, buffeting the soft darkness:

An airman told me before he died

And I don't think the bastard lied....

Early in September our A Section drivers— 'My chickens' Lieutenant Moon ⁹ called them—spread their wings for the first time and set out for the **Western Desert.**

The date, 5 September, marks the beginning of a chapter—for the family feeling that was to hold the section together through four long years, those characteristics, that corporate personality (that soul, if you like the word) that was to distinguish A Section from its equally individual companions—aloof B Section, friendly, games-playing C Section, party-loving Workshops, Headquarters, harassed and cynical, and the still unborn Ammunition Platoon with its Cinderella complex—started from the moment when Lieutenant Moon and his chickens took flight before dawn, heading for the **Western Desert to set up in business on their own. ¹⁰**

Ikingi Maryut, near the Maryut turn-off on the **Alexandria road, was their immediate destination, and every mile of the journey increased their delightful sense of being on active service. This was further heightened soon afterwards by a brilliantly spectacular air raid on **Alexandria**. Steel helmets and slit-trenches were forgotten and they conducted themselves like spectators at a prize-fight, and with some excuse, for the sight was magnificent.**

The sky above **Alexandria was lit up like a Christmas tree. Tinsel and gold baubles and coloured chains scintillated in the darkness, and one white moth of a bomber, the star of Bethlehem crowning the whole tree, was caught in a cat's cradle of searchlights. It was a spectacle that our drivers were to see many times before the war ended but never again would they see it with the same shock of surprise at its beauty, its savagery, its marvellous patterns.**

Lieutenant Moon, though, was not pleased. 'In future,' he said, 'you'll use your slit-trenches. And Davies, ¹¹ I don't want any more running commentaries. Your name's not Gordon Hutter.'

Lieutenant Moon was a New Zealander to the core but he spoke with a soft drawl that suggested the Confederate States. When he abused them his chickens could almost hear the ice tinkling in the glasses of mint julep and the darkies singing in the plantations. (And when he called them his chickens, by the way, he meant very much what Long John Silver meant when he spoke of his lambs.) He had a gift for humorous exaggeration and he made full use of it. To appear on parade with the least suspicion of a sidewhisker was to invite the comment that there was no room in A Section for 'any dam' John Bowles', and the driver whose vehicle raised the smallest particle of dust in the area was promptly asked what had given him the idea that he was Segrave or Sir Malcolm Campbell. His chickens cursed him and they told stories against him—'Yes,' he was supposed to have said while testing one of the vehicles, 'she certainly is runnin' mighty sick. When you get home just clean number three plug. Guess that'll fix her.'—but they laughed at his jokes and they would have followed him into any Balaclava-like situation you care to imagine if he had said to them, 'Righti-o! Get weavin'.' When he left them they gave him a silver cigarette case—and funds were low at the time.

After a week or so at **Ikingi Maryut** A Section moved up to **El Daba**, some forty miles east of **Baggush**, and there we can leave it for the time being.

Towards the end of September it seemed that another transport section might be needed in the **Western Desert**, for since the beginning of the month the greater part of the Division had been stationed there—mostly at **Baggush**, where defences were being constructed. Accordingly Major McGuire decided that Lieutenant Roberts's ¹² section should be acclimatised to the desert. A camp site was chosen about seven miles from **Abbassia** (out of reach of the sybaritic influence of the barracks and yet near enough for the section to continue with its Cairo Sub-area duties), and to this, on 26 September, Lieutenant Roberts and thirty-eight men moved with B Section's transport.

In spite of its voluptuous name, the Virgin's Breast (suggested to Arab geographers by the presence of two conical hills surmounted by stone cairns), the locality was sufficiently sandy and inhospitable to satisfy all requirements. As it was a toughening-up camp the drivers slept in their lorries, than which, surfeited as they were with tents and barrack-rooms, nothing could have suited them better. A wet canteen was established, and impromptu evening entertainments followed automatically. Nightly the Virgin's Breast (our drivers had a coarser name for it) vibrated to shouts and echoes robuster than any that had troubled its innocence through an eternity of passing caravans.

Time softens everything—buildings, bad liquor, memories. The bright enchanted islands—the excitements, the good times we had, the moving on crisp, sunny mornings through countries as strange to us as Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, the suppers of oyster fritters—these alone seem to stand out, whereas the dreary and bitter tasting sea in which they were pin-points only—the monotony, the homesickness, the recurrent feeling (did anyone quite escape it?) that one's individual efforts were doing rather less to win the war than those of the Man in the Moon—seemed misted over for the most part, and by mists rosy and luminous as from reflected sunsets. They *were* good times, though, and many of us can look back on those days at [El Daba](#) and the Virgin's Breast and say: 'Those were the best times I had in the Army.' Adding as a rider, of course: 'Up till then.'

¹ Meat and vegetable ration.

² Dvr C. J. O'Brien; carpenter's apprentice; [Cambridge](#); born [Napier](#), 12 Jun 1919.

³ Dvr F. J. Wells; labourer; Manurewa; born NZ, 5 Jun 1914; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

⁴ Dvr C. P. Sanders; truck driver; [Whangarei](#); born [Dargaville](#), 22

Sep 1914.

⁵ We now had vehicles for an ammunition company planned to consist of Company headquarters (three officers and 69 ORs), three transport sections (A Section: two officers, 98 ORs, and four sub-sections with a total of 21 load-carriers; B Section: two officers, 89 ORs, and four sub-sections with a total of 19 load-carriers; C Section: ditto), and Workshops Section (one officer and 44 ORs). Total all ranks, less attachments: 399. Total vehicles, plus staff cars, motor-cycles, and Company headquarters, section headquarters, and Workshops' transport: 129.

⁶ Of 35 matches played in 1940 we won 27, drew 3, and lost 5.

⁷ S-Sgt E. J. Schonau; motor mechanic; Frankton Junction; born [Kent](#), England, 23 Jun 1913.

⁸ Gnr T. H. Woodill; fellmonger; Te Papa, [Auckland](#); born [Taihape](#), 11 Nov 1911; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

⁹ Maj N. C. Moon, m.i.d.; commercial traveller; Takapuna, [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 8 Feb 1912.

¹⁰ The two officers and 70 ORs of A Section took with 'them only their correct establishment of transport, so the vehicles held for C Section were left without drivers. The situation was met by the attachment of one sergeant and 36 ORs from the RASC.

¹¹ Dvr N. R. Davies; labourer; Paratu, Walton; born NZ, 21 May 1914.

¹² Maj L. W. Roberts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; clerk; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 4 Sep 1911; appointed OC 2 NZ Amn Coy, Jun 1943; OC 1 NZ Sup Coy, Sep 1945; Regular soldier; Assistant Director Supplies and Transport, Northern Military District.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 3 – MEETING AT AMIRIYA

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JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(1) BIRTH OF A HAPPY SECTION

(1) Birth of a Happy Section

AT this time, while some of us were at **El Daba, some at the Virgin's Breast, and some at **Abbassia**. C Section comes marching into our story.**

The main body of the **Third Echelon entered **Burnham Camp** in the middle of May 1940, and there all NZASC units were trained together, the idea being to give them a clear picture of how their own particular cogs would interlock with the rest of the NZASC machine. C Section's officers were Captain J. Veitch ¹ and Second-Lieutenant J. D. Fenton. ²**

In no time at all the section's parade-ground work reached an extremely high standard. It could hardly have done otherwise with Sergeant-Major Bill Dillon ³—the 'Bull'—as CSM. He was a power and a personality and his parade-ground voice possessed all the properties of an airburst, each word of command seeming to explode exactly above the centre of the centre rank and about eight feet from the ground. The 'Bull' was an example of the best type of modern Permanent Staff man—the exact antithesis of the old-fashioned sergeant-major of the waxed moustache, the face like underdone beef, and the obscene tongue. He knew exactly where he stood and where the officers stood and where everyone else stood, and he used his knowledge with wisdom and forbearance.

Sergeants-major in quest of regimental perfection can be extremely trying and the 'Bull' spared neither officers nor drivers (the former, perhaps, even less than the latter), but nearly everyone was pleased for his sake when the complete camp guard was chosen from C Section on the day of the Governor-General's visit and when the section defeated all comers from the NZASC in a drill competition.

The section was extremely fortunate in its leaders. Captain Veitch—

he was called 'Scotty' always—was a man of great energy and personal charm, and the spirit of happy keenness with which he and Second-Lieutenant Fenton imbued their drivers during those early months was felt as an influence for unity long after both officers had gone their ways, one of them to a grave in **Crete**.

July ended and final leave came along. Then, on 27 August, C Section (91 all ranks) boarded the **Orcades** at **Lyttelton**. She sailed that evening and was joined in Cook Strait the next morning by the **Mauretania** and the **Empress of Japan**, which were carrying the **North Island** contingent. The escort consisted of **HMAS Perth** and (our drivers were glad to see) HMS **Achilles**, whose honours were fresh upon her. In those days the Battle of the **River Plate** was still a stirring memory.

The next morning the convoy swung west and soon the Southern Alps had faded from sight. Near the coast of **Australia** the **Achilles** drew a ring round the convoy, as though placing it within the protection of a magic circle, and turned back towards New Zealand. Her place was taken by **HMAS Canberra**, which had brought the **Aquitania** from **Sydney**.

It was cold in the Bight but the sun blazed as the ships came into **Fremantle** on 4 September. ⁴ There was leave in **Fremantle** and **Perth** and a wonderful welcome from the Australians, and on the 5th the convoy was away again, steaming under cloudless skies through seas like watered silk.

The next land was sighted on the 16th and early in the afternoon the **Orcades** anchored in **Bombay** harbour, which was crammed with transports, fussy steamers, and graceful dhows.

The **Orcades** tied up in the Alexandria Dock at lunch-time the next day and the drivers marched to temporary quarters in the cricket stadium. Leave was granted until a late hour. The New Zealanders spent their money on everything from expensive carved ornaments to cheap Indian babies. The latter were being sold like puppies and the line was evidently one that had proved popular among visiting troops.

On the following morning, after a long wait near the quayside, C Section went aboard the *Ormonde*. While the men were embarking they cast disgusted glances at a large pile of carcasses covered with flies. Native stevedores were dragging them through filth and dust and after they had been loaded an odour of decay permeated a great part of the ship.

Shore leave was granted that evening and early the next morning the *Ormonde* moved into the stream and dropped anchor. For lunch there was stew. It was not appetising and its smell, to put the matter mildly, was powerful. A memory of fly-covered carcasses haunted the men's minds and no one made much of a meal. And there were other reasons for dissatisfaction. The ship had been left dirty by Imperial troops, who had disembarked a few hours earlier, and quarters seemed cramped after those in the *Orcades*. To make matters worse it began to rain.

There were murmurs and more than murmurs, and while the officers were at lunch serious trouble broke out. At a quarter past one, shortly before the ship was due to sail, troops took possession of bridge and wheelhouse and told the captain that the ship would not leave port until their grievances had been redressed.

The C Section drivers, although as discontented as anyone, remained quiet. Captain Veitch and Second-Lieutenant Fenton visited their quarters and urged them (the former in no measured terms) not to side with the malcontents and to remember that the important thing was to join their comrades of the *First Echelon* with the least possible delay. Nearly everyone agreed and much disappointment was felt when the convoy sailed without the *Ormonde*.

That night it became imperative that the ship, which was now under arrest, should leave within a few hours if it was to catch up the convoy. Pickets were posted at all vital points at half past six the next morning and by seven the *Ormonde* was under way, catching up the rest of the convoy, which had been steaming at reduced speed, at half past three in

the afternoon. The next day the ships entered the danger zone.

The Red Sea was entered early on 26 September and shortly after daylight the drivers were encouraged by the sight of a large convoy of merchantmen ploughing placidly towards the Gulf of **Aden**. Even if *Britannia* no longer ruled every wave the old lady was still behaving as though she did. Throughout the day the coastline of Italian-owned **Eritrea** slid past on the port side and during the night the naval base of **Massawa** was left behind.

Port Tewfik was reached on the 29th. Our drivers spent the 30th on board and on 1 October they disembarked. That night they ate their evening meal at **Abbassia**.

From the start the newcomers got on famously with the rest of the unit, and if they were irritated by a slight tendency on the part of some of their new friends to speak of New Zealand as though it were a country in which they had spent a happy childhood long, long ago, they did not show it. In matters such as finding one's way about **Cairo** and speaking Arabic they allowed the old hands to appear to advantage for a few weeks, but when it came to playing the first tentative games of the Rugby football season they could permit no patronage.

For several weeks they trained in the bull-ring, growing progressively wearier of the 'Bull's' bellow, but at last their vehicles were handed over to them. Routine duties in the Cairo Sub-area gave them plenty of driving practice under difficult conditions, and on the whole they provided their seniors in service with disappointingly few dented mudguards at which to raise a pained eyebrow. They helped, too, with the ferry service, which now extended to Mersa Matruh, some thirty miles west of **Baggush**.

Meanwhile the war had been changing and expanding. Over Britain the **Luftwaffe** had switched from day-bombing to night-bombing; German troops had virtually occupied Roumania; **Mussolini** had attacked **Greece**. But there was another side to the picture. Bombs—not many bombs and

not large bombs but bombs that Goering had boasted would never fall—were causing consternation in **Berlin** and other cities within the Reich, and the German people had been forced to the conclusion that victory before Christmas 1940, which they had been promised by everything except a direct statement from the Fuehrer himself, was now an impossibility.

And then, on a December day, we showed that we too could attack.

¹ Capt J. Veitch; bus driver; born **Scotland**, 2 Feb 1901; transferred to 4 Res MT Coy, 3 Mar 1941; died of wounds, 3 Jun 1941.

² Maj J. D. Fenton, MBE, m.i.d.; foreman motor mechanic; **Wellington**; born Waitara, 24 Jul 1912; Regular soldier, RNZEME.

³ Maj W. L. Dillon, m.i.d.; Regular soldier; Central Military District, **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 11 Aug 1912.

⁴ Cpl Roy Hintz, who had been admitted to the ship's hospital on the first day of the voyage with a severe abscess and had undergone an operation in **Bass Strait**, was put ashore at **Fremantle**, the intention being to return him to New Zealand. As soon as he was better, however, he took matters into his own hands, boarding an Australian troopship bound for Egypt. 'What are you doing here?' said the OC Troops. 'I got on the wrong ship,' said Roy. 'Well then,' said the OC, 'you'd better go and live in the sergeants' mess.' Roy rejoined his section on 4 January.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(2) WORKING FOR WAVELL

(2) Working for Wavell

Ever since the outbreak of the Italo-Abyssinian war the Libyan frontier had been a chink in our imperial armour, and since **Mussolini** had sided with **Hitler** it had been a chink with a javelin levelled at it. And the range, since 14 September 1940, when the Italians crossed the frontier and occupied **Sollum**, had been point-blank.

From then on General Sir Archibald Wavell had been playing David to Graziani's Goliath.

In the circumstances our A Section drivers camped at **El Daba**, less than 200 miles from **Sidi Barrani**, towards which the Italians were advancing, had little right to the cheerful happiness they were enjoying. Every afternoon they swam in the **Mediterranean**, their heads dotting the blue water like corks and their common sense telling them that this was the pleasantest of all pleasant wars. In the evenings they gathered in the canteen tent to sing songs and drink bottled beer while wild dogs howled out their hearts in the surrounding desert and tame Italian pilots moved discreetly among the high clouds.

The *Regia Aeronautica*, although it was often heard and on moonlight nights and exceptionally clear days sometimes seen, was never a nuisance as far as A Section was concerned. Its behaviour justified the popular witticism: the Italians come in at 5000 feet and dive to 10,000. What they excelled in was sowing the desert with explosive fancy goods—thermos flasks, fountain pens, and other ingenious trifles.

After spending two lazy months at **El Daba** the section moved a few miles to a new area. Here the drivers had no sooner established themselves in comfort than they were ordered to pack up.

They moved again on the night of 4-5 December, travelling to **Qasaba**, between **Baggush** and Mersa Matruh. It must have been a day or two later, no more, that Lieutenant Roberts, who was in charge of the section at this time, Captain Moon being away on leave, came into the mess tent at lunch-time waving a slip of paper. It was a Special Order of the Day by General Wavell. He read it out, adding: 'Well, there you are, chaps. The show's on. I'm only sorry I shall be missing it.'

It was hardly Henry V haranguing his troops before Agincourt but the effect was the same. Lieutenant Roberts was not alone in being excluded from the coming show, and the few New Zealanders, the happy few whom fate had chosen to take part in it—transport drivers, engineers, signallers—would have been less than human if they had failed to compare themselves to their own advantage with gentlemen in base camps then abed.

The campaign opened brilliantly and by the evening of the 10th **Sidi Barrani** was in our hands. **Sollum** fell on the 16th and **Fort Capuzzo** the next day.

At first the drivers worked between **Qasaba** railhead and an advanced ammunition dump a few miles farther west, and later they assisted in stocking the forward supply depots, the trips becoming longer as the campaign pursued its successful course. Occasionally they carried troops to the forward areas, but for the most part they were employed in bringing up ammunition, petrol, water, and rations. On the return trips they took salvage and prisoners to Mersa Matruh.

The Wolves of **Tuscany**—the Tigers of **Tunis**—were surrendering in their thousands and they needed no guarding. Their one fear was that they might be left in the desert and they gave trouble only when they thought the lorries were going to move without them. Then they would fly into a panic and start fighting to get aboard, yelling '*Uno momento! Uno momento!*' Sometimes it was necessary to fire a shot over their heads or, as a last resort, threaten them with freedom. Once they were in the lorries, however, the clouds melted and soon the desert would be

ringing with their throaty baritones and sweet tenors. Our drivers didn't mind. There was something notable and even humorous and touching about bumping over desert tracks, or along the vile coast road, trailing clouds of Verdi and Puccini.

After Sollum had fallen the trips to the forward areas took two days, and loading and unloading usually took another day, so the drivers had little time for servicing their vehicles and less for sleep. The roads were always bad and day after day vision was reduced to only a few yards by wicked dust-storms whipped up by high winds. The lorries stumbled through a whirling ginger gloom, crashing into pot-holes, breaking springs, tearing tires.



Main street, Helwan

Main street, Helwan

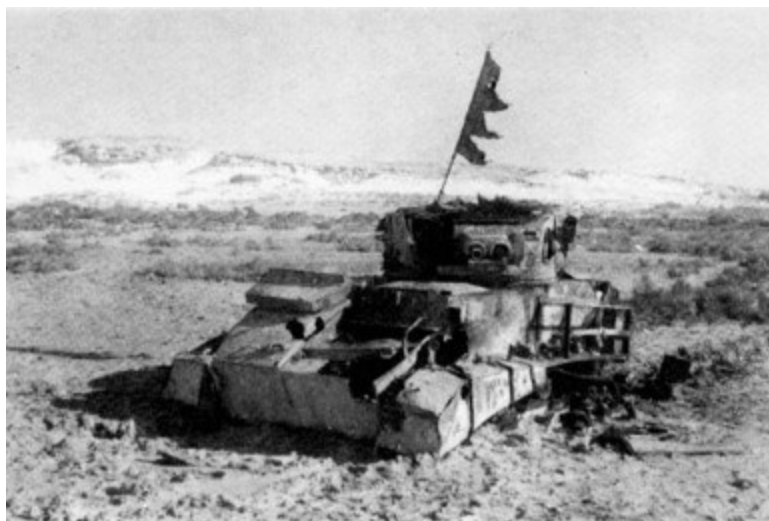
Italian prisoners from Bardia



*Italian prisoners from **Bardia***



'Bardia Bill'
'Bardia Bill'



In the salt marshes of Buqbuq—a British tank bogged
*In the salt marshes of **Buqbuq**—a British tank bogged*

On fine days—for a while at least—the work was fascinating and the drivers were like children let loose in a toy department. The desert was dotted with wrecked diesel lorries and abandoned dugouts. Quartermasters' tents debouched boots, bales of new uniforms, knives and forks, jars of face cream, and packets of sweets. It was an *embarras de richesse*. Undiscriminating as jackdaws, they brought back mixed treasure and rubbish to their **Qasaba** camp: Italian groundsheets, canteens, water bottles, broken machine guns, motor-cycles. For days 'Bully' Higgins ¹ was resplendent in the sky blue and gold braid of a high naval officer and the amount of useless impedimenta carted around in the ack-ack lorry drew a protest from Captain Moon: 'How the hell could you work that Goddam gun?'

It was tremendous fun for a while but from the first there had been a bad drawback. You would see the lorries break convoy, converge on some fort or system of defences, and pull up with a squeal of brakes. Then the drivers would plunge into the dugouts and reappear laden with loot, only to cast it away a second later on finding their legs and arms dusted with black fleas and their clothes hopping with them.

After the fall of **Sollum** and **Halfaya Pass** there was a lull in the campaign and during that lull came Christmas—the Christmas before which more than one optimist had promised himself he would be home. Well, what of it? Graziani's mighty army was falling to pieces in North Africa and in **Albania** the heroic Greeks were driving the Italians towards the sea. In Germany no oil, no warmth, no food, no hope. One hesitated to make predictions, but still, possibly by next Christmas....

At Abbassia things were done in style—Christmas turkey and Christmas pudding by 'Fat' Davison, a speech by the Major—but at **Qasaba** it was not possible to make a great deal of the occasion, many of the drivers being on the road. However, the day did not pass unnoticed. It was honoured with beer, with extra rations, and with songs, but not, as Captain Moon had proposed, by the sacrifice of his private rooster. 'Sheriff' Davies, with guests to feed after a party, had been before him. 'I

snuck out', admitted the 'Sheriff', 'and I snuck along to where that ol' rooster lived, and I screwed that ol' rooster's neck, and I snuck him into the ol' pot.' However, under the benignant influence of the season, all was forgiven and forgotten: the theft of the rooster and Captain Moon's equally high-handed conduct in closing the bar for a week to punish his chickens for imitating Long John Silver's lambs in the matter of some looted rum.

With the arrival of the New Year Wavell struck again. **Bardia**, fifteen miles beyond **Sollum**, was the next objective, and 200 New Zealand lorries were detailed for transporting Australians to the battle zone. Accordingly, A Section embussed Australian infantry at five on New Year's morning, taking them to **Buqbuq**, about thirty miles east of **Sollum**, where they bivouacked for the night. From the direction of **Bardia**, on the far side of the border, came the sound of heavy gunfire and of bursting bombs. A late start was made the next day and the troops were taken to **Sollum**, where a halt was called at the bottom of the escarpment. 'Bardia Bill', the famous big gun of which so many stories have been told, whose capture so many units have claimed, and whose calibre has been the subject of so many arguments, sent over a few shells, some of which were considered by our drivers to have landed close enough to enable them to say they had been under fire.

Towards evening, however, under the huge shadow of the escarpment, with the battle banging away in the distance and night approaching, something inside the drivers, a little knot of anxiety and anticipation, tightened. After all, this was a real battle their passengers were going into and it was the first battle that our drivers had had anything to do with.

As it happened, that period of waiting and wondering was the most memorable part of the trip, for what followed was in the nature of anti-climax. After dark the Australians were driven up the escarpment and deposited near **Fort Capuzzo**, a dozen or more miles south of **Bardia**, and there, so far as A Section was concerned, the job ended.

Bardia fell on the morning of the 5th and **Tobruk** on the 22nd. By the end of the month **Derna** was in our hands.

As the field supply depots moved forward, the drivers, working in small convoys under their sub-section corporals, made longer and longer trips, but the novelty had worn off. What had seemed treasure once was now dirty Italian rubbish—wrecked lorries, torn groundsheets, little rifles with ridiculous folding bayonets. What had seemed high adventure was now long hours of bumping over the chunky and half-finished surface of **Mussolini's** preposterous Victory Avenue.

However, not all the jobs were the same. A few drivers were fortunate enough to visit **Siwa** oasis where the British maintained a small garrison. Here, 200 miles due south of **Sidi Barrani**, a surf of date palms broke against an island of mud buildings—some whitewashed and lived in, others empty and haunted. Our drivers can hardly have been unaffected by the atmosphere of the place—an atmosphere of brooding mystery and of secrets so old that only the first Gods remember them.² They may have noticed, too, that there were few dogs or cats about. The explanation of this was more prosaic. Siwans eat cats and dogs.

A Section's drivers did not have a monopoly of the forward areas at this time. As the fighting troops advanced so did the RASC units catered for by our ferry service, and by the beginning of February we were making round trips of from 1300 to 2000 miles and spending anything from a week to ten days on the road.

The Divisional Ammunition Company was now at **Helwan Camp**, some twenty miles south of **Cairo**, having moved there on 13 January after handing over its duties in Cairo Sub-area to the RASC. Other units of the Division had also moved to **Helwan** from **Maadi** and the **Western Desert**.

At Helwan we occupied large huts in No. 1 area—not that the number matters, for no area differed from another except in its relation to Shafto's cinema and the NAAFI's. All the huts were identical and

around all of them was the same sand.

On the day after the move C Section was given a new job.

When it seemed likely that the British would have to withdraw towards the Nile Delta, large quantities of petrol, oil, water, and food were buried in the desert at Gebel Ruzza, sixty miles due west of Cairo, but soon after the first victories in Libya it was decided to exhume these valuable supplies and take them to Abbassia. The task was entrusted to C Section, which, with a fatigue party from the First Echelon, moved to Gebel Ruzza—a hill and nothing more. All around was virgin desert—miles of it, hard and ochrous, miles of it, soft, dazzlingly white, and untouched by wheel track or footprint.

When the lorries were away working and the camp was deserted except for the cooks and a mechanic from Workshops, there was a touch of fantasy about the scene, and for a moment you wondered why. Then you saw it: the tents—two big and one small—the water cart and the lorry the mechanic was tinkering with, they were the only objects of their own size in the whole landscape. Everything else was small like the little pebbles and the wisps of camel-thorn, or large like the hill of Gebel Ruzza, or enormous like the billowing clouds.

The supplies had been buried over a wide area and there were many dumps to be uncovered. The presence of some was proclaimed by the hard outline of a layer of packing cases and around others there was a litter of broken boards, showing that marauders had been at work, but a few had to be searched for like buried treasure.

The members of the digging party were angry and resentful at first, taking it amiss that men junior to them in service should be handling the lorries, but the weather was so fine and the air so pure (being sharp and golden like a good orange) and working in the bright sunshine stripped to the waist was such an agreeable experience that they had no choice but to enjoy themselves, and presently the various gangs were vying with one another in the amount of work they could do.

They worked all day and they worked, illicitly, at night, for it is in human nature to love digging things up—whether buried by Captain Flint or dropped carelessly by the Chaldeans. Evening after evening they would creep out of camp to dig secretly for the rum and cigarettes they believed were concealed somewhere, but they never found anything worth taking except a few cases of condensed milk and some tinned fruit.

The lorry drivers, too, were enjoying themselves. Each morning as the sunlight started to spill over the flats a loaded convoy set out for **Abbassia. There were landmarks to steer by—hills and escarpments—but in the desert some demon of confusion plays draughts with landmarks and it soon became necessary to blaze a trail with empty petrol containers. That was after a convoy leader had taken a day and a half to reach **Cairo**, travelling 160 miles.**

To everyone's disappointment the job lasted only ten days. Its importance, however, was out of all proportion to the miles covered and the tons lifted. It was the story of a party of disgruntled drivers sweating out a grievance in the sunshine and ending up by doing a good job and having a fine time. The unit was growing up and it was growing together.

At Helwan we had neither beds nor bed-boards—only straw palliasses and a concrete floor. However, we had discovered by now that the less the Army does for you the more you are allowed to do for yourself, and we had no difficulty in making ourselves comfortable. Life was becoming daily less regimental and we were still doing enough work to keep us off the parade ground.

We worked for New Zealand units in **Helwan and for several weeks many drivers were employed in carting rubble from a local quarry to a road on the outskirts of the camp. This was highly remunerative employment, for it never occurred to the Egyptian contractors, for whose benefit the transport was provided, to insult our intelligence by supposing that we should be willing to work unless it was made worth**

our while. Always at the end of the day a fat hand would come through the cab window and in it would be anything from 50 to 100 piastres.

Meanwhile we were still operating the ferry service, and on 26 January the unit sustained its first casualties in the **Western Desert** when Bob Larkin ³ stepped on an Italian thermos bomb, injuring his left foot very severely and eventually losing it. Joe Carter ⁴ was wounded in a leg by the same bomb but was able to return to us five weeks later.

February came, and as by now most of the vehicles had covered between 15,000 and 20,000 miles, it was decided to give them a thorough overhaul. To complete the job within a month our Workshops' drivers, helped by everyone who could be spared, slaved seven days a week, and every night for two weeks they put in three hours of overtime by electric light.

February, then, was a month of hard work and long hours, but it had its lighter moments. The loss of our orderly room through fire and the consequent destruction of the greater part of our records (which we watched with complacency, believing that anything recorded about us was unlikely to be to our advantage); a Divisional regatta in which we won the assault-boat event; the finals and semi-finals of the Divisional boxing tournament, in which Frank O'Connor ⁵ and Jack Cave ⁶ made a fine showing; our victory over the 6th Field Regiment at Rugby by five points to nil—these were incidents that enlivened February, making pleasant interludes in our greasy battle with stub-axles and shell bearings.

Early in the month the return of A Section had been heralded by the arrival of the Don Rs and within a week the last group of lorries had arrived back. As they reported in they were fallen on by the mechanics, for it was now known that a move could be expected any day.

Only one question was asked: where now? Each of us possessed a clue. They hung in the huts or crowned our bedrolls, battered, some of them, already. There had been a fresh issue of sun helmets. Now that,

surely, meant the **Red Sea** and a landing on the coast of **British Somaliland**. It could mean a trip round the Cape to England. Or (why not?) a landing beyond **Benghazi**. **Greece** was out of the question, for the Greeks were showing themselves quite capable of settling **Mussolini's** hash, and surely **Germany**, with her hands full in **Europe** and her shortage of oil, would not be crazy enough to embark on any **Balkan** adventure? Besides, who ever heard of sun helmets in **Greece**? A landing in **France** perhaps—but no, those damned sun helmets....

March came and on the 3rd of the month 'Bull' Dillon disappeared. He was our advanced party.

The next day was our last at **Helwan**. Carefully we made a final check. Tanks full? Water tins full? Tucker box bulging? Hide away those Italian blankets and groundsheets and those extra spanners—might come in useful, eh?

That night the NAAFI's did a roaring trade. Bottles covered every table. Bottles covered the floor. Underfoot there was a roughness of broken glass and a sloppiness of spilled beer. Every now and again some soldier would be intolerably wounded in his deepest feelings and would strike out wildly.

The next morning was bright and chilly, very soothing to feverish brows. Long before the time to start our lorries were lined up and waiting. At last the Major's car moved slowly towards the road and we followed. Slowly we drove through **Maadi**, through **Cairo**, and along the **Alexandria** road. In Wadi Natrun near the Halfway House (where the drinks were ice-cold and the prices red-hot) we halted, bivouacking for the night.

The next morning we set out for **Amiriya**, the transit camp for the port of **Alexandria**.

The engines barely purred for we were travelling very slowly. Louder than the engines, louder than the tires whispering to the black bitumen, was a noise of singing. In no other way could we express our

exhilaration, our confidence in the future, our delight in being on the move.

¹ L-Cpl W. T. Higgins; miller; Roto-o-Rangi, Cambridge; born Blenheim, 9 May 1914.

² Between AD 20 and 1792 Siwa disappeared from history, and between then and the First World War no more than twenty outsiders are believed to have set foot in it.

³ Dvr R. C. Larkin; truck driver; Dargaville; born Colchester, England, 27 Sep 1913; wounded 26 Jan 1941.

⁴ Dvr J. Carter; mechanic fitter; Papatoetoe, Auckland; born NZ, 5 Mar 1917; wounded 26 Jan 1941.

⁵ Dvr F. E. O'Connor; motor body builder; Christchurch; born Ashburton, 5 Mar 1913.

⁶ Dvr J. A. Cave; farmhand; Auckland; born NZ, 23 Jul 1918.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(3) DIVERSION TO A DRAGON-SLAYING

(3) Diversion to a Dragon-Slaying

Nothing remains but to get B Section to **Amiriya**. The section—the company rather ¹—had entered **Papakura Camp** on 12 January 1940, ² had trained under Captain N. M. Pryde ³ and Lieutenant S. A. Sampson, ⁴ and on 1 May had boarded the *Aquitania*.

While the convoy was in the **Indian Ocean** its destination was changed from Egypt to England. **Capetown** was reached on 26 May; **Freetown**, capital of Sierra Leone, on 7 June. The convoy spent only a few hours here and no shore leave was granted.

Paris fell on the 14th, and two days later the convoy arrived at **Greenock** in the Firth of Clyde after having travelled 17,000 miles.

The troops went ashore in lighters, entraining for **Aldershot** the same afternoon. Their arrival, of course, was unheralded, but as they went through **Scotland** and over the border into England, and down through the northern counties (catching, as they rumbled through the June night, the reek of blast furnaces, and sometimes, as a wayside station flashed past, a fragrance of cottage flowers), the news of their coming went before them and at every halt they were welcomed with smiles and little bursts of applause and with sandwiches and hot drinks. They were glad, these English people, to see Australians and New Zealanders, but they were not surprised. Only **Hitler** was surprised. Knowing everything about the Statute of Westminster but little about the hearts of free peoples, he had expected the Empire to fly to pieces.

The Ammunition Company was taken to the village of Bourley, about four miles from **Aldershot**. There it went under canvas.

During their first week in England all New Zealand troops were issued with free rail warrants and granted 48 hours' disembarkation

leave. Our drivers were sent off in three groups and most of them went to **London**.

In London there are barbed-wire entanglements and machinegun emplacements, and the parks and the city gardens have been divested of their iron railings, which are being converted into armaments. **Oxford Street** and the Strand are still as crowded as ever, with hundreds of scarlet omnibuses, seemingly careless and half asleep, but as sure as cats, swooping and pouncing through the traffic. Grey pigeons, fat and pompous, stump up and down in front of Saint Paul's and the **British Museum** on delicate pink feet; the **London** sparrows are busy about **Charing Cross**, and the waterfowl, all the colours of the rainbow, paddle in the Serpentine. **France** has fallen and the swastika floats above the Eiffel Tower, but the birds of **London**, free in the city as in a forest, are undisturbed.

And so are the **London** people—the people in the scarlet omnibuses and the people who stream out into the sunlight like black ants from tube and underground, clutching their *Evening Standards*.

They are undisturbed, too, in the sleepy market towns and the villages of the South Country. Some of the drivers have gone there, taking the winding English lanes whose hedges are white with hawthorn and following them to quiet places where (close to the grey church, always so large and stately in comparison with the other houses: a stone sheepdog guarding her stone pups) the village inn—the Lion, the Three Tuns, the Death of **Nelson**—stands open for thirsty travellers. Here the landlord, smothering a polite belch, looks up from polishing the bar to take the order, and then, seeing the New Zealand hat, smiles broadly and refuses payment. He had a lad, or someone he knows had a lad, who was over to them parts....

They are not disturbed (or if they are they are keeping it to themselves) in the big houses, walking towards which and admiring the rhododendrons New Zealanders may be seen often, a friendly old gentleman or an old lady having offered them a meal and a hot bath.

They are not worried in the village shops and the cottages (or if they are they are taking care to hide it) or in the Commercial Road and the Elephant and Castle. Gone are the days when people were eager for soft jobs, searched for funk-holes in the country, grumbled about evacuees, bought up all the tinned stuff in the neighbourhood, carped and criticised. Since France has fallen, since England has been defeated in **Europe** and **Dunkirk** has happened, there has been a new courage abroad, and a new gentleness, and a new fierceness. England is in mortal danger and her people are ready and they are waiting. **David Low** has published a cartoon in the *Evening Standard*. It depicts a solitary British soldier in a steel helmet. He stands on the cliffs of **Dover** with the Channel at his feet and shakes his fist at a ravaged and beaten continent. And the caption is this: 'Very well, alone!'

It was their finest hour.

A week passed and the company was issued with its transport (Bedfords and a few Albions) and its second-line holding of ammunition.

During July the drivers underwent extensive training in convoy work and vehicle maintenance besides carrying out brigade transport duties and taking part in field exercises. Everywhere they went they noticed the feverish preparations that were being made to meet the invasion. Signposts had been taken down and concrete road-blocks were being erected near bridges and villages. Boys and elderly men, at all hours of the night and day, could be seen panting up and down hillsides or crouching in ditches, practising for the defence of their own corner of England. They had few rifles.

Early in August a Divisional exercise was carried out and the company established ammunition points and functioned in accordance with the rules laid down for a transport unit. Our drivers returned to Bourley on the 8th, the richer by much practical experience in operational work and by memories of the **Sussex** countryside. Also, they had acquired some skill at darts, England's national game.

On the night of the 27th-28th a move was made to St. Leonard's Forest near Hastings. The journey took four hours, and for the greater part of that time it was impossible to use lights as enemy aircraft were overhead. On two occasions the convoy was halted by air raids. The next day was spent in working out a scheme of protection for the bivouac area and in digging in anti-tank rifles and machine guns. On the 29th the company returned to its old area at Bourley.

Meanwhile the Battle of **Britain** had begun and every day it was mounting in intensity. All day long the skies over Hampshire, **Sussex**, and **Kent** were ribboned with vapour trails and speckled with white puffs as the British fighter pilots fought back and anti-aircraft guns, hidden beside rick and oast-house, in coppice and by wayside tearoom, barked and coughed. Hienkels, Dorniers, and Messerschmitts fell out of the sky, crashing in hop fields, flaming in orchards and cottage gardens. In the streets of **London** paper-sellers chalked up the score: 8 August, 60 planes destroyed over the Channel; 11 August, another 60; 12 August, 78 planes destroyed over the Channel; 14 August, 180 planes destroyed over Great Britain. Our own fighters, precious beyond price and for a time irreplaceable, were falling too. But at bench and assembly line the battle was also being waged. Men and women worked until they dropped, and new squadrons took the air.

August ended, and the sky over England was still ours and **Germany** changed her plans. If London were smashed, if the city were in flames and the **Thames** estuary closed, then, surely, the people would rise against their Government, mad for peace.

From their bivouac area, and in the country lanes where their convoys were held up, our drivers saw the planes come over. For a start they came in arrowhead formation with Messerschmitts above them and one large black bomber, usually, in the lead. Later they came over in tight blocks or in serried tiers, and they came from all points of the compass. Ack-ack pounded them and our fighters darted to the attack, snarling all over the sky in great circles, but many of them got through,

and presently from the direction of **London** came the sullen rumble of bombs. Often at night the sky was pink over the city.

At first the whine of the sirens was the signal for everyone to drop what he was doing and take cover, but after a while it was decided that work should continue during alerts, unit air sentries being relied on to give adequate warning of any real danger. The company maintained two ack-ack posts.

On 6 September the unit left Bourley for Bristling Wood, near **Maidstone**, in **Kent**, the 68-mile journey, which was made at night, taking ten hours to complete on account of air raids and traffic blocks. There was something electric in the atmosphere and our drivers, as they sat in their lorries watching the white beams of the searchlights stroking the clouds and making their vast geometry over **London**, were conscious of a prickling excitement, half pleasurable and half fearful. Even now the barges might be leaving the French ports. ⁵

The new area provided good cover, which was just as well, for concealment and camouflage had become matters of the first importance. A Dornier was shot down only half a mile from the area soon after the company arrived, and a week later a Hurricane crashed 400 yards away, the pilot escaping with minor injuries. The ack-ack posts were no longer engaging even low-flying aircraft, for orders had been issued forbidding them to open fire unless the area was directly threatened.

The weather, in the meantime, had changed. It was less warm now. Shotguns were banging away in the woods and the nuts were ripening. Leaves and bracken had turned to gold. On fine days the skies were luminous with diffused sunlight and as delicate as a robin's egg and as softly blue, with sunset a hidden pink and later a red blaze like burning **London**. Often, though, they were sullen and overcast and the raiders would be hidden by cloud banks or by grey vapours that scudded across the heavens like spindrift. And at times they were flat and featureless and drained of all colour, so that the raiders, tier above neat tier, had

the appearance of being stationary, like verses on old vellum.

The Luftwaffe was losing heavily—on 15 September, when the battle was at its peak, 185 enemy planes were reported shot down—but still it was getting through to **London**. In the shopping districts there were charred ruins where great shops had stood, the names of which had been known everywhere. Buckingham Palace had been damaged and famous houses had disappeared from the West End. Rows of small villas had been wiped out in the suburbs and grass was sprouting in the slums, where for the first time in centuries fresh air had been allowed to penetrate and flowers were growing. By city wharves warehouses stood gaunt and gutted. Faces were grimmer now, for there was little sleep in **London**. People spent the nights in their cellars and in the tubes. Hundreds had lost their homes and many were in mourning. Gone was that strange gaiety and gladness that had come to Londoners after **Dunkirk**. Dogged endurance had supervened. *Very well, alone!*

In spite of her scars and of the constant danger from the skies **London** continued to draw our drivers like a magnet. She was to blame even more than **Scotland** for the fact that large numbers of New Zealanders were always absent without leave.

Under the circumstances the allowance of official leave was not niggardly. Each week three of the drivers were granted seven days' leave, and free rail travel was provided to all places as far north as Carlisle.

October arrived, and by this time autumn had become early winter. It was no weather for camping out and everyone was glad to hear that the company would be moving into winter quarters, suitable accommodation having been found at Hunton, a small village near **Maidstone**. Company headquarters was to occupy the village hall and the transport section an oast-house, which consisted of a two-storied building surrounded by six conical towers.

The drivers of the transport section moved to Hunton a day earlier than the rest and it was as well they did, for they had been gone only a

few hours—it was the afternoon of the 3rd—when the old area was bracketed by an enemy bomber. The residue of the company did not present a large target and no damage was done.

In the days that lay ahead they were to become used to narrow escapes, for while they were at Hunton the neighbourhood received plenty of attention from the **Luftwaffe**. They had been there barely three days before a dive bomber dropped a stick of bombs that shook the whole village, and on the following day four high-explosive bombs fell near their billets, the nearest of them landing eighty yards from the vehicle park. There was another raid on the 13th, but, less than a fortnight later, our drivers had a taste of revenge. A Messerschmitt 109 flew over the area with three Spitfires on its tail and while circling round, losing height all the time, was engaged vigorously by the two ack-ack posts. Finally it made a forced landing about 400 yards from Section headquarters and the guard lost no time in taking the pilot into custody. He gave his name as Birk and our drivers noticed that he was decorated with the Knight's Cross and the Iron Cross. German pilots at this time were popularly supposed either to be drugged or to go into battle under the eye of the **Gestapo** ('My dear, in every bomber that's forced down there is always one man who has been shot through the head: he's the **Gestapo** man. '), and with these stories in mind our drivers gazed curiously at Herr Birk, but there was nothing in his appearance either to confirm them or to refute them. All that one could say of him was that he looked scared, as well he might do considering how people of his kind were regarded in Hunton—scared and bewildered. How did it go, that song? 'Sleep well, my kitten—we are marching against England.' Well, he could forget about marching for some time and about seeing his kitten—unless, of course, **Hitler** came. But **Hitler** was long overdue, and in England (and in **Germany** as well, perhaps) people were beginning to say that the Battle of **Britain** was already over. The first dragon, the daylight dragon, had been vanquished, and as for the second one, the dragon that flew by night breathing fire over **London**, burning St. Clement Danes, Westminster Hall, Our Lady of Victories, Turner's house in Cheyne Walk, and the Wren churches, that, too, was mortal.

During October bad weather interfered with the training programme but transport duties were carried out as usual. It was pleasant indeed after driving for hours through the cold rain to come home to the oast-house, which was always warm and dry. In the lower story, which was used as a mess room and cookhouse, a large open fire was kept burning night and day and its grateful warmth pervaded the sleeping quarters, which were separated from the room below by nothing except an iron grating, spread now with palliasses and bedrolls instead of with drying hops.

The New Zealand contingent moved from [Maidstone](#) to [Aldershot](#) during the first week of November. The company went to Ash, a village about four miles from the town, the drivers being billeted in a fair-sized country house called Shawfield Farm. The bad weather continued and the rest of the month was passed chiefly in a struggle to prevent the lorries from sinking below the surface of the vehicle park.

December came and brought an improvement in the weather. The mornings were bitterly cold but the ground was dry and hard and there were many of those lovely hours of December sunshine that come early in the afternoon when the last bronze leaves are eddying through the still air under milky skies, blue here, with the delicate faint blue of milk, and gold in places, but only dusted with gold, like cream. With twilight the frost seized everything and in village streets there was no warm glow from cottage window or inn door to speak of Christmas. Enemy bombers droned and hiccupped through the night sky and tighter than the grip of frost was the grip of darkness.

The company had been released from its operational role on moving from the [Maidstone](#) area, and early in the month all transport was handed in except a few lorries that were kept for domestic use. On the 11th, together with other NZASC units, the company was inspected at [Mytchett](#), near [Aldershot](#), by the [Duke of Gloucester](#), Captain Pryde being in charge of the parade. That afternoon the balance of the transport was handed in.

The days flew by and it was Christmas—Christmas for German kittens whose fathers were marching against England and Christmas for the children of Ash. There was holly and mistletoe and reedy trebles touchingly out of tune singing about the shepherds and good King Wenceslas, but there were no bells. For the first time since England had known churches and the Christmas story they were silent in proud belfries and tall steeples and in little, red brick chapels. Only for the invasion would they ring out.

Christmas dinner for the whole company was held in a gaily decorated garage, part of Company headquarters' billets. The fare was excellent and until late in the afternoon everyone was merry. Then there was bad news. Sergeant Andrew Morton ⁶ had been killed while standing on the running-board of a lorry. He was buried on 28 December in Brockwood cemetery.

The old year ended, and early on 3 January 1941 our drivers entrained at **Aldershot**. For the last time they were smelling that horrible and fascinating smell—a distillation of coal-dust, egg sandwiches, and escaping steam—that would always remind them of English railways.

Half across England they travelled, reaching Newport at half past ten in the morning and boarding the *Duchess of Bedford* the same day. On the 5th the ship moved down the Severn estuary, anchoring in the Barry Roads, where she spent the 6th. She sailed at five the next morning, crossed the Irish Sea in company with three other transports, and anchored off Bangor, County Down, on the 8th.

The convoy received an addition of six transports on the 11th, and on the 12th, after sailing before dawn, was joined by eleven more off the Firth of Clyde, which brought the total number of ships to twenty-one, not counting a large naval escort.

Scotland and **Ireland** faded in the distance and presently the procession of ships was alone with the grey waters of the **Atlantic** and

the circling gulls. The gulls lingered for a while and then turned towards the shore, winging their way homeward, making for their small island, their obtuse island. 'Effete,' said **Germany**. 'Fat,' said **Italy**. 'Perfidious,' said **France**. The charges might still stand, but there was a word to be added, and the word was 'Brave'. Every New Zealander, each in his own way, echoed it in his heart. They could say through all the years to come: 'I was there. I saw it.' They could tell how a small island, obtuse and not over brilliant in battle, had stood alone, defying dragons.

A bitter wind and green-grey tumbling seas marbled with foam. 'Hell,' says everyone, 'Must be near **Iceland**.' The convoy alters course and the wind mellows, smoothing the seas to long **Atlantic** rollers. Our drivers march round the deck wearing boots. The sea is calm now and the weather much warmer. Grinning, the orderlies swab iodine on the soldiers' arms and the doctor drives home his needle. Hotter and hotter becomes the weather. The convoy is making for **Freetown**. The heat in the estuary is blinding. No training is possible and the soldiers lie panting in the shade. Anti-malaria ointment has been issued and they are able to sleep on deck—a great boon. Everyone is glad when the coast of **Africa** fades in the distance, but it is still hot and the soldiers grumble about the food. It had seemed excellent during the first few days, as it always does on shipboard. Now they can hardly face it. Longingly they describe the kind of meals they will eat in **Capetown**—steaks, eggs, fish, great juicy fruit. A spicy fragrance blows from Cape Province and the *Duchess* is in harbour. Leave is granted and no one behaves outrageously so there is more leave. Old friends are greeted and the dream meals are translated into fact. Three clear days at **Capetown**—then to sea again. Table Mountain fades from sight and a week later the convoy is sweltering in the hottest part of the **Indian Ocean**. The sea is glassy and in places jet black owing to its great depth. Tropical rain falls in solid sheets and the soldiers rush into the open, bathe themselves, rinse out their underclothes. The hills behind **Aden** are sighted and a **Blenheim** bomber flies overhead as the convoy enters the **Red Sea**. Everyone starts to pack. At last, late in the afternoon on 3 March, fifty-seven days after leaving Newport, the *Duchess* anchors in the Gulf of **Suez**.

On the 5th our drivers go ashore and a train takes them to **Maadi**. From Maadi they get leave to **Cairo**. After two days they climb aboard lorries and are taken to **Amiriya**. The Divisional Ammunition Company is complete.

‘Old Johnny made it, eh?’

‘Yeah. Got a ride up with “Cash”, his RMT brother.’

‘Tough “C. Jay” missing—and “Plunger” and old “Snow”.’

‘Yeah. He couldn't have made it, “C. Jay”—not with that toe of his. Not carrying this load.’

Cigarettes glowed in the darkness. Somebody cursed the cold and made reference to the peculiar effect it would have on a brass monkey. That bitter chill that creeps over the desert just before dawn was making us shiver in spite of greatcoats and a mass of equipment. We should be warm enough, though, when we started moving. Valise (with blanket-roll bound round it), haversack, kitbag, full web equipment, rifle, ammunition, water bottle, respirator, and a hundred odds and ends—under this load it was difficult even to stand up, let alone march.

During the ten days we had spent at **Amiriya** we had had plenty of time in which to experiment with rolls and bundles and many of us had packed and unpacked a score of times. Leave, of course, had been out of the question and few of us had cared to slip into **Alexandria** and take the risk of being left behind. The arrival of B Section had broken the monotony a little but it could not be said that A Section and C Section as a whole had taken the newcomers to their hearts. They were inclined to regard us—or perhaps it was our imagination—as recruits, raw and unblooded, and their references to the Battle of **Britain** annoyed us. We called them the ‘Glamour Boys’ and ‘Cook's Tourists’. Watching the

lorries leave had been another distraction. Four days after our arrival at **Amiriya** twenty of them had left for the docks under Second-Lieutenant Fenton and on the following day the rest had left under the Major and Lieutenant Aitken. ⁷ The drivers in charge of them had gone too and that had necessitated finding fresh players to fill the vacancies in the poker and pontoon schools. Then there had been a sandstorm, one of the worst in our experience. Latterly we had spent most of our time in rehearsing the present scene.

Dawn drew a streak of lemon in the east and someone said: 'All right. Pick up your gear. By the centre, quick march. Keep your ranks.' Tripping over rocks, cursing our loads, which (in spite of the rehearsals) kept trying either to hamstring us or to garrotte us, we trudged across the desert in the direction of El Quadir station. It was only a short march—a couple of miles or so—but by the time it was finished the strongest of us had had enough. As soon as the train arrived the jostling and pushing that had characterised our behaviour from the moment of parading started all over again. Everyone was anxious to keep close to his special friends so that he could be with them on the boat. From the train stop to the wharf was a short march and we made it under the mocking glances of the Egyptians, who were far too wise and too wicked to go to war themselves. Without much delay we were got aboard **HMAS Perth**.

At a quarter past eleven in the morning the gap between the wharf and the cruiser's side started to widen. Clumsily we dressed ship, getting barked at by the Master at Arms for talking. 'Smartly there! You're in the **Navy** now.'

Swiftly the cruiser gathered speed, dipping through the cold and sparkling waters.

Someone asked a sailor where we were going. He looked surprised.

'**Greece**,' he said, 'We've been taking 'em there all week.'



Map of Greece

¹ At that time our drivers of the **Second Echelon** were organised as a company, which consisted of Company headquarters, one transport section, and Workshops. This organisation continued until they joined us at **Amiriya**, when the transport section became B Section and the remaining drivers, most of whom were specialists, were absorbed by Company headquarters and Workshops. Their strength on entering Egypt was two officers (Maj Pryde and Capt Sampson), one warrant officer, four sergeants, and 119 ORs. Maj Pryde was posted to the Divisional Supply Column three days after he joined us.

² The advanced party, which had entered **Papakura** on 29 Dec 1939 while the **First Echelon** was still there, consisted of Lt P. E. Coutts, a staff-sergeant, and two drivers.

³ Maj N. M. Pryde, MBE, ED; bank accountant; **Papakura**; born Waikaka Valley, Southland, 6 May 1899; served in Div Amn Coy, Nov 1939-Mar 1941; OC Div Sup Coy Mar 1941-Dec 1942; OC 2 Amn Coy Dec 1942-Jun 1943.

⁴ Maj S. A. Sampson, OBE, m.i.d.; butcher; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 20 May 1911; OC 1 Amn Coy 26 Jan 1943-17 Apr 1944.

⁵ The move from the **Aldershot** area to the coast sectors in **Kent** and **Sussex** was made by the entire New Zealand contingent. It was to be held in reserve near the coast so that in the event of invasion it could launch the first counter-attack.

⁶ Sgt A. Morton; motor driver; born **Scotland**, 6 Jun 1904; accidentally killed 25 Dec 1940.

⁷ Maj R. C. Aitken; mechanic; **Wellington**; born **Edinburgh, Scotland**, 6 Jul 1894.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 4 – PICNIC BEFORE A THUNDERSTORM

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PICNIC BEFORE A THUNDERSTORM

DURING our first six hours on Greek soil we attracted very little attention. We arrived at the port of **Piraeus** on 18 March on one of those hot, pale afternoons that put a circle of primrose light round the horizon. On the rim of the circle we could see the **Acropolis**, but not very clearly.

After we had landed and stood for some while in three ranks we were told to fall out and stay within call. Greek labourers looked up from the huge trench they were digging near the wharf and accepted cigarettes. Only one person took any real notice of us and he was the proprietor of the little wineshop at the dock gates. He responded to our presence by doubling the price of his wines and spirits. And that was all that happened. We were disappointed, for we had expected to be made a fuss of.

We were disappointed, too, in what we could see of **Piraeus**, and a third disappointment was the long wait at the docks. After the excitement of the past week and our dash through the **Mediterranean**—**Perth** had made the trip in just over twenty-four hours—it was felt as an anti-climax. Ten-ton diesel lorries had taken away one load of men, and here we were sitting on our gear on the wharf, hot and uncomfortable in pith helmets and battledress, waiting for their return.

A diversion was caused when the **Araybank**, very high in the water, sidled into the space lately vacated by the **Perth**, presenting the men ashore with a side like a red cliff, from the summit of which the drivers in charge of vehicles peered down excitedly, shouting abuse to their friends and being taunted in return with comparisons between the **Perth's** quick journey and the eight days it had taken the **Araybank** to cross.

At last, after we had waited six hours, the ten-tonners came back and we climbed aboard. As we rumbled through **Athens** the shadows were

bunching at the street corners and at every corner there was a crowd of people, their faces turned up to us, their eyes bright. Here was the welcome we had been waiting for. They neither cheered nor called out to us, but as each lorry went past they threw flowers and there was a burst of clapping as though we were beloved actors.

It was embarrassing but it was pleasant. It was pleasant to read, or to imagine we read, love and trust in those Greek faces, pale in the half-light—flower-like faces of children, old men's faces out of the Old Testament, women's faces that Bellini might have painted, and the many other faces equally Greek but not as clearly distinguished in that moment of sentiment: the fruitshop faces ('Yes, we have no bananas.') and the café and dining-room faces ('You lika da steak and da oyst, no?') and the blue-black jowls and greasy coiffeurs and sweating foreheads of the **Levant: 'I show you the good time, my friend!'**

We did not start singing until we had left **Athens behind and were rushing through the leafy darkness towards Kephissia, eight miles north-east of **Athens**, with the cold, sweet air tasting in our throats like the aftermath of peppermints.**

When we reached the camp we came down to earth with a bang. Most of the tents were only half-pitched and there was nothing to eat. Our advanced party—not his fault—had gone to the wrong camp.

We were up early the next morning—almost before the wet, white mist had cleared from the pine trees. Those of us who were not on duty (thirty lorries were employed in carting supplies and ammunition from **Piraeus to various dumps near **Athens**) were away as soon as breakfast was finished.**

Everything was a delight and a wonder—strange and yet not altogether strange, for this, too, was our heritage. Grimm was a German and Hans Andersen lived in **Denmark, so half our babyhood, including Christmas trees and Santa Claus, came from **Europe**. The castles we saw were of the kind that Grimm's ogres emerged from; the cottages were no**

different from the one Hansel and Gretel lived in; the tailors sat cross-legged in their shops as they had done since fairy tales were first told; the huts of the charcoal burners and woodcutters were exactly as we had known them in childhood and the forests were the forests of our first memories.

Soon after we arrived at Kephissia everyone was given a 500-drachma note worth rather less than a pound. Such a quantity of notes had never before been seen in the neighbouring cafés and wineshops and within a few hours the whole district was swept clean of change. Messengers had to be sent to **Athens** to relieve the situation.

During the afternoon and evening we became acquainted with the delicious wines of the country: mavrodaphne and the ordinary crassi, as well as with Metaxa brandy, the not-so-delicious ouzo (we had known it as zibbib in Egypt and as arrack in Palestine), and a noisome liquid that tasted of turpentine and pine needles and made everyone who took too much of it allergic to fir trees for about a year afterwards.

For a little while we listened to the fruity baritones and thrilling tenors of the Greek police. (Afterwards they had to listen to us.) They wore olive-green uniforms and they seemed to be the only men of an age and condition to be called up who were not in the forward areas. They sang beautifully but with rather too much emotion, their voices reminding one of massed violas anguished among whipped cream. (Our own singing, later in the evening, was even more emotional and not nearly as good.) Their favourite chorus went to the tune of the *Woodpecker's Song* but the only word we could distinguish was **Mussolini**.¹ It sounded tremendously gay and gallant and defiant: it expressed the very essence of the Greek Evzones. The whole of **Greece** was singing it at that time, and it was still being sung more seldom, more sombrely, no less gallantly, sometimes by a group of Greek soldiers struggling home, sometimes by a single small boy, at the end of April. Doubtless the Fascist guards heard it whistled in the streets of **Athens** long after we had gone.

**We scoff at you, [Mussolini](#),
You and your cowardly conscripts.
Very soon you will be advancing rapidly
Backwards:
Backwards, until upon Rome itself
The Greek flag will be flying.**

But how hopeful it sounded then! Hopeful for us and hopeful for the Greek people; hopeful for everyone who knew nothing at all about what was going on. Possibly there never had been a more hopeful convoy than the one that pulled out from Kephissia camp for northern [Greece](#) at six in the morning on 22 March 1941.

Soon we were passing through [Athens](#), old and shabby and graceful, birthplace of half we were fighting for. The city was not wholly strange to some of us, for on the day after our arrival at Kephissia, as the Major had discovered on ordering a check parade, over sixty drivers had absented themselves from camp. With Athens behind us we came into a country of rounded hills, soft as green velvet and knotted all over with little holm-oaks: it was like tapestry. From between two of these hills, winging its way towards the convoy, came a large, black bird about the size of a young gobbler. This was too much for A Section's anti-aircraft gun crew and they started dusting it with tracer bullets as with a kind of monstrous red pepper. Two minutes later they were under arrest.

On through [Thebes](#)—pretty and full of colour as a cottage garden — through [Levadhia](#), through Atalante, and by this time the headlamps and bonnets of the lorries were bedecked with flowers and the cabs were full of flowers too. We must have resembled a convoy of sacrificial bulls. At every halt the people came to us with wine, cakes, and eggs. ‘*Kalimera*, New Zealand!’ they cried—all the rosy-cheeked children and handsome young women and shepherds and old men.

As the shadows became larger—shadows as big as sheep stations cast by tremendous hills—the halts occurred more often and it was dark when we arrived at [Kamena Voula](#), our halting place for the night. If it

had been daylight we could have looked across the water to the island of Euboea. We had covered 150 miles in a long day full of incident.

The next day we moved off at first light and travelled through fairy-tale country—pocket-handkerchief fields, patchwork-quilt farms, little laughing streams rushing from openings in the hills as from school, with, behind them and above them, terrific, towering, gold and green and purple mountains, like sleeping heroes, like sleeping gods, with huge lazy limbs sprawled carelessly everywhere and muscles like bits of the Elgin Marbles blotting out a quarter of the sky. We refuelled at **Larissa** railhead, camping for the night ten miles north of the town.

That night we were not so tired and some of us went to a small, tumbledown village and drank rough red wine in a little dark wineshop where Greek soldiers were singing their defiant woodpecker song. Our battledress and the badness of the wine were the only things that would have surprised Homer had he come strolling in.

Off again early the next morning and on till we reached the foot of the **Olympus Pass**. Then a long, winding crawl to the summit and a crawl down the other side at twelve miles an hour. Those of us who were not driving gazed wonderingly at the calm and unutterably lovely outline of the great mountain, whose top, so the ancients had said, reached Heaven, on whose grassy slopes centaurs had browsed and galloped, in whose shadowed or sunlit folds the old gods had lived human and irritable lives, feasting, quarrelling, and making love. Those of us who were driving, though, looked only at the road. Hundreds of feet below, a sheer drop from the road's edge—you could have spat down at them—were the tops of pine trees. Small and tender as asparagus tips they looked, but as menacing as massed spears.

We made camp beside the **Larissa- Katerine** road, a few miles west of **Katerine**. Our area was a tongue of land looped off from the surrounding woods and meadows by a bubbling, rock-filled stream, which could be crossed only by a narrow stone bridge. We parked our lorries beneath tall beeches. Behind us were soft hills mossy with fruit trees and old farms

and browsing sheep. Beyond them was the mountain.

We had arrived at our destination and it was a lovely place.

During the next few days we were very busy. A Section supplied a guard for ammunition at **Katerine** railhead, the clearing of which was the first transport job we were given. Ammunition was delivered to New Zealand units in and around Gannokhora, a village two or three miles north of **Katerine**, and between 26 and 30 March our lorries plied between railhead and neighbouring dumps, meeting the trains as they arrived. At that time the New Zealand Division was preparing a line that ran inland from a point on the coast fourteen miles beyond **Katerine** and south of the mouth of the **Aliakmon River**. This was part of the **Aliakmon line**. Farther north was a fortress line manned by Greeks—the **Metaxas line**.

When we were not working we were enjoying ourselves among our new surroundings. We went for long walks; we washed our bodies and our clothes in the icy stream and every evening we feasted on new-laid eggs and fresh bread, in payment for which the country people accepted empty petrol tins. There was leave to **Katerine**, but on our arrival the Major had held a sort of quarter sessions to deal with the accumulated charges of a fortnight, as a result of which many were confined to barracks—what a phrase to use when we were living in the very shadow of **Olympus** in a wood crazy with birds! It was spring, too, and the mountain's snowcaps glinted like silver in the spring sunlight, which flowed over the foothills and slanted in bright bars between the tree-trunks. Drifting mauve and white clouds blundered against the snowcaps and descended on us in fine rain, making the stream chuckle fiercely among the boulders.

On one of the clear days an enemy observation plane flew over. It hung in the air, small and silvery and innocent-looking, and we gazed up at it with intense interest and some awe. 'Don't look up, boys,' yelled Second-Lieutenant S. F. Toogood.² 'He'll see the whites of your eyes.' Happy laughter drowned the tiny buzzing noise, but after we had laughed

ourselves out—and it took quite a time—the buzzing could be heard still: a tiny waspish whisper: ‘I can see the whites of your eyes.’³

The enemy went away and there was nothing sinister any longer under the mountain in the clear sunshine. Spirits were high at that time; the whole green spring was only a breath away and the note was hope. Ours was the Woodpecker's attitude towards the war and we never doubted that it was shared by Generals Papagos and Wilson.⁴ Probably they whistled that gay tune (or felt like whistling it) at their conferences.

We had no newspapers and no wireless sets, and when **Yugoslavia** signed a protocol to the **Berlin-Rome-Tokio** pact on 25 March it is probable that only a dozen men in the company knew what had happened. A few days later a small group of our drivers was accosted by a Greek priest in a great state of excitement. Speaking in Greek and pointing to a Greek newspaper, he put it into our heads that **Mussolini** had been assassinated and that the whole of **Italy** was aflame. The drivers lost no time in passing on the good news. What he had been trying to tell them, perhaps, was that the Government of **Yugoslavia** had been overthrown and that General Simovitch, who had replaced the pro-Nazi Prince Paul, had pledged his country to neutrality.

When we heard the news we began to talk about leave in **Athens**.

On 2 April the company was ordered to unload its second-line holding of ammunition at Kilo 9 on the **Larissa-Katerine** road and report to Headquarters 81st Base Sub-area at **Larissa**.⁵ The whole company, with the exception of Workshops, which stayed where it was, moved the next day, pitching camp among smooth green hills a few miles from **Larissa**. That evening the Major was told that his transport would be needed for an indefinite period, and during the next five days and nights we carted ammunition, petrol, and rations from **Larissa** railhead to supply dumps near **Servia**, between forty and fifty miles north of **Larissa**, and to others still farther north on the far side of the **Aliakmon River**. These were for a mixed British, Australian, and New Zealand force—the

Amyntaion detachment—that had been organised to fight a delaying action in the event of a German thrust from [Yugoslavia](#).

We were employed in this manner when [Germany](#) invaded [Greece](#) and [Yugoslavia](#) on 6 April and swept away the last vestige of that agreeable feeling that we were guests at a Grecian picnic. We were ordered to carry arms at all times and to be on the alert for paratroops and fifth columnists. Everyone began to listen to and repeat alarming rumours: three New Zealand machine-gunners had not been heard of since a party of men dressed as Greek soldiers had lured them into a dark wood with promises of bread and eggs: two RASC drivers had died in agony after accepting a gift of cognac from a Greek shepherd. Probably neither of these stories—and there were scores like them—had any foundation, but can you wonder that the charming old gentleman who peddled tobacco leaves in our area became suddenly a sinister figure? That behind the tinkle of sheep bells we heard the clink of Lugers? We saw a party of Greek soldiers trooping silently against the skyline, purposeful, mysterious, a led mule in the midst of them, and we wondered....

We were still excited and eager—more so than ever—but the Woodpecker was glancing uneasily behind him, which was what the Germans had hoped he would be doing. André Maurois records that Jean Cocteau said to him after the disaster at Sedan: ‘All you see now on the roads of [France](#) are nuns winding on their puttees’.

On the night of 8-9 April—the night before the Germans occupied [Salonika](#)—we returned to the old area at [Katerine](#), travelling without lights and with only the slanting rain showing ahead. We had been told to pick up our second-line holding of ammunition and bring it south. The Germans were driving swiftly through [Yugoslavia](#) and [Macedonia](#) and the New Zealand Division had been ordered back to the [Olympus](#) line—not really a line at all but a series of fortified positions running from the north-west corner of [Greece](#), near [Florina](#), to [Mount Olympus](#).

The roads were so greasy that they might have been smeared with

lard and it was so dark in the pass that the spare drivers had to stand on the running-board and give directions. Many of us had already taken out our windscreens in spite of the cold.

The next day we took our second-line holding to an area near **Dolikhe**, just south of the pass on the **Larissa- Katerine** road. Here we unloaded and stood by to assist with the withdrawal of part of the 6th Brigade from positions forward of **Katerine** to a reserve position north of **Dolikhe**. This job was done on the 10th and on the same day we sent a convoy to Gannokhora to salvage engineers' stores.

Meanwhile the **Wehrmacht** was winning battles. The Greeks, who in comparison with the Germans were fighting only with the weapons of the spirit, had been overwhelmed quickly in their fortress positions near the frontier, and now the British, with too few troops to meet the attack in their hastily-prepared northern line, were withdrawing south to a shorter one. By the 11th the Amyntaion detachment, which for one had not withdrawn but had advanced, was fighting a delaying action against motorised troops and armour south-east of **Florina** near the Yugoslav and Albanian borders. It was outnumbered and could be expected to hold only for a little while.

We, of course, knew little or nothing of what was going on. As we saw it the deluded Germans were being allowed to hurl themselves against our impregnable positions at **Servia** and **Olympus**. Accordingly we tackled our salvage jobs with the comfortable feeling of making everything snug and shipshape enjoyed by the yachtsman as he heaves to—by Crusoe while securing his flocks.

On 11 April—by which time all New Zealand troops had withdrawn from the positions forward of **Olympus** with the exception of the Divisional Cavalry, one troop of the 5th Field Regiment, and a section of engineers—the Major, Captain Moon, and Second-Lieutenant Toogood took a convoy to **Sphendami**, nine miles north of **Katerine**, to salvage stores left behind by the 6th Brigade. While these were being loaded the Major received a message from the Divisional Cavalry asking him to

supply transport for carting road metal. Some lorries had started for home already but the rest were put to work at once and by late evening the worst parts of the Cavalry's withdrawal route had been repaired. The lorries then went home—all, that is, except three. These, led by Major McGuire and Captain Moon and accompanied by a machine-gun party composed of A Section's ack-ack crew, set out for Aiginion, a village some seven miles north of **Sphendami**, where there were valuable stores that would have to be abandoned to the enemy unless they could be gathered up within a few hours. By the light of burning supply stacks the officers and drivers collected what was most valuable and by eleven o'clock that night the lorries were loaded to capacity. They headed southwards with fires bobbing behind them in the windy darkness.

The NZASC was functioning well at this time but the panzer divisions were also functioning well. There was a lot to take away and not much time. Colonel Crump, Commander NZASC, must have experienced all the sensations of a man who hurries down crowded streets with armfuls of Christmas shopping and has valuable parcels flung at him from all sides. The hour for destroying instead of salvaging was in sight.

For us it arrived on Easter Sunday, 13 April. That morning Captain Sampson took a convoy to Amyntaion near the **Florina** gap to pick up petrol from a dump in that neighbourhood. Unaware of the exact position of the dump he led the convoy right into Amyntaion just as a barrage was feeling its way towards that doomed village. It came marching down the hillsides by the **Florina** gap; it crossed Lake Petron and entered Amyntaion. Little time was lost in stopping and turning but shells were landing among the houses as the last lorries gathered speed. Early that evening—it was late afternoon when our lorries arrived—the Germans were to drive in great strength down the centre of the Veve Pass near Lake Petron and force a withdrawal.

The petrol was discovered about six miles down the Amyntaion-**Servia** road and as soon as the lorries were loaded our drivers turned their attention to the ration section of the dump. They were shown

where the luxuries were stacked and told to help themselves. It was their first experience of what was to be known later as an 'open slather' and many of them were pink with excitement as they scrambled among the stacks, breaking open cases of tinned fruit, tinned vegetables, pickles, jam, tobacco, cigarettes. You just helped yourself. It was a childhood dream come true and for a quarter of an hour they behaved like greedy small boys. They stuffed their blouses with tins and threw cases on top of the loads of petrol.

Often, in the days that lay ahead, we were to be wet and cold, sick and sorry, tired and frightened—never hungry. Empty and half-empty tins of peas and beans and pears and raspberries were to mark the passage of our convoys. It is probably fair to say that from the day of the first 'open slather' until the day we left [Greece](#) most of us over-ate.

After our drivers had taken all they could cram into the lorries they were told to destroy what was left. It was forbidden to use fire so they spiked the petrol tins and poured kerosene over the food. While they were doing this they were ordered away by British officers who wanted the area for their guns.

The drive back to [Dolikhe](#) was unpleasant. There was mud everywhere and the road was jammed by British armour. It was snowing too. The petrol was dumped south of the [Portas Pass](#) for the 6th Australian Division and the 4th Brigade, and it was well after midnight before our drivers got home.

They slept uneasily—'cramm'd with distressful bread'.

After a week of rain and snow and cold winds Easter Sunday dawned bright and clear, promising fine weather. By midday our sodden hillside was drying out well. If the rain held off, we prophesied, the [RAF](#) would be able to knock hell out of the German columns.

After a big lunch of tinned meat, pickles, and fruit salad—in every section the cook's lorry was well stocked now—a convoy left to pick up

the 26th Battalion at its reserve position a few miles north of our area and take it by way of **Servia** to a debussing point west of the nearby **Portas Pass**. From there the infantry would march eight miles to occupy a part of the line overlooking the village of **Rymnion** and the **Aliakmon River**.

By this time the battle for **Portas Pass** had begun. The Luftwaffe had opened it that morning with bombers and fighters. The Divisional Cavalry, in its position forward of **Olympus**, was also in action.

Those of us who stayed in camp hung out our blankets to dry in the bright sunshine, washed our clothes, kicked footballs. It was a lovely afternoon and the sunshine was spilling over the foothills by the **Olympus Pass** like golden syrup. At afternoon-tea time there came a hollow coughing from below the nearest of these hills, and a number of white puffs, like dabs of cotton wool, appeared on a level with the hilltops. Then we saw a flight of black Stukas come falling out of the sky. None of us had seen Stukas in action before and for a moment we wondered if they had been shot down. Then we saw black mushrooms of smoke materialising around the Bofors emplacements. After they had dropped their bombs the Stukas climbed back into the sky. Then the Messerschmitts came, diving and climbing among the woolly puffs with tremendous energy. They were followed by more Stukas, which stood on their yellow noses and fell like plummets towards the gun emplacements. A single woolly puff appeared high above them and the guns were silent. After a while the Stukas and Messerschmitts turned north and disappeared over the mountains. The smoke drifted away from where the guns had been and presently there was nothing to show, in all that sunny afternoon, that a raid had occurred.

Chattering like monkeys, the drivers came down from their vantage points. A Section's cooks went back to their interrupted task of cornering and killing a large porker that had been driven into a gully. Washing was resumed and the footballs were brought out again. It was still a lovely day. There was a sound—you could hear if you listened carefully—that suggested that other and larger footballs were being

punted about beyond the mountains: Pomp! Pomp! Pomp! Pomp! Anti-aircraft guns were in action.

The drivers who had been with the 26th Battalion returned to camp. They had been dive-bombed but without damage or casualties.

Easter Monday was another lovely day.

A convoy set out to collect ammunition from a field supply depot south of **Servia for delivery to Australians on the **Servia** front. It was not an easy trip. The earth was still ours but the Germans had already conquered the skies and there was no safety any more. Schools of Dorniers in the kind of formations you see in an aquarium swam sedately over the mountains and dropped their loads on bridges and gun positions. Slim Messerschmitts, like furious wasps, flew along the valleys and above the roads, stabbing spitefully at traffic blocks and convoys. These were our particular enemies—these and the bright-nosed, crooked-winged, black-spatted Stukas, with their swinish squeals, their mad zest, their Gadarene plunge.**

The traffic was thick on the roads and it was difficult to keep any distance between the lorries. The spare driver rode behind the cab and watched the skies. As soon as he saw aircraft he banged hard on the roof. The lorry jerked to a stop and both drivers tumbled into the ditch or ran into the waist-high crops and lay quiet and quaking. As soon as the aircraft had passed the lorries moved on. The idea was to save your life without holding up the traffic more than you could help.

After one heavy raid Wally Mosen ⁶ was the first to get to his feet and the first to return to his lorry. A fighter-bomber, following in the wake of the main wave, came up the valley strafing and Wally, who was one of the most popular drivers in B Section, was killed by an explosive bullet.

After delivering their loads the drivers headed for home, very thankful to have got rid of their ammunition. A fork in the road was now

under German observation and it was being shelled, but the lorries rushed through at wide intervals and all got safely past.

The convoy was machine-gunned again and Jim Nichols ⁷ and Dave Forbes ⁸ were wounded—Jim in the forehead and Dave badly in the thigh. Both were on the same B Section lorry.

It was sundown by the time the company area was reached and everyone was very tired and shaken. It was a new area, those of us who had stayed at home having moved four miles down the road in the afternoon. We, too, had something to talk about. No sooner had we settled in than half a dozen bombers, flying close and fast like wild geese, had appeared from the east. They were quite low and there was a clicking of rifle bolts as we got ready to engage them. As soon as they were within range the rifles began to crack, sounding under the beat of engines like snapping twigs. We were too excited to feel afraid, and when the first bomb started to whistle down one or two of us had our rifles pointed straight up in the air and were almost over-balancing. The bombs came striding across the paddock, punching great brown holes in the soft ground, but the only casualties were two sheep.

That evening we told stories of our escapes and gathered in the last sunshine to examine a lorry that had been towed in with bullet holes in cab and windscreen.

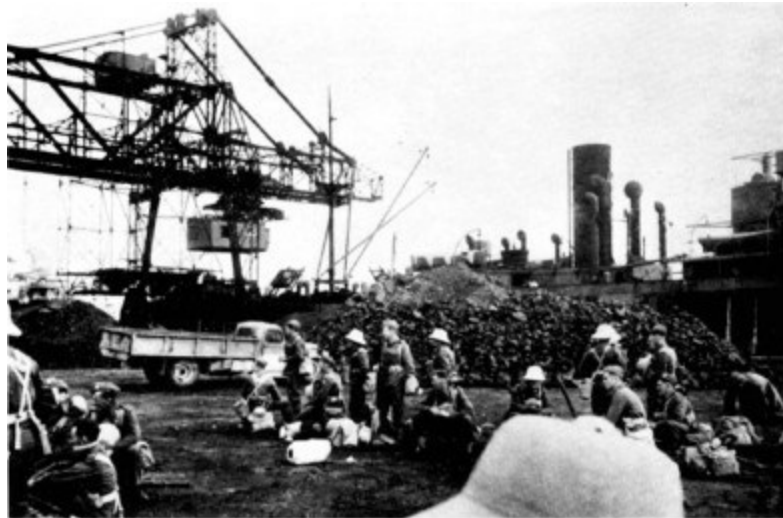
In A Section's ack-ack truck, Percy Sanders and Jim Stanley ⁹ were loading Bren magazines. The floor of the truck was littered with shell cases.

‘They stuck to their guns all day,’ the drivers were saying. ‘Percy worked the Bren and old Jim fired the Boys anti-tank rifle from the shoulder. They reckon he's black and blue.’

Presently shadows covered everything—the bomb craters, the two dead sheep, the faithful Bedfords—and everyone who was not on picket duty turned in. We had a feeling that we should be wise to lay in a supply of sleep.



Fort Capuzzo
Fort Capuzzo



Arrival in Greece, Piraeus
Arrival in Greece, Piraeus



New Zealand infantry in Athens
New Zealand infantry in Athens



Katerine, a typical village
Katerine, a typical village

¹ Jim Henderson, in *Gunner Inglorious*, suggests the following translation:

² Maj S. F. Toogood, m.i.d.; theatre manager; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 4 Apr 1916; Ammunition officer 2 NZ Division Sep 1941-Feb 1946.

³ The chief appointments on 2 March were: Company headquarters, Maj McGuire, Capt R. C. Gibson (posted 22 Jan 41), WO II W. L. Dillon (appointed CSM 10 Nov 40); A Section, Capt Moon, 2 Lt S. F. Toogood (attached 28 Feb 41); B Section,

Capt Sampson; C Section, Capt Torbet, 2 Lt Fenton; Workshops, Lt Aitken.

The following had left us: Lt Roberts (appointed OC Base Training Depot, NZASC, Dec 40), Lt Radford (posted to HQ Command NZASC, 16 Dec 40), WO II Colton (posted to OCTU, 10 Nov 40).

⁴ Commanders-in-Chief of the Greek and British forces respectively.

⁵ Second-line holding of [Divisional Ammunition Company](#) of three sections each carrying ammunition for an infantry brigade and for one-third of divisional troops units: 5400 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition for 72 guns, * 2304 rounds of 2-pounder anti-tank ammunition for 48 guns, 18,000 rounds of .55 anti-tank ammunition for 360 rifles, † 390,000 rounds of .303 ammunition for 1360 light machine guns, † 42,000 rounds of .303 ammunition for 28 medium machine guns, 7000 rounds of .5 ammunition for 28 heavy machine guns, 320,000 rounds of .303 ammunition for 8000 rifles, † 8400 rounds of .38 ammunition for 1400 pistols, † 1296 bombs (HE and smoke) for 18 three-inch mortars, 5184 bombs (HE and smoke) for 108 two-inch mortars, 1620 grenades, 1800 rounds for 300 signal pistols, † five tons of miscellaneous explosives, and 1000 active and 1000 dummy anti-tank mines. Total loads: 57 3-ton, 12 30-cwt.

*** Scale per weapon: 53 rounds HE, 17 smoke, 5 AP.**

† Approximately.

⁶ Dvr W. V. Mosen; lorry driver; born Raetihi, 6 May 1916; killed in action 14 Apr 1941.

⁷ Dvr J. Nichols; labourer; Matamata; born [Auckland](#), 12 Jan 1912; wounded and p.w., Apr 1941.

⁸ Dvr D. C. Forbes; general store-keeper; **Hamilton**; born **Scotland**, 20 Jan 1904; wounded and p.w., Apr 1941.

⁹ Dvr F. J. Stanley; motor mechanic; born NZ, 27 Dec 1908; wounded Dec 1941.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 5 – THE THUNDERSTORM

CHAPTER 5

THE THUNDERSTORM

SHADOWS over our drivers asleep in their Bedfords, shadows over **Greece**, and shadows over the cause we were fighting for. Nothing but good news for the Germans and nothing but bad news for us. Yesterday we had given up **Bardia** in North Africa; to-day—that dangerous and eventful Easter Monday described in the last chapter—the decision had been made to abandon the **Olympus** line and withdraw to one based on **Thermopylae**. The reason for this was that the Greeks on our left flank could not be expected to hold out much longer on their own and we could send them no help.

At a late hour that night we were visited by Colonel Crump. After he had gone there was a hurried conference of section officers and presently the sleepy drivers were shaken into wakefulness and told to get ready to move at once. A group of drivers started to strike a tent but the Major told them not to bother with it. ‘You won't need that tent,’ he said. The drivers looked at him for a moment, wanting to ask questions. There was something ominous in the words. They were like the small, chilling whisper from the silver reconnaissance plane: *I can see the whites of your eyes*. For days past we had been saving things that other people had left behind and now we were ourselves leaving behind things. We didn't like it.

Our orders were to take first our second-line holding and then the ammunition from a nearby field supply depot to a new area near **Tyrnavos**, some ten miles north-west of **Larissa**. These were not long trips but they were trying ones, for we were very sleepy.

Soon after midnight word arrived by Don R that all heavy non-combatant vehicles were to be through **Larissa** and heading south by seven the next morning. Half past six found Workshops, with its great six-wheel Thornycrofts, trying to move through the town but being unable to do so because of a heavy air raid. Eventually the drivers by-

passed it by cutting across some fields and through a Cypriot camp. Then they headed towards **Athens**, ignorant of their destination.

Meanwhile the drivers of the section vehicles had finished clearing the field supply depot and were back in the **Tyrnavos** area. If they had been counting on a rest they were disappointed. With the exception of fifteen 3-ton and six 30-cwt. lorries, which had been detached on special duty under the command of Second-Lieutenant Fenton, all the load-carriers left under the Major to pick up the 25th Battalion from the **Olympus** sector and take it to positions covering **Elasson**. The 4th Brigade was stilling holding at **Servia** and the 5th Brigade in the **Olympus Pass** but the design for the withdrawal had begun to take shape.

We were on the road all through the night of the 15th-16th (stopping and starting and dozing off), and the last group of lorries did not get home until the afternoon of the next day. As they were pulling off the road into the **Tyrnavos** area they were machine-gunned by a single aircraft, and Stan Fisher ¹ was wounded in the back while returning the fire from B Section's ack-ack truck.

The lorries that had reached home earlier in the day were already back on the road. They had been formed into a convoy to take ammunition from **Dolikhe** to positions covering the Vale of **Tempe**, south of **Mount Olympus**, where the New Zealand Artillery was waiting to meet a German thrust down the east coast. Soon the famous battle of the **Peneios Gorge** would start.

By dusk, however, all transport was in the **Tyrnavos** area and it looked as though we should get a night's sleep. We were dead-tired but we were happy and cheerful. The story had got around—and of course we accepted it—that the Germans were being drawn into a trap. Somewhere—at the next row of mountains probably—the exhausted panzers would run head on into the guns, the tanks, the swarms of planes. Was it then or later that we heard about the tens of thousands of Canadians that were pouring into **Thrace**? And the hundreds of Hurricanes at **Athens**

that were waiting only to have their guns fitted? Yes, there was much to cheer us and as yet we were in no physical distress. The cabs of our Bedfords were comfortable and the man who was not driving could doze off for ten, twenty minutes, an hour at a time. We had plenty of tobacco and we were full of good food—hot food at that. The lorries had small inspection traps that could be opened from inside the cab and there was always a tin of beans, sausages, or M&V wedged against the hot manifold. We were young, too, most of us—many were only boys. Hell, it was a great adventure! All we needed was a night's sleep.

No sooner had we fallen asleep, it seemed, than the NCOs were going from lorry to lorry and telling us to throw on our ammunition as quickly as possible. By a quarter past one we were heading for **Volos**, on the coast below **Larissa**, and half the transport in **Greece** seemed to be travelling with us. Think of a very old goods train with very loose couplings. Picture it stopping and starting twenty times in a mile and that will give you an idea of our night's progress. It was raining, too, and lorries slipped off the road continually. Sergeant Robin Hood had a motor-cycle accident and broke a leg, and a B Section lorry went over a steep bank, boxes of 25-pounder ammunition falling on 'Merry' Meredith ² and 'Barney' George ³ who were asleep in the back. 'Merry' broke a leg and 'Barney' was injured in the leg and face.

Dawn of the 17th found us jammed nose to tail in a column that stretched as far as one could see. Fortunately it was still raining, so no aircraft came over. After we had passed through **Larissa** there were continual halts and at one stage of the journey we took four hours to cover two miles. By the time we had reached our destination, which was near **Almiros**, some fifteen miles below **Volos**, and uncomfortably close to an airfield, the weather had begun to mend and we lost no time in dispersing. No sooner had we done so than a flight of Stukas swept in to shoot up two aircraft that were parked nearby. After they had gone the Major searched the airfield for petrol, of which we were extremely short. He found a number of large drums of aviation spirit and from these we filled our tanks.

We ate our supper under the grey olive trees, the drivers hesitating between tinned peaches and tinned cherries, tinned pineapple and tinned pears. On a little grassy plateau a portable gramophone looted from a bombed house ground out the theme song of the campaign:

He's up each morning bright and early
To wake up all the neighbourhood.
He brings to every boy and girlie
His happy serenade on wood....

It was still, even though we were beginning to detect in it a faint note of mockery, a delightful tune.

That night, for the first time in over eighty hours, we enjoyed a long, sound sleep.

The detached vehicles under Second-Lieutenant Fenton had come under the direct orders of Headquarters NZASC two days earlier. On the 16th, while the three-tonners carted engineers' stores from **Dolikhe** to **Elasson**, the 30-cwts. stood by under Sergeant Buckleigh in the company's old area near **Dolikhe**, and that evening they set out to meet the 32nd Battery of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment at **Kokkinoplos**, a hamlet perched high in the hills above the **Olympus Pass**. It was raining and the drivers did not know where the Germans were or whether the anti-tank gunners would be able to reach the rendezvous.

Meanwhile the three-tonners had returned to **Dolikhe** and Headquarters NZASC had moved south. After travelling all night with his convoy Second-Lieutenant Fenton found it at **Tyrnavos**, and during the morning he attended a conference about the withdrawal of the 20th Battalion from its rearguard position near Lava, some two miles south of **Servia**. The whole 4th Brigade Group was to be withdrawn that night—the 20th Battalion by Second-Lieutenant Fenton's detachment and a detachment from the **Divisional Petrol Company**.

By 9 p.m. the lorries were dispersed some distance from the

embussing point, waiting for the signal to move forward to collect the troops. Stacks of supplies were burning not far away and the transport was silhouetted against the rosy light, which faded and glowed jerkily. Presently the order to move came. Leaving the fires behind, the convoy went forward into a blackness so complete that at the first halt the drivers fastened scraps of white paper to the tailboards of their lorries. As they neared the embussing point they could see where German shells were landing and sometimes the shell-bursts could be heard above the whine of the engines. The nearest one was like the sudden opening and clanging shut of a furnace door. The lorries halted, and the infantry came plodding out of the night, wet, cold, muddy, tired, hungry. They had marched many miles with full equipment but they were cheerful still. The drivers scabbled among the gear in the backs of the lorries for tins of fruit and packets of cigarettes for their passengers and then stood by to lift up the tailboards. It was not much but it was part of the service.

When everyone was aboard the convoy set out for the **Thermopylae** line—the last line before **Athens**.

Through Elasson it went, through **Tyrnavos**, and, as dawn was breaking, through **Larissa**. Our drivers could see how thoroughly the Germans had finished what the recent earthquake had started. Alleys and courtyards were filled with rubble, houses had been sheered in half, and the dead lay among the ruins. Sections of the town were still smouldering, sending up streamers and columns of smoke, and a livid ceiling, part weather and part ruin, covered the whole of it.

Our lorries had been crawling all night—the whole of the 4th Brigade Group was on the move—but beyond **Larissa** the pace slowed still further. Soon they were moving only in starts and stops, and an old refugee, shambling by with his bundle, passed lorry after lorry. Presently the convoy halted for good. Stukas, it appeared, had blown the road ahead and behind, trapping a mass of transport. Aircraft came over, bombing and machine-gunning and taking no notice of the small-arms fire except to send a special squirt of bullets in the direction of any

Bren-gunner who was too persistent. After they had gone several lorries were burning and others had to be pushed off the road.

A message from the head of the column seemed to suggest that the halt would be a short one, but the road was badly blocked and after a while the drivers were ordered to disperse their vehicles as best they could. The section of the column that included most of Second-Lieutenant Fenton's detachment—Sergeant Buckleigh's 30-cwts. were now close behind it—was directed on to a hillside, part of which was in crops. To reach it the drivers had to cross a stretch of meadow that was very muddy and had been badly churned up by traffic. The lorries started to shoulder their way out of the congestion, slipping and lurching over the ruined verges and sticking, some of them, and having to be towed out. And all the time, impudent and unassailable, a German reconnaissance plane was perched in the sky above them— *I can see the whites of your eyes*—sending messages to its base. The lorries ploughed through the mud and cut swathes through the bright green barley, the infantry running ahead of them, breasting the crops like bathers, seeking the cover of distant trees, desperate to get away from the road and the planes that were coming to bomb it. Farther up the road towards Larissa machine guns were firing.

Presently the whole hillside was still. The lorries were not well dispersed but the drivers had done the best they could. Their nerves were as taut as piano wire and they stood by their lorries and glowered at their nearest neighbours, each believing that it was the other fellow's fault that the transport was not better dispersed. 'Why can't the mad b—— move his b—— truck over that way?'

Soon the bombers came. They came singly and in groups. They bombed and machine-gunned the road and then they concentrated on the paddocks and hillsides. Several aircraft headed straight for where six or seven of our vehicles were parked. They flew low and there was no scream from the bombs—just a swosh-swosh-swosh that was inaudible above the hammering of the engines unless you were close to it. Then

came the sheets of flame and the terrific slaps—one, two, three, four—and the sense of being smashed over the head with a rubber truncheon. Black smoke streamed over the hillside and through the murk you could see the red tracers, elongated like jelly beans and travelling, it seemed, no faster than cricket balls, wavering up towards the bombers. The bombers banked and you could see tongues of flame shooting from their wings as their machine guns fired. And then, like an afterthought, came the slap of a last bomb.

The planes had come in so low that some bombs had skidded along the soft ground without exploding.

After they had gone the drivers checked up on the damage. It might have been far worse. There had been casualties and several vehicles were on fire. One of these was parked among Sergeant Buckleigh's 30-cwts. and in the back of it cases of small-arms ammunition were burning like popcorn. A bomb had landed beside one of our 30-cwts. and the driver was muttering all the oaths he could think of. Only a few minutes before, by fitting an extra horn, he had concluded a programme of work that had made his vehicle the most complete and comfortable in the unit—in the Division. His engine would have taken him round the world and a retreat to **Cape Matapan** would not have emptied his larder. Now his beauty—his pretty one—was torn and blackened. It was down by the head like a bull beaten to its knees. A mixture of petrol and pineapple juice trickled from holes in its tray and he could have wept.

The enemy came over again and there were more casualties and more lorries were damaged and set on fire. While this raid was in progress Sergeant Buckleigh attended to the wounded, taking no notice of bombs and bullets. Helped by a corporal from the **Divisional Petrol Company**, who was afterwards awarded the Military Medal, he brought several wounded to the shelter of a small hollow. Among them was Dick Taylor ⁴ (C Section) who had been wounded in the left arm by an explosive bullet.

Several of the drivers did good work that day. Among them was Alf

Hallmond, ⁵ Bren-gunner on C Section's ack-ack truck. He shot down one Dornier for certain and our drivers credited him with another. In the course of the day he burnt out two barrels and during one raid he emptied all his magazines.

During the morning something happened to Larissa. The Luftwaffe, perhaps, hit an ammunition dump—or perhaps it was the work of our engineers. At all events a pile of pearl-grey smoke, swift as a genie materialising from a bottle, built itself up, fold upon fold, layer upon billowing layer, until it was as vast as a mountain. It seemed to have the consistency of whipped cream. No one had seen anything like it before.

It was late in the afternoon before any general movement was possible on the road, and all day long the enemy passed backwards and forwards in the sky, owning it. All day long the New Zealanders crouched in culverts or bomb craters or lay hidden in the barley, watching the relentless sky or glancing longingly towards the mountains in the south, towards which the road ran straight and level across the plain. And all day long the transport stayed in the same area. It was near the village of Nikaia, six or seven miles south of Larissa.

At last came the order to move. A prolonged hooting of horns brought the infantry from their hiding places at the double, and they crouched and squatted among the tangles of equipment, edging as close to the tailboards as possible.

Driving conditions were extremely bad. There was only a yard or so between each lorry and here and there a burning or disabled vehicle lay half across the road. You saw bombs bursting ahead of you and every so often a tremendous banging on the cab almost made you jump out of your skin. In one convulsive jerk you grabbed the hand brake, cut the engine, and dived into the ditch. Sometimes a Messerschmitt roared past; often it was a false alarm. In any case many of the infantry would run two or three hundred yards from the lorries—not that our drivers blamed them for this: they knew the infantry had been through far more than they had—and it might be three minutes before the column could

again start to move. Progress was so slow that the passengers began to argue among themselves about the wisdom of stopping. Some were for keeping going; some were hotly against it.

'For God's sake box on, driver.'

'You're doin' all right, driver. We're not gettin' killed for these bloody jokers.'

'We'll never get any bloody place if we keep stoppin'. Get on and get it over with.'

Panicky drivers of light or unloaded vehicles—drivers of heavy vehicles too for that matter—lost their heads completely and kept blowing their horns, mad to pass everything on the road whether or not there was room to squeeze by. As soon as our drivers managed to get a little space between their lorries, these others—free lances or interlopers from convoys farther back—cut in. More than one put his vehicle over the bank. At one stage Colonel Crump drove past and shouted that all drivers were to stay in convoy and keep discipline. For a time conditions improved but soon they were as bad as ever.

The time came when the column was blocked by a burning vehicle and a huge bomb crater near a bridge. A detour had been made—was still being made, the shovels darting like tongues under the very wheels of the lorries, which jerked, stopped, screamed in anguish, jerked on—through a sodden meadow. In this several of our vehicles became bogged, and the **Luftwaffe** came over again.

The hold-up, however, though intensely trying to everyone's nerves, with the mountains and safety beckoning, was really a blessing. It enabled the military police to prevent any driver from turning into the meadow until the vehicle in front of him was a fair distance in the lead. Consequently when the transport got back on the road it was properly dispersed at intervals of from 50 to 100 yards. These intervals were held without much trouble until dusk.

The sun was setting as the main group of our lorries gained the foothills. Spearheads of olive shadow were thrusting across the plain of **Thessaly**, and the setting sun, with that strange trick it has of picking out, for no particular reason, a single farm or a field of barley, was casting pools of honey-coloured light among the mountains. Two Messerschmitts were still swooping and turning in the gorges, trying to follow the twists in the road with the object of getting in a few farewell bursts, but our drivers were happy now that the mountains sheltered them. Soon it would be dark.

After dark the column closed up until it was travelling nose-to-tail once more. Then there was another long halt and a group of drivers gathered round one of the 30-cwts. They were excited and they laughed a good deal. They ate ravenously for a little while, chopping and changing, turning from this to that—from tinned peaches to pickles, from pickles to condensed milk—but their appetites soon failed. They became solemn and spoke of Second-Lieutenant Norman Chissell ⁶ who had been killed at the rear of the convoy by bomb blast earlier in the day. An original member of the unit, Norman had been commissioned in March and posted to the **Divisional Petrol Company**.

The driver of the 30-cwt. told how Sergeant Buckleigh's detachment had collected the 32nd Battery of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment from **Kokkinoplos**:

‘We did the job two nights ago. They dragged us away late in the evening from a supply dump we were stuck into—beer, tobacco, good tinned stuff. We went along the main road and turned right before it goes up into the pass. We stopped in a paddock for a bit and then set off up a hell of a narrow, winding, rocky track. There was just room for a 30-cwt.—a three-tonner wouldn't have made the corners. We must have been the first transport to go up there since Adam was a cowboy. It was getting dark now and raining pretty steady and on the left-hand side of the road there was a sheer drop. Away in the hills you could see the guns flashing like summer lightning—at least I suppose it was the guns—but

you couldn't hear them or tell whose they were.

'It took us a while to get to where we had to pick up the antitank jokers and when we did arrive there was a long wait. It was as black as the inside of a cow and raining hard and we had an awkward place to turn the trucks in. One of them had conked out a little way down the track, blocking it completely, so "Buck" gave orders to shove it over the cliff. We had time, though, to strip her of anything worth keeping.

'The anti-tank boys were just about finished when they arrived. They'd marched miles over the mountains and had had to destroy all their guns and transport. They didn't feel too good about it.

'We travelled south all the rest of that night and part of the next day, dropping our passengers in an area off the [Larissa- Tyrnavos](#) road. After a bit of a rest we headed back to a dump near Tvrnavos to pick up some petrol and stuff that had to be taken to [Molos](#) for the 4th Brigade.

'We got to the area, threw the load on, and still had a bit of daylight left. We were parked right by a river and it was a corker evening. We had a clean up and some of the boys got their rifles out and threw tins in the river for target practice. Some storks came over and we put a few shots round them. There was a supply dump on the other side of the road but the eyes had been picked out of it and the Greeks were lugging away what was left—bully and stuff. Some of the B Section jokers had some beer but not enough for a party.

'We had a great night's sleep and it was daylight when we woke up this morning. "Buck" came round and said we were to get cracking at once as Jerry was only one jump behind us. It was as quiet as one thing and there was hardly any stuff going past on the road. We caught up the main traffic stream just outside [Larissa](#) and got in with you jokers not long before we were bombed.'

By this time most of his listeners had wandered back to their own vehicles. With the two or three that remained the talk became general. It was agreed that fighters and anti-aircraft guns were on their way to

Greece and that the Germans were certainly being drawn into a trap. The next couple of weeks might not be so good but after that—**BASH!** The bombing had been bad, yes, but look how few casualties there had been. And look, taking it by and large, how few vehicles had been hit! The Germans were getting it, too. Our Divisional Cavalry by the **Aliakmon River**, our machine-gunners at Veve—this was the story and we believed it—had caused such slaughter among drugged German infantry advancing shoulder to shoulder that many of them had vomited over their guns. But how they came on! ‘A Div. Cav. joker,’ said someone, ‘told me that when the Jerries come to a blown bridge they drive a tank into the gap, and if that doesn't fill it they drive another one in and they keep on driving tanks in until it is filled. Then the rest of the tanks drive straight on over.’

After a while the column moved again. An endless stream of lorries was heading for the **Thermopylae** line, grinding, clanking, creaking, whining through the night—the drivers, dirty, unshaven, red eyed, sitting stiffly behind their steering wheels, the trays of their lorries packed with sprawling, exhausted troops or with huge, unwieldy, hastily flung on loads. The air was heavy with the reek of burnt petrol. Every now and then the miles-long column ground to a halt and then there was a long, listening silence complete except for the quick whisper of exhausts. Behind every steering wheel a cigarette glowed redly, for no one was any longer observing the rules about smoking. Then the convoy would move on again with a deep growl of lorries in low gear, which presently thinned out to a monotonous whine as the drivers shifted into third.

During the early part of the night nearly everyone drove without lights, but later, as there was no evidence that the **Luftwaffe** was on night duty, sections of the column, one after another, switched on their headlamps, and soon the road was twinkling and sparkling for miles. It was as though a necklace of brilliants had been flung around the dark shoulders of the hills. Sometimes a British military policeman, standing at bridge or crossroads, would call out: ‘Switch off those lights, chum, or

you'll get bombed'. Then a section of the necklace would vanish, only to appear again ten minutes later.

For a long time the drivers had been puzzled by a rosy glow ahead of them. It was a town burning and someone said it was **Lamia**. A group of our lorries halted in the main street and the drivers were able to look around. Ordinarily they would have been sad to see Greek houses—houses from which people had waved to them and brought them presents—burning steadily, but today they had been through enough emotional experiences and if they felt anything at all it was gratitude for the pleasant warmth. A rain of soft hot ash was falling in the street and the atmosphere belonged to a drowsy afternoon in midsummer. The fire had eaten up about three-quarters of the main street and was now consuming the rest without any unnecessary fuss or noise. No one was trying to put it out: possibly everyone had fled. It was a fantastic sight. Each naked rafter wore a comb of fire and little questing flames were flickering about the charred doors and windows in search of further nourishment. In the ruins of the local cinema what was left of the grand piano glowed like a yule-log.

Leaving it behind for the Germans—it was only a tiny incident in the long Walpurgis night they had wished on the whole world—our lorries drove on into the cold darkness, which seemed to be unending and immutable. Nine miles was as much as they did in any hour and sometimes they did no more than two.

Dawn came at last and the journey ended soon afterwards. Second-Lieutenant Fenton's detachment dropped the 20th Battalion in its new positions and then set out to rejoin the unit, finding it on the coast below **Molos**. Sergeant Buckleigh's detachment off-loaded and remained under the command of the 4th Brigade.

The rest of our load-carriers had also been on the road that night and the day before. On Friday the 18th at seven in the morning a Don R had arrived from Headquarters NZASC and told the Major to take us back to the **Tyrnavos** area. We were to help withdraw the 4th Brigade Group.

Refreshed by our sound sleep we set out in good spirits along the coast road and although we were attacked from the air no harm was done—the heavy bombing and strafing of Second-Lieutenant Fenton's and Sergeant Buckleigh's detachments was taking place on the inland road. The convoy was halted and dispersed about eight miles south-east of **Larissa** and the Major went ahead in his car to see how the land lay. The situation was obscure and the available reports were not reassuring. He passed through **Larissa**, which was being heavily bombed at the time, and carried on until he reached the **Tyrnavos** area, where he found the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**. No instructions had been left for him.

Puzzled, he returned to the lorries and at the entrance to the dispersal area was met by a Don R who handed him a message cancelling his previous instructions and telling him to go back to **Almiros** to await others. The convoy started at once.

To move in or out of many roadside areas in **Greece** was impossible without wheel chains, and we seemed to spend half our days kneeling in the mud with broken finger nails and bleeding knuckles grappling to our chests the dead weight of those icy, slimy, accursed, indispensable chains. On the roads they were a nuisance because they worked loose and flailed the mudguards.

The drivers of a three-tonner at the tail of the convoy were removing theirs when they were attacked by three Messerschmitts. Their lorry was set on fire and destroyed, and Captain Sampson's pick-up, which they had pulled out of the mud a little earlier, had to be abandoned with four flat tires.

During the journey to **Almiros** the convoy was attacked several times and A Section's ack-ack crew did good work. If Percy Sanders and Jim Stanley had been using a heavier gun in **Greece**, a .5 instead of a .303, they would have been shooting down aircraft instead of merely opposing them. They cost the **Luftwaffe** some flying time (because even bullet holes have to be repaired) and probably, by keeping irresolute pilots high,

they saved some lives; but a light machine gun—and this applied equally to B and C Sections' crews—was not the weapon they deserved. Percy was hitting the bombers with his Bren—you could see the tracer stubs flaking away as the bullets hit the armour-plating—but, heart-breakingly, they seldom took notice. No wonder he was seen, after one raid, to throw his gun on the ground and jump on it. Jim was using the Boys anti-tank rifle (weight 34 lb.), firing it from the shoulder until he was a mass of bruises. 'I'll get the bastard,' he used to say, savagely jamming shells into the magazine. 'He's only got to fly low and slow and I'll get the bastard.' One day the chance he had been waiting for came. He was sitting on a grassy slope with the rifle between his knees when a fighter-bomber cruised lazily down the valley. When it was level with him and about seventy yards away he heaved the rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim—Jim had smashed as many clay pigeons as any man in New Zealand—and squeezed. The rifle misfired. Jim was too upset even to swear.

However, he and Percy continued to stand by their guns, and they stood by them valiantly on 18 April on the road to **Almiros**. This was a town about twenty miles south-west of **Volos**, four from the coast, and between fifty and sixty miles by road from the **Thermopylae** line. No fresh orders awaited the Major when he got there, so at ten that night he set out for the **Thermopylae** line—an action he was told later was correct.

By daylight we were in an area near **Longos**, a small coast village some fifteen miles east-south-east of **Molos**. There was no work for us that day, so we tried to get some sleep, but sleep was almost impossible. All day long reconnaissance planes hovered noisily above our olive trees in search of dispersal areas and we strongly suspected that they were being helped by fifth columnists. We were warned to be on the lookout for a blue touring car, the driver of which was believed to be signalling to aircraft by parking it near areas that contained troops and vehicles. Only a short while before two drivers had halted just such a car, something about it having aroused suspicion. They had searched it but

had found nothing to justify their detaining the driver and his passengers.

The next day was 20 April, a Sunday. It was also **Adolf Hitler's** 52nd birthday. Congratulatory messages were in order and the **Luftwaffe** decided to say it with bombs. Bombs fell on roads and bridges, bullets pruned the olive trees in the dispersal areas, and we were grateful that we were not called on to make any general move. By this time Company headquarters had shifted to an area near Atalante, some fifteen miles farther down the road, and a small convoy of our load-carriers, which had spent the night there, had to rejoin the sections at **Longos**. The birthday bombs fell steadily all the way but no one was hurt, the narrowest escape occurring when a piece of shrapnel the size of a flat-iron passed between two drivers and out through the back of their cab.

Workshops, which had been in an area off the **Thebes- Khalkis** road since the 16th, also had cause to remember the birthday. At eight in the morning three sticks of bombs fell on a nearby Australian ambulance unit. Our drivers dug slit-trenches and then went on with their work. About ten o'clock, eight aircraft (to choose the most conservative sum from a mass of hasty arithmetic) started to bomb and machine-gun the area. One bomb landed a few feet from a staff car without damaging it but shrapnel and bullets sped unerringly towards a new radiator just fitted to a load-carrier. A chin-strap broke when a steel helmet was torn from its wearer's head by blast and that was the sum of the damage—a not very impressive total for a raid in which between forty and fifty bombs had been dropped.

The raids continued and by three in the afternoon the drivers had retired in disgust to a dry creek-bed some distance from the area, leaving a sergeant, a corporal, and two volunteers to operate a report centre.

Just on dusk two Messerschmitts flew low over the area. By this time it was pitted with bomb holes, so the pilots may well have gone home to report that in addition to the damage done to **Khalkis** harbour during the day a scene of chaos existed beside the **Thebes- Khalkis** road. The

truth would have disappointed them. A direct hit had been scored on the cookhouse, smashing the two olive trees between which it had been set up and strewing the neighbourhood with dixies, flour, and tinned food—this was the worst damage—and the water cart had been riddled with holes, but it would still go and the bottom half of the tank would still hold water.

Workshops inspected its area with wonder and happy pride. The drivers gathered beside the indestructible staff car to marvel at the enlargement of the original crater by a second bomb. They agreed that a greatcoat riddled by machine gun bullets had certainly been mistaken for a prone soldier and that the administrative corporal had cut a ludicrous figure while sheltering in a too-small slit trench. They wondered how the sections had got on.

The sections had got on very well. The same euphoria was being experienced in the **Longos** area and here, too, the tendency was to laugh and talk. The birthday had been going on all over eastern **Greece** all day.

During the afternoon the spare men and the drivers without vehicles had been given a particularly unpleasant task—the loading of the unit's transport with 3000 rounds of 25-pounder, all of which was in a single stack a few miles from the area. The Major himself superintended the operation, taking with him enough labour to load two or three lorries at a time, his idea being to get the job done quickly so that the men could return to the comparative safety of the olive trees. The lorries were held on the road two to a mile and as they were needed they were signalled forward by Dick Grant,⁷ the Major's driver. His was an unenviable job and he performed it with such coolness that he was later awarded the Military Medal. Enemy aircraft were overhead nearly all the time but the Major refused to allow anyone to take cover. Consequently the stack was soon cleared and the lorries safely dispersed in the unit area.

The birthday ended when night came, and although it had been our most dangerous day so far only two men had been injured—neither seriously. They were Jack Murdoch⁸ (C Section) and 'Scotty' Reid⁹ (B

Section).

By now the New Zealand Artillery had taken up positions in the **Thermopylae** line and at midnight we started delivering ammunition to the guns. While we were doing this the Major was asked for enough transport to move the 24th Battalion to a fresh position in the line. Hardly a load-carrier was in the area, but he rushed round to the various regiments and by three in the morning a convoy had been assembled and was embussing the infantry. It returned to **Longos** the next day, and but for the **Luftwaffe**, which seemed remarkably fresh after the birthday celebrations, we should have spent a quiet afternoon.

The sea was nearby and that evening many of us had a quick bathe. The water was cold but it was deliciously refreshing. When aircraft came over we stretched ourselves on the pebbles and lay still, letting the creamy surf wash over us.

Nearly everyone was in good fettle. From the downward curve of the sun you could trace the upward curve of our spirits: it was a new law of nature introduced by the **Luftwaffe**. We boasted about our prowess as runners, making it the subject of ridiculous comparisons ('Boy, did I move? Lovelock's a slug to me.'), and every- thing at all funny was treasured and passed around. The best story, perhaps, was about a B Section driver. He was travelling along the road when he heard what he thought was a motor-cycle roaring behind him. He indicated that the road was clear and a Messerschmitt swept by at hedge height. He swears that the pilot leaned out of the cockpit and acknowledged the courtesy with a gracious wave.



Bombed
Bombed



Bombing in Larissa
Bombing in Larissa



A convoy halted in Volos
A convoy halted in Volos



'A direct hit on the cookhouse' —page 79

'A direct hit on the cookhouse'— page 79

Laughing and talking and calling to one another in the darkness, the drivers ate their supper and turned in. Presently the whole area was hushed. All you could hear was the footsteps of the sentries as they strolled under the olive trees, a muffled grumble of talk coming from a lorry far up the hillside, and the occasional sweet, clear pipe of a night bird. We had been told that the German paratroopers signalled to one another by imitating bird calls.

All night long, silent, impassive, stoical, in twos, in tens, in twenties, not glancing at the sentry who stood in the entrance to our area, Greek soldiers trudged south. None of them had rifles; few carried anything beyond a small bundle. They were like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. They were not men, you felt, but symbols of defeat, expressing all the pity and terror of the world we live in but feeling none of it themselves. Probably, though, they had fought with unbelievable bravery and their hearts were full of bitterness and anguish. Or were they merely dead-tired and longing for home and glad that for them the war was nearly over?

The sentry at the entrance was puzzled. He did not know that a Greek army in the Epirus had been surrounded and forced to capitulate to the Germans, nor did he know that during the day the **Greek Government had asked the British to withdraw their troops from **Greece**.**

General Wavell himself had gone to **Athens** to make sure of the Government's attitude. It was sensible and honourable. **Greece** could hold out only a few days longer. Let the British save what they could while they could.

We were told about this the next day. Our first reaction to the news, human and perfectly pardonable, was one of relief. Freedom from Stukas, a hot bath, leave in **Cairo**—it sounded like Heaven. Then we remembered the old men who had saluted us, the women we had seen working on the roads, and the hundreds of baby fists, so cocky and confident, that had waved frantically for notice or had been held up proudly for our attention: Look, English—the sign! *Your sign!* Thumbs up! We remembered the storm of flowers and the faces in the twilight in **Athens**. There would, of necessity, be a ride back.

And we remembered other things. ‘The English? They know only one military operation—re-embarkation.’ Lord Haw-Haw had called us ‘**Freyberg's Circus**’, and how did it go, that epigram? Give the Canadians more motor-cycles and they'll break their necks; leave the Australians alone and they'll kill each other off; pay the New Zealanders an extra pound a week and they'll drink themselves to death. No libel so wounding as the one with a small core of truth. No, we were not looking forward to that second ride through **Athens**.

The Major told us of the withdrawal after breakfast on the morning of the 22nd and he added a word of warning. He had noticed, he said, that some of us were getting jittery. He reminded us that only one man in the unit had so far been killed, though all had had narrow escapes. It was better, he said, to go home without an arm or a leg than with broken nerves.

After that the odd men and the drivers without vehicles stacked their kitbags in a dry ditch, guessing they had seen the last of them, though there was some talk of sending them down later. Then they climbed aboard two A Section lorries and were driven south under the command of Second-Lieutenant Toogood. Their destination was an

assembly area near Daphni on the outskirts of **Athens**. They were attacked several times on the way down and on one occasion six A Section drivers could find nothing to shelter behind except a lone sapling whose trunk was as slender as a drainpipe. They packed round it tighter than piglets round a trough and waited for the bullets, but they never came. The Messerschmitt rose to avoid the sapling then dipped to machine-gun the drivers from the second lorry who were sheltering in a ditch by the roadside. No one was hurt.

When the party reached the Daphni area they found that Company headquarters was already there. Workshops arrived the next day.

Moved off (noted the senior NCO, Staff-Sergeant Jim Harley), ¹⁰ at 5 a.m. after making sure that everything possible was destroyed. Went through **Thebes** and were lucky enough to find gap on main south road through which to move our convoy. Destroyed vehicles lying on both sides of road. Had anxious time getting our heavy vehicles past some of the wrecks.

8 a.m. Were caught in Thebes Pass. Enemy planes overhead had caused a large convoy to stop. Strafing but no damage done.

9 a.m. Got going again. Orders were for us to destroy Workshops and stores waggons by running them over the steepest cliff in the pass but thought better of it and took them on.

2 p.m. Arrived Daphni. Quite a number of unit vehicles parked in olive grove. Dispersed and settled down for a meal.

4 p.m. Enemy planes over; no damage.

The rest of the unit spent the day in the **Longos** area. The Luftwaffe was never very far away but good luck and good management kept our drivers safe until the friendly darkness arrived, bringing them a second night of sound sleep. The next morning, however, the enemy came over before he was expected, catching B Section off guard. Its area was heavily bombed and machine-gunned, Georgie Ireland ¹¹ and R. V. B.

Brown ¹² being partly buried by a bomb and Claude Hitchon ¹³ and 'Kolynos' Carroll ¹⁴ wounded. Two vehicles, one an LAD, ¹⁵ were damaged.

Later in the morning we were told to keep two lorries for unit transport and destroy the rest, with the exception of eighteen from C Section, four from A Section, and three from B Section, which were to stand by to help with the withdrawal of the 6th Brigade. First we removed the petrol tanks for delivery to the New Zealand Artillery, which was short of petrol. Then we drained the oil from sumps and differentials and poured grit in them. We started the engines and pulled the throttles wide open. They hammered for a time; then they began to cough and spit. Finally they clattered into silence. The Major went round with his tommy gun and delivered the *coup-de-grâce*. They were good lorries. They had covered thousands of miles in Egypt and the **Western Desert**, and in **Greece** most of them had done about 4000 miles. For many months they had been our jobs and our homes. Savagely we drove picks into headlamps, radiators, windscreens; we slashed tires, destroyed dynamos, batteries, distributors.

Then we sat down to refresh ourselves with tinned fruit. The twisted roots of the olive trees were now our larders, their cleft trunks our wardrobes, their branches our coat-hangers. Owning nothing except what we stood up in and could carry, and having nothing to take care of any longer except our rifles and ourselves, we felt strangely free.

Late that afternoon, with many glances at the sky, the drivers whose vehicles had been destroyed left for Daphni in the two lorries that had been kept for that purpose, Captain Moon leading them in his staff car. They arrived safely, as Workshops had done earlier in the day. The Longos area was empty now except for the transport that was standing by to shift the 6th Brigade. At eight the evening before twenty-five vehicles from the Supply Column and twenty-five from the **Petrol Company** had come under the Major's command for this job.

Since dawn on the 23rd the 6th Brigade, supported by the New

Zealand Artillery and a number of British guns, had been holding the coast sector of the [Thermopylae](#) line. By day it had been under almost constant attack from the air and during the afternoon of the 24th our infantry and artillery engaged enemy tanks and infantry. The men were to withdraw with their guns that night, relying on speed and darkness to see them safely through the dangerous miles that lay between [Molos](#) and the 4th Brigade's covering positions at [Kriekouki](#), a mountain pass south of [Thebes](#).

On the evening of the 23rd the Major had been shown the embussing point in the 6th Brigade headquarters' area by the Brigade Major and told that his transport was to be there at nine o'clock the next night. Later, however, it was decided to advance the hour so as to free the narrow coast road for south-bound traffic engaged in earlier withdrawals, but because communications had broken down the Major did not get his fresh orders. (It would have made no difference if he had. Nothing—not even a motor-cycle—could move on the road in daylight.) Consequently, when the convoy did not arrive at the embussing point in the afternoon, the brigade concluded that it was lost and the 6th Field Regiment was ordered to destroy its guns to free transport for evacuating men.

Following what he thought was still the plan, the Major left the [Longos](#) area after dark with the intention of getting his convoy to the embussing point at nine o'clock, but even this was not possible. The timetable had broken down and the convoy was delayed by south-bound Artillery transport.

As the lorries drew near the danger zone— [Molos](#) had been shelled heavily a few hours earlier—flares and Very lights made everything as bright as day, and our drivers, with lorry almost touching lorry, felt certain they had been spotted. Subsequent talks with the infantry suggested that fifth columnists were responsible.

The infantry, as it happened, were also late in arriving, but at half past nine the vehicles from our unit embussed the 24th Battalion. Under the weird light, fantastic with leaping shadows and sudden gouts of

darkness and sinister with small sounds, the lorries were loaded and in no time they were down on their springs with their canopies bulging like untidy parcels. Some of the men were famished and our drivers showed them where the food was kept and the cigarettes.

One by one the lorries disappeared in the darkness and went lurching along the narrow road, travelling without lights. The Major and Second-Lieutenant Butt ¹⁶ stayed behind with their lorries to pick up stragglers. They collected twenty-one and pulled out just in front of the rearguard, beating the enemy by twenty minutes and passing through Atalante ten minutes before the arrival of an enemy force that had driven down the centre of **Greece**.

More than a hundred miles were covered before daylight and morning found the brigade well south of the last line of defence. The 24th Battalion was hidden in an oak grove near Eleusis, a few miles north-west of **Athens**, with the transport camouflaged and the infantry sleeping. Re-embarkation had started already and that night the brigade was to go to a beach near **Marathon**.

It was Anzac Day.

¹ Dvr S. A. Fisher; railway storeman, Otahuhu; **Auckland**; born Aoroa, Northern Wairoa, 1 Mar 1904; wounded 17 Apr 1941.

² Dvr R. H. Meredith; motor driver; **Auckland**; born **Onehunga**, 1 Dec 1904; injured 17 Apr 1941.

³ Dvr C. L. George; shearer; Te Kowhai, Frankton Junction; born **Dunedin**, 6 Apr 1915; injured and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped 7 Mar 1945.

⁴ Dvr Q. R. W. Taylor; civil servant; Takapuna, **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 10 Oct 1918; wounded 18 Apr 1941.

⁵ Dvr A. J. Hallmond; labourer; **Dargaville**; born **Dargaville**, 3 Mar 1919; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁶ 2 Lt N. F. Chissell; garage attendant; born NZ, 25 May 1917; killed in action, 18 Apr 1941.

⁷ Dvr R. S. Grant, MM; garage attendant; **Frankton Junction**; born NZ, 29 Nov 1911.

⁸ Dvr J. I. Murdoch; truck driver; **Napier**; born **Kairanga**, 7 Jul 1921; wounded and p.w., Apr 1941.

⁹ Dvr R. T. Reid; driver; **Henderson**, **Auckland**; born **Hamilton, Scotland**, 21 Apr 1918; wounded 20 Apr 1941.

¹⁰ Capt J. W. Harley; mechanic; **Leeston**; born NZ, 23 Apr 1911.

¹¹ Dvr G. E. **Ireland**; storeman; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 29 Jul 1917; wounded 23 Apr 1941.

¹² Dvr R. V. B. Brown; factory hand; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 20 Oct 1918; wounded 23 Apr 1941.

¹³ L-Cpl C. B. Hitchon; taxi proprietor; **Kaikohe**; born **Waikiora South**, 13 Feb 1901; wounded 23 Apr 1941.

¹⁴ Dvr G. M. Carroll; cook; born **England**, 6 Jun 1916; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.

¹⁵ Light Aid Detachment.

¹⁶ Capt F. G. Butt, m.i.d.; farmer; **Seddon**; born **Blenheim**, 8 Dec 1918.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 6 – WITHDRAWAL FROM GREECE

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ANZAC morning.

In the Daphni area Company Quartermaster-Sergeant Jack Williams¹ stood among piles of new shirts, new underclothes, and emergency rations. A ring of drivers hung round him like wolves but, as he had not yet been given instructions about destroying or giving away his stock, he attempted to fob them off with a few tins of sardines and some deck shoes. The moment his back was turned they snatched shirts, shorts, and underclothing, growing bolder as he grew wearier. Aircraft flew over at frequent intervals and after every alarm the heap was seen to have diminished. Soon most of the drivers were wearing new clothes.

Anzac afternoon.

In an area below Kriekouki Sergeant Buckleigh's detachment of nine 30-cwt. lorries (the tenth had been destroyed) was standing by to help with the final withdrawal of the 4th Brigade, which was to hold its present positions at all costs until the next night. The detachment was now under the command of a lieutenant from the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** whose own convoy, originally of thirty lorries, had been depleted by eight. The sunshine was soft and pleasant and our drivers smoked, played cards, slept in the warm grass.

Anzac evening.

On Kea Island, fifteen miles from the Greek mainland, a party of New Zealanders left the shelter of the olive trees and the wooded gullies and made for the harbour. They had been ordered to sleep near the beaches in case a ship came. Among them were Sergeant 'Dad' Cleave,² Corporal Ian McBeth,³ and some fifteen A Section drivers who had left us the day before to embark from a beach east of **Athens** with elements of Divisional Headquarters.

‘We were in the last landing craft to leave the beach,’ said Ian McBeth. When she moved off we were under the impression that we were being taken to a ship but as time went by and we seemed to be heading for the open sea we began to wonder. Then the commander of the landing craft spoke to us out of the darkness. He spoke quietly in level tones. He said: “We regret that it is impossible to take you to **Crete by destroyer this morning. The destroyer's departure is already overdue and we have decided to take you to **Kea Island**. There you will be safer from bombing and enemy action than you would be on the mainland. We intend to get in touch with a destroyer and we hope you will be picked up in the course of the next day or two. If that doesn't happen you will have to make your own way to **Crete** as best you can. **Crete** is about 150 miles due south of **Kea Island**.”**

‘The voyage that followed was supremely uncomfortable. There were five or six hundred men in the landing craft and except for a small space forward she was decked over. Nearly everyone was wearing his greatcoat, web equipment, and haversack, and we were so jammed together that it was next to impossible to take anything off and difficult even to loosen a strap or unbutton an overcoat. We were standing in a mixture of water, oil, and petrol, and the fumes were so bad that smoking was quite out of the question. Soon we were wet through with sweat.

‘After sailing for four and a half hours the landing craft arrived at **Kea Island. The sun was well up and it was a lovely morning. We were ordered to get ashore quickly and disperse ourselves among the olive trees but to stay within call. We needed no urging, for as we were going ashore two German aircraft came skimming over the harbour a few feet above sea level. We got under cover and most of us went straight to sleep.’**

They had slept soundly, many of them, even while the harbour was being bombed and low-flying aircraft were strafing the gullies and hillsides. Now, waiting by the beach, few were sleepy. They talked on

into the night and no ship came.

Sitting in the darkness and talking about ships—that was what Second-Lieutenant Fenton and the drivers of C Section's administrative vehicles were doing on Anzac evening. They were in the **Peloponnese** and in sight of **Nauplion** harbour. They had destroyed all their lorries except one and that was being kept for New Zealand soldiers who were too sick to march. The sick men, together with some hospital orderlies, had been picked up at Daphni camp the day before and taken by way of the **Corinth** bridge and **Argos** to an area near **Nauplion**, a drive of between eighty and ninety miles. The convoy had been held up in **Argos** and severely bombed. Here twenty lost men of the **Divisional Petrol Company** had been taken aboard.

Late that afternoon our drivers saw a tragic sight. The ***Ulster Prince***, a sizeable merchant ship, went aground in **Nauplion** harbour and while she was lying there helpless the Stukas came over. They circled above her, and then, with beautiful precision, one after another, they dived. The first bombs fell a little wide but the second attack was successful. The ship was hit by an oil bomb dropped by one of the leading Stukas, and the others, following behind, poured streams of incendiary bullets into her decks and superstructure. Presently she was burning from stem to stern. When the fire reached the magazine—that at least was how our drivers saw it—there was a tremendous explosion. Gear of all kinds—derricks, deck-houses, stanchions, whole and in fragments—was thrown upwards in a cloud of smoke and came pattering down into the water. Then she started to blaze in earnest.

No one was surprised when it was learned that there would be no embarkation that night.

And so, on Anzac evening, after spending all day in hiding, our drivers were waiting for the word to move. It came after dark and they marched eight miles to a quiet cove, carrying greatcoats, toilet gear, and one blanket each. When they got to the cove nothing happened, and later they were told that there was no chance of their being taken off

that night. They were weary and disappointed and they dreaded another day under the **Luftwaffe**.

‘Who goes there?’ said an authoritative voice from the darkness. Our drivers were fed up and each of them waited for someone else to reply—a dangerous habit at that time. The challenge was repeated and they could make out an English officer with drawn revolver. It was time somebody answered. Replied Bill Davies, ⁴ wearily, lugubriously, and with perfect timing: ‘Schmidt der Spy!’

The next day was the 26th and the sands were running out—running out in the **Peloponnese**, running out on the beaches near **Athens**, running out in the Daphni area, running out on **Kea Island**.

To the hungry drivers on **Kea Island** the ‘Sheriff’s’ stew was beginning to smell good. Anything warm and meaty would have smelt good to them for this was their second day on the island and rations were almost exhausted.

The foundation of the stew was a chicken and a kid. The former had been given to ‘Sheriff’ by a village woman; the latter he had returned with after disappearing among the trees. He stirred the pot with his bayonet and thoughtfully sucked a finger. No—it was not quite ready.

Intent on their bellies our drivers were not listening for the assembly signal, but the moment it was heard—three shots in quick succession—hunger was forgotten and they hurried to where the NZASC party was forming up under a captain from the Supply Column who was on the island with 200 others from his unit.

The landing craft had moved a few miles to a safer anchorage and the troops were to march over the hills and join her. They started off in groups of twenty. It was about noon.

For a while the going was flat; then the trail started to zigzag upwards. As soon as one summit was gained another one appeared behind it. ‘Dad’ Cleave made his involved jokes and helped where he

could and the men kept going. At last, when they were beginning to feel that everything in the world was vanity except the pleasure of stopping and stretching out at full length, the trail began to wind downhill. It wound through a village, and there, by the water's edge, was the landing craft. Three of our drivers were the first to reach her, which was remarkable considering that the NZASC party had been the last to start. They stripped off and fell into the sea, snatching several glorious minutes before it was realised how clearly their white bodies showed up.

The barge sailed at dusk. Early the next morning our drivers were taken aboard the anti-aircraft cruiser *Carlisle* bound for **Crete**.

Near the Daphni area the two great Thornycrofts—the Workshops lorry with lathe and drill and work bench, and the stores lorry with pigeon-holes and bins filled with everything from cotterpins to spare steering assemblies—had been pushed into a gully. One of them lay on its side, three of its six wheels towering high above the mechanics. The other was still upright, its nose crushed into the bank. It was the morning of the 26th.

Gear-boxes, differentials, and engines were stuffed with ammonal, the entire contents of a case about the size of a butter box being used, and fuses were laid. Later it was felt that a smaller amount of explosive would have done the job.

After lunch the drivers were told that if all went well they would embark that night, and at four in the afternoon the remaining transport, with the exception of a pick-up and a breakdown lorry, set out on its last journey, leaving Second-Lieutenant Aitken and a small party to demolish the Thornycrofts.

The fuses were lit—they were supposed to burn for a minute—and the demolition party piled into the pick-up, which stopped dead after travelling some fifty yards, its differential wedged against a rock. The explosion was expected momentarily and the party's efforts during the next minute may be described as frantic. As it happened there was

plenty of time to spare, for the lorries were still intact when the pick-up reached the main road, which was about a mile away. By this time Creek civilians were making for the gully in search of loot, impervious to waves and shouts. The minutes dragged by and at last the lorries disintegrated with a shattering explosion, injuring or killing, our drivers felt guiltily certain, more than one civilian. A column of smoke rose in the air and a flight of Messerschmitts dived on it, their guns firing. Staying no longer, the party headed towards **Athens**, the driver whose job it was to clear the road of wrecked vehicles taking the breakdown lorry. When we saw him later he told us he had dragged several vehicles off the road, some of which seemed to have been placed there deliberately.

Meanwhile the main party was on its way through **Athens**. For most of us it was a trying experience. Flowers and cognac we did not look for. Taunts and jeers—not that we were expecting them—we could have answered with taunts and jeers. A polite acceptance of the fact of our withdrawal we could have faced with equanimity. But when they smiled at us, when they waved to us, when they held up as a gesture—the lorries were moving fast with the general stream—small presents: cakes, a white rose, a glass of wine; when they did this, the children waving, the men saluting, the women smiling, they made it hard for us. For what were we to do? Wave back? Grin all over our faces like Cheshire cats? Say over and over again our three Greek words— *kalimera*, *kalaspera*, *kalinikta*? No, it was easier to exchange waves with the two drunk Australians, their arms around girls, on a balcony. It was easier, going through Constitution Square, to taunt, as one of our drivers did, with what cruel injustice he could not be expected to know, the lonely airman seated on the café *terrasse*, elbows on an iron table: ‘Having a good leave, old man?’ The airman did not look up.

The hedges of the pretty road east of **Athens** were white with dust and in the ditches there were wrecked vehicles. We headed towards **Raphena** where we were to embark from D beach. After travelling for about fifteen miles we turned off the road into a grassy olive grove. We

ate a hurried meal and then repacked our valises, making the final decisions about what to leave behind. We had been told we could take very little.

We were ordered to destroy Captain Moon's staff car and all but two or three of the lorries. Destroying the staff car was good fun: there was plenty of upholstery to slash, plenty of gadgets to break. The indomitable huckster who had been negotiating with a Greek business man looked on in distress. To the dozen or so civilians who had gathered to watch us we gave the back cushion, the radiator muff, a few blankets, and some tins of food. The portable gramophone—the one we had looted—went to a little boy. He was delighted with it and thanked us prettily in correct English.

He was playing it when we moved off at dusk in the remaining transport, and the 'Woodpecker's Song', which had greeted us on arrival, made a fitting requiem for the broken, deserted lorries, blurred and shadowy in the twilight, round the little boy and his gramophone.

We dismounted a few miles down the road, leaving the transport to be destroyed by engineers. Then we shuffled down to the beach in pitch darkness. We stood in a long, whispering queue and time lapsed. At last we were packed aboard a landing craft and taken, with water washing about our boots and our heads bowed beneath the steel deck, to the *Glengyle*. As soon as we had settled down in the warm, seething, and lighted hold we were given hot cocoa and large bully-beef sandwiches. Then we slept. At three on the morning of the 27th the *Glengyle* sailed for Crete.

The Greek women saw the flash of 'Tiny' Kinnaird's ⁵ rifle, saw the German aircraft spiralling to earth, and sprang to a perfectly natural conclusion. A second later he was being hugged and kissed by half a dozen wildly enthusiastic civilians.

Apart from that, 26 April had not been an amusing day for Second-Lieutenant Fenton and his detachment. Dawn had found them hiding

beneath olive trees not far from the **Nauplion** beaches and from then on they had been in constant danger. Probably there was nothing personal about the strafing. The German pilots went backwards and forwards over likely dispersal areas with the thoroughness of ploughmen and our drivers were not missed. Whenever a large flight of aircraft appeared the watchers half expected to see the sky blossom with parachutes. It was known that paratroops had landed near **Corinth**.

The landing had occurred at breakfast-time that morning, and by then, after travelling all night, the 6th Brigade was in position between **Miloi**, a few miles south of **Argos**, and the town of **Tripolis**. The NZASC detachment, of course, was still with the infantry, but it was now under the command of Captain Torbet ⁶ (C Section), Major McGuire ⁷ having gone ahead on the night of the withdrawal from the **Thermopylae** line to report to Colonel Crump.

At that time it was the intention to withdraw the 4th Brigade across the **Corinth Canal**, so as soon as it was known that paratroops had landed near the bridge the 26th Battalion was ordered to send back two rifle companies to help the small mixed force that was defending it. Two of our lorries carried them.

‘We were heavily bombed and strafed on the way up,’ said Reg Troughear ⁸ (C Section), ‘and finally we were halted by a big bomb crater in the middle of the road. After we had filled it in I went back to my lorry, but I couldn't find Arthur Hearn ⁹ who was the other driver. I knew he was dead-tired, so I supposed he had lain down somewhere and gone to sleep. I didn't worry much because the officer in charge of us had decided not to take the other Ammunition Company lorry any farther, his idea being to keep at least one lorry in reserve in case his transport got badly knocked about. I told the drivers of this lorry, Corporal Ivan Hogg ¹⁰ and Alan Bradbury ¹¹ (B Section) to look out for Arthur, and I went on with the rest of the convoy.

‘So much time had been wasted in taking cover from aircraft that now we just carried on. We debussed the infantry and pretty soon they

were in action, though they were too late to do anything about the **Corinth** bridge, which had been blown up before they arrived. I didn't see any paratroops but I saw plenty of enemy aircraft and I kept my head down.

‘The infantry held their positions until evening and then they moved back to fresh ones—the idea, I think, was to cover the withdrawal of wounded and stragglers. Anyway it was late at night before we got back to where we had left the B Section lorry. What was left of it was still burning and there was no sign of Arthur and the others.’

Bradbury and Hogg had been told to stay where they were until a given hour and then move south. They were joined by Arthur Hearn, and later, as there was no sign of the infantry, they pulled on to the road. At once they were machine-gunned from the air, the lorry being set on fire. Alan Bradbury was killed, Ivan Hogg wounded in the hand and leg, and Arthur Hearn in the thigh.

Meanwhile the rest of the 26th Battalion had moved to positions about twenty miles north of **Miloi**, leaving the 25th in reserve near that town and the 24th in positions protecting **Tripolis**. The situation in the **Peloponnese** was getting graver every hour. German troops had crossed the Gulf of **Corinth** near **Patras** and were advancing down the west coast, threatening **Tripolis** and the port of **Kalamata**, from which the 6th Brigade was to have been the last fighting force to leave **Greece**. Now it was to embark from **Monemvasia**, far down on the south-east coast.

‘These daylight moves,’ said Captain Torbet, ‘were made under merciless attacks from the air. We left the **Miloi** area at one in the afternoon with the 24th Battalion. From a hilltop near the coast we had a clear view of the **Nauplion** harbour. Clouds of smoke were trailing across the water and peeping through them were the masts of precious shipping.

‘In **Tripolis**, which was being bombed as we passed through it, we

were met by civic officials who handed us a sheet of typescript stating that no British troops were to stage within three miles of the town as their presence was likely to provoke air raids.

‘It looked to me like fifth column work, and later I was not surprised to hear that signboards in **Tripolis** had been switched, so that transport, instead of going to **Monemvasia**, went to **Kalamata**.’

For No. 9 and No. 10 sub-sections, which were travelling at the end of the convoy with instructions to pick up stragglers, it might have been better had the signboards been switched earlier, for they were directed to **Kalamata** and had no trouble in finding their way there. They arrived at the beach that night with stragglers riding on the mudguards of the lorries and on the cab roofs, but they were not embarked.

North of the canal, too, the situation was becoming graver. Throughout the 26th, Sergeant Buckleigh's 30-cwts. had continued to stand by for the withdrawal of the 4th Brigade from its positions at **Kriekouki**.

‘During the day,’ said ‘Chum’ Thomas ¹² (B Section), ‘scraps of news came back to us. We heard that the enemy was in **Thebes**, then that a German column was heading towards the pass. We heard our artillery getting stuck into it and later we were told it had been driven back. Then we heard about the paratroops at **Corinth** and that the Germans were working round east of us, and we knew things were sticky.

‘The withdrawal started when it got dark. The infantry marched to the end of the pass and we picked them up and headed towards **Athens**.’

Near the beach at Nauplion Second-Lieutenant Fenton's detachment had come to the end of its second day of waiting. No paratroops had landed there, the last Messerschmitt had gone singing into the sunset, and it was dark again. Our drivers were happy in the lovely darkness and for the moment they were not worried about the morning, though they knew now that if they were not taken off that night they were unlikely to be taken off at all.

Presently they were ordered to go to the beach and they fell in at the end of a long column of Australians who were marching nine abreast. They could not believe there would be enough shipping in the harbour to hold all those Australians and themselves as well. When they got to the beach they were ordered to about turn. This put them at the head of the column, which apparently had marched past the embarkation point in the darkness. Wading, swimming, floundering, they boarded a landing craft, and as soon as it was full it put off, slapping through the salty darkness. For a while the commander of the craft believed he would have to make **Crete** on his own, but after heading out to sea for two miles—by now it was almost dawn—he found **HMAS Perth**, which had been embarking troops at the nearby port of **Tolos**.

Our drivers were given sandwiches and hot drinks and while they were enjoying these they discovered that the *Perth's* crew, under the impression that the men ashore were in trouble, had volunteered to a man to cover their embarkation. ¹³

The next day—the 27th—was lovely—a perfect spring Sunday.

The Greeks wore their best clothes and went to church. Under the baroque spires and onion-shaped domes, pink, golden, or gleaming white, they prayed fervently for the strange soldiers, a stream of entreaties going up to Heaven when engines were heard and ripples of dark shadow rushed over the bright domes.

The soldiers with the shabby uniforms and tired faces were still there after the service. When you spoke to them, saying ‘*Nike*’ (victory), or gave them the thumbs-up sign, they answered in their foreign language: ‘That’s right, Dad. How you doin’, anyway?’

‘It was all pretty quiet and peaceful,’ said ‘Chum’ Thomas, ‘with people going to church and that sort of thing, but we were expecting the Germans to appear any moment. The 4th Brigade Group was dispersed between **Athens** and the beaches. I don't think anything interesting had

happened to any of our drivers during the night journey from the **Kriekouki** positions. There was nothing to do, so we kept under cover and waited for orders.

‘During the morning we were told to destroy our trucks. Stan Barrow¹⁴ and I drained our oil and we were just going to put grit in the sump when the order was countermanded. By now the other boys had wrecked their trucks and started out for the beaches, but all ours needed was a fill of oil. We had mortars on board and these were wanted by one of the companies of the 20th Battalion chosen to cover the embarkation.

‘We had been under attack from the air all day long and when we moved back towards **Athens**, heading for **Markopoulon**, a little village some six or seven miles west of the beaches, we were quite expecting to get it. There were about eight lorries in our convoy—our own was towing three others—and I dare say it was the last lot of British transport moving north of the **Corinth Canal**. Anyway, as we were coming over the brow of a hill about sixteen Messerschmitts came down on us. Our passengers tumbled into the ditch and I jumped from one side of the cab and Stan from the other. An Australian artillery officer was killed beside me and four vehicles were destroyed, ours included. The Messerschmitts stayed for some time and when the officer in command called a muster he found that eight or nine men had been killed—I think that's right—and others were casualties. There was no sign of Stan.

‘Soon shells started to land near us and from then on it was rather like a bad dream. German motor-cyclists came down the road and we fired on them. I remember the tracers and the noise and the flash of mortars and I remember noticing that our truck was still burning. This went on for some time and then things quietened down.

‘Later we were given orders to go to the beach and after a march of about five miles we went straight on to the landing craft. When I got aboard the ship I met some of the other boys and they had the surprise of their lives. Stan, who had made his way to the beach after our truck was hit, had told them I had been killed in the raid.’

The ships that sailed that night were the last to embark troops from the **Athens** area and in them went all Sergeant Buckleigh's drivers except two—'Chum' Arblaster ¹⁵ and Bill Dolphin ¹⁶ who had been sent out to collect supplies two days earlier and had not been seen since. That left only Captain Torbet's detachment in **Greece**.

The morning of the 27th—that brilliant and interminable day—found the 6th Brigade still guarding **Tripolis**. It was to hold its positions until dark and then move as quickly as possible to a dispersal area near **Monemvasia**. As the enemy had not put in an appearance by noon the 26th Battalion started the journey in daylight. The bulk of Captain Torbet's transport stayed behind with the 25th and 24th Battalions. The latter was to be the rearguard.

All day long fighters, bombers, and little impudent Henschels, like dragonflies, brushed the tree-tops, searching for troops and vehicles. No cooking was done and our drivers moved only when the camouflage nets had to be shifted to cover the changing shadows cast by the lorries.

'Some of us,' said Captain Torbet, 'were hidden among olive trees on the slopes of a little valley, and during the day an elderly man in peasant clothes strolled down the centre of it, glancing from side to side and calling out with a strong American accent: "Come out, boys! Come on out! Don't be scared!" No one moved and he went away.'

That evening Captain Torbet heard a German radio announcer state that the **Luftwaffe** had been looking for the remnants of the New Zealand Division all day but had been unable to find them owing to their clever camouflage.

One of the biggest worries was petrol. As the original intention had been to embark the brigade from **Khalkis** the drivers had started out with only one case of spare petrol on each lorry, and now, with a journey of about eighty miles in front of them, their reserves were dangerously low. Corporal Roy Hintz ¹⁷ had returned from a foraging expedition with six cases, and these, together with a few gallons obtained by draining

the tanks of abandoned vehicles and a few more allocated to Captain Torbet from supplies requisitioned in **Tripolis**, enabled our lorries to move out that night with a reasonable chance of reaching **Monemvasia**. The total reserve—two gallons—was carried in C Section's LAD.

It was difficult to guess how much petrol the lorries would burn. They had been heavily laden when they left the **Thermopylae** line and since then a large number of stragglers had been picked up and many vehicles had been destroyed or had broken down, so that now the remainder were loaded far beyond the safety mark and were gulping petrol. The LAD—a 30-cwt.—was to end the journey with thirty-five men aboard.

The convoy passed through **Sparta**, which looked pretty and peaceful in the quiet starlight. Indeed many of the drivers recall to this day how charming it looked, and doubtless at the time, as they drove through its graceful streets, little scraps of forgotten knowledge, things they had heard in childhood about **Sparta** and the Spartans, stirred in more than one tired mind. And they drove on, perhaps, thinking of **Sparta** at war with **Athens**, or of the small boy and his fox, until with a start and a sudden breath-taking swerve they were back in the present and their own chapter of Greek history. Then they would remember where they were and what they were doing and determine to banish everything from their minds except the tailboard of the vehicle ahead. But thoughts would come drifting back, thoughts and dreams, and the road would fade in front of them and the unmeaning gabble of the engine change to music—the kind of music that Caliban heard on his island: ‘sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not’—and mix gently with the conversation of people they had known at home. Then one of them would sleep for a few seconds—sleep soundly until an urgency of disquiet, a subconscious warning that something was terribly amiss somewhere, pulled him back on to the road to **Monemvasia**. At once he would wake his friend, slumped in the seat beside him drenched and drowned in sleep, so that he could have a rest from driving or at least have someone to talk to.

Before daylight brought the **Luftwaffe** the transport was dispersed some miles from the beaches and drivers and infantry were prepared for another day in hiding. The first wave of aircraft came over soon after dawn and sank a small ship in the harbour, and from then on the sky was seldom completely empty; but the hours dragged by and still the battalion areas had not been attacked.

The day seemed endless.

And the next day—the 29th—seemed endless in a little town some miles from **Kalamata**, but punctually at seven in the evening, as they had said they would, the Germans arrived. They came in a British staff car, which was for two British officers, and a British lorry, which was for sixty-odd British other ranks and three New Zealanders. The Germans could congratulate themselves on a little tableau that exemplified the efficiency of the **Wehrmacht** in a really striking manner.

‘For three nights running,’ said Corporal Wally Dahl,¹⁸ ‘we had gone down to the beaches. The last was the 28th-29th and during the day and the early part of the night there had been fighting in **Kalamata**. In the small hours, when all hope of a planned evacuation seemed to have ended, the thousands of troops in the area were told that the senior officer present, a British brigadier, intended to surrender to the Germans at half past five in the morning. On hearing this, Les Robinson¹⁹ and Arthur Davie²⁰ and I—C Section had become split up into small groups by this time—decided to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the beaches. We marched seven or eight miles, taking our rifles with us. Towards daylight we came to an empty farmhouse, which we broke into. Here we rested for about two hours; then we heard shooting, so we pushed on, marching for five and a half hours through a swamp. Les Robinson had an infected hand and by now it was up like a balloon and he was feverish and in great pain. It was clear he couldn't be expected to carry on much longer, and as we didn't want to leave him on his own, which was what he wished, we began to think there was nothing for it but to give ourselves up. Late in the morning we came to a

little town and there we were met by two British officers and a civilian. The civilian, they told us, was a German policeman. They said there were about sixty British soldiers waiting in a building in the town for the arrival of the Germans. They had sent word that they would be there at seven that evening. The officers told us we would have to surrender our rifles, so we smashed them. Then we joined the others in the building. We gave our names and addresses to a Greek woman—a **Red Cross** worker—and she promised to write to our families. The civilians were very decent to us, giving us soup, bread, and eggs. Then we settled down to wait for the Germans.

‘They arrived punctually at seven and we were taken to a barracks near **Kalamata**. On the way we drove past an endless column of marching prisoners, among whom I recognised two C Section boys. Later we met the others.’

In all, seventeen of our drivers were captured in the **Kalamata** area.

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At eleven the night before, Captain Torbet's transport had been marshalled in a dry creek-bed and about an hour later it moved off towards the beaches at **Monemvasia**. It crossed a bridge and this was demolished behind the last vehicle by New Zealand engineers, the flash and the explosion causing some of the drivers to think that the convoy was being bombed. At the top of a steep cliff, about a quarter of a mile from the beach, the lorries were halted in line, the infantry forming up on the right-hand side of the road. On the other side there was a drop of 200 feet to the sea. An order was given and a dozen men collected round each vehicle. One after another the lorries were pushed over the cliff. Some smashed on rocks and others fell into deep water, while the headlamps of a few could be seen shining under the sea. It is hard to explain how they came to be switched on and why they were not broken. Some of the vehicles on the rocks started to burn. There were hundreds of vehicles below the cliff and our drivers heard later that the **Navy** came back and destroyed them completely by shellfire.

In groups of seventy the men marched down to the beach. A wait followed and Captain Torbet was told that about 200 men, including his own drivers, ²² might not be embarked until the next night. He was informed of the signals that would be used in that event.

Through the small hours of the morning, when the sky is darkest and the human spirit reaches its lowest ebb, the drivers waited on the beach, hope and courage running out like sand. They heard the putter of engines as landing craft went backwards and forwards in the bay and they knew there were not many troops left on the beach.

Finally, when hope was beginning to seem foolish, they were taken to the *Ajax*, the last ship to be loaded. The last boatload reached her just before four in the morning.

In *Ajax*, as in *Havock*, *Griffin*, *Isis*, *Calcutta*, *Vampire*, *Voyager*, *Perth*, *Kingston*, *Glengyle*, and all the other ships that had taken part in the evacuation, everything was under control. The sailors relieved our drivers of their valises and handed them up the gangway. The decks were heaped with equipment and the companion-ways were blocked with troops, but it was like stepping out of chaos into order. After days of confusion and destruction and falling back the journey had ended in a place where panic was unthinkable. You felt that if the last trump sounded and the graves started to give up their dead *Ajax* would be standing by to proceed with the evacuation of His Majesty's subjects from the four corners of the earth. The very sight of the bluejackets—their levity, their good humour, their confidence—was better than a promise from St. Michael that in the last event *Hitler* would not prevail. We understood now why Napoleon had failed to invade *Britain*, and why *Hitler* would fail also, and why no one would ever invade her successfully; and the reason was this: the people of *Britain* in time of danger, knowingly or unknowingly, thought of their island as a ship, and worked and fought her as a ship, and behind them to teach them how was the knowledge and experience and steadiness of a hundred generations of seamen. 'Stand by to repel boarders....'

Soon the soldiers of the **Wehrmacht** would be trampling over the whole of **Greece**, a country lovelier and older than anything they could understand, but not over **Kent** and **Sussex**, and never would a single German soldier set foot in the **Ajax** or in any ship of the **Royal Navy**.

As soon as our drivers had settled down they were given hot cocoa and bully-beef sandwiches. They tried to say thank you but it was no good. 'Garn,' said the sailors. 'Ev another muckin' cup. My oath, Miss Weston....'

On 16 October 1944 the **Piraeus** naval radio station sent this message to the British Naval Base at **Alexandria**:

It is good to be with you after three years.

¹ Capt B. J. Williams, MC; hotel manager; Birkdale, **Auckland**; born **Australia**, 6 Jun 1905.

² WO II V. J. Cleave, MM; motor mechanic; **Auckland**; born Inglewood, 8 Aug 1910.

³ WO I I. McBeth, m.i.d.; civil servant; **Auckland**; born **Motueka**, 1 Oct 1908.

⁴ Dvr W. H. Davies; motor mechanic; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ, 12 Sep 1909.

⁵ Dvr F. H. Kinnaird; bush hand; Ruahine, Southland; born Taumarunui, 21 Oct 1911.

⁶ Maj C. M. Torbet, OBE, m.i.d.; motor engineer; **Auckland**; born **Wanganui**, 19 Dec 1909; OC 18 Tk Tptr Coy 1 Apr-6 Nov 1944.

⁷ He was occupied during the 25th and 26th in locating supplies and petrol and arranging for their distribution. In the early hours

of the 27th he sailed for **Crete** in the *Kingston*.

⁸ Cpl R. Troughear; lorry driver; **Pokeno, Auckland**; born **Runanga**, 15 Jun 1914.

⁹ Dvr A. W. Hearn; lorry driver; **Waihi**; born **Waihi**, 10 Nov 1911; wounded 26 Apr 1941.

¹⁰ Cpl I. V. Hogg; panel beater; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 17 Mar 1914; wounded 26 Apr 1941.

¹¹ Dvr A. N. Bradbury; lorry driver; born **Dargaville**, 24 Oct 1917; killed in action, 26 Apr 1941.

¹² Dvr B. A. Thomas; bricklayer; **Pinner, Middlesex, England**; born **England**, 26 Oct 1913.

¹³ That was the last planned embarkation from the **Nauplion** area and most of the troops who were not taken off that night were captured.

¹⁴ Dvr R. S. Barrow; seaman; **Hamilton**; born **Christchurch**, 24 Oct 1913; posted missing, **Crete**, 2 Jun 1941; escaped by boat to **North Africa**.

¹⁵ Dvr C. F. Arblaster; carpenter; **Auckland**; born **NZ**, 12 Jul 1918; p.w. Apr 1941.

¹⁶ Dvr R. J. W. Dolphin; contractor; **Auckland**; born **Petone**, 22 Jul 1918; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

¹⁷ Sgt R. O. Hintz; driver-mechanic; born **Te Aroha**, 9 Sep 1917; died in **NZ**, 1 Mar 1948.

¹⁸ Sgt W. A. Dahl; tram driver; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 17

Jan 1905; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

¹⁹ Dvr L. S. H. Robinson; motor driver; born [Waihi](#), 7 Mar 1914; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

²⁰ Dvr A. C. Davie; motor driver; Walton, [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 26 Sep 1919; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

²¹ They were Cpl Wally Dahl, Cpl Cam Grinter, Bill Dalton, Arthur Davie, Jack Donnelly, Ted Donnelly, Don Hourigan, Bill Johnson, Bill Leathwick, George Le Comte, 'Red' Lee, Ted Malcolm, Bob McNee, Phil Moore, Les Robinson, Jack Shaw, and Sid Spilsbury.

²² One hundred and twenty NZASC all ranks were embarked from [Monemvasia](#) on the night of the 28th-29th, the majority of them under the command of Capt Torbet. There were about forty of our drivers among them.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 7 – ISLAND INTERLUDE

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ISLAND INTERLUDE

WE set off in fairly good order from **Suda** but after we had marched a few hundred yards the column began to go to pieces. The accumulated tiredness of days was having its effect on us and the 12-hour trip from **Greece** to **Crete** had been anything but a pleasure cruise. The *Glengyle*, carrying Company headquarters, Workshops, and some of the section drivers, had been attacked during the morning, one bomb landing near enough to buckle plates and cause interior damage, against which the **Navy** had claimed one plane destroyed. Bombs at sea, we had discovered, were far more terrifying than bombs ashore.

Soon men started to drop out and sit down in the cool on the low stone wall beside the lane. Some took off their boots; others opened packets of biscuits and tins of sardines. More men fell out when we came to a little wineshop and no effort was made to stop them. Presently what was left of our column, with the exception of a hardy twenty or thirty who were marching in the lead with Captain Moon, broke into small groups, each going its own pace. When they came to a spot that looked pleasant they halted and made camp. Everyone was tired but happy to be in **Crete**.

Just before dusk the men who had carried on for an extra mile or so were rewarded by coming to a field kitchen by the roadside. Here you could collect a cup of tea and something to eat. Soon it was dark and the flames from the cooks' fires, leaping and dancing beneath the big dixies, threw a ruddy glow on the faces of the men near them. Few talked or laughed and everyone waited patiently in the long queues as men who are already drenched wait patiently in a rainstorm. We were soaked through with tiredness.

Two searchlights fingered a silver cloud-bank and there was a distant thump but hardly anyone took cover. Hot tea first, then sleep—that was the programme.

By noon the following day all but a few of our drivers had reported at the assembly area, which was three miles west of the town of **Canea**. They arrived in twos and threes, dripping with sweat and caked from head to foot with white dust. On the way in they passed a clear pool in which people were laughing, splashing, and laundering their underclothes. Soon the pool was full.

The area, of course, consisted only of rows of olive trees festooned with grey blankets. Scores of little fires were burning beneath them and on every fire there was a battered tin with shaving water in it. We had the rest of the day in which to get cleaned up and that night we had another sound sleep.

Captain Torbet's detachment went straight to Egypt and Major McGuire was given a battalion composed of the combined NZASC personnel in **Crete**. The rest of us were together in one area by the beginning of May but seldom were we in the same place for two nights running.

During our first four or five days on the island we did little except march, and when we were not marching we were sitting under the olive trees waiting to march or lying down under them exhausted after marching. We marched along the coast road between **Canea** and the **Maleme** airfield, casting longing glances at the dark-purple sea. We marched along narrow by-ways, kicking up the white dust with our boots—it was like flour underfoot—until the olive trees by the roadside were pale as powder-puffs. Each night we had a different olive grove for our home and a different stream for our wash-place.

We were infantry now (it exhilarated and disturbed us) and the purpose of this marching, as we saw it, was to get us fit and at the same time confuse reconnaissance pilots.

Our officers—true they were not as heavily laden as we were, their bedrolls, so it seemed, being shifted from place to place by mysterious agencies: donkeys, perhaps, were at the bottom of it—marched with us.

In the lead would be Captain Moon, looking as spruce and nonchalant as though he had stepped from the white portico of the old home to give an order to his coloured overseer, and in the rear Second-Lieutenant Toogood, larding the ground like Falstaff but always ready with a word of encouragement or abuse and never too exhausted to join battle with his verbal sparring partner, Alan Falconer. ¹ Tagging along behind, taking their time because they were encumbered with Bren guns and magazines, came the ack-ack crews. Jim Stanley still had his anti-tank rifle.

We grumbled a good deal, of course, but most of our grumbles were merely a concession to good form. We were fit, the weather was glorious, and we were more than a little pleased with ourselves. The thunder had roared, the lightning danced, and we were hardly any the worse for it. Some had been wounded, some had been taken prisoner, and some were missing, but only one had been killed—no, two; for we counted Norman Chissell. ²

Late on 1 May, to everyone's distress, the sections were split up, though the unit remained intact. The NZASC Battalion had been absorbed into **Oakes Force**, which consisted of artillerymen without guns and drivers without vehicles. We were to operate under our own officers in three infantry companies.

We were reshuffled and the next day we marched to a position in the hills about a mile north of **Galatas**. The area **Oakes Force** had been given to defend extended roughly from the western outskirts of **Galatas** to the coast, and we were more or less in the middle of it. Facing north, we overlooked the sea and the tents of the 7th General Hospital; facing south-east, the white buildings and walled compounds of the prison of **Aghya**. A quarter of an hour up a winding lane took us to the village of **Galatas** and a good afternoon's walk to **Canea**. These names meant nothing to anyone at the time.

Here we settled down as infantry. We established ack-ack posts, kept paratroop watches by day, posted strong pickets at night, and at dawn

sent out patrols and stood to arms. We had no shovels and no wire and not all of us had rifles. A few were without overcoats, and in the chill of the early morning when the white mists were mounting beneath the olive trees you were liable to be challenged by a figure in a grey blanket with a scarlet stripe. A head-dress of turkey feathers and the illusion would have been complete

Some of us pretended to be bored, adopting the attitude that tools and engines were our business—not this infantry nonsense. But most of us played the new game with tremendous zest.

Every morning half the unit had leave to go swimming or to visit Galatas and in the afternoon the other half was free. On fine days—and the weather was mostly fine—it was a delightful life, but we were uncomfortable when it rained. Then there was nothing for it but to crouch shivering in rough shelters made from groundsheets and green barley blades and watch the miserable thin rain—it seldom did more than drizzle—prick down like piano wire.

This open-air life made us desperately hungry and the rations, unfortunately, were slender. The cooks were using open fires—gathering wood was one of our daily jobs—and they had no gear except a few dixies and some cut-down petrol tins, but most of them went to a lot of trouble to make the bully-beef stews appetising. They added herbs and vegetables, purchased from a common fund or stolen, and Mark Brown³ (B Section) cooked some delicious meals. The helpings were sometimes smaller than he could have wished but into the serving of them he never put less than his whole heart. From Galatas almost to the sea he could be heard calling his men to breakfast, and drowsy sentries would grip their rifles thinking the Germans had come. As the queue lengthened Mark's barrage of abuse would lift to include each new arrival—he knew everyone in the company—as he dolloped the steaming mess into a collection of old tins. Most of us had a mug or a spoon but few had a complete set of mess gear and some had nothing. Any dixies there were had to do double or treble duty.

We were hungry all the time. Grapes were all about us but they were a few weeks short of being ripe. However, we raided the local potato patches and we killed pigeons. Stuffed with onions and bread-crumbs they were delicious.

The days slipped quickly by. Looked back on they seem all blue and gold. In spite of our many duties we were able to spend hours on the beach and hours in the little wineshops fronting the **Mediterranean**. For a hundred drachmae you could get as drunk as a lord, but it was more fun to stay sober and watch the Cretan fishermen at work in the calm waters between the mainland and Theodoroi Island. Towards evening, carrying their catch—red mullet and small silver fish—they would call in for wine. Many of them wore wonderful embroidered waistcoats and a few wore gold ear-rings—like the seafaring rat in the *Wind in the Willows*, whom they rather resembled. To go with the wine there were little dishes of baked cuttle-fish, chopped egg and tomato, and—most delicious of all—rice wrapped in vine leaves and fried in oil with paprika.

Always at this hour the watch for paratroops was intensified. Throughout the lovely May evenings the watchers sat in pairs on the highest knolls in the brigade area, searching the sky and the surrounding country. The olive trees stretched away in every direction like toy soldiers, parting here and there to allow room for a vineyard, green and tender with young vines, or a square orange grove guarded by white walls. In the background, so massive that the country brushed up to them over the foothills appeared toy-like, were the **White Mountains**, all grey and purple and dark green until you reached the snow line. On their western slopes the sunlight lay thick and flat as though it had been put on with a paint brush—like yellow varnish. Little white boxes of houses stood out clearly among the green and gold, just a cluster of them here and there, with the biggest cluster, **Galatas**, close at hand.

The whole countryside looked like a wonderful old carpet that has lain for long years in a busy, sunny room. The colours, still warm and glowing, were like the ghosts of colours once unbelievably brilliant.

Everything had a look of long use. Millions of hands had worn the well smooth; millions of feet had hardened the clay path. Every house and cottage—the feeling was inescapable—was so saturated with family life that the house *was* the family.

Here the pattern of life had gone on unchanged and unbroken, threaded through by the same customs, the same smells of cooking, the same unaltering round—water to be got from the well and fish from the sea, goats to be milked, grapes to be gathered in and wine pressed out in due season—since Minos was a king in **Crete** and Theseus slew the Minotaur and Deedalus and Icarus set out to fly to **Italy**. We were awed by the amount of living that had been done in one narrow island, by the tomes of history and legend that were one island's story—awed and comforted. Centuries of struggle and catastrophe and darkness, and the children still played in the streets and there was smoke in the chimneys and the girls put on their pretty dresses on Sunday. These things persisted in spite of Minotaurs and Luftwaffes.

On 8 May we left our rifles and ammunition for **Oakes Force** and marched first to a transit camp east of **Galatas** and then to one a mile or so south-west of **Canea**. We were told we should be there for a few hours but the days slipped past and we were still in **Crete**.

Having no arms we did no guard duties, and as we were on a moment's notice to move there was no leave. This left us unlimited time for doing what we could to make ourselves more comfortable or less hungry. Greek pedlars came round with trays of cakes and pastries and as long as our drachmae lasted we bought them, but they were not cheap. We built shelters of rushes and groundsheets and talked interminably about our experiences in **Greece**. And we lay under the olive trees, content in the sunshine.

When dusk gathered we built fierce bonfires. Their life was limited to about half an hour because of the blackout, so we built them more for cheerfulness than for warmth. Sometimes a water bottle of red wine would pass from hand to hand and then there would be singing, much to

the disgust of Winston Churchill, A Section's old bulldog. He would gaze into the flames with an expression incredibly wise, mournful, and disapproving, and when the concert ended, as it did invariably, to the strains of 'Ole King Farouk' (our version—not a respectful one—of the Egyptian national anthem), he would yawn with relief, showing his yellow, broken stumps.

Most of us turned in soon after dark, to lie talking for a long while or gazing up under the enormous yellow moon at a tangle of olive branches, beautiful and complicated as a rood-screen. Often we heard aircraft, and then someone would yell out, simulating panic: 'Don't look up, boys. Stop smiling, that man with the gold teeth.' The aircraft would go back to Greece, the talk die down, and a hush fall over the whole island, enabling you to sort out and separate from one another all the small noises of the night: the munching of grass from the tiny erratic tolling of a goat bell, and both from the far hiss of waves. The thin moaning that had troubled you for some time would identify itself as drunken singing. And with the increased silence (as though sound could impede scent) smells became clearer—from the hills the clean smell of thyme, from the grass a sweetness of dew, from our blankets a sour, sickish smell, and from the beaches, faint but discernible, a lovely suggestion of wet shingle, boats, lobster pots. And sleep would come.

Sometimes we were woken by the sound of strafing, and whenever the harbour was bombed the ground stirred under our ribs as though the island had coughed. Once we awoke to see a plane diving down the white beam of a searchlight, its guns firing.

They were happy and healthy days and the war situation gave us no uneasiness at all. The official news—a neighbouring British medical unit had a wireless set—was mostly bad: it told of heavy night raids on Britain; but from sources within Crete, the workings of which have never been explained satisfactorily, we were supplied with good tidings, and false and genuine news became inextricably mixed. Berlin was in ruins and Hitler had asked Churchill for three days in which to bury his dead. On being refused he had threatened to use gas and Churchill had

replied: 'Go right ahead. That's just the excuse we want. We've got something that'll finish the war in three weeks.' None of us had actually heard the broadcast of this remarkable exchange but several of us knew people who had. We were sceptical, of course, but the story had its effect and we preferred it to the official news. It was better, at any rate, than Lord Haw-Haw's melodramatic gloating over what he called the Island of Doom.

Captain G. A. Hook ⁴ (Supply Column) and Captain Moon (acting officer commanding Ammunition Company) stood under an olive tree and watched Father Jim Henley ⁵ (NZASC chaplain) spin a coin. The matter at issue was whether we should go to Egypt or stay in **Crete**.

Originally the intention had been to evacuate both the Supply Column and the Ammunition Company in the *Nieuw Zeeland* but the available space had been reduced unexpectedly and it had been decided to embark either the whole of the larger unit, the Supply Column (less certain details that would have to remain in **Crete** to administer the detail issue depot), or the whole of the Ammunition Company plus the Supply Column's workshops and specialist personnel. But which was it to be?

Father Henley took a coin from his pocket and spun it, Captain Moon calling heads. Heads it was.

Accordingly, on 14 May, at half past one in the afternoon, we set out for **Suda**.

We went aboard the *Nieuw Zeeland* late in the evening and at dusk she began sidling into the stream. The gap between her side and the wharf widened like a slow yawn, and then, just as the slack water was beginning to ruffle, a man pounded on to the wharf. Without hesitating, he flung his revolver to someone on the weather deck and made a flat gangling dive. He came up gasping and spluttering and was dragged aboard at the end of a life-line. We laughed and clapped and gazed again at the lonely diminishing figures still standing on the wharf while the

beautiful island, like an island in an old story, melted into the twilight behind them. The incident had been very dramatic—the revolver flying through the air, the plunge into the black water, the widening ripples, the gasping, spluttering swimmer being dragged aboard—and we knew now that we had witnessed an escape. We too, perhaps, were escaping. ⁶

We knew now that the Germans would come—tomorrow or in a week's time. Captain Moon, perhaps, had known all along. Anyhow, the coin which Father Henley had tossed was in his pocket. He was keeping it as a souvenir.

The *Nieuw Zeeland* took us safely to **Port Said**, which was reached at two in the afternoon on 16 May. We waited by a railway siding until ten that night, arriving in **Helwan Camp** at breakfast-time the next morning. On the morning after that we took part in a ceremonial parade for the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser.

We had nothing in common any longer with the gipsy company that had lived in rags under the olive trees. Our island days were like a dream and it was as though we had never been away. Under the newly risen sun—it would be a scorcher later on—we stood stiffly to attention. Everything we wore, from boots to despised sun helmets, was brand-new. We were clean, shaved, regimented, and—for the moment—bored.

¹ Cpl A. Falconer; truck driver; **Wanganui**; born Leuchars, Fifehire, **Scotland**, 25 Nov 1916.

² At that time we were unaware that Alan Bradbury had been killed and two sub-sections captured. Our casualties in **Greece** were: killed 2; wounded 12; missing 31; Total 45. The following were captured as a result of wounds, injuries, or sickness: Sgt Robin Hood, Dave Adams, Charlie Black, Alan Bush, 'Kolynos' Carroll, Dave Forbes, Barney George, Jim Nichols, Fred Wells, and Harry Wishaw.

³ Cpl J. M. Brown; cook; **Rotorua**; born **Wanganui**, 11 Jul 1900.

⁴ **Capt G. A. Hook; motor mechanic; Hastings; born Marton, 10 Jan 1905; p.w. 2 Jun 1941.**

⁵ **Rev. Fr. J. F. Henley, CF; Roman Catholic priest; Eltham; born Palmerston North, 10 Sep 1903.**

⁶ **We left behind Capt H. A. Rowe (posted to unit 27 Mar 41: attached to Supply Column 27 Apr 41), Lauris Newfield (his batman-driver), Cpl Keith Smith (sick), and Jim Winstanley and Stan Barrow (missing when we embarked).**

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 8 – MURDER ON THE OLD HOOK

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MURDER ON THE OLD HOOK

CRETE was a German island and in **Libya** it was all to do again. In the **Mediterranean** the balance of sea power was against us and the **Royal Air Force** was at a greater disadvantage than ever. Everything was as black as night, but in the NAAFI's at **Helwan** no shadow fell athwart the merry-makers.

Readers of Westerns must have been irresistibly reminded of the saloons in their favourite boom towns. Pianos tinkled interminably, oceans of beer were drunk, and no one thought twice before changing a 100-piastre note. Credits were substantial after the austerities of **Greece** and **Crete** and remittances were on their way from New Zealand. 'Send her along! Get into her! Shoot her up!' That was the feeling of the hour and nowhere in the **Middle East** was it being translated into action with more enthusiasm than in the **Helwan** NAAFI's. Pandemonium reigned. South Africans and New Zealanders sang, screamed, and argued, never quite drowning, as shrieking seagulls never quite drown the surf, the steady rhythmic booming of the Crown and Anchor kings. Two at a table they sat—one to rattle the dice and put over the spiel, one to rake in the money.

'The old firm boys the old firm. Here before **Greece** here before **Crete** here before Christmas. You pick 'em and we pay 'em. We're not here to make money we're here to make friends. You gotta speculate to accumulate. A good horse never stumbles and a good sport never grumbles. The more you put down the more you pick up and a good bet to you Sport. Ten akkers on the old corner pub. Pounds crowns and browns. No bet too big no bet too small pass round the cigarettes Ted. Roll up here gentlemen to make your Palestine leave. A good bet to you Sir. Fifty on the old Sergeant-Major from our friend over there give the gentleman his change Ted. That leaves the old Mae West and the dinkie-die running for the old man. Its murder on the old hook murder on the old hook. Any more before we lift her up we can't keep these good

punters waiting. She's a game of speed gentlemen and we want to keep her that way. Yes we've got to lift her up and what do we see. We see the old name of the game two hooks and one crown. Just where the money lies and the old man coughs blood. Pay out on the hook and crown Ted and away to war we go again. IT'S THE OLD FIRM BOYS IT'S THE OLD FIRM....'



Driver's windscreen removed for visibility
Driver's windscreen removed for visibility

Two bombs in one hole near a staff car



Two bombs in one hole near a staff car



Destruction of Workshops' store lorry —page 90

Destruction of Workshops' store lorry — page 90



RETREAT THROUGH ATHENS
'When they waved to us' —page 90

**RETREAT THROUGH
*'When they waved to us' — page 90***

The Crown and Anchor kings were reaping a golden harvest. Needing no equipment beyond lungs of brass, a heart the size of a pea, and the conscience of a hermit crab, they had been making a good thing out of the Army ever since the first day of the war and they intended to go on making a good thing out of it as long as the good Lord gave them health and strength. They knew all the dodges. Not for them parades and fatigues. Not for them the discomforts and limitations of the field.

For a while they were untroubled by competition and there were enough suckers to go round. Soon, however, a large number of outsiders,

among whom were members of the Ammunition Company, succumbed to the lure of quick riches. They pooled their resources and set up in business on their own, and it was not long before a table shortage developed. The result was a new racket: table-broking. At auction a table would fetch anything from 15 to 30 shillings.

The authorities probably had a fair idea of what was going on, and almost nightly there were raids, but warning was given by a corps of highly-paid scouts ('OK, boys. Wrap her up. Officer of the picket.') and arrests were uncommon.

Everything went smoothly for about a month—too smoothly, for by then most of the suckers in **Helwan** had no money left and those who still had a few pounds were patronising the tables that offered the biggest bonuses and provided the most free beer and cigarettes. Overheads bounded as profits dwindled, and only the hermit crabs, drawing on their vast resources, were able to continue in business. The small men withdrew hurriedly, licking their financial wounds. A few of our drivers—those who had not lingered too long—had done well, and others had made money as punters, but the majority had gained nothing but experience.

The craze passed, or at least abated considerably, and remittances arrived from New Zealand to restore our finances and enable us to take advantage of the fortnight's leave due to us.

Most of us spent at least a week of it in the Holy Land. **Jerusalem** we found impressive but puzzling. An atmosphere of sorrow undoubtedly pervaded the place—the very stones, massive and brooding, seemed to exhale it—but an atmosphere of sanctity was not always perceptible. Money-changers were abroad in the temple, and a brisk traffic in German and Japanese hardware was being carried on in the Via Dolorosa, which was cluttered with squalid shops. The organised tours, too, though cheap and instructive, were placed so solidly on a commercial basis and the guides rattled through them with so much glibness and cheapjack assurance that it was really inevitable that an

Australian soldier, a little the worse for drink, should interrupt the lay brother who was lecturing a party of us in the crypt of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem (possibly the most sacred spot in Christendom) by tapping him smartly on the shoulder and remarking, obviously with no wish to offend: 'You're all to hell, George. Where's them bloody bulrushes?'

Tel Aviv was different. Here there was no need for reverence, real or assumed. All you were expected to do was indulge your appetites as often and as expensively as possible. Every taste was catered for and a little unorthodoxy was not frowned on.

For our second week's leave most of us went no farther than **Cairo**, choosing to spend a restful holiday at the New Royal or at one of the other *pensions* established for British troops. In these it was possible—indeed, you were expected and encouraged—to lie at ease in bed during the greater part of the morning and drink American canned beer. Nothing we did or left undone could surprise the Achmeds and Mahomets. Their cynical and amused tolerance (which, we should have said, was *our* attitude towards *them*) was proof against everything.

Thus the end of May and the first weeks of June.

Naturally we had little time in which to concern ourselves with the march of events, and perhaps it was as well, for a full knowledge of their course might have caused us to break out in a cold sweat. On a June weekend the Axis gained a decisive victory in a tank battle in the **Sollum** area and after that Egypt lay wide open. But for our still holding **Tobruk**, in which more than a division was bottled up, Rommel would probably have followed up this success. As it was, his dislike of a threatened flank stood us in good stead, though **Tobruk** (like **Malta**) was living from hand to mouth and holding only from day to day.

Not that there was nothing, or even little, on the credit side. A brilliant campaign in **Abyssinia** had ended in the surrender of the Duke of Aosta and his army at Amba Alagi, and in **Syria** (if there is anything

creditable to anyone in fratricide) the struggle between French on the one hand and French and British on the other was being brought to a successful conclusion. Best of all tanks, guns, and aircraft had begun to arrive from **Britain** in a steady stream.

But no one could dispute that **Germany** held most of the cards or that it was her play. Trumps were still panzers and she could be relied on to lead trumps. On 22 June she attacked **Russia**.

Our first reaction towards this stupendous event was probably the common one: **Britain** had not so much gained an ally as lost a potential foe. It was the end of a nightmare and once again the old simple solution that had appealed to so many of us at the time of **Munich** seemed a possibility: let the two serpents swallow each other's tails. But the red serpent, said the military experts, was incapable of swallowing anything. They doubted if she could hold out for more than a few months. **Hitler** gave her a few weeks and for a while his optimism seemed justified. No matter—we had been reprieved.

Late in June we moved to the Mahfouz area, the hottest and sandiest place in **Helwan**. Formerly we had been on high ground; now we were in a kind of basin to which no breath of wind ever penetrated.

The move to the new area marked the division between a life of comparative indulgence and a more rigorous ordering of our days. Well, that suited us. We had enjoyed our leave and we had spent our money. Now was the moment for the hermit crabs to take their bulging pocket-books to **Tel Aviv** and for us to look forward. For a while there had been a tendency in our unit—it may not have been so in others—to speak of the Division as though it were finished as a fighting force and of ourselves as battered knights who would never again enter the lists. ('The old Div, Dig, she's been cut to pieces.') That was all done with now and we were as keen as ever.

The violent catharsis effected by **Tel Aviv**, **Cairo**, and the **Helwan** NAAFI had left us a trifle flabby physically and spiritually, but that was

changed, too, and it was not long before Major McGuire was able to march us from **Helwan** to **Maadi** in record time. We rose at dawn for a period of physical training and until midday we were busy with infantry drill, weapon training, and route marches, after which it was too hot to do anything except lie sweating on one's bed.

It was not a programme of absorbing interest and anything that presaged action—the arrival, for instance, of forty-eight reinforcements—was welcomed eagerly. ‘When will we get our new vehicles?’ was the most canvassed question. Most of us had not touched a steering wheel since our arrival at **Helwan** and we were pining to get our hands greasy again.

The lorries arrived early in August. We collected them from **Abbassia** and we sang as we drove them home. They were new four-wheel drive Chevrolets and they were as good as the Bedfords—better in some ways. They were easy to handle in soft sand, their cabs gave good vision, and they were well equipped with tools. We stood round them and discussed their points.

From then on we were unable to take the slightest interest in route marches and training programmes. Drivers to whom vehicles had been allotted were distinguishable from the rest by their habit of strolling through the vehicle park at odd hours as a farmer strolls down to the paddock to inspect his new Jerseys. The unlucky ones—whenever the unit was at full strength we had plenty of spare men—were hard put to it to conceal their disappointment. ‘A loader's job'll do me, boy. You can have your stinking trucks. But I don't know what come over old “Dad” giving one to what's-his-name.’

A chance to test the new Chevrolets came later in the month, when first C Section, then A Section, then B Section, took part in a 36-hour desert exercise in the **Mena- Fayoum** area. These were only short trips but it was like old times to pull out of camp at 50-yard intervals, nod to the transport sergeant as he waved you past, and know that your tanks were full of petrol and your tucker box of rations and that your bedroll

was bouncing around in the back. The lorries fulfilled all our expectations but it was not until the end of August, when A Section returned after ten days at **Suez**, that we realised how good they were. The section had been delivering troops and supplies to camps in the Canal zone and had covered over 33,000 miles. Complaints: one faulty generator.

September came and soon we were preparing for a move. The attendance at the morning sick parades dropped sharply and drivers who had been nursing desert sores with the assiduity of professional beggars began to pester 'Doc' Turner ¹ for more effective unguents. No one wanted to stay in **Helwan**. We had had enough, and more than enough, of **Cairo**, Crown and Anchor, check parades, zibbib, and all the other ingredients of Base life. We thought nostalgically of long drives over desert tracks, meals round the cooks' lorries, bathes in the **Mediterranean**, evenings round our new wireless sets, cool desert nights.

We had it all worked out—a season in the desert, a race to **Tripoli**, back to **Cairo** with money in our pockets, a week's leave, and then—why not?—New Zealand. The Wehrmacht had slowed down in **Russia** and even the old oil story had taken on a new lease of life. If the opinion of the Oxford Institute of Statistics was worth anything the Germans would do well to go very steadily with those tanks and trucks.

On 16 September, after collecting our second-line holding of ammunition and filling our lorries with enough petrol for a satisfyingly long journey, we left **Helwan**. Two days later we were at **Fuka**, half-way between **El Daba** and Mersa Matruh. ²

The new area was ideal. Headquarters and Workshops were on the beach—the drivers could jump straight out of bed into the **Mediterranean**—and the sections were parked near the main road. As it seemed likely that we should be there for some time we set to work to make ourselves comfortable. Those who had no lorries to live in built dugouts and each section established a wet canteen, Workshops contriving a charming little tavern at the end of the untidy straggle of

dugouts and bivouacs that was, so to speak, our main street—our seafront. It looked out across the **Mediterranean** and in many ways it resembled those tiny taprooms that are to be found on the coasts of Devonshire and Dorset. Many were the pleasant evenings spent there by the Workshops' drivers and their visitors, and the rafters (it had rafters—yes, and settles too, cut in the sand) rang to many a good song. In units such as ours, sections, like people, come suddenly into social prominence and have their hour. The time at **Fuka** belonged to the Workshops' drivers. It was, you might say, their coming out. We realised all of a sudden their tremendous capacity for squeezing the last drop of enjoyment out of Army life. When there was work to be done they worked hard and to the business of enjoying themselves they brought the same keenness. Theirs were the merriest parties, the happiest homes, the liveliest adventures. At Fuka, for instance, they built themselves a raft—a crazy, delightful contraption with an old canvas bivouac for a sail—and from this they fished and bathed morning, noon, and night.

But it was not all holiday for Workshops—nor for the rest of us. We worked for the New Zealand brigades and we played our part in building up the desert supply dumps for the coming offensive. No one had told us, of course, that an offensive was in preparation, but we could read the signs: hundreds of square miles covered with stacks of ammunition, petrol, and food: camps springing up everywhere: convoys of guns and lorries. The desert railway was being pushed forward as well and we had a finger in that pie. For over seven weeks the drivers of No. 1 sub-section carted sleepers and rails for the New Zealand Railway Construction Companies, earning praise for their work.

The Luftwaffe and the *Regia Aeronautica* were not indifferent to all this activity but there was little they could do about it. The desert allows unlimited room for dispersal and the **Royal Air Force** of autumn 1941 was a very different proposition from that of autumn 1940. Where we had seen old Bombays and biplane Gladiators we now saw Hurricanes, Blenheims, Wellingtons, and Beaufighters, and the American Marylands,

Tomahawks, Bostons, Brewsters, and Kittyhawks.

Our drivers saw little of the *Luftwaffe* except on one memorable occasion when an ammunition train in the *Fuka* railway yards was hit. Sand trickled from dugout walls and the ground quivered under us—it was as though the revolving globe had run a ‘big end.’

It was our only excitement at *Fuka* and we made the most of it.

The autumn days slipped past pleasantly and quietly and soon we were well into November. The desert was cold at night now and the *Mediterranean* was cooling too, though it was still speckled with bathers on sunny afternoons and Workshops' crazy raft still flopped up and down on it.

There had been very few changes. Major McGuire had left us for Headquarters Base NZASC and his place had been taken by Major P. E. Coutts ³ whom B Section had known as a lieutenant. ⁴ There had been a fuss in Company headquarters over some lost binoculars, our unit number had been changed from 24 to 69, and eight picked NCOs had been sent to OCTU.

What else had occurred? Nothing much—only a few slow processes. During the past six weeks our lorries had been run in completely and the same could be said of our unit. After the campaign in *Greece* new parts had been needed and old ones had required patching. Naturally there had been friction at first, but now the machine was running smoothly again and you had to have a good ear to hear a squeak or a groan. Our drivers of the 4th and 5th Reinforcements were no longer ‘those new jokers’: they were Dave and ‘Old Baldy’ and sometimes—not often—‘that bastard what's-his-name’. With the unit, as with the lorries, most of the running in had been done at *Fuka*. A wink in the bar of the New Zealand Forces Club or a nod across the tables in the Sweet Melody, a shared grumble on a route march and then home again to your respective tents and friends—that got you somewhere. But sharing the same wave in the *Mediterranean* or a tin of oysters in the back of the same lorry, or

driving for long hours in the same cab—that got you further.

We still cursed and grumbled, blackguarding our officers and any NCOs who were outstandingly conscientious, but we did it almost without malice and almost without meaning to. Of the squeaks of genuine distress, the hammering of round pegs in square holes, the chafing of loose parts, there remained only that irreducible minimum one finds even in hand-made machines and in hand-picked companies, and our lorries were certainly not the one nor was our unit the other. In short, we were run in. So something had happened—something quite important.

The autumn days slipped by and past our area moved new guns, new tanks, new troops, new lorries. We watched them and we knew the hour was at hand. Well, it had been a long time, but doubtless that time had been well spent. Evidently this new army they were talking about—and this new commander, General Auchinleck ⁵—intended to make a bird of it. And a good thing too. Old Jerry certainly had it coming to him.

We watched the new tanks—Valentines, Crusaders, and American General Stuarts—going past in the golden dust.

‘Valentines, eh? Two-pounder gun?’

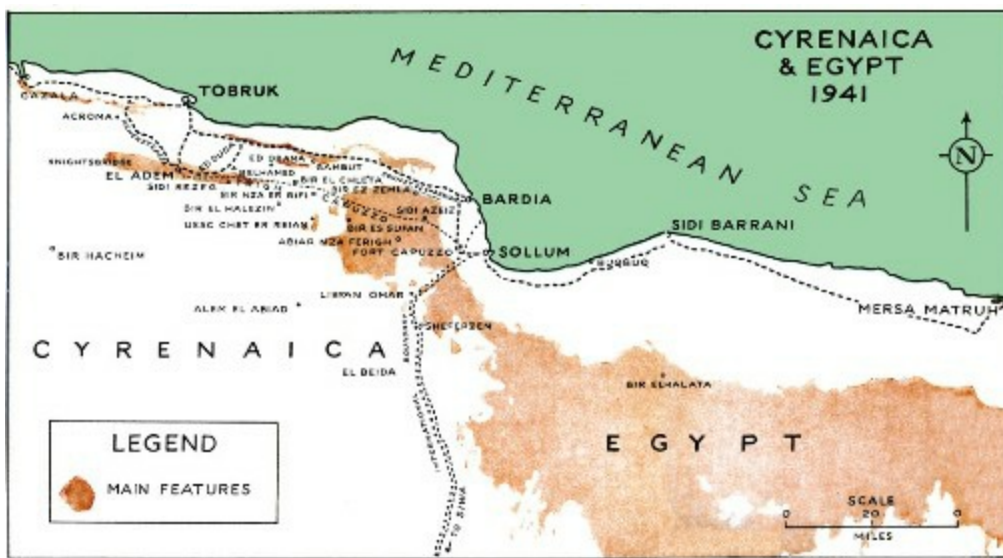
‘Valentines me —-. Matildas! Look at the armour.’

‘Well anyway, lend us your bike, “Broady”, to go down to “Cocky’s”.’

‘Mind old Percy doesn’t see you.’

During the second week of November we were told to prepare our vehicles for large-scale desert manœuvres. ‘Manœuvres me —!’ we said, echoing ‘Broady’ on the subject of Valentines. We knew better.

At 2.20 p.m., 13 November, we pulled on to the main road, heading west.



CYRENAICA & EGYPT 1941

¹ Cpl C. R. Turner, m.i.d.; storeman; Otahuhu; born Ti Tree Point, Hawke's Bay, 7 Jun 1900.

² Not all of us, though. C Section was attached to the 5th Brigade Group at this time and did not join us at **Fuka** until early in October, when the brigade moved to **Baggush**.

³ Maj P. E. Coutts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; salesman; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 4 Dec 1903; OC 1 Amn Coy 4 Oct 1941-26 Jan 1943 and 2 Feb-6 Oct 1945; OC 18 Tk Tpnr Coy Jan 1943-31 Mar 1944.

⁴ The chief appointments on 9 November were: Company headquarters, Maj Coutts (posted 3 Oct 41), Capt S. A. Sampson (second-in-command), 2 Lt K. E. May (posted 28 Jun 41), Capt H. S. Jones (artillery officer attached), 2 Lt O. W. Hill (attached 24 Nov 41), WO II Dillon; A Section, Capt R. C. Gibson, 2 Lt J. M. Fitzgerald (posted 3 Sep 41); B Section, Capt D. C. Ward (posted 3 Sep 41), 2 Lt A. M. W. West-Watson (posted 18 Oct 41); C Section, * 2 Lt (T-Capt) F. G. Butt (posted 31 Mar 41), 2 Lt W. S. Duke (posted 1 Nov 41); Workshops, 2 Lt (T-Capt) A. G. Morris (posted 10 Sep 41).

The following had left us: Maj McGuire (posted to HQ Base NZASC, 3 Sep 41), Capt Moon (posted to Supply Column, 26 Aug

41), Capt Torbet (posted to [Petrol Company](#), 25 Jun 41), Lt Aitken (posted to Base Training Depot, 28 Oct 41) and 2 Lt Toogood (posted to HQ NZASC, 3 Sep 41).

*** Lt Fenton was detached from the unit at this time and on 14 November he was posted to the newly-formed 6th Reserve MT Company.**

⁵ General Sir Claude Auchinleck had succeeded General Wavell as C-in-C MEF on 5 July, and on 26 September the [Eighth Army](#), which consisted of two main groups (30th Corps and 13th Corps), had been formed under Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham. The New Zealand Division had come under the command of 13th Corps a fortnight earlier.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 9 – FOX IN THE FOWL RUN

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FOX IN THE FOWL RUN

WHINING in low gear, the stream of vehicles headed for the setting sun. In the Ministries and offices the big men had done their jobs and now it was our turn—the turn of the small men. Only through our goodwill would the guns shoot, the tanks advance, the wheels go round. The columns of figures had crawled out of their pigeon-holes, the acres of maps had become solid desert, and under the uncaring sun, which was levelled on the advancing transport like a spotlight, glinting on windscreens, causing the drivers to blink and curse, the drama began to unfold.

Campaigns go well or badly; they seldom go smoothly. Already hitches had occurred. We had moved on to the road over two hours ago, and now, at 4 p.m., we were still only a few miles from where we started. Our carefully-nursed dispersal had not survived the assaults of an ambulance unit and a heavy anti-aircraft regiment, and it seemed as though the convoy would be split up hopelessly before it reached the starting point for the advance.

It was dark when we turned off the coast road to the **Siwa** road, and we drove without lights, following the white wraith of dust thrown up by the vehicle ahead. Every once in a while a mudguard folded up with a crunch. Finally the convoy turned into the desert, lurched another four miles over very rough ground, and halted until dawn.

A little uneasy sleep, and then, with heavy heads and stiff, cold limbs, we climbed back into the cabs and bumped off towards the west, while the chill morning, white and pale grey with a fleck of yellow in it, opened behind us like an oyster. Now we could see what the Ammunition Company looked like in desert formation. As far as the eye could see the sand was chequered with our lorries, each of which—in theory, anyway—was the moving but constant centre of 160,000 square yards of empty desert. Crawling through the colourless morning light, they resembled a

regiment of monstrous snails, humped, drab, uniform. They butted their way up the sides of wadis, crunched over hard ground, ploughing fluffily through soft patches—infinately strange and menacing and never more so than when they entered a great open expanse, flat and boundless, and moved across it with a dry rustling sound, a wisp of dust smoking behind each lorry while an angry looking sun levered itself over the horizon.

The area in which we were scheduled to spend the night of 14-15 November was reached late in the morning. We were then about thirty miles from the coast and still quite close to the [Siwa](#) road. During the afternoon our already large convoy—the 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section, NZASC, had come under the Major's command the day before—was further augmented by the temporary attachment of the New Zealand Mobile Surgical Unit.

Throughout the 15th we travelled slowly but steadily due west, halting at dusk after travelling forty-five miles. The last three stages of the journey to the frontier were to be made at night, so we rested during the 16th, moving off at dusk in close formation. When we halted at one in the morning we had travelled twenty-five miles and were thirty-two miles due south of [Buqbuq](#). We rested again during the 17th.

So far everything had gone fairly smoothly, but early on the night of 17-18 November the formation struck soft sand, some thirty lorries sinking axle-deep. Vehicles without four-wheel drive—some of the sections had a few Mapleleaf Chevrolets—became hopelessly bogged and this meant hard work for our breakdown lorries. Where the ground was not soft it was villainously rough and it was often necessary for the formation to narrow its front to avoid wadis or minefields. The presence of the latter was indicated by softly-glowing lanterns, but several of the drivers, confused by the darkness and knowing they were out of position, had moments of panic when they wondered if they were on the right side of the line. It was an eerie night. In ragged columns the vehicles plunged and stumbled through the desolation of stone and camel-thorn, and the heat and smell of them—you got a blast of it when a dozen or more swept crazily together to avoid an obstacle—alternated with a

whisper of cold wind, forbidding as the brush of skirts when the coven gathers for its sabbat. West, in the direction of the frontier, sheets of lightning blinked and played along the horizon. North, south, and east, we were hedged in by the deep, mocking darkness.

We crossed the Egyptian frontier at dawn on the 19th, halting near **El Beida**, thirty-three miles south-west of **Sollum**. Ahead of us was the barbed-wire entanglement—never known as anything but the Wire—erected by **Mussolini** in 1932 to prevent the Libyan bedouin from leaving **Libya** and from coming back again should they manage to leave. To some of us it was a familiar landmark but others were seeing it for the first time. Six feet high and nine feet wide, it rolled away to the horizon like an enormous, hairy, reddish-brown caterpillar. It was an evil-looking thing and it had done evil. It ran from **Sollum** to the Great Sand Sea below Jerabub and **Siwa**, and to a people who in times of drought had been accustomed to move freely between **Cyrenaica** and Egypt in search of grazing it had meant something next door to starvation.

That night we enjoyed a sound sleep, and we spent the 20th in doing the hundred and one jobs—everything from washing a pair of socks to adjusting a noisy tappet—that accumulate in the course of a long journey.

On the following afternoon we moved through the 300-yard breach in the wire to occupy an area eleven miles north-west of **El Beida** and there we spent another quiet night. Many of us had begun to ask when the fun was going to start.

It had started already.

Already advanced elements of 30th Corps, after taking Rommel by surprise and clashing with his armour, were in sight of the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment, which overlooked the force investing **Tobruk**. Already the garrison had begun its sortie. The 13th Corps, for its part, was striking north to isolate large enemy forces in the **Sollum- Bardia** area.

The next morning—the 22nd—we set out for **Abiar Nza Ferigh**, eight miles south-west of **Sidi Azeiz** (itself twelve miles south-west of **Bardia**), which New Zealanders had captured the evening before.

After we had travelled steadily for an hour and a half the Major was told that his lorries were passing between the frontier fortress of Libyan Omar and troops of the 7th Indian Brigade who were about to attack it. If we didn't want to get shelled, he was told, we had better swing left at once. Our drivers could see the Indian infantry sitting silently in open lorries. Almost immediately, with a whine and a clap, shells began to land around us. In places, notably on our right flank, clouds of dust obscured what was going on, and new clouds were springing up every moment. It was as though the desert were being beaten like an old carpet. By this time our formation had wheeled and was heading north-west. A halt was called as soon as we were out of range and it was found that no damage had been done. Nevertheless there had been several narrow escapes and nerves were still tingling when two armoured cars came towards us across the desert. They were flying a single pennant and we had been told that our own armoured fighting vehicles would be flying two.

All was well, however, and we reached our new area, where we made haste to dig in, early in the afternoon. The New Zealand Division was now in action against **Bardia** and the frontier forts in the coastal sector, and our ammunition began to sell like hot cakes.

Meanwhile the fighting around **Sidi Rezegh** had reached a critical stage, and the evening of the 22nd found the 6th Brigade, under the command of 30th Corps, hurrying west to lend a hand. The next day the 4th Brigade moved against **Gambut**, an airfield halfway between **Bardia** and **Tobruk**, the 5th Brigade staying behind to contain the enemy in the **Sollum- Capuzzo- Bardia** triangle. With the splitting up of the Division problems of supply at once became three times as difficult, and a Composite NZASC Company was formed under Captain L. W. Roberts (Supply Column) to serve the 6th Brigade. To this we contributed C

Section under Captain Butt.

At nine on the morning of the 23rd a convoy from the new company, composed of C Section (ammunition), two sections from the Supply Column (rations), and six lorries from the 4th Reserve Mechanical Transport Company (water), left Abiar Nza Ferigh under Captain Roberts to join Headquarters 6th Brigade at Bir el Chleta, six miles south-west of Gambut. After travelling west for seven miles the convoy was met by a 6th Brigade officer who reported that enemy tanks were on Trigh Capuzzo, a rough but extremely important track running from Capuzzo to El Adem, a large airfield sixteen miles due south of Tobruk. Bir el Chleta was just north of the Trigh. Accordingly Captain Roberts decided to head west for another twelve miles before turning north.

In the usual desert formation, which by now our drivers had become adept in maintaining, the convoy pushed on, encountering here and there bad patches of soft sand in which a number of lorries gave trouble, halting all the rest. The second time this happened C Section was joined by four Royal Army Service Corps Bedfords whose excited drivers told how their convoy had been attacked and dispersed on Trigh Capuzzo.

They were in the middle of their story when five enemy armoured fighting vehicles were sighted. Some of the lorries were still bogged, so the drivers were ordered to form the transport into a defensive square and defend it with their rifles.

Fortunately the enemy sheered off without firing, and Captain Butt, grabbing a shovel, at once organised the spare drivers into a digging party. Soon every lorry was on firm ground again.

At two in the afternoon, when the convoy was due south of Gambut, Captain Roberts swung north, leading his transport through what had very recently been an Italian camp. Wine bottles and empty tins together with more offensive refuse lay thick about trenches and weapon-pits, and in one place a fire was still smouldering. On the left flank, about a mile away, unidentified armour could be seen moving

west.

An hour and a half later three enemy armoured cars bore down on the convoy from the east, attempting to cut it off. The Trigh was now only five miles ahead, so Captain Roberts decided to run for it. As soon as the drivers saw the *speed-it-up* signal the transport surged forward, rocking and bumping over the rough desert. The manoeuvre was successful and the armoured cars dropped away on the right flank. Just in front of Bir Nza er Rifi, which was a mile south of the Trigh and in line with **Gambut**, the convoy halted in deference to a mass of transport that covered the southern slope of a wadi about a mile ahead. It was taking a lot of punishment. Shells were landing among it with good effect and our C Section drivers watched from their ringside seats with growing excitement. They had decided the transport was friendly.

Meanwhile Captain Butt had gone forward in his staff car to put the matter to the test. The moment it reached the floor of the wadi the car came under machine-gun fire, and as it whipped round and came racing back a string of bullets stitched a seam in the desert a few feet from it. The position was now plain: the transport was the enemy's and the shells were from our own 25-pounders. There was no hope of crossing the Trigh and reaching Bir el Chleta.

A second later our drivers lost all interest in what was going on in the wadi. Now they were under fire themselves. They leaped for their cabs and with a throaty scream of engines the whole convoy turned and fled south while three armoured cars fired on it from one direction, two machine guns from another, and two small-calibre guns (probably anti-tank guns) from a third. The going was abominable and there were slit-trenches everywhere. Into one of these a Bedford—one of the four that had joined the convoy earlier—plunged headlong, having to be abandoned.

The pursuit was not given up until more than five miles had been covered and all the while a heavy concentration of unidentified transport had been moving north-west on the right flank.

After travelling south for eight miles, Captain Roberts turned east at Uesc Chet er Reian (through which the convoy had already passed once), carried on for another nine miles, and halted for the night at Bir es Sufan, the transport forming up in a laager just as the covered wagons did in Red Indian country.

Bir es Sufan, no doubt, meant something to Arab nomads. One could imagine—though not without an effort—their comparing it with Nza er Rifi and Uesc Chet er Reian and confessing a nostalgic preference for the former. To our drivers it was nothing—just a stretch of desert indistinguishable from any other stretch. To Captains Butt and Roberts it was a six-figure map reference (475392). Even the cistern, whose presence was suggested by the prefix *Bir*, was invisible to the uninitiated.

Some of the drivers had eaten and bedded down and others were still busy over their primuses, with canopies close drawn to prevent any light from showing, when a distant squeaking and rumbling, as of mice and volcanoes mixed, forced itself on the attention. Presently its import became unmistakable and Captain Butt sped from lorry to lorry. He said: 'Stay where you are. No noise, No lights. No smoking.'

From the monstrous racket individual sounds began to sort themselves out: the clank of tracks, the clatter of exhausts, the chafing of metal against metal, the unruly hammering of a diesel engine. When the crescendo reached its peak our drivers could see black shapes moving past in close formation. They waited in dead silence, hardly breathing. After the column had gone by white flares of a type the Germans were using at that time shot up at intervals along its whole length. Gradually the noise died away in the distance and at last it was only a faint squeaking.

Feeling that they had experienced quite enough for one day the drivers went to bed.

Only a few miles from where C Section's lorries were laagered but

separated from them by Heaven alone knew how many wandering groups of Germans, New Zealanders, Italians, and South Africans—for by now the confusion on both sides was considerable—the Major was recording the day's events.

November 23 0100 hours: 14 Lt A-A Section ¹ ceases to be a separate entity and is marched in as an additional section of Ammunition Company. 0600: 26 lorries left for 50 FSD under 2-Lt May to load ammunition. 0900: Reported to Col Crump and was instructed to move to Uesc Chet er Reian and form ammunition point. Point to be operating at 1400 hours. 1100: Advised by HQ that enemy tanks were in the new area and unit would not move until information had been received that area was clear. 1400: Instructions received for unit to move. 1500: Convoy under 2-Lt May returns from 50 FSD. 1600: Unit moves off. After travelling seven miles convoy makes contact with rear of Divisional Headquarters. It appears to be held up while waiting for the area ahead to be cleared of enemy tanks. 1700: Unit halts and prepares evening meal. At dusk **Divisional Headquarters** moves on but unit stays in present area for the night. No word from C Section which left supply column lines under Capt Roberts at 0930 hours....

Everyone from the Major down—from General Auchinleck down—was worried. There was reason to be. The Germans had retaken **Sidi Rezegh**, the sortie from **Tobruk** was pinned down, and worst of all the spring had gone out of our attack. It had been hammered out and for the moment we were on the defensive.

The tired sentries paced up and down beside the closely-packed lorries, starting nervously at distant flares, listening intently to every movement in the darkness.

On the morning of 24 November Rommel felt the ball in his hands and he decided to make a touch-down. Collecting three armoured divisions—two German and one Italian—he made a run for the Wire. Tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade, like plucky half-backs, went in to tackle him, but he fended them off, and in the afternoon the 21st

Panzer Division under General von Ravenstein reached the frontier at Sheferzen and crossed into Egypt. Then it went merrily to work. It fanned out in columns and began shooting up transport and overrunning supply dumps, field workshops, and B Echelon areas.

Supplying the New Zealand Division with ammunition, petrol, food, and water had been difficult before; now it was a nightmare task. The 50th Field Supply Depot, from which we had been drawing ammunition, was near El Beida, on the Egyptian side of the Wire. The 5th Brigade, with its headquarters at Sidi Azeiz and large forces of the enemy all about it, was still investing the Sollum- Capuzzo- Bardia triangle. The 6th Brigade, with no safe lines of communication, was fighting in the Sidi Rezegh area, and the 4th Brigade was at Gambut. Bits and pieces of the enemy were anywhere and everywhere.

For transport units there was no safety. Every convoy was like a fleet of fishing smacks in a hostile ocean. It was now to be discovered if our drivers could really drive—if our section officers and subalterns could really read maps and lead men.

The 24th dawned cold and bright, a pleasantly astringent Monday morning. Taking their cue from the weather, the drivers woke in good heart. Already, no doubt, steps had been taken to avoid a recurrence of the unpleasantness of yesterday.

Renewed optimism was in the air and ‘Fat’ Davison responded to the general feeling by giving his drivers a breakfast of fried sausages—a rare treat after a succession of bully-beef stews eked out with army biscuits.

They queued up in the chill silver and gold sunlight, avoiding the long spikes of shadow cast by the lorries and chatting happily about the fright the armoured column had given them the night before.



Waiting for nightfall, Crete
Waiting for nightfall, Crete



The Prime Minister inspects Bedfords at Maadi
The Prime Minister inspects Bedfords at Maadi



Leave in Tel Aviv
Leave in Tel Aviv



Ration trucks at a supply depot
Ration trucks at a supply depot

‘I was next in the queue,’ said George Laverick,² ‘and I was holding out my dixie and just beginning to lick my chops when two South African vehicles—a pick-up and a three-tonner—came tearing over towards us. There were about half a dozen South Africans aboard and they were in a bad way. Their clothes were in shreds and some of them were covered with blood. We particularly noticed the negro driver of one of the vehicles. His eyes were rolling in his head with fright and excitement. An officer, tattered and bloody, told Captain Butt there were enemy tanks in the neighbourhood. He said his own outfit had been cut to pieces.’³

‘A column of some sort was moving towards us from the northwest, so the cooks packed up at once and I didn't get my snarler. A few minutes later we were on the move, heading south and then east towards [Abiar Nza Ferigh](#), which we had left the morning before.’

The rest of the unit had also started the day on an empty stomach. We were roused before dawn and the Major led us westwards across the desert, Captain H. S. Jones⁴ having been sent ahead to make contact with Colonel Crump on Trigh Capuzzo. He returned some two hours later to report that he had been fired on as he was approaching what he thought was Divisional Headquarters. Soon afterwards British tank officers who were enquiring for the 6th Brigade warned the Major that

enemy armour was in the neighbourhood. No one seemed to know what was what or where anything was.

In real fact the situation, at least as it affected the New Zealanders, was beginning to clear a little. The 4th Brigade was at **Gambut** (where advanced troops of 13th Corps had been held up for some while), and it was waiting for the word to move west and link up with the 6th Brigade, which after a hard battle was in possession of Point 175, four and a half miles east of **Sidi Rezegh**.

The brigades linked up later in the day in readiness for the final battle for **Tobruk**. Facing them was the hard knot of **Sidi Rezegh**, Ed Duda, and **Belhamed**.⁵

At half past ten a Divisional military policeman told us to go to Bir el Halezin, seven miles south-west of Bir el Chleta. We moved steadily in that direction until noon when we were halted by an action between British and enemy tanks. While we were waiting for the situation to clear, Captain Ward⁶ and B Section, accompanied by a **Petrol Company** section that had joined us early that morning after being chased by tanks, set out to serve the 6th Brigade, and twenty minutes later Captain Jones returned from **Divisional Headquarters** with a report that the 4th Brigade was short of ammunition. He brought with him the brigade liaison officer, who had been fired on by our own tanks, his batman sustaining severe wounds. Captain Gibson⁷ and A Section left at once for the 4th Brigade and Sergeant Sam Mellows and six lorries from the former 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section, NZASC, left about half an hour later with Bofors ammunition for the 41st Battery.

Watching from Company headquarters' area, Corporal Bev Hendrey⁸ (Don R) followed the six lorries as they moved across the desert. He saw them join a fairly large formation of transport—they were just dots by now—and continue south with it. Then there was a sound of gunfire from the north and a lorry near the tail of the formation stopped and began to burn. None of those six lorries was seen again.

Later in the afternoon the Major was asked to move his transport as it was parked between German tanks and the guns of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. We moved a mile south and settled down for the night.

The light faded from apple-green to blue-grey and all over the desert groups of transport huddled close in the prescribed formation—Custer's Last Stand. A Section's lorries were protected by the 4th Brigade, B Section's by the 6th, and C Section's, at **Abiar Nza Ferigh**, by the 5th. Sam Mellows's detachment, with the exception of Arty Meiklejohn ⁹ and Steve Kennedy ¹⁰ who were lying beside their burnt-out lorry almost within sight of Company headquarters, was under the protection of German panzers. The rest of the unit was near Bir el Halezin with the 22nd Armoured Brigade.

Again the sentries walked up and down beside the close-packed lorries. Nothing very alarming had occurred during the day and they spoke sagely and cheerfully of final flings, mopping-up operations, and isolated pockets of resistance—and their wireless sets did the same. True there were some disturbing stories about. Packs of panzers, it seemed, were roaming the desert and chivying and savaging unprotected convoys. And there was that business about the tanks. None of ours, a bewildered tankie had explained, fired anything heavier than a two-pound shell, whereas the lightest shell fired by the German tanks was 4½ pounds and the heaviest 14-15 pounds.

We consoled ourselves by thinking of their horrible pink petrol. A British tank wouldn't look at it.

The blue light faded to black and later the moon rose. The burnt-out stubs of tanks and trucks stood out dark against the desert, the surface of which seemed to have been strewn with largesse—great silver pieces. They were only petrol tins, though, and empty German and Italian and British food tins.

With eighteen men and one corpse in the back of the lorry Sam Mellows's drivers found it impossible to stretch out in comfort. They

dozed for a while, then woke up aching with cold and cramps, then dozed again. Before dawn they were roused by a rumble of tanks and a confused shouting from the Germans. They shook hands in the darkness, feeling suddenly certain that the enemy was surrounded and they would soon be free.

‘It started the afternoon before.’ said Corporal S. T. Midgley ¹¹ (known to everyone as ‘Midge’). ‘The six lorries of Sam Mellows's subsection left the unit area with myself and twelve others about half an hour after Captain Gibson's convoy. We were to serve the 41st Battery, which was under the command of the 4th Brigade, and our orders were to travel four miles west and then about six north. We set out in desert formation with an interval of 150 yards between vehicles.

‘After we had gone about three miles we noticed a convoy in the far distance moving towards us on our right front. Sam Mellows thought it was most probably Captain Gibson returning with A Section after failing to get through to the 4th Brigade, so he halted his vehicles. Shortly afterwards we saw six armoured cars swing across our front and drive swiftly down our left flank, keeping about half a mile out in the desert. We could now see that the formation ahead of us was an armoured column and our spirits sank when we noticed that it was accompanied by motor-cycles with side-cars.

‘The six armoured cars swung left, each of them heading towards one of our lorries. Sam Mellows shouted to the drivers to stand firm. The car that had singled us out halted fifty yards away and an officer said in perfect English: “Hands up! Have you any arms?” I said: “Rifles only.” The officer said: “Drive to the rear of the column.” A German soldier got in beside our driver and Sam Mellows and I climbed into the back of the lorry, two guards going with us.

‘Meanwhile this scene was being repeated at each of the lorries and in a matter of minutes the convoy was heading towards the German column, which had never halted, the armoured cars following behind with their machine guns trained on us. While we were catching up the

column we passed within a mile or so of the company area and I could see our boys and their vehicles.

‘After we had travelled a short distance we came under heavy fire from British 25-pounders and Jerry set off at full speed, altering direction from time to time. Shells were landing all round us and we heard afterwards that the lorry in which Arty Meiklejohn and Steve Kennedy were driving received a direct hit, but we could get no details. The shelling continued for about half an hour and all this time the column seemed to be travelling more or less in circles.

‘At dusk we halted. After dark the column moved five miles to confuse the **Royal Air Force**, which had had us under observation all day long, and laagered in tight formation. It was now possible to make a rough estimate of Jerry's strength. The column appeared to consist of about sixty vehicles—load-carriers, staff cars, armoured cars, and tanks. There were plenty of motor-cycles with side-cars mounted with machine guns.

‘That night we were told to unload one of the captured lorries and we were all herded into it. We were joined by six Tommies who had been captured earlier in the day and that made eighteen of us. It was pretty close quarters.

‘We didn't get a feed that night. In fact the Jerries gave us nothing all the time we were with them. I don't know how we should have managed if the boys hadn't thought to grab a few tins of food while they were travelling in the backs of their lorries. Our Jerry guard—he stayed with us always and he used to sit on the camel tank, which by a mercy was full of water—was pretty generous in sharing his own rations. He was a good little joker. He came from **Munich**.

‘An officer, an elderly man who visited us before we turned in, was quite decent too. After telling us to make ourselves as comfortable as possible he stayed for a little chat, mentioning that he knew England well and liked it. He said he used to referee soccer matches at Wembley

stadium.

‘As a matter of fact most of the Jerries we met treated us well. On the whole we found them a pretty free and easy crowd, much like ourselves, and there was only one incident that really got our goat. That had occurred during the afternoon. Sam and I, while we were in the back of our lorry, dug out a carton of 200 cigarettes, from which we gave the two guards a couple of packets each. They must have mentioned this outside, for during one of the halts an officer came up to us—he was a typical Prussian specimen: lean, with a cold, hard eye and a clipped, abrupt way of speaking—and demanded some of the 2000 cigarettes he understood we possessed. When we told him we had only a few packets he flew into a rage and said he could make thing very unpleasant for us if we didn't obey orders. After a bit of back-chat we gave him three or four packets and he went away muttering under his breath.

‘With eighteen jokers in the back of the lorry it was hell trying to get to sleep. To make matters worse we had a most unpleasant addition to our number early in the night. An officer poked his head in and said he was going to give us a “dead comrade”. Naturally we thought he meant either Arty Meiklejohn or Steve Kennedy, but what we got was a dead German with a sack over his head. No one felt like grabbing hold of him and there was a bit of hanging back before he was hoisted aboard. No one wanted him as a neighbour either and he gradually got edged forward to the front of the lorry, ending up wedged between me and the spare wheel. He was like frozen mutton.

‘Before daylight we saw flares in the sky, and the Jerries started shouting and we heard tanks. We were highly delighted, believing the laager was surrounded by our own chaps. Nothing happened, though, and soon it was light enough for us to see that we had been joined by a huge enemy force—a collection of armour and lorried infantry. Rommel was there as well we heard later. We looked through peepholes we had made in the canopy and saw vehicles of all types stretching out in every direction. It was a bitter sight.

'We moved at sunrise—having first got rid of the dead Jerry, thank goodness!—with the bulk of the tanks travelling in front and a screen of armoured cars and tanks on the flanks and scout cars away out on the horizon. Royal Air Force reconnaissance planes were almost continually overhead throughout the morning and we knew that before long we should be getting it good and heavy....'

By this time the fate of the six lorries was no longer a mystery. At breakfast-time Steve Kennedy had reached Company headquarters dazed with exhaustion. He said that his lorry had been destroyed and Arty Meiklejohn was lying out in the desert seriously wounded. A rescue party was formed under Captain Sampson, with Steve, although he was almost at the end of his tether, acting as guide. He told his story as they went along.

When the German column came under fire from our 25-pounders Steve's and Arty's lorry received a direct hit, both drivers being blown out of the cab. Arty's leg was almost severed by a piece of shrapnel but Steve escaped with a bad shaking. The lorry started to burn fiercely.

A German soldier pointed his revolver at Steve and told him to leave Arty and climb aboard the next lorry. Steve refused to do this and the German fired, missing him and wounding Arty in the shoulder. Ashamed of himself, or afraid of being left behind, he went away with the rest, and soon the convoy was out of sight. Our drivers stayed by their burning lorry and after a while a British tank came over to them. The crew applied a tourniquet to Arty's leg and then left, promising to send an ambulance. No ambulance arrived and they spent the night in the open. At daybreak, realising that Arty would die if no help came, Steve made his way to our lines.

After a fairly long search—Steve could give only vague directions—the burnt lorry was sighted with Arty lying beside it. He was in bad shape by now, and for the time being it was impossible to evacuate him to a field dressing station. (He was evacuated the next day and was killed on the day after that—the 28th—when New Zealand medical units were

overrun between Bir el Chleta and Point 175.)

The rest of the morning passed quietly. A Section returned from serving the 4th Brigade and B Section from serving the 6th.

Early in the afternoon orders arrived for the 65th RASC Company, which had reached our lines before breakfast with the now familiar story of a chase by tanks. Their ammunition was to go to the 4th Field Regiment, their petrol and water to the supply point. It was as well that something for the guns to shoot had come forward, for C Section was now serving the 5th Brigade in the **Bardia** area, and until we received word that the way was open to the new replenishment point— **El Beida** was closed to us—nothing could be done about refilling A and B Section's lorries.

Word came at two in the afternoon and the sections set out under Captains Gibson and Ward to load ammunition at the 62nd Field Supply Depot, which was some distance from Alem el Abiad and over thirty miles south by west of Bir el Halezin.

After the convoy had travelled a dozen miles it was halted by Captain Gibson who had noticed a suspicious movement ahead. Some A Section drivers took advantage of the halt to salvage a perfectly good staff car that was sitting unattended in the desert. It was undamaged except for a few bullet holes, and a short tow started the engine. In the meantime two armoured cars had moved to a ridge on the left flank.

As soon as the convoy moved off they pounced—like a cat with a mouse. A bullet nicked Colin Cameron ¹² in the thigh and a stream of bullets followed the newly-acquired staff car as it shot to the front, its driver feeling no gratification at being mistaken for an important target. Through the crackle of machine guns and the roar of engines came the heavy knock, five times repeated, of Jim Stanley's anti-tank rifle, the one he had used in **Greece**. He was lying on his stomach in the back of A Section's ack-ack lorry and firing over the tailboard. Before the chase was given up he managed to get away the best part of three magazines,

but by that time the convoy had been driven far off its course. There was nothing for it but to return to the unit lines and report that the Germans were watching the route to the supply depot.

Our drivers got home in time for tea. The steaming bully stew and soggy rice, reassuringly familiar against the rather macabre atmosphere of the campaign, went down well after the day's excitements, a pleasant consciousness of dangers overcome adding sauce to the cooks' efforts. A and B Sections were not sorry to have had an adventure of their own, for C Section, according to all reports, had been stealing the limelight.

During the 24th—the day of Rommel's dash to the frontier—the Composite NZASC Company had been disbanded, C Section remaining at **Abiar Nza Ferigh** to serve the 5th Brigade in the **Bardia** area; and by the morning of the 25th seventeen lorries had been emptied. Their drivers breakfasted at dawn and set off under Captain Butt to refill at the 50th Field Supply Depot on the far side of the Wire.

After travelling south by west for eighteen miles the convoy came under fire from artillery on the right flank. Captain Butt turned it about and headed for a tank recovery section he had passed four miles back. He made his report to the officer commanding the unit but it was received sceptically and his request for an armoured escort refused. The tanks in the area, he was told, were under repair and none of them was really fit for action.

In an attempt to by-pass the danger zone he led the convoy five miles west and then turned south, only to be halted after travelling a further two miles by the sight of nine or ten armoured cars on a low rise. With the early sun behind them they were dipped in pools of their own shadow and it was impossible to tell whose they were. Our drivers were inclined to think they were South African. Captain Butt, however, was taking no chances. He halted the convoy and went ahead to reconnoitre.

'I was in the staff car with Freddy Butt and his driver,' said Sergeant Bob Aro. ¹³ 'Freddy put the glasses on the armoured cars but what with

the shadows and the haze they weren't any help. We crept nearer and stopped. We did that four times, halting finally when we were about 150 yards away. In the leading armoured car there was a joker with a black beret like our tankies wear. He was standing on the turret and waving us to come on. Then we saw someone hop down into a weapon-pit beside the car. We all saw him at the same time and Freddy yelled to his driver: "Go for your life, Jack!" Jack Girvan ¹⁴ spun the car round and as we turned I saw the joker on the turret drop behind his gun and a second later a burst of bullets ploughed up the sand alongside us. It was Jack who saved us. He did a marvellous job of driving, going flat out and flinging the car around to make it hard for the Jerries to draw a bead on us.'

Our drivers saw the staff car come tearing towards them in a spray of bullets and the lorries turned as one. As they did so five more armoured cars appeared on the right flank, and for a minute it looked as though the game was up. Bullets went between the lorries and over and under and through them. At first the convoy drew ahead, but then it struck soft sand and the armoured cars started to gain. One lorry was hit in a vital part and it clattered to a standstill, the drivers tumbling out. The enemy kept up the pursuit mile after mile, and all the time Captain Butt's staff car was like a sheepdog. Now it was in the lead indicating the course; now it was on a flank watching over a straggler. The C Section drivers were beginning to swear by him. Finally he led them back to the recovery section and only then did the armoured cars give up the chase.

Again the officer in command was asked for the loan of a light tank and this time the request was granted. However, just as the convoy was setting off, three armoured cars appeared 1300 yards north of the position. They prowled about, nosed this way and that, and then sat back on their haunches for all the world like dingoes; and like dingoes they slipped away into the haze when four I-tanks rumbled towards them. The incident, unfortunately, caused the officer commanding to change his mind. He decided that he must keep everything he had for

his own protection, so Captain Butt had no alternative but to leave the convoy where it was and try to get through to Headquarters NZASC with a report.

During the next two hours the drivers amused themselves by exploring the recovery section. It consisted of a mass of vehicles—tank-transporters, lorries, and light trucks—and at the moment it was engaged in repairing British I-tanks that had come to grief in the fighting for the Omar forts, the nearest of which, Libyan Omar, was about six miles to the east. There were several light tanks in various stages of disrepair and about eight heavy ones. A number of these could be used as artillery, so the position was by no means undefended. An opportunity to defend it came early in the afternoon.

A cloud of dust appeared from the direction of Libyan Omar and rapidly grew larger. ‘What can you see?’ asked Tom Laverick ¹⁵ of a British sergeant, who replied: ‘I can't see a lovely thing for lovely dust’. The sergeant, except that he was standing in a tank turret and was looking through field-glasses, was like Sister Anne. Even when the cloud was quite close it was impossible to see what caused it, but an ominous squeaking and rumbling told its own story. ‘See anything now?’ asked Tom. ‘Lovely Jerries,’ said the sergeant, closing the turret. A second later his gun went into action.

There was an instant—a moment suspended in time—in which the dust cloud was stabbed with orange flames and a voice could be heard shouting ‘Take post!’ and the Tommies could be seen manning their ruined tanks, calm through despair or through long discipline. Then the shells came over with a squeal and a short rush and the dust hid everything. On Bob Aro's orders our drivers had started their engines at the first hint of trouble and they were under way as soon as the firing started. They zigzagged among the slit-trenches while shells burst ahead of them. Twelve lorries headed west, four headed west by south, and smoke and dust separated the two groups.

Bob Aro was leading the larger group, and as soon as it was safe to do

so he swung north and went straight to the Supply Column lines near **Abiar Nza Ferigh**—no mean feat without a compass. There he reported to an officer, but his story was laughed at, so he pushed on in the hope of finding either Captain Butt or the rest of the section. Presently he met Major Pryde, who put him on his way to the ammunition point at which the loaded lorries were still standing by. It was where he had left it that morning. Ten minutes later a staff car drove up with a short, stocky man, a tommy gun in his arms, leaning through the trapdoor in the roof. ‘Freddy,’ said the drivers, their hearts lightening.

Captain Butt had managed to get through to Headquarters NZASC and had been instructed to put himself and his section under the command of Captain Roberts, the Composite NZASC Company having been re-formed to serve the 5th Brigade. He had set out for the recovery section to collect the convoy and while still some distance away had seen fires break out in the area. He had closed to 1800 yards and then to 1300. By that time at least six vehicles were in flames and he was able to make out, in and about the camp and round the British I-tanks, at least fifty strange tanks and armoured cars and about 200 load-carriers. He stayed no longer.

Except for the party that had dashed off on its own—ten drivers in four lorries—C Section was complete again. Without further delay it joined the Composite Company and moved seven or eight miles north-east into the **Sidi Azeiz** position, where Headquarters 5th Brigade was entrenched. The company was still there when night came.

Night came with a quickening chill, a dropping of green and pink and blue veils and a rush of shadows.

At twenty minutes to eight, after moving four miles north with the 22nd Armoured Brigade, our unit halted and made camp. The German column halted after moving five or six miles.

‘It was quite dark by then,’ said ‘Midge’. ‘The boys were in good spirits, though some of them had begun to feel a bit knocked up. We

were stiff and sore and what we needed above everything else was a smoke. That was out of the question of course. A glimmer of a light would probably have been a shooting matter. The Jerries, I think, were getting a bit rattled, but you couldn't blame them for that. We'd had a taste of the **Royal Air Force** ourselves when thirty Blenheims came over in the afternoon. The concentration of tanks and lorries made a good target—the Jerries didn't seem to go in for dispersal on the scale we did—and columns of black smoke showed that some hits had been scored.

‘Later in the afternoon, while halted, we were shelled by British 25-pounders. Several vehicles were hit and one shell landed only thirty yards away from us, spraying our lorry with stones and gravel. We were not allowed to get out and take cover and we didn't feel any too good sitting up there like Jacky. Craning from the back of the lorry, we could see the flash of the guns when they fired and after each flash we spent some lovely seconds wondering where the shells were going to land.

‘Presently we moved out of range and we kept going until just on sunset, when all the tanks went forward, apparently to engage a British force. I got out of the lorry for a minute, the guard going with me. Our lorry was pointing north and the sun was going down on the left flank. Standing near me was a German officer. At that moment two 8-cwt. Chevrolets driven by Tommies came towards us out of the setting sun. When they were about twenty yards away they must have noticed my battledress and the uniforms of the two Germans, for they changed down with a flourish and one of them shouted: “What the hell goes on?” One of our boys had been watching through a peephole in the canopy and he yelled out: “Go for your bloody lives!” The two Chevrolets leapt forward, swung hard left round the tail of the lorry and hard left again round the bonnet, and were away into the setting sun, gathering speed. The officer yelled to the guard for his rifle. It was at the slung position and a second or two went by while he struggled with it. A few more were lost while the officer doubled round the lorry and by that time the target was just a diminishing cloud of dust right in the eye of the setting sun. It was hopeless and he lowered his rifle without even trying a shot. He didn't

say a word.

‘Taking it by and large, we felt pretty chirpy that second night. We knew we had a good chance of being rescued so long as the column stayed in the forward areas. We discussed it from this angle and that, and all the while the need for a smoke got worse and the cold struck up through the steel tray....’

Clusters of tanks, trucks, and tired men—like islands of various sizes in a cold, dark ocean—dotted the whole desert. They lay so still that it was possible for two of them to be almost cheek by jowl without knowing it. In a dozen places the leopard was lying down with the kid or with other leopards, but not in amity. The German column, for instance, as ‘Midge’ and his friends were to find out shortly, had chosen a British force for a bed-fellow, and it was chance alone—a dozen miles in this or the other direction—that prevented that force from being the one that was sheltering our ten lost C Section drivers and the Tommy sergeant who had driven up exclaiming: ‘Blimey, chum! You bloody near shot me.’ He had been mistaken for a German.

Now there were only three lorries, the fourth having broken down early in the chase, which had been very hot for a while. Rough going, however, had helped our drivers to get clear, and after putting a safe distance between themselves and the doomed recovery section they had halted and allowed the irate Tommy sergeant to come up with them. A bullet fired by Alf Hallmond had missed him by a whisker.

The drivers said to Corporal Ernie Symons ¹⁶: ‘You’re the boss. What do you reckon we should do?’

There was a mass of transport on the horizon and it was decided to approach it from the flank with extreme caution. Shy as antelopes and as vulnerable, the three lorries and the Tommy sergeant’s pick-up drove hesitantly across the desert, halting near a British anti-tank gun. There was a bad moment when the crew abandoned their billy of tea and sprang to action stations, but the drivers were wise enough to stay still

and presently they were recognised. 'If you'd turned round, Kiwis,' they were told, 'you'd have got it proper.' Our drivers must have looked a bit white about the gills, for the Tommies handed over their billy like gentlemen. 'A nice cuppa Mike McGee,' they said. 'Get it into you, chums.'

The fugitives had found sanctuary with the B Echelon of a British armoured brigade. About 300 vehicles, including tanks and tank-transporters, were dispersed over a wide area, and the position was protected by anti-tank guns. Ernie Symons and the others were not sorry when the officer commanding the unit ordered them to stay where they were until contact could be made with a New Zealand convoy. While they were talking with the OC a scout car brought in a captured lorry and ten Germans, one of whom was an officer, a big, tow-headed Nazi who must have weighed every ounce of 16 stone. As soon as he got his feet on the ground he slung the OC a tremendous **Wehrmacht** salute, which was so smart as to be insulting. The Englishman just sketched the courtesy, and the honours, in point of offensiveness, were even. Meanwhile the Tommies had discovered several large tins of ham in the captured lorry. 'That,' said the big Nazi, 'is for our tea.' 'No,' said a Tommy sergeant-major. 'That's for *our* tea. For you, chummy, we've kept a nice bit of bull.' The big Nazi looked hose pipes and hunting whips but had sense enough to keep quiet.

Each of our drivers received a big helping of ham and they went to bed that night on full stomachs, to dream, perhaps, of dusk, gentle and soft as a suède glove, brushing over **Auckland** harbour while a liner goes past the heads lit up like a Christmas tree, and a little familiar ferry, grubby and well-loved, butts over to **Devonport** with all its lights in the water. Or did they dream, snoring in their three lorries, of a sea of sand, of an engine that spat and snuffled like a hairy goat, of an armoured Westphalian ham—gaining, always gaining—bestriden by a gigantic, tow-headed Nazi?

Dawn in the desert comes in about five blinks. Peering through gummy eyes and a misted windscreen, you see only a lumpy pallor

joggling beyond the radiator cap. You blink—and perhaps doze for five minutes—and when you open your eyes individual snail shells and spikes of camel-thorn can be seen plainly. You blink again and you recognise the lorry ahead of you as ‘Mack’s’ by the dent in its tailboard. Again, and you can make out the staff car, louse-like, scurrying far ahead.

We had been woken by gunfire shortly before dawn—the dawn of the 26th—and the company, at the request of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, was moving back to Bir el Halezin. (Our overnight area, no doubt, was needed for a tank battle.) Captain Butt’s convoy, as dawn broke, was feeling its way, engines grunting and backfiring in low gear, down a winding, precipitous track on the Sghifet el Charruba escarpment, near Bir ez Zemla, seven miles north of **Sidi Azeiz**, which had been left at one that morning. It was entering the 22nd Battalion’s area, where an ammunition point was to be established. Some C Section drivers—those whose lorries were either empty or loaded with mines or explosives—had stayed in **Sidi Azeiz**, and daybreak found them huddled in their slit-trenches, rifles at the ready, and eyes straining to make out what was in front of them. For an hour past they had been listening to the groans of the wounded.

‘That hour before dawn,’ said George Laverick, ‘was the worst part of a long, bad night. Quite early we had seen distant enemy flares and later the whole horizon was jumping with them. At the same time we could hear the growl of heavy transport going past. By midnight there were Very lights and parachute flares on all sides of us and it looked to me as though we were pretty well surrounded. However, the loaded lorries got away all right and I felt better after that. My lorry carried mines, so I didn’t have to go.

‘Not long before daylight a small group of transport, part of the great mass that was still moving past, got off its course or mistook us for Jerries. Anyway, it came in across the small airfield—there was one just in front of us—and when it reached the middle it was given the works. Machine-gunners opened up at point-blank range and an anti-tank gun

joined the fray. This lasted about ten hectic minutes. Tommy voices could be heard calling out: they said they were British prisoners. But Germans voices could be heard too, so the officer in charge of us, suspecting a trap, refused to allow them to come in and ordered us to fire on the slightest movement. The cries from the wounded were terrible.

‘When dawn came we saw a grisly sight. About thirty German and Italian soldiers were lying out there wounded and three were dead. I didn't see any wounded Tommies, but I feel certain there must have been some as about sixty prisoners had been set free and in the trays of two of the six lorries captured there were large pools of blood. There was an ambulance—occupied by a British airman and a German—that did not seem to have been hit, and there was a German staff car, the driver of which was dead.

‘The day opened quietly and I was just beginning to think things were rather fun when—at about nine in the morning—a Jerry convoy came towards us, very uncertain about who we were. It came on about ten yards at a time, taking all precautions. Its inquisitiveness was soon satisfied. Our 25-pounders opened up and the way those Jerries turned and took to their scrapers reminded me of my own experiences. It was all right to see the old Jerry getting a bit of his own back.

‘The next target to show itself was a crawler and a second shot from a 25-pounder sent it to its doom. The two occupants tried to escape but Kiwi machine-gunners changed their minds for them. One of them came in with his hands up. The other had no hands; he was badly burnt as well, and he died.

‘Intermittent firing by our guns had been going on since early morning and it was now early afternoon. Stuff was still going past out in the desert....’

Throughout the afternoon a mass of tanks and transport moved towards **Bardia**, passing between **Sidi Azeiz** and the 22nd Battalion's

position at Bir ez Zemla where the ammunition point had been established. C Section's lorries were dispersed against the steep side of a wadi, at the mouth of which two sub-sections commanded by Corporal Alec Mills ¹⁷ had taken up defensive positions.

There was nothing to do except watch and wait, so Clarry Monahan ¹⁸ ('The Prune') beguiled the time by setting fire to a heap of German flares. They burnt with a beautiful blue light and everyone was extremely gratified. But not for long. Three German tanks—two Mark IVs and one Mark III—came into the wadi firing green and white recognition signals. They passed within 200 yards of Alec Mills's detachment and then stopped dead, having spotted an anti-tank gun on the right flank. The tank nearest to it opened fire and it replied in the same instant. Two more guns joined in at long range and the tanks turned and made off, one of them limping a little. Our drivers mopped their brows and implored Clarry not to do any more signalling. Then they put the billy on, for it was afternoon-tea time. In Sidi Azeiz, too, our drivers were boiling up.

For 'Midge' and his friends, passing at that moment through the gap between the two positions, there was no afternoon tea. In other circumstances Clarry could have served them from the ammunition point or George Laverick could have driven over from [Sidi Azeiz](#) with what was left in the billy, and the brew, though it might have been black and not very hot, would have at least been drinkable, for the gap was only six or seven miles wide. Germans, of course, never boil up, and in any case the column was in a hurry to reach [Bardia](#), the perimeter of which was still five miles away.

'This was our third day with the Jerries,' said 'Midge'. 'At dawn that morning we were woken by the hell of a racket and by shouts for the driver of our lorry, Stan Wrack, ¹⁹ who was in the back with us. He was doing all the driving with a big Jerry sitting beside him. Our move the previous night had landed us next door to a mob of British armour and with first light it had spotted us and opened fire. The Jerries set off at full speed, armour-piercing shells landing among the vehicles. We could

see them darting towards us, glowing red-hot in the half-light. When they hit the ground they rebounded with a flash of sparks. The British followed us for several miles, firing all the time, and as far as we could judge the Jerries lost about twenty vehicles.

‘Next we were machine-gunned by fighter aircraft from a low level. At the time we were in semi-darkness, the guard having tied down the canopy at the back of the lorry. We could hear the planes swooping down on us and the rattle of their machine guns, and we cowered in the tray with our tin hats crammed over our ears. It sounded as though the planes were right on top of us and it was the hell of a feeling sitting there and not knowing what was going on outside. The raid lasted about five minutes but it seemed like five hours.

‘At every halt Stan would sing out the news and the boys found this a great comfort. Stan’s was a difficult job and everyone remarked that he was the right man for it. He kept cool and nursed us along over the bumps.

‘During the day we were transferred to an open Jerry three-tonner, Stan coming with us. We were now near the front of the convoy.

‘We had only the vaguest idea of our position but we guessed we had been making a good deal of easting since our capture and were now close to the frontier. Actually we were not far from **Bardia**, which we thought was in British hands. Our impression that we were with some sort of a raiding column was confirmed during the afternoon. A party of Tommy linesmen were repairing a telephone line on our right flank and they hardly bothered to look up when the huge formation rumbled past. Two of them were still working away at the top of a telephone pole when an armoured car pulled up to collect them.

‘When we were a few miles from **Bardia**, which we could see in the distance, the German armour suddenly veered to the right, the thin-skinned vehicles carrying on towards the fortress.’

It was afternoon-tea time and when the bombing was over B Section boiled up, but A Section, which had not sustained casualties, carried on towards **Sidi Azeiz** where there was supposed to be a field supply depot.

At two in the afternoon nineteen empty A Section lorries followed by twenty-two empty B Section lorries (plus a detachment from the 65th RASC Company) had left the unit lines at Bir el Halezin, joining Trigh Capuzzo and heading east. According to **Divisional Headquarters** the road to **Sidi Azeiz** was clear.

Shortly before three, by which time A Section was ten miles from **Sidi Azeiz**, Captain Gibson halted his vehicles. Behind them, a few miles down the track, a heavy air raid was in progress. 'Hell!' said the drivers. 'That's B Section getting it.' They could hear machine-gun fire and see the black smoke from the bombs.

Then the raiders headed towards A Section. The drivers started to scatter but someone sang out: 'It's all right, you jokers. They're ours.' And they were. **Blenheim** bombers with an escort of fighters flew over and dropped a white flare. Then bursts of bullets swept the dispersal lines. Our drivers gaped at the red, white, and blue circles, and many of them were too dumbfounded even to take cover. 'But the bastards are ours,' they cried. 'You can see the bastards are ours.'

There were two Very light pistols in A Section's ack-ack lorry but Jim Stanley had no idea what to do with them.

The firing stopped as suddenly as it had started and the aircraft flew away. Possibly only a warning had been intended. At all events, though the area had been raked with fire, no damage had been done. This was not the case with Captain Ward's B Section.

'We were driving along Trigh Capuzzo in column of route,' said 'Skin' Wilson, ²⁰ 'when we saw the dust in front of us being kicked up by bullets. At first we thought we were being fired on by enemy armour but when anti-personnel bombs began to fall we realised that we were being

done over from the air. Shrapnel and machine-gun bullets tore the canopies of the lorries and Tom Barlow ²¹—the “Tree Man” —was wounded in the arm and chest.

‘Our convoy then moved off the Trigh and got into desert formation but we were still pretty close together. Apparently we had been attacked by Blenheims with heavy fighter escort and no one could get the guts of it at all. However, hardly any damage had been done—a punctured tire for the “Tree Man” was about as far as it went.’

While the lorries were being checked a single British fighter-bomber flew over and dropped two flares. This was done to reassure them, the drivers decided, so no one was much concerned when a large **Royal Army Service Corps** convoy came driving through the lines of transport, making a splendid target, or when British aircraft were sighted a second time. Doubtless the mistake had been discovered and the pilots were returning to see what damage had been done. Our drivers shook their fists, but only when the planes banked to bring the sun behind them did they think of taking cover.

‘I stood watching the planes,’ said ‘Skin’, ‘and it was not until I saw the black blobs falling that I realised we were being bombed again. Some of us dived under lorries. Others ran for it. I got about fifty yards from my lorry and flopped down in the sand. I think there were about eighteen planes, bombers and fighters, the same ones that had attacked us before. They dropped stick after stick of little anti-personnel bombs and I didn't think I was going to come out alive.’

In the second raid Frank George ²² and Lionel Hawking ²³ were wounded slightly, Doug Henderson ²⁴ seriously, and Albert Storey ²⁵ mortally.

‘After that,’ said ‘Skin’, ‘we were told to disperse the transport properly. I could see that my lorry had been knocked about a good deal—she had three flat tires for one thing—but I got into the cab to have a go at starting her. As I did so I called out to “Yorkie”—Albert Storey—who

was my cobbler on the lorry. A second later I saw him struggling to his feet right at my elbow. He looked pretty bad and I had just time to hop out of the cab and grab hold of him before he slipped to the ground. He had been hit in the back by a piece of shrapnel that had passed right through the engine. Everyone thought the world of "Yorkie". He was a fine musician, and back in **Petone**, where he came from, he was assistant band master. His instrument was the cornet. Ray Crapp²⁶ bandaged him up pretty smartly but he hadn't a show.'

Six lorries belonging to the **Royal Army Service Corps** detachment, which had sustained one casualty, were wrecks, and four of B Section's were badly damaged. The convoy hardest hit was the one that had cut in just before the attack started. A doctor who was travelling with it attended to the wounded but there was no vehicle suitable for evacuating them to a dressing station. While waiting for one to come along, our drivers put the billy on and then got out wheel-braces and jacks. There were many flat tires.

A Section, meanwhile, was nearing **Sidi Azeiz**. By now it had acquired 150 prisoners—a present from a passing artillery convoy. Three German officers were travelling in state in Jim Stanley's ack-ack lorry. The first thing they had asked for was water and then they had wanted something to eat. Two of them were polite and grateful but the third was a deplorable-looking person with small snake's eyes, thin lips, criminal forehead, and an expression in which cunning, meanness, and brutality were blended. He sat in glowering silence until Jim provoked him by saying: 'Well, the war's over for you, boy. Good thing, eh?' 'For the soldier,' he replied, 'it is better to fight.' The remark was correct enough but the tone in which it was uttered was so extraordinarily malignant that Jim picked up his Tommy gun and thoughtfully released the safety catch.

'It is not very nice, this desert warfare,' said one of the other officers in a gentlemanly sort of way, evidently wishing to dispel the unpleasant impression made by his companion. 'Myself, I do not find it very nice. These biscuits, they are very nice.' (They weren't: they were horrible.)

‘You have plenty?’

He was a tall, fine-looking man with a simple face and very honest blue eyes. He was the sort of man you would be glad to get into conversation with on a railway journey. It was impossible to doubt his courage and integrity and difficult to doubt that he was inherently decent: it seemed unbelievable that a man of his stamp could have anything but contempt for the Nazi bosses. (This was in the days when people still spoke wistfully of ‘honourable elements in the German officer class’.) He said he came from Bavaria. His rat-faced companion came from **Munich, which seemed a most appropriate place for him to come from. One could imagine his having a high old time in the basements of the Brown House.**

The remaining member of the trio was a small, plump man with a cherubic face, steel spectacles, and a really charming smile. He spoke hardly at all, contenting himself with munching biscuits, smiling his disarming smile, and bouncing up and down in the uncomfortable little seat provided by the Motley mounting. He looked like a village schoolmaster—you thought of woollen mufflers and children singing ‘Silent Night’—or like one of those lovable, absent-minded German professors whom most of us had read about but none had actually seen because for ten years or more all of them had been busy, in a lovable and absent-minded way, in places like Peenemünde. Probably he was a passionate believer in the Hitler Youth, just as his gentlemanly colleague was probably an admirer of Goering's. Looking at him, however, you saw only the rosy-cheeked children, heard only the rejoicing fiddles and the crunch of snow. It was very puzzling.

Conversation with the pleasant Bavarian and the task of keeping a sharp eye on the disgusting little creature from **Munich kept the ack-ack crew fully occupied until the convoy halted outside **Sidi Azeiz**. Twilight had fallen and the outlines of gun positions and barbed-wire entanglements were barely visible at a distance of 200 yards. Close to where Trigh Capuzzo touched the perimeter a gun and a gun-tower were**

burning fitfully, putting out petals of scarlet flame which bloomed and faded fantastically in the quiet dusk. No sound came from the garrison.

After halting the convoy Captain Gibson drove forward alone, tooting his horn. He stopped for a moment at the guarded entrance, then signalled the lorries forward. They went rumbling into **Sidi Azeiz**.

‘You're lucky, boy,’ a New Zealand anti-tank gunner said to Jim Stanley. ‘We were watching you all the way. We were pretty near certain you were Germans and if that officer of yours hadn't come forward the way he did you'd have stopped the lot.’ He pointed to where the gun and tower were glowing softly in the twilight, adding: ‘That's our work.’

There was no supply depot in **Sidi Azeiz**, so the lorries were unable to load. The prisoners were placed under guard and given some packets of biscuits and what water could be spared, which was very little. Our drivers drew rations from the cooks' lorry—tinned sausages and tinned potatoes—and lit their primuses. Soon it was dark, and later the moon rose and went shining on through the long, cold hours.

It shone on Company headquarters, Workshops, and the handful of load-carriers at Bir el Halezin. It shone on the small, dirty compound in **Bardia** where ‘Midge’ and his friends, cold and supperless, were experiencing their first night as prisoners of war. It shone between half past nine and midnight on Captain Butt and his drivers as they crept across the seven miles of desert dividing **Sidi Azeiz** from El Charruba escarpment, where they had spent the day with the 22nd Battalion. It showed them a dizzy pattern of Allied and enemy wheel tracks, and although they had with them the rest of the Composite NZASC Company and an escort of armoured cars they could hardly have felt more vulnerable if the convoy had been a small, lost, goods train in a siding controlled by a mad signalman. Anguished, they waited for the shining, snorting expresses to come whistling down on them.

It shone on Captain Ward's lorries, which, about midnight, were forming a laager somewhere east of Bir el Halezin. The wounded drivers,

after waiting nearly five hours, had been taken in a passing British ambulance to 13th Corps' main dressing station. After that the convoy had headed for home, Captain Ward's information being that it was useless to try to reach **Sidi Azeiz**. It shone on Ed Duda, where, about an hour later, men from the 19th Battalion shook hands with men from the **Tobruk** garrison, and on **Belhamed**, which the 4th Brigade had captured the night before, and on **Sidi Rezegh** where the 6th Brigade was fighting.

It shone on the B Echelon of the British armoured brigade, one of whose six laagers sheltered the three lorries in which Ernie Symons and his nine C Section drivers were sleeping. No dreams tonight of Nazis and Westphalian hams. They had spent a pleasantly quiet afternoon tinkering with a German motor-cycle that Ernie and Alf Hallmond had brought back to camp after going out on patrol with the scout cars, and later they had taken their turn at the listening posts. Now they were sound asleep.

The aircraft came over about half past one in the morning. They circled in the moonlight and dropped several bombs, all of which fell on the same laager—the one in which the C Section lorries were parked. Two were set on fire and the third was riddled with shrapnel. Tom Laverick was wounded in the back, Bob Troughear ²⁷ in the face and leg, Alf Hallmond in the leg, and Sid Pausina ²⁸ in the thigh. The Tommies had suffered heavily as well and several of their vehicles were blazing.

Tom Laverick was stunned by blast and when he came to he was surrounded by flames.

‘I opened my eyes,’ he said, ‘and the canopy was blazing and fire was darting all over the back of the lorry. At first I couldn't make out what had happened or where I was. A few seconds must have passed before I pulled myself together but once I did start to move I was over that tailboard like lightning. I didn't realise I had been hit until I was outside.

‘At the back of the lorry there was a Tommy with his head blown off. Another Tommy had lost his leg and was screaming out and calling for

his sergeant. I went over to see if I could help but there wasn't a thing I could do for him. A plane was still hovering over the burning lorries and machine-gunning.'

The driver of the third lorry, meanwhile, had climbed into his riddled cab and pressed the starter, expecting no result. To his astonishment the engine fired at once. The others scrambled aboard, the fit helping the wounded, and the lorry headed for the open desert, which seemed safety itself in comparison with that fiery neighbourhood. It was a wise move, for presently the aircraft returned, bombing and strafing.

Banners of flame streamed skywards for a long while, and afterwards, in half a dozen places, hot metal glowed cherry red.

The moon had still an hour or two left. It shone down on **Sidi Azeiz**, where the slit-trenches were like stencilled Ls, the gunpits like blobs of ink, and the barbed wire like faint scribbling—a dirty, blotted page. The lorries were huddled together for protection and clumps of them formed dark patches in the desert. There was resentment in the humped outlines of their canopies, in the blank stare of their stubby radiators and blind headlamps. Under the cold craziness of the moon they seemed to be on the point of trumpeting shrilly and stampeding across the desert, driven mad by all the hounding and harrying they had put up with during the past forty-eight hours.

Most of A Section's lorries were grouped roughly around an open space, which appeared at first glance to be a dumping ground for old clothes and abandoned equipment; then the moonlight, striking a livid face or glinting on an outflung hand, showed that it was covered with human beings, all tangled together in an effort to keep warm. Even their uneasy stirrings, the risings and subsidings in the amorphous mass, were suggestive more of the burrowing of rats among rubbish than of the movements of living people. These, though, were German prisoners—captured *Herrenvolk*—and the poor devils were as cold as any Pole and as hungry as any Greek. Yesterday they had ranked with the world's finest soldiers: tonight they were down and out—finished. The presence

of two Bren guns crouched over slim bipods—bird dogs inspecting the day's bag—seemed almost superfluous.

The prisoners squirmed and muttered and some of them moaned a little. Nothing else moved. They might have been dying men on a dead planet. Everything looked cold and dead, and low in the heavens, colder and more dead than anything on earth, washing the sands with silver, emphasizing each mean and ugly detail—the discarded tins, the rusty wire, the poor disgusting prisoners—turning the sentries into silver statues and silvering the guns and lorries, evil and indifferent, was the moon.

The drivers lay for a minute longer—two minutes longer—in the lovely blankets, but the voices came back: 'Right-oh, you jokers. Pack up. Pack up. Moving in ten minutes.'

It was a little before two in the morning and Captain Roberts had been ordered to replenish the Composite NZASC Company at the 50th Field Supply Depot near [El Beida](#). A Section was to go with him, and all empty C Section lorries. The loaded ones were to remain in [Sidi Azeiz](#) under Second-Lieutenant W. S. Duke.²⁹ Counting six from the former 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section, there were twenty of these. The rest packed up at once.

The frozen prisoners were herded aboard—with pathetic honesty they scuttled round trying to return old radiator muffs and bits of canvas they had borrowed—and within ten minutes the convoy was under way, travelling south-west. Ahead and on both flanks German flares bobbed up and down in a manner indescribably knowing and intimidating, making the outing hardly less unpleasant than a swim in a shark-infested lagoon.

The drivers who had been left behind were inclined to congratulate themselves—the No. 1 drivers anyway: the spare drivers were less certain. They had been issued with hand grenades and extra rifle ammunition and told they were infantry. They shivered in their slit-

trenches, longing for dawn.

‘The night was quiet,’ said George Laverick, ‘but Jerry put up a continual string of flares, showing that he had us taped pretty near all round. My heart was right down in my scrapers.’

Just before dawn two Hurricanes took off from the airfield. Soon it was light.

‘With great sighs of relief,’ said George, ‘my cobbers and I made our way back to the lorries and put the billy on. When we were all set for the first mouthful—the milk was in the billy and some of the boys were getting their cups and others were fossicking around for eats—the siren sounded. The rising sun was just level with the horizon, and over a low ridge, about a thousand yards away, came German tanks, lorried infantry, and motor-cyclists, shooting and shelling.’

¹ 123 ORs commanded by Capt G. Fordyce.

² Dvr G. P. Laverick; truck driver; Netherton, **Paeroa**; born **Rangitane, Palmerston North**, 14 Dec 1916; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

³ On the 23rd the 5th South African Brigade had been overrun south of **Sidi Rezegh** and had ceased to be effective.

⁴ Lt-Col H. S. Jones; company manager; **New Plymouth**; born Carmarthen, Wales, 21 Nov 1896.

⁵ **Gambut** had fallen to the 4th Brigade the day before. Hence the shells that C Section drivers had seen landing among German transport.

⁶ Capt D. C. Ward; motor driver; born NZ, 24 Apr 1905.

- ⁷ Maj R. C. Gibson; woodwork instructor, Auckland Education Board; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1909; OC 1 Amn Coy 17 Apr-21 Sep 1944.**
- ⁸ 2 Lt C. B. P. Hendrey; truck driver; Auckland; born Auckland, 15 Nov 1914.**
- ⁹ Dvr A. B. Meiklejohn; orchardist; born NZ, 29 Oct 1918; wounded 24 Nov 1941; killed in action, 28 Nov 1941.**
- ¹⁰ Dvr. O. J. Kennedy; builder's labourer; Tapanui, Otago; born Tapanui, 24 Aug 1911.**
- ¹¹ Sgt S. T. Midgley; traveller; Kaiapoi; born Dunedin, 12 Jun 1907.**
- ¹² Dvr C. Cameron; butcher; born NZ, 23 Jul 1919; wounded 25 Nov 1941; killed in action (drowned) 5 Dec 1941.**
- ¹³ WO II R. G. Aro, MM; fitter and turner; Auckland; born NZ, 9 Feb 1914.**
- ¹⁴ L-Cpl J. F. Girvan; tractor driver; Seafield, Ashburton; born NZ, 1 Sep 1917.**
- ¹⁵ Cpl T. D. Laverick; factory assistant; Paeroa; born Rangitane, 19 Oct 1914; wounded 27 Nov 1941.**
- ¹⁶ Cpl A. E. Symons; farmer; Ohaupo, Waikato; born Hamilton, 11 Jul 1918.**
- ¹⁷ L-Sgt A. F. Mills; lorry driver; Te Kawa West, Auckland; born England, 21 Jan 1919.**

18 Dvr C. Monahan; builder; Hastings; born **Auckland**, 14 May 1905.

19 L-Cpl C. S. Wrack; storeman; **Whangarei**; born **Whangarei**, 22 Dec 1918; p.w. 24 Nov 1941; evacuated from **Bardia** to **Italy** 15 Dec 1941.

20 Dvr E. D. Wilson; shop assistant; **Auckland**; born **Te Puke**, 29 Apr 1919.

21 Dvr T. W. P. Barlow; truck driver; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 10 Apr 1916; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

22 L-Cpl F. A. F. George; shearer; Glen Massey, **Huntly**; born **Dunedin**, 25 Nov 1913; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

23 Dvr L. A. Hawking; dealer; Bayswater, **Auckland**; born Kew, England, 11 Mar 1906; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

24 S-Sgt D. C. Henderson; clerk; born **Greymouth**, 15 Sep 1917; wounded 26 Nov 1941; died of wounds 14 Jul 1942.

25 Dvr A. H. Storey; motor driver; born **Yorkshire**, England, 31 Jan 1905; died of wounds 26 Nov 1941.

26 Dvr R. L. Crapp; labourer; born **Whakatane**, 21 Mar 1913; died in NZ, 11 Jan 1945.

27 Cpl R. W. Troughear; carting contractor; Pokeno, **Auckland**; born NZ, 10 Apr 1912; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

28 Dvr S. C. Pausina; butcher; **Kaikohe**; born **Auckland**, 4 Sep 1916; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

²⁹ Capt W. S. Duke; butcher; **Dunedin**; born **Dunedin**, 28 Jan 1913; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941; evacuated from **Bardia** to **Italy** Dec 1941.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 10 – THURSDAY, FRIDAY, AND SATURDAY

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THURSDAY, FRIDAY, AND SATURDAY

THE siren sounded, Bren carriers raced in from the desert, and our guns opened fire. It was 27 November.

‘We were woken by the hell of a racket of shelling and machine-gunning,’ said Claude Campbell,¹ ‘and Harvey McCabe,² Don Baker,³ and I tumbled out of bed and into the nearest slit-trenches half-dressed and only half-awake. The tracers were criss-crossing a few feet above our heads like red ribbons and shells crashed round us. Before long our lorries were burning and a load of gun-cotton and ammonal blew up.’

At the start of the attack some of our drivers were asleep; others were brewing up, folding their blankets, cleaning their teeth. Noel Orsborn⁴ (14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section) was killed in the first minute of the battle while he was still asleep in the back of a lorry loaded with Bofors shells. Fortunately the whole area was scarred with Italian dugouts and British and Italian slit-trenches.

‘Very soon,’ said Clarry Monahan, who had taken cover behind a small stone cairn, ‘the machine-gunning made it too hot for us and we retired to a small building beside which a lorry was parked. The lorry was hit and went up in a roar of flames. I began to sweat considerably for I knew it was loaded with Bofors shells. There was a mob of jokers sheltering in the building and when I suggested making a dash for an old ruin about a chain away they said: “You’ll never make it.” I said: “I’d as soon give it a go as wait here to be killed by those bloody Bofors.” About seven of us made a dash through the machine-gun fire and all of us got away with it. The ruin was manned by three airmen with Lewis guns and it was under heavy mortar fire. Soon afterwards the load of Bofors went up with a noise like the end of the world.’

One after another the lorries caught fire and those carrying mines or explosive blew up.

Corporal Nigel Barach ⁵ (B Section), and Cyril Aro ⁶ (C Section) were sheltering in an Italian dugout. Cyril peeped over the breastwork and saw Dick Turner ⁷ (C Section) crawling in the open. He was wounded in the thigh so Cyril went out under fire and dragged him to safety. While he was being bandaged an engineers' lorry caught alight about five yards from the wall of the dugout.

'We asked the engineers what was in it,' said Cyril. 'They told us it was ammonal. We asked them how much and they said "Half a dozen cases." Then they disappeared. It was impossible to move Dick, so Nigel and I decided to stay with him. About five minutes later the ammonal blew up, the blast knocking us all unconscious.'

Meanwhile the casualty list was mounting. Gil Drinnan ⁸ (C Section) was mortally wounded by machine-gun bullets while the battle was at its height and Charley Mann ⁹ (14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section) was wounded in the foot by a bullet from the same burst. He dragged Gil behind a wheel of the lorry they were sheltering under and there they were pinned to the ground by intense fire, Gil dying about half an hour later. Another C Section driver, Ben Clifford, ¹⁰ was mortally wounded by bullets and 'Fat' Davison was hit in the calf and thigh.

George Laverick had gone to ground beside the billy and the brimming mugs, and he watched the tanks close in, firing as they came.

'As soon as the leading tank was within range,' said George, 'a Bofors gun about ten yards away from me had a go at it. The Bofors fired one clip and was quiet, having received a direct hit from the tank it was engaging. A man I had known in "civvy street" came out alive but another member of the crew had the sights of the gun blown through his neck. How the others got on I am not sure.

'By this time the machine-gun fire and mortaring was terrific. I could see three tanks about 300 yards away and still coming on. I spotted a better hole farther back and started crawling towards it. I had crawled twenty-five yards and still had another twenty-five to do when

Jerry spotted me and started to do a bit of peppering. It was time for me to take to the old feet and I tell you Lovelock's record had nothing on that last twenty-five yards. I landed in a good, deep hole with an 18-inch stone wall right round it. Through the cracks I could follow operations and as things progressed I am not ashamed to say that I put up a prayer or two. At one stage I noticed a little bird like a sparrow standing near me. He wasn't game to get up and fly.

'I could see things were hopeless, so I buried my diary and two or three letters, keeping only my paybook. The three tanks came within fifty yards of me, and then one of them halted and continued to let fly with all he had while the other two, firing furiously, carried on, intent on routing us out. One rumbled each side of me at a distance of about three yards, but—thank God!—I was not noticed.'

At that moment Don Baker was saying: 'Look at this.' About fifty yards away, side on to the trench in which he was sheltering with Claude and Harvey, three German Mark IV tanks, their guns shooting out flames eight feet long, were finishing off a 25-pounder.

'A few minutes later,' said George, 'things ended. I stood up and gazed about me. It was a sorry sight. The place was a mass of burning vehicles. I had seen three of our lorries disappear in black smoke, but some of the others—the ones with less sensitive loads—were still in the process of going up. Even though the firing had stopped [Sidi Azeiz](#) was still far from healthy.'

When the firing stopped Cyril Aro and Nigel Barach stood up too.

'The blast from the ammonal had knocked all of us unconscious,' said Cyril, 'and by the time we had come to and struggled out of the sand and stuff that was half burying us—the breastwork had been levelled flat—everyone was standing up with hands in the air. We helped each other out and found we were OK except for being bruised and shaken. Then we started to carry Dick Turner over to the Regimental Aid Post, where the prisoners were being herded together.'

All over the area our drivers were standing up, their hands in the air.

‘The Jerry who routed us out,’ said Claude Campbell, ‘wore glasses and had a bit of camouflage in his tin hat. He was wildly excited and he looked grotesque, but he meant business all right. Stuff was burning all round us. One of the armoured cars that had escorted us from the 22nd's position the night before was burning like a torch, and as we watched the wireless mast started to wilt and bend slowly over.’

‘I stood up,’ said Clarry Monahan, ‘and the white flags were flying and the German tanks came flooding in with Rommel leading them.’

It was not Rommel whom Clarry saw but a German tank commander. His tank halted near Brigadier Hargest ¹¹ and he stood up in the turret—he was a fine-looking man with a monocle and an **Afrika Korps** cap—and said: ‘You fought well.’ Brigadier Hargest asked if his men could get their gear; the tank commander agreed.

When Clarry and another driver approached their lorries they were turned back by Germans with tommy guns. George Laverick had the same experience.

‘I had about 200 yards to walk to where our lorry had been before it was blown up,’ said George, ‘and when I got there out pops a Jerry. He was about the biggest of the lot and why he had to pick on me I just don't know. He took one look at me and then rammed the snout of his tommy gun in the fleshy part of my back, at the same time saying something that sounded like *Ooch!* and pointing towards Rommel's tank. ¹² His meaning was plain, so I didn't stop to argue the point with him. As far as I was concerned he was welcome to that part of the desert, but he wasn't satisfied and he repeated the *Ooch* performance. By this time I was under way, running with my hands in the air, which wasn't easy. A couple more pokes and a couple of *Oochs* and I was in full gallop. We kept it up between us until I reached the other prisoners at the RAP.’

It was little enough our drivers were allowed to salvage from their

wrecked vehicles—a blanket, perhaps, or an overcoat. Most of them had lost everything except what they stood up in. While they were searching among charred rubbish German amateur photographers got busy with their cameras. ‘Smile, please,’ they said, and many of the prisoners responded automatically before realising their mistake. Other Germans were routing around for tinned food and when they discovered a tin of something particularly palatable they opened it on the spot, making a hearty meal in front of the breakfast-less prisoners. British emergency rations—slabs of rich chocolate—were in great demand, and for these a number of our drivers were searched.

With the lorries burning around them, the dead lying beside their guns, and the wounded and dying being carried to the Regimental Aid Post on stretchers, the prisoners were lined up in four ranks and counted. An inspection took place, the German guards pulling up short when they came to a New Zealander who was wearing ammunition pouches and a bayonet. ‘The Jerries,’ said Clarry, ‘did their scones. They dragged him out of the ranks and whipped his bayonet off him, looking thoroughly disgusted. We did a big grin.’

It was their last grin for some while. After the strain, relief had brought gaiety, almost hilarity, but this had worn off now and our drivers were feeling lost and forlorn. In all fifty-four members of the Ammunition Company had been captured—forty-seven from C Section (counting former 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section personnel) and seven from B Section. ¹³

Twenty-one lorries had been burnt or captured.

Half an hour after the battle the German transport and armour headed west, a skeleton force remaining to look after the prisoners. At last they were given the order to move, and the long column, escorted by motor-cycles with spandaus mounted on side-cars, started its 18-mile trudge to the prison compound in [Bardia](#), those who were unable to march—among them were Charley Mann, Dick Turner, and Tom Barlow—being left behind at the aid post.

Our drivers were hungry, thirsty, and over-wrought, and the struggle to rise to their feet after the short hourly rests became increasingly painful. 'Fat' Davison, with wounds in the calf and thigh, was soon in great distress, but he struggled on gamely mile after mile until at last he was forced to sit down by the roadside. George Laverick and two others stayed with him. After a while a staff car pulled up and a German officer asked them what they were doing. They told him that 'Fat' was wounded and could go no farther. The officer said: 'Don't worry, boys. I was a prisoner in **France** for one day and the British treated me well. You never know your luck. You may be free tomorrow.' When the car moved off towards **Bardia** 'Fat' was draped across the roof—there was no room inside—like a huge fish.

The prisoners were halted near the outer defences until dark. Just on dusk a German officer drove up and shouted that there was a hot meal waiting inside the fortress. Our drivers gave him a cheer, but the announcement was made either in error or as a cruel joke, for the small walled compound into which they were eventually herded after another march contained nothing except a little water, dirty and brackish. The prisoners were parched with thirst and they rushed it, with the result that many of them failed to get a drink.

The compound was so crowded that there was hardly room to turn. This mattered little, for the night was bitterly cold and the prisoners would have had to huddle together in any event. Besides there was comfort in proximity.

They slept at last, forming under the cold moon in **Bardia**, as the German prisoners had formed in **Sidi Azeiz**, a great squalid mass of insulted and protesting flesh, a community of aches and pains, with a battle going on in each tired mind—guns firing, lorries exploding, guns firing, guns firing, on and on through the night.

*Through the Wire—
the opening of the
Second Libyan Cam-
paign*



Through the Wire—the opening of the Second Libyan Campaign



Inside the boundary wire—a plane burns in the distance

Inside the boundary wire—a plane burns in the distance



New Zealand Divisional Headquarters at Bir el Chleta

New Zealand Divisional Headquarters at Bir el Chleta



Despatch riders, Tobruk

Despatch riders, Tobruk

The rest of the Composite NZASC Company was still free, but only, as it seemed to our drivers, by a miracle. After leaving **Sidi Azeiz** the convoy had travelled five miles south-west by south and then laagered for the night. It would have been senseless to go on. Enemy flares were appearing in almost every direction and some of the drivers had not slept for thirty-eight hours. They rolled themselves in their blankets beside the lorries without even taking off their boots.

At first light, with unidentified vehicles approaching from the north-east, the convoy continued on its course, swinging wide from the Wire, only to run into a semi-circle of enemy tanks, transport, and armoured cars. Turning under fire, it went back to **Sidi Azeiz**, the enemy pursuing. A shell whistled over Jim Stanley's head—he felt the draught of it—and landed almost between the front wheels of Les Howarth's ¹⁴ lorry but without doing damage. From the direction of **Sidi Azeiz** came a sound of heavy firing, and over the position there was a pall of black smoke beneath which were dabs of vermilion.

Still pursued, the convoy headed towards the 22nd Battalion at Bir ez Zemla, but was turned back once again. Captain Roberts considered next the possibility of dodging the enemy until dark and then trying to return to **Sidi Azeiz**, but shortage of petrol was an objection. Finally it was decided to run west towards Bir el Halezin, where the Divisional

Administration Group was known to be.

Now began a breathless scramble for safety and it went on hour after hour. The going, for the most part, was terrible, and the convoy became as formless as a chariot race. Each driver chose his own path, intent only on following the leading staff car and avoiding slit-trenches. Often three or four lorries would be travelling abreast, mudguard almost touching mudguard.

What they were running from was not always clear to the drivers, but when they looked south or behind them they could usually discern little scurrying objects preceding a plume of dust, the more terrifying because they were seldom glimpsed clearly. Even when the pursuers were invisible the spectacle of between ninety and a hundred vehicles being thrashed along at top speed was enough to suggest that Nightmare was following with all her brood.

The man at the wheel, of course, saw only what was in front of him, and for mile after mile it was little except clumps of camel-thorn round which the drifting sand had formed hard mounds anything from six inches to a foot high. They were so close together that it was impossible to steer between them and a lorry could be kept on its course only by brute strength. It was like driving over a gigantic nutmeg grater.

Hardly ever was it possible to travel in top gear, but in second and third they attained speeds they had previously thought impossible. They no longer gave a damn about their cherished engines. They prayed only that 'conrods' would not buckle like hot poker and flying pistons mix everything into a metal omelet. But the wonderful Chevrolets never faltered. They boiled along mile after mile, screaming like circular saws. They took terrific wrenches; they were slammed up and down until it seemed next to impossible that a single spring could be unbroken; but only one Ammunition Company lorry was lost through a mechanical defect that day. It had been towed for some miles and was cast off the moment the situation became really dangerous.

A Section's anti-aircraft lorry was on the southern flank of the convoy, the muzzle of Jim's anti-tank rifle projecting over the tailboard. On several occasions he drew a bead on distant armour, but it was not until early in the afternoon that he got a chance to fire. Three midget armoured cars, which his experiences in the 1940 Libyan campaign enabled him to identify as Italian, appeared suddenly from the south and scuttled along beside the convoy at a distance of 300 yards. Jim got in several shots, the barrel of his anti-tank rifle swinging in a crazy arc between earth and sky. Some of the shots kicked up the dust a few yards away and others soared towards the Pole star, but two got home, or near enough to it to make the Italians sheer off.

After they had gone Jim threw his rifle on the deck and glowered at it. Its rubber shoulder pad had come away from the butt and he had taken some shrewd knocks. Besides, he had never quite forgiven it for misfiring in **Greece. Something like a personal quarrel had developed between the two of them and twice already it had been 'given a passage'—Jim's phrase—over the tailboard, sharing the fate of a really formidable list of refractory primuses and skin-removing spanners, the majority of which had been retrieved when Jim had cooled down a little. His rages seldom lasted more than a minute or two, and now, after giving his enemy a few kicks, he began tenderly to wipe its breech.**

Earlier, a number of **Royal Army Service Corps vehicles had joined the convoy, and at this stage they began to run out of petrol. One after another they were abandoned, their drivers piling into a large, open Morris Commercial that was acting as a sort of lifeboat. It literally bounded across the desert, and ever and again its unfortunate occupants, wearing agonised expressions, would rise into the air in a body exactly as though they were being tossed in a blanket. It was a marvel that some of them were not thrown out.**

Nor were the prisoners having a comfortable ride, but they were in good spirits. They became cockier as the day wore on, laughing and cheering whenever the convoy changed course and shouting unsolicited

advice. They accused our drivers of fleeing from their own friends and perhaps they were not always wrong. Our officers were still handicapped by their inability to recognise or acknowledge friendly signals.

Time was passing and the estimated distance to Bir el Halezin had been covered, but still there was no sign of the New Zealand Division. Plainly the convoy was off course. It turned north, covered four miles, and ran into a tank battle. Then it turned east. The drivers were beginning to believe that this was one of those nightmares from which you don't wake. Finally the convoy halted. There were armoured fighting vehicles ahead of it and on both flanks. They dotted the horizon, and though it was impossible to distinguish details our drivers had the impression of being mocked and stared at by wild beasts. They could picture the bright, hot eyes, the dribble of saliva. The officers held a hurried consultation and it was decided to keep moving until the last. Petrol was short and the chase was bound to end soon one way or the other.

Like weary buffaloes the lorries swung round and charged towards the widest gap, but almost at once tanks appeared ahead of them and that was the finish. It was a relief in a way. They slowed to a trot, to a crawl, then halted. One of the staff cars went ahead and presently the convoy was waved forward. Soon the drivers were able to see the faces of the men in the tanks and armoured cars. They were red, grinning faces, unmistakably British. Everyone began talking at once, talking and laughing with relief. It was anti-climax.

'We bin watching you blokes,' said a fat, red-headed sergeant. 'Saw you muckin' about all over muckin' desert. Had a go at heading you off twice. Suppose you thought we was muckin' Jerries. Fourth Armoured Brigade—that's us.'

The officers checked their sections and all our vehicles were accounted for except 'Dad' Cleave's and Basil Thorburn's ¹⁵ LAD. No one had seen it since eleven in the morning when three tanks had attacked the convoy from the south. A Supply Column officer and his driver had

also been missed at eleven, and as their pick-up was known to have been giving trouble it was thought that 'Dad' and Basil might have been captured while helping them.

Now that the excitement was over our drivers found themselves as stiff and sore as though they had been playing the first football match of the season. In rather less than eight hours they had been chased for 100 miles over country across which you would have hesitated to drive a horse and cart.

Staying with the 4th Armoured Brigade—it was eight miles south by west of Bir el Halezin—only long enough to check their engines and distribute evenly what little petrol remained, the A Section drivers set out for the unit area, reaching it without further trouble. Captain Butt with what was left of C Section—nine lorries of the original thirty-six—arrived a quarter of an hour later, reporting that the Composite NZASC Company had been disbanded.

For the rest of us the 27th had been a quiet day. Captain Ward and B Section had returned early in the morning to report that the road to **Sidi Azeiz** was closed, giving the Major just time to prevent the balance of the load-carriers from trying to reach it. Then we had moved four miles north-west, our empty trays, with no comforting weight of ammunition to hold them down, rattling loosely behind us. We had halted three miles from Point 175, which, with Ed Duda, **Belhamed**, and **Sidi Rezegh**, was still in our hands, though precariously. For the rest, it was known that Rommel's armour was returning from the frontier.

There was no longer the least doubt about the gravity of the situation and we were depressed by the emptiness of our lorries. It gave us a special feeling of failure. For the time being, through no fault of our own, we were just an incubus—dumb and idle, but eating, drinking, and burning petrol—on the shoulders of an exhausted division. It was a bitter pill for men who were accustomed to regard themselves as universal providers.

The sun came up next morning—the morning of the 28th—fresh and golden as a lemon, flooding the desert with clear light, easing aches and pains, making it less of a tribulation to hold ice-cold dixies at breakfast-time. It cheered everyone, even the sixty-six members of our unit who were breakfasting lightly in **Bardia** on cold water; even Charley Mann, Dick Turner, and Tom Barlow, who, with some sixty other sick and wounded men, had been left at **Sidi Azeiz** in the care of medical orderlies until someone—friend or foe—had time to collect them; even Ernie Symons's party, which, carrying its wounded in the remaining lorry, was moving slowly towards the Wire with a well-guarded convoy. Throughout the previous day its British hosts had been chased in a wide circle, Tom Laverick, who was a stretcher case, riding in a captured vehicle with the Tommy sergeant whom Alf Hallmond had done his best to kill. He had been wounded at the same time as Tom and he enlivened the trip by remarking as each shell from pursuing armour whistled overhead: 'The next one's ours, chum. It stands to reason.'

For Ernie, Tom, and the others the campaign was over and for us, too, it was drawing to a close. ¹⁶

After breakfast on the 28th we were told to shift three miles in a south-westerly direction to allow elbow room for a tank battle, and no sooner had we begun to move than the action started. For a long while we could hear the slam of the two-pounders and the steady drilling of heavy machine guns. We moved again at 10 a.m., heading north and passing through **Divisional Headquarters'** area. Our course took us close to Point 175 and over a stretch of desert that had seen much fighting. It was dotted with burnt-out tanks and vehicles—German, British, and South African. They stood in splashes of charred sand, and from the tail of each, like viscera from a squashed beetle, debouched a litter of rubbish—clothes, equipment, toilet gear, and reams of letters and photographs. Whenever the convoy halted, which it did often, our drivers would tear over to the nearest wrecks and grub frantically in these rubbish heaps. In every case the eyes had been picked out of them, but no one returned to his lorry without an armful of assorted litter that

ranged from boltless Mausers to torn German overcoats.

The fascination of these lucky dips never failed. Apart from sometimes yielding a Leica camera or a Luger, they were like a peep into the enemy's private mind. Why, for instance, did German soldiers encumber themselves with cosmetics? Wherever they had been the desert was littered with pots of face cream and skin salve, bottles of sun-tan lotion and hair oil, and little tins of powder. It argued a sybaritism we had not suspected. The Italians on the other hand—reputedly delicate and effeminate—were industriously turning the desert into a midden.

The propensity of the German soldier—and of the Italian soldier too—for burdening himself with letters and photographs was easier to understand. Our soldiers were the same. Whenever a battle had occurred the state of the desert suggested that a gigantic paper-chase had been in progress concurrently with the fighting. Acres of cheap notepaper covered eastern **Cyrenaica** at this time, letters in German and Italian mingling in the same drifts with letters from **Britain**, South Africa, and New Zealand. The writing was nearly always feminine and one is tempted to add that nearly every letter might have been written by the same woman. Few of us could read German or Italian and the scribbles from Bermondsey, **Capetown**, and Central Otago were protected from prying eyes by a delicacy that was almost universal, but one knew instinctively what each letter said, whether it was written to *Caro Enrico*, *Lieber Heinrich*, or *Dear Harry*. Has the parcel arrived safely? Is the food still enough? The curtains in the sitting-room at home ... and so on. Hardly a word, of course, about **Hitler** or **Mussolini** or Churchill or Peter Fraser. Nearly always the same letter—nearly always the same woman. Lying crumpled in the desert, mixed with torn photographs of girls, pudding-faced babies, and mournful-looking mothers—mournful behind the bright, fixed smile—they exhaled, the blue, the pink, and the mauve sheets, to an almost unbearable degree, that *weltschmerz*, that sentimental pessimism, which, though peculiarly German, is common to soldiers the world over.

Was there a hint here—it was one of the things we discussed often—

that the German soldier, so like ourselves in the externals of his daily life, was subtly different from the blind automaton of legend, just as we were different, by the grace of God, from the flattering conception of the Kiwi warrior—always brave, always modest, always magnificently independent—presented by friendly journalists for the delectation of our admirers? Was it, perhaps, the whole thing, a lie and a mistake? There was no bitterness in desert warfare, no slow poison of starving civilians and smashed cottages. Rommel was a hero to both sides.

We halted at noon near **Ed Dbana**, three miles north of Trigh Capuzzo and eight or nine miles due east of **Belhamed**. Soon afterwards we came under shellfire, which continued in a desultory fashion for half an hour, damage being confined to a few shrapnel holes in our vehicles.

After tea we were warned to expect a night move. The optimists said it was the beginning of the chase to **Tripoli**. The pessimists said that the Division had been cut to pieces and what was left of it was going to run for the Wire. Some said we were moving to **Tobruk**. Most of us were too sleepy to care much.

A tank battle, like a foundry in full blast, was banging away just over the horizon, and as darkness closed in it moved nearer and soon we could see the flash of guns and watch the tracers, like rows of red stitches, curving against the night. At one stage a tank must have received a direct hit from an armour-piercing shell, for a patch of rose pink, like the instantaneous blooming of a peony, appeared suddenly in the darkness. It bloomed and faded and was gone in five seconds.

We were called soon after nine and at twenty-five minutes to ten we set off in desert formation, tacking on behind the rear of Headquarters 13th Corps half an hour later. The whole of the Divisional Administration Group—**Petrol Company**, Supply Column, Divisional Ordnance Workshops, and many smaller units and parts of units—was moving behind us. We went through 4th Brigade headquarters area at **Belhamed** and then on to Ed Duda, passing the infantry in their slit-trenches. Some of them were asleep and our drivers were desperately

afraid of running over them. We were in single file because there were minefields on both sides of the track, and that was another worry. German flares were disconcertingly close and we could hear machine-gun fire. At Ed Duda, or near it, we turned north-west, and we guessed then that we were going to **Tobruk**. This was confirmed soon afterwards by Tommies—men of the **Essex Regiment**—who spoke to us from the darkness in their slow, warm voices. As long as we were driving we were strained and jumpy, but at every halt—and halts became more and more frequent—the tightness inside us unwound and billowing layers of exhaustion, like an eiderdown quilt, like an anaesthetic, came down and smothered us. Engines were switched off and sometimes it was very quiet. A cough, the squeak of a tank, the faint tapping of a machine gun, came to us close and clear like the noises that cattle make near at hand in a mist. Often a sentry would walk over to us.

‘How is she, Kiwi?’

‘Good. How's the war going?’

‘All right, Kiwi.’

‘Whose flares, d'you reckon?’

‘Dunno. Must be old Jerry's.’

Silence then, and an upward jerk of the chin to avoid sleep as a swimmer avoids a wave. Sometimes the wave was too tall and it would break over its victim, drowning him quietly and suddenly—but only for a short time. He would wake up, perhaps a quarter of an hour later, to find darkness in front of him and behind him a column of silent vehicles of which he was the self-appointed leader. He would start his engine in a panic and push on as fast as he dared, praying that some sixth sense was leading him in the right direction. It was easy to make a mistake, for on both sides of the track wheel marks led confidently into the darkness, clamouring to be followed. In an agony of indecision he would make his choice and go blundering on through the night, until at last to

his enormous relief the outline of a lorry appeared ahead of him. Now someone else was doing the leading. Now it was another's responsibility if half the NZASC ran into a minefield or ended up in the German lines.

Even for the Major, who was accustomed to leading large convoys under difficult conditions, it was a night of appalling anxiety. With drivers falling asleep at every stop and others following strange leaders and passing him in the darkness, he found it impossible to keep us together or watch over us. Soon after midnight he discovered his leading vehicles in a minefield, and with trampled tape all round him he directed them while they turned in the width of the track and retraced their wheel marks.

By three in the morning only a few 13th Corps vehicles were ahead of him. He was told by a British officer that the enemy was on all sides and was advised to travel on a bearing of 317 degrees, the officer adding that it was essential to get the transport clear of the corridor by daylight.

Just before dawn, by which time the bulk of our unit had passed through or gone round the whole of 13th Corps headquarters, the Major discovered that he was being followed by only half a dozen vehicles. He halted, and Corporal Bev Hendrey went back on his motor-cycle to try to find the rest. The next section of the convoy was half a mile behind, a sleeping driver heading a long line of other sleeping drivers, most of whom were ours.

We were led through the rubbish of a battlefield, among which infantry were standing-to in slit-trenches, and at a quarter past six, while it was still dark, the head of the huge column—it has been said that something like a thousand vehicles passed through the corridor that night—crossed the perimeter of **Tobruk**. Company headquarters was in the van and a party of our Don Rs led the way in. Behind them was the first column to enter **Tobruk** since the Australian 9th Division, seven and a half months earlier, had halted there on its way through **Cyrenaica**—had halted and fought.

'It's bloody Kiwis!' said three tired, dirty infantrymen. For thirty weeks—thirty aeons—they had been beleaguered in the world's most desolate and dangerous spot and now they were so pleased and excited they could only swear. Doubtless, under that pale dawn, they saw us as liberators. Dancing before them were visions of clean beds, Cairo food, Cairo girls, liquor. It was not for us to disillusion them or tell them of our suspicion: no one would be leaving Tobruk; people were coming in. The General commanding 13th Corps put the matter in a nutshell: 'Tobruk is relieved but not half so relieved as I am.'

By daylight nearly all our vehicles were inside the perimeter but we were not yet out of the wood. Heavy-calibre shells began feeling for the long column in which we were jammed nose to tail. They groped blindly across the desert, found the roadway, then overshot it. They tried again and this time did better. The column kept halting and it was impossible to leave the road because of minefields. When we did move it was at a maddening crawl, but our luck was in.

We got clear after what seemed an age, and the Major's logbook takes up the story:

At 0800 hours Corps Headquarters directed us to unit area, but owing to various Corps officers giving different instructions the unit moved three times before it finally halted late in the morning. We had travelled 20 miles in 14 hours. At once the vehicles were sent to 108 AA Site to load ammunition. Fresh rations drawn and nearly empty water trailers refilled. Rations included bread. Drivers very tired, and as soon as they had completed maintenance of vehicles they were ordered to rest as much as possible.

When we had finished our jobs there was still some pale daylight left but no one wanted to have anything to do with it. The scene that surrounded us was unbelievably dismal and it was a pleasure to draw down the canopy and shut it out. Hardly a soul was abroad and the shabby lorries, with no human figures about them, looked lonely and dead-tired. Nothing can express weariness better than an army lorry.

They looked not only weary and solitary, but, in some indefinable way, disgruntled. Their present surroundings, it seemed, accustomed though they were to salty and stubborn pastures, were a little too much even for them. It was as though the charred skeletons of the British and Italian lorries that littered the neighbourhood were able to remind them of mortality. It was as though they were feeling in a queer way—and an old lorry (you think with it and for it so much) is almost sentient—that no tenderness of ours, no oiling, greasing, 'four-o-sixing', could aid them against their last enemy. To just such desolate cemeteries all vehicles were bound.

And indeed, with the wind blowing thin and mean, the prospect they looked out on was so bleak, so barren, so starved and withered, that you said to yourself: 'The thing's dead. It's a bit of the world that went bad. They cut it off and threw it away.'

Our area was in the eastern part of the fortress and the ruined town with its harbour full of lost ships was hidden from view. Looking seawards, one saw only naked hills, framing here and there a fragment of the **Mediterranean**—hard and lustreless as blue china broken on a rubbish heap. Inland there was nothing but minefields, tangles of barbed wire, wrecked vehicles, abandoned gun positions, shell cases. The hillsides, the minefields, the area we were parked in, all were sprinkled liberally with little pieces of shrapnel. It was as though the owner of the estate, the demon who inhabited **Tobruk**, had gone forth to sow, and in scorn and mockery of all fertile things had sown shards.

¹ L-Cpl H. J. C. Campbell; truck driver; Mangamuka, **North Auckland**; born **Whangarei**, 17 Dec 1914; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

² Dvr H. W. McCabe; lorry driver; Ohaupo, **Waikato**; born **Whitianga**, 5 Dec 1916; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

³ Dvr D. H. Baker; contractor; Mangamuka, **North Auckland**;

born NZ, 14 Apr 1904; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

⁴ Dvr N. J. N. Orsborn; farm labourer; born NZ, 6 Dec 1915; killed in action, 27 Nov 1941.

⁵ Cpl N. J. Barach; motor driver; Maungaturoto, **North Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 26 Jan 1908; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941; evacuated to **Italy** 15 Dec 1941.

⁶ Dvr C. Aro; driver-mechanic; **Christchurch**, born **Auckland**, 25 Aug 1915; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

⁷ Dvr E. Turner; motor trimmer; **Wellington**; born NZ, 14 Sep 1909; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁸ Dvr G. B. Drinnan; farmer; born Milton, 26 Jul 1909; died of wounds, 27 Nov 1941.

⁹ Cpl C. G. Mann; grocer; **Dunedin**; born **Dunedin**, 8 Jun 1917; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

¹⁰ Dvr J. D. B. Clifford; carpenter; born **New Plymouth**, 26 Nov 1903; died of wounds, 28 Nov 1941.

¹¹ Brigadier James Hargest was then in command of the 5th Brigade. He was captured with 46 officers and 650 ORs after an action lasting about an hour and a half. He escaped in March 1943 from a prison camp near **Florence**, eventually reaching England, and was killed in action in **Normandy** in August 1944.

¹² George, like most of the others, had confused Rommel with the tank commander. Rommel arrived in **Sidi Azeiz** about half an hour after the surrender.

¹³ A party from B Section had been left in charge of mines in the **Abiar Nza Ferigh** area and later taken to **Sidi Azeiz** in C Section

transport.

14 Dvr L. J. Howarth; farmhand; **Morrinsville**; born **Morrinsville**, 4 Nov 1917.

15 Dvr B. J. L. Thorburn; printer; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 1 Dec 1918.

16 All our wounded were evacuated safely to the rear. The three drivers who had been left at **Sidi Azeiz**, after living mainly on rice for three days and nights and being visited daily by German patrols and once by British armour, were taken on the 30th to **Fort Capuzzo**. Ernie Symons's party, after leaving their wounded with a New Zealand field ambulance unit on the far side of the Wire, continued in their own lorry to **Fuka**, where they were held until it was possible for them to rejoin us.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 11 – PRISON AND THE MUSHROOM COUNTRY

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PRISON AND THE MUSHROOM COUNTRY

THROUGHOUT the last day of November the battle went on, the Germans fighting to close the **Tobruk** corridor, our forces to keep it open.

At 9 a.m. we were ordered to send eighty vehicles to serve the 4th and 6th Brigades, but the Tobruk Control Post said that a convoy of that size would not be able to get through. Finally fifteen lorries loaded with 25-pounder ammunition left at noon under Captain Gibson.

As they were moving out of the fortress they came under shellfire but no damage was done. They moved slowly towards the Ed Duda escarpment, skirted the **Essex Regiment**, and travelled for a mile and a half along the *Achenstrasse*, the 40-mile road built to by-pass **Tobruk**. Turning left, they found the 4th and 6th Brigades a short distance south of **Belhamed**. The infantry were shivering in their slit-trenches, damp and frozen but still indomitably cheerful. The campaign had yielded a good harvest of loot—pistols, binoculars, cameras—and they were like children on Christmas morning.

Half the 25-pounder ammunition was delivered to the 4th Field Regiment and half to the 6th. The latter was down to its last few rounds and our drivers went straight to the gun positions and flung off their loads. Scarcely had they done so than tanks came out of the setting sun and the guns opened fire. From tray to breech, from breech to enemy tank, and all in a matter of minutes—that was how it had happened in our dreams and that was how it was happening now. It made up for any number of disappointments, frustrations, and seemingly fruitless journeys.

With 200 prisoners aboard and the guns firing around them—and not firing only but fighting, hitting out in a hot rage so that the desert shook and quivered—the lorries were hustled from the area. Presently, looking back, our drivers saw a ring of fires burning rosily in the half-

light. They were supremely content, never doubting that each fire was a tank.

Doubt came the next morning—it was 1 December—when we heard that **Sidi Rezegh** was again in German hands, and it deepened when we were told not to reload our lorries. We were to be used as garrison troops.

All through the day rumours of disaster, like evil birds returning to their grim roost, came back to **Tobruk**, and we were asked to believe, not for the first time in our Army careers, that the Division had been cut to pieces.

During the afternoon four lorries loaded with engineers' stores and mixed ammunition set out under Second-Lieutenant West-Watson ¹ to serve the 14th British Brigade, which was hard pressed on the left flank of the 4th Brigade a few miles north of **Belhamed**. The Ed Duda route was now closed and the lorries had to travel east along the **Bardia** road before bearing inland. Even the infantry guides from Headquarters 14th Brigade were uncertain of the way, but at last, after being turned back by unidentified motor-cyclists and coming under mortar fire, the convoy arrived safely at the command post of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, for which the ammunition was intended. It was now just on dusk.

‘I was told,’ said Second-Lieutenant West-Watson, ‘to keep the loads on wheels during the night, but as the enemy held an escarpment overlooking the post this seemed to me to be courting disaster. Accordingly I asked to be put through on the telephone to our own **Divisional Headquarters** so that I could get the order confirmed.

‘Meanwhile the enemy had attacked and for an hour he subjected the post to heavy mortar and machine-gun fire and tried to range his mortars on the transport. Our only casualty, however, was a driver who sprained his knee while scrambling for cover.

‘The enemy then broke through and drove the infantry on to the post itself. I withdrew our drivers to a nearby hollow occupied by the

battalion headquarters, chose fire positions, and waited. The expected attack never came because British tanks arrived and with their support our troops were able to counter-attack.

‘During the fighting that followed one lorry went forward under infantry escort with a load of mixed ammunition, and while it was away we unloaded the others in accordance with orders that had come through. As soon as the lorry returned we set out for home.’

While this small convoy was slipping towards **Tobruk under shellfire, remnants of the New Zealand Division were heading for Egypt.**

The attempt to keep open the corridor had failed and **Tobruk was again isolated.**

Rumour had it that we were to be evacuated by sea and the prospect pleased hardly anyone. We had no objection to leaving **Tobruk, which seemed to us not so much God-forsaken as never to have been visited by Divine Providence, but we did object strongly to the idea of abandoning our lorries. However, after being whole-heartedly accepted for a few hours, the story, on as little evidence, was as whole-heartedly rejected, and during the days that followed our employment was so strenuous that Rumour, which has an objection to busy men, wasted little time on us.**

Day and night, in working parties of from thirty to a hundred, we laboured at the docks, handling petrol, ammunition, and food. Every night there was at least one air raid and often there were several. Sometimes a lone raider would make a hit-and-run attack. Sometimes four, five, or six bombers, converging on the target from different directions, would dive through the ack-ack barrage and drop their bombs in or around the harbour. Our greatest danger was from falling nosecaps and shell fragments, for the barrage was terrific—fantastic. It arched above us like the red ribs of a gigantic burning lobster pot and the noise was physically painful to listen to. There was the deep crash of the three-point-sevens, the pom-pom-pom-pom of the Bofors, the heavy stammer of the point-fives, and the light clatter, no louder in that

colossal din than the tapping of a typewriter, of the Bren and Lewis guns. The technique that had saved [Malta](#) was being used. The guns were firing on fixed lines, making every square foot of the sky perilous. Only the machine guns quested at will, their red tracers, like angry bees, swarming from target to target. It was breath-taking to see aircraft fly through this inferno apparently unscathed, but they seldom stayed long enough to aim properly and damage to shipping was rare. They dropped their loads almost at random and made off at once.

Sometimes the barrage would end raggedly, with odd bangs and slams and stutterings continuing after most of the guns had ceased fire. At other times it would end as though in obedience to a conductor's baton, and then, in the immense silence that followed, you could hear the delicate patter of falling shrapnel, and occasionally the wicked swish-swish-swish of a falling nose-cap or a loud clang as a fragment of shell case landed on a metal deck. The dark waters of the harbour would be ringed as by rising fish.

We worked in the ships' holds, loading the slings in which the cargo was transferred to barges and landing craft, and on the wharves, carrying an endless succession of crates, boxes, and tins to the waiting lorries, a number of which were our own.

At first, when the siren sounded, we used to go at once to the official shelters, which consisted of deep caves near the wharves, but after a while, disgusted by this waste of time, we took to ducking beneath the nearest cover, starting work again the moment the raid ended.

Unloading petrol from a motor ship was one of our first jobs. Dave Falconer ² describes what it was like:

‘When we stopped working we got as cold as hell. Our clothes were soaked in petrol and the stuff was washing about in the scuppers. This was because the petrol was in “flimsies” and in every slingful about half a dozen tins were crushed. On the first night of the job the hatches were closed on account of the danger from red-hot pieces of shrapnel, but on

the second night, owing to the urgency of the work, they were left open. That night the first plane came over at nine. The beggar cut his engine and glided in unobserved—there was only one plane—and let a bomb go near our ship. He may have caught on that we were handling an important cargo, for about half an hour later we were attacked again—by the same plane we thought—and three bombs landed about a hundred yards away. We felt the blast in the hold.

‘Before that we had been scuttling aft during raids to shelter under the poop but from then on we stayed in the hold. We looked at it this way: the whole ship was swimming in petrol and either she went up or she didn't.’

On 3 December we help to unload an ammunition ship—a ship whose arrival had been awaited with great anxiety, as two days earlier the supply of 25-pounder ammunition in **Tobruk** had totalled only 4000 rounds.

In some ships the winches were operated by British soldiers, often with less skill than enthusiasm. More than once our drivers were fascinated by the sight of a heavy bomb swinging nonchalantly among booms and stanchions, and on one occasion a 500-pound bomb was dumped unceremoniously on the deck a few inches from the ship's side. There it dangled, half in and half out of the sling, while the onlookers, forgetting what they had learnt about detonators, wondered if it would explode at once or wait until it toppled into the lighter below. On the petrol ship, too, the winchman was sometimes at fault, but never more so than when he jumped overboard during an air raid and swam ashore.

In spite of these anxious moments it seems safe to say that most of us enjoyed working in **Tobruk** harbour, though enjoyed, perhaps, is not quite the word. It was like a football game in which you would sooner not have played but are glad afterwards that you did. At all events we discovered that hard physical labour is an excellent nerve tonic. Backwards and forwards we went hour after hour, carrying boxes from the dim-lit bowels of the invasion barges to the waiting lorries, crossing

and re-crossing the landing ramps, which rested on the quaysides like dropped jaws. The sweat trickled over us like warm oil and the urgent rhythm of the work was as soothing as music. How much more pleasant it was than crouching in a cold slit-trench and suffering the complete nightmare from ambulance to operating table with the passage of each plane!

Many of us, too, were affected by the poetry of the scene. All the business of the port was being carried on in the dark. Winches rattled, voices shouted, tugs fussed, lorries arrived. 'Right hand down. Bring her back on that. Keep coming. HOLD IT!' In the background were the lost ships, which, like ghosts, were the more powerfully present for being hidden. We had marvelled at them by daylight. Everywhere masts and funnels poked skywards at crazy angles. There was a small steamer with only her wheelhouse, like an old-fashioned bathing machine, showing above the surface. There was a tramp with her side torn out, so that you could see the grey water sloshing along the catwalks in her engine-room. Near the harbour's mouth there was the Italian cruiser *San Giorgio*, black with rust, and across from the wharves, on the far side of the harbour, an Italian liner was aground, looking as though she had tried to rush into the hills. There were dozens of drowned ships.



A GROUP NEAR TOBRUK
(L. to r.) H. S. Jones, P. E. Coutts, D. C. Ward, F. G. Butt,
K. E. May, S. A. Sampson

A GROUP NEAR (L. to r.) H. S. Jones, P. E. Coutts, D. C. Ward, F. G. Butt. K. E. May, S. A. Sampson



Tobruk Harbour in August 1941
Tobruk Harbour in August 1941



Stuka attack on transport south-west of Gazala
Stuka attack on transport south-west of Gazala



Divisional Ammunition Company dispersed
Divisional Ammunition Company dispersed



Ammunition Company Workshops at Bir el Thalata

Sometimes the harbour was shelled but no one took notice of that. We stopped work only for the banshee howling of the siren, which was the perfect voice for the demon that inhabited **Tobruk**. Then it was as though the night were being operated on without ether. While the sweat dried on us we waited for the hacking, chopping, thwacking of the many guns, and for the sky to be torn open marvellously and filled with streamers, loops, and whorls, as of scarlet and gold viscera.

No doubt a little of our contentment at that time can be attributed to the rum that was always available at the docks. We referred to it with affectionate deference as 'Tom Thumb' and agreed that it was even more potent and unpredictable in its effect than 'Uncle Joe', our name for zibbib. Most of us took it in the form of café royal, which we made with cold coffee and condensed milk and found delicious. We helped ourselves liberally to cigarettes from the **NAAFI** supplies we handled and it was wonderful not to have to save butts any longer. During the past fortnight some of us had been reduced to smoking cigars (Italian Army issue), than which no more powerful emetic exists, and a few of us had experimented with tea leaves.

During daylight, much to the annoyance of the night shift, the **Luftwaffe** concentrated on supply depots rather than on the docks, and from the unit area we saw several exciting raids. On one occasion a

large bomber was brought down, and on another we were moved almost to the point of cheering by the behaviour of a tiny minesweeper, which, with bombs throwing up water spouts all round her, calmly went about on arriving at the end of her beat and steamed back on a parallel course, defending herself vigorously all the while.

At night, to the annoyance of the day shift, we were kept awake by a nearby battery of three-point-sevens and by the noise from the harbour, but if we had lost nothing except sleep during our stay at **Tobruk** we should have been well content. Unhappily there were casualties. Lennie De Pina ³ (A Section) was wounded in the leg by a stray piece of shrapnel, and Colin Cameron lost his life. The slight wound he had received earlier in the campaign had not mended and on 5 December he was evacuated from **Tobruk** in the merchant ship *Chakdina*, which was sunk by an aerial torpedo.

And we lost one life through sickness. Cliff Collie ⁴ (B Section) was taken ill in the night and died before reaching hospital. That closed our casualty list for the campaign, making it: killed, 6; wounded, 11; prisoners (at that time), 66; died of sickness, 1; total 84.

Meanwhile, in the desert outside **Tobruk**, defeat had become victory. The scale had been tipped by the **Royal Air Force**, by the skill and daring of 'Jock' columns—fast-moving, hard-hitting raiding parties named after their originator, Brigadier Jock Campbell, VC—and by the fighting qualities of the ordinary British Tommy *vis-à-vis* those of his German counterpart. By 5 December the corridor was open again, and two days later Rommel broke off the battle and began to retire westwards.

On the 7th we dumped our ammunition, and the next morning while the world was ringing with two words— **Pearl Harbour**—we left **Tobruk**, heading for the Wire with the rest of the Administration Group.

We were a sadly truncated unit. A Section, with a sub-section from Workshops, had been attached to a Composite NZASC Company newly-formed under Captain Roberts to serve the 5th Brigade; B Section, with

five lorries from A Section, had stayed in **Tobruk** to serve elements of the 4th Brigade, and fifteen of our spare drivers with 172 others from the NZASC had stayed to do garrison duties.

The rest of us moved through the Wire at **El Beida** late in the afternoon and the next night found us a few miles from the **Siwa** road. On the 10th, at five in the afternoon, we halted in our old area at **Fuka**, from which we had been away a little less than a month. The vehicles came to rest in their old parking places and we jumped out to inspect our dugouts, which we found half-filled with loose sand but otherwise habitable.

As we boiled our billies that evening we were conscious of an agreeable symmetry in our affairs, a soothing pattern. The pity of it was that not everyone had returned to the starting point. Many were prisoners, some were in hospital, and some had gone out of the world altogether. But mixed with our melancholy was a certain smugness perfectly compatible with sincere grief. The conviction was upon us—the survivor's unwarrantable conviction—that in avoiding pitfalls into which others had fallen and returning unscathed to **Fuka** we had evinced judgment: had, in fact, shown merit. And our absent friends would have been the last to cavil at this: it was a feeling they would have shared.

The next day we resumed the pleasant seashore life that the campaign with Rommel had interrupted and two days later B Section returned to us. On the day after that the unit logbook contained this comfortable and laconic entry: COY AT .

But the statement was too comfortable and too laconic to be comprehensive. It took no account of A Section, which was now at **Acroma**, some fifteen to twenty miles west by south of **Tobruk**, girding its loins (it hoped) for the pursuit to **Tripoli**, or of the fifteen spare drivers who had been left behind in **Tobruk** (they were working on the wharves and being bombed nightly), or of the sixty-six members of our unit who were freezing and starving in the prison compound in **Bardia**.

They must have guessed that by now they had been posted as missing and struck off the unit strength, but they kept together still and they still regarded themselves as members of the Ammunition Company, though on bad days their time with the company seemed remote and clouded like childhood and fugitive like a dream. Always when they had been away from it before—on leave, on courses, in hospital—it had continued to govern and condition their lives: the parent unit. It was a train that could be caught up at the next station, and in that train above a certain seat in a certain compartment in a certain coach was a notice: RESERVED. Now it was a train that had dashed off into the darkness, none knowing how far it would travel or in what direction. At last, after a decent interval, the ticket-collector would come down the corridor, see the RESERVED sign, and take it away. Then a stranger would sit down.

The prisoners daily grew weaker and sometimes they felt dizzy and light-headed. Then nothing that had happened to them *before* and *outside*—not their homes, nor the Ammunition Company, nor the girls they remembered—had any reality beside the icy fingers of wind that tugged at the overcoats and dirty blankets beneath which they huddled close for warmth in hollows scooped out with steel helmets, the crying need for a cigarette, the grey bread and black coffee they had been given for breakfast, the macaroni, dried potatoes, dried onions, dab of sauce, small piece of bread (it was neither as filling nor as appetising as it sounds) they could look forward to for dinner. Only these things were real.

Sometimes one hardship seemed important to the exclusion of all others. Sometimes it was dysentery—many were suffering from this. Sometimes it was a smaller thing: trouble with dirty false teeth, not hearing from home, long finger-nails that broke when you tried to scratch yourself through your clothes.

Time meant nothing in the prison compound. Our drivers' watches—the ones that had not been confiscated on the first day—had gone to

Italian guards in exchange for scraps of food or a few cigarettes. (One prisoner handed over a gold watch for a small black loaf.) It was enough that every morning the sun elbowed itself over the grey rim of the horizon as from a bath of filthy, freezing water, to shine dimly for a few hours or to be obscured at once by drifting veils of rain. It was enough that three times a day prison meals were served.

For the prisoners to say that they had been only two and a half weeks in **Bardia** meant nothing. The events of their captivity, spaced by an eternity of boredom and discomfort, stretched behind them like a perspective of telegraph posts, reaching as distant an horizon as any they had ever known. They saw, smudged at the end of the long line, the morning on which the two parties—Sergeant Mellows's drivers and the party from **Sidi Azeiz**—had met in prison. That was on 28 November. After the meeting they had been searched, first by German and then by Italian guards. The latter confiscated compasses, service watches (and some private watches, too), knives, razors, and anything else that took their fancy. Then about a third of the prisoners had been marched to a larger compound full of rocks and rubble, where they were joined by the rest a day or two later. Except on the north side, where it was divided from **Bardia** by the blank walls of houses, the new compound was bounded by a wall nine or ten feet high. The next day, to facilitate the issue of water and rations, the prisoners had been sorted into groups of thirty under their own NCOs and some old Italian mess tins and water bottles had been handed round. Then the camp sergeant-major, WO I O. A. Wahrlich ⁵ (5th Field Regiment), had taken the names of those who had neither blankets nor overcoats. When the blankets arrived they were filthy and there were not enough of them.

The sound of falling bombs had been comforting at first, but on 1 December nine Marylands dropped their loads near the compound and on the 2nd there was another raid, even closer this time. When that happened our drivers were filled with unreasoning bitterness. That day it rained and the camp sergeant-major wrote in his diary:

What a hell of a condition for men to live in! Some will die of

exposure unless something is done soon.

And three days later: Cold again. Sick parade was attended by MO. Germans appear to have no medical supplies. Bread rather good but loaves appear to be getting smaller. Rumour that some of the officers had been taken away. Men getting a little down. Quite a number of dysentery cases. Cold at night and dust-storms as well. Saw men fighting over scraping out a dixie to get more to eat. No sign of **RAF during the day but quite a bit of bombing at night.**

Although the officers had been imprisoned in another compound our drivers felt more unprotected than ever when it was learned that they had been taken to **Italy by submarine, Second-Lieutenant Duke with them. Now there was no authority to appeal to, however uselessly, when the Italians made unreasonable demands, as they did on the 6th. On that day Claude Campbell and others were told to clean up an area some distance from the compound, but when they got there they refused to work. They felt sure the enemy meant to use the area as a supply dump; apart from this it was littered with disgusting filth and was a favourite target of the **Royal Air Force**. The camp sergeant-major was sent for and he told the Italians that the order was an improper one, on which the officer of the guard flew into a passion, threatening to keep the party there without food or water until the job was done and adding that he would not hesitate to use machine guns if there was any more trouble.**

In face of this unanswerable argument a start was made, but the work was interrupted before long by a visit from nine Marylands. The Italians at once took to their heels and so did the working party. 'But we did not run,' said Claude Campbell, 'either as far or as fast as the Italians.'

In the midst of their miseries and discomforts our drivers were buoyed up by the belief that **Bardia would fall soon. Brigadier Hargest had spoken to some of them on the first day of their captivity, telling them to be of good cheer because they would be free in a few days. They clung to this promise and they were quick to notice how on some days**

their guards were milder and more friendly.

Then Japan attacked [Pearl Harbour](#) and the Germans and Italians became twice as arrogant as before. Gloatingly they pointed out that New Zealand was now in the danger zone, and soon they were able to speak of the sinking of the *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*. Our drivers did their best to discount this claim as propaganda and they repeated their own stories— [Turkey](#) was in the war on our side and the Russians were rolling up the German Army—but in their low state it was difficult to remain cheerful and confident.

They were haunted always by the fear of being sent to [Italy](#), and fear became panic on 15 December when a hospital ship was seen approaching the harbour. Contradictory announcements were made in quick succession. Only the sick and wounded were to go. Everyone would be going. No, it was the sick and wounded plus all who had attended sick parades. These would not fill the ship so some fit men would have to go as well. A list was being made out.

There was no further change of plan and later in the day 300 prisoners, several of whom were members of the Ammunition Company, were paraded and marched down to the jetty. There they were kept waiting for about an hour, at the end of which a [Medical Corps](#) major began questioning some of the less obviously sick. In nearly every case he was given the same answer: 'I'm as fit as a fiddle. There isn't a thing wrong with me.' Whereupon he delivered a lecture on the Geneva Convention and ended by ordering all fit men back to the compound. Back they marched, happy as though the compound were paradise.

Among those who did not return—WO I Wahrlich was told later that sixty-two New Zealanders had been embarked—were Corporal Nigel Barach, Lance-Corporal Stan Wrack, Owen Blomfield, ⁶ Pat Dooley, ⁷ Bill Gamble, ⁸ and George Jeffrey, ⁹ all of whom, with the exception of Stan who had gallantly volunteered to go to [Italy](#) as a medical orderly, were sick and exhausted.

The rest could still hope, so life went on in the compound, flickering a little more feebly each day. Weakened by hunger the prisoners suffered increasingly from cold and at times they were conscious only of an empty, aching stomach to which was attached a pair of enormous numb hands and a pair of enormous numb feet. But they could still *baa* provocatively when the Italians herded them into line for roll-call; they could still discuss the gargantuan meals they would order when they reached **Cairo** (a whole chicken, six eggs, chips ...); they could still, in the intervals of lying together among the rubble in inert filthy heaps, grumble a little, play poker or two-up, laugh a little. Together they would chant the schoolboy quatrain—‘Cold as a frog in a frozen pool’—and someone would say: ‘Put a sock in it, you jokers. Go help Fred catch a seagull.’

Meanwhile Rommel was being hard pressed at **Gazala**, some thirty-five miles down the coast road from **Tobruk**. Taking part in the battle under the command of 13th Corps was the 5th Brigade, which had left the **Sollum- Capuzzo** area on the 9th. A Section, as part of the Composite NZASC Company serving the brigade, had gone first to **El Adem**, camping for a day or two on the outskirts of the great Axis airfield there. Here the section was joined by ‘Dad’ Cleave and Basil Thorburn who had been given up for lost (they had been with the Supply Column all the time), and here Jim Stanley was wounded in the thumb by a small explosion that occurred while he was inspecting captured equipment.

From El Adem, still serving the 5th Brigade, the section had gone to **Acroma**, twenty miles west by south of **Tobruk**, and from there to **Gazala**, from which Rommel had been driven on the 17th. On 23 December while the **Eighth Army** continued its advance— **Derna** had been occupied four days before—the 5th Brigade began the long journey to **Baggush**, A Section picking up the 23rd Battalion at **Gazala** and taking it as far as **El Adem**, where the drivers spent Christmas Day. For lunch they had bully beef, but it was followed by a fruit salad, the ingredients of which the cooks had been saving for a long time.

In Tobruk, in spite of an unpromising start—there was a duststorm and a heavy air raid in the morning and for some reason the NZASC party had not been included in the garrison strength for the issue of Christmas comforts—the unfortunate fifteen did tolerably. For dinner they had tinned turkey, tinned chicken, and tinned plum pudding (an issue they made to themselves), and someone produced 60 litres of bad wine.

At Fuka the fare was frugal, for it had been decided to postpone the Christmas festivities until the unit was complete. Nevertheless it was as pleasant a day as Christmas can hope to be without children, and if we enjoyed it more as a remembered happiness or as a happiness experienced vicariously—in New Zealand the red flowers were on the pohutukawa, yachts were sailing in the **Waitemata, nephews, nieces, and small brothers were shrieking to high heaven, and the 5-gallon kegs were in the sinks—it was none the worse for that.**

Bev Hendrey describes the day in his diary:

Most of the blokes writing home. A few of them got primed. Very quiet on the whole.

In Bardia the prisoners fared better than they expected. A few days before, Major-General Artur Schmidt, the German commander, had paid them a visit.

‘He had grey hair, pale-blue eyes, and a hard mouth—one of the old school,’ said Claude Campbell. ‘But his manner was friendly and when Harvey hit him up for a Christmas dinner he said: “I will promise you nodding. Your comrades outside have cut our lines of communication.” He added something to the effect that we should get our Christmas dinner if the position was restored in time but we told him what he could do with it. The chaps complained about the conditions and the food and the old boy said: “This desert warfare is very uncomfortable.” To which someone replied: “You said it, pal!”’

After this unpromising conversation the Christmas rations came as a pleasant surprise. Each man was given ten cigarettes, two packets of biscuits, and two or three sweets, and the usual issue of coffee and rice was augmented by an issue of bully beef (three men to a tin), cheese, jam, sugar, and cognac. From this the cooks were able to prepare two good meals, one of savoury rice, with cheese and bully, and one of sweet rice. The cognac went into the coffee. That night for the first time in twenty-seven days our drivers went to bed on full stomachs. They were comforted, too, by the feeling of having feasted from the barren fig tree. Fresh water from the rock in Horeb was hardly a greater miracle than good cheer in that flinty compound.

On Boxing Day, as in prison and workhouse the world over, it was a case of back to porridge and old clothes, but the confidence that freedom was not far away grew stronger daily. Since 16 December the prisoners had been guarded only by Italians, all Germans being needed for the front line. Each day the air raids on gun positions and supply depots became fiercer—on one occasion bombs landed only twenty-five yards from the west wall of the prison, one prisoner being killed and four wounded—and nightly the artillery bombardment was intensified.

As their eventual release was now almost a certainty few of the prisoners thought of trying to escape; indeed, as far as our drivers could discover, only one man made a serious attempt. He was Jacky O'Connor¹⁰ (B Section). On the night of the 27th-28th, taking nothing with him, not even his greatcoat, he scaled the prison wall, hung for a moment by his finger-tips, and dropped into the darkness. He was risking a bad injury—for at the point he had chosen (it was where the latrine abutted upon the outer wall) the ground sloped steeply—but he escaped with nothing worse than a twisted ankle. Guided by the British barrage and depending on it to drown the noise he was making, he crossed a succession of deep gullies. He had relied on being clear of Bardia by dawn, but the going was much harder than he had expected and he was hindered by his ankle. When daylight came it found him on the side of a gorge among German infantry positions. There was nothing for it but to

creep into a patch of camel-thorn and lie there all day without moving a muscle. Without water, food, or overcoat, and with so little freedom of movement that the small desert birds scuffled in the sand only a few feet from his face, he lay still for hours, hating the daylight as it has seldom been hated before and waiting for nightfall as a man waits for his girl. It came at last, late but beloved, and he moved forward cautiously until he was among the outermost German pillboxes. The escaper's supreme moment was now upon him: safety in sight and the worst dangers all about him like a thicket; on the one hand, the fun of strolling into his own lines a free man, free by his own nerve and efforts; on the other, the disaster of being dragged back to prison ignominiously or shot down like a dog.

But escapers need luck and Jacky's was dead out. He disturbed some Germans in a pillbox and began to run. There were guttural shouts from three sides of him and rifles stabbed the darkness with flashes of smoky orange. He yelled '*Kamerad!*' and the Germans came up to him.

Instead of being returned to the compound he was placed in a building outside it, and the Italian guards slyly allowed Corporal Jack Moore, ¹¹ the commander of Group 8, to which most of C Section's drivers belonged, to continue reporting him present. When they were tired of the joke they turned nasty, threatening Jack with a diet of biscuits and water and the whole of Group 8 with the dreaded punishment of a submarine trip to [Italy](#).

Neither threat was carried out, for by now it was plain to both prisoners and guards that their roles would shortly be reversed. On 30 December it was learned that [Benghazi](#) was in British hands, and that day each man was given ten cigarettes and there was a double issue of rice, not to mention several unexpected issues of civility.

On New Year's Eve the camp sergeant-major wrote in his diary:

At 0430 hours the attack commenced. A bombardment was kept up for more than two hours and then some tanks appeared over the

horizon. Boys as excited as hell. Well, it's 1200 hours and they still seem to be cracking away and a 2-pounder has just whizzed down the gully. The idea of being a prisoner and more or less in the firing line as well is not so good. Still, here's hoping. Tons of ammo have been expended today and it can't go on like this for long. Rifle fire can be heard. Men laying odds about how long it will last. Truck arrives with water. Tanks with infantry behind can be seen approaching over the hill. Rifle fire a little closer. Brens can be heard in action.

New Year's Day was cold and bleak. Showers of rain swept over the compound and a savage wind tugged and tore at the miscellaneous rubbish from which our drivers had built shelters. The noise of the fighting was not loud but everyone knew that the end was very near. The Italian guards treated the prisoners with a solicitude that was almost tender.

January 2 (wrote the camp sergeant-major). Heavy bombardment last night. Quite a lot of shell splinters flying round our area. Garrison surrenders....

At 10 a.m., after a two-hour truce, Major-General Schmidt surrendered unconditionally to General de Villiers, commander of the 2nd South African Division. The prisoners had been told earlier that their friends would be with them at 9 a.m.

In Bardia there were 1100 prisoners, gaunt, bearded, filthy, wobbly at the knees—1100 scarecrows with hearts as light as puffballs. After the first flush of joy they became 1100 craving stomachs.

'Jokers from the Div. Cav. were the first troops we saw,' said Claude Campbell, 'and as soon as they arrived they started to dish out cigarettes, tucker, and their own Christmas parcels. Don and Harvey and I got a cake. We ate it straight away and it made us crook. We were still hungry, though, and for the rest of the day, off and on, we were eating or trying to eat.'

Clarry Monahan and a friend breakfasted with German officers in a

well-found mess.

‘After breakfast,’ said Clarry, ‘we still wanted more, so we set off down a steep hill to the waterfront, where we remembered having seen a bakehouse when we marched down to the hospital ship. We were as weak as kittens but excitement kept us going. We missed out at the bakehouse, so we went over to some caves that looked as though provisions might be stored in them. Here we struck it lucky and we each filled a sandbag with Jerry pork and beans. We struggled back to the compound and dished the stuff out to our cobbles. It made them croaker than hell.’

They ate all day, many of them, with a kind of sterile lust, just for the pleasure of feeling the meat in their mouths. Dusk found them lying ill in their old places in the compound heaped with enemy blankets. The next morning, suffering from every known variety of stomach disorder, they set out for **Maadi**.

At Maadi they were rested and fed up (in both senses of the word) and as the weeks went by there was some danger of their forming themselves into an exclusive **Bardia** society. Other members of the unit who were at Base—drivers discharged from hospital—waited anxiously for our return, refraining in the meantime from complaining too loudly of cold when anyone from **Bardia** was present or stressing unduly that slight feeling of emptiness that assails the ordinary soldier between tea-time and bed-time.

Cold and hunger had been established once and for all as their special province—and you cannot argue with experts.

As early as 16 December our unit had been reorganised as a reserve mechanical transport company to serve the **Eighth Army**, forty-seven vehicles with appropriate personnel being attached to us from other NZASC units and thirty-six from the Artillery. From then on we were under three hours' notice to move but it was not until five days after Christmas that we left **Fuka** for Bir el Thalata to start our new duties. A

Section, which had moved from **El Adem** on Christmas afternoon with the 22nd Battalion aboard, was already there, and the **Tobruk** party rejoined us during the day, so the unit was complete again.

By this time Rommel had withdrawn to positions—temporary ones—at **Agedabia** at the bottom of the **Benghazi** bulge, and the forward units of the **Eighth Army**, tired now, very thin on the ground, and worried by supply problems, could do little until **Benghazi** port was made usable and reinforcements arrived. That was the position on 2 January when A Section ('favoured A Section,' said some, though the Major was celebrated for his impartiality) embussed the 1st **Welch Regiment** at **Thalata** and headed west, leaving the rest of us to the pleasant but not wildly exciting task of shifting miscellaneous supplies from the railhead to **Tobruk**.

There was a holiday feeling in the air as A Section's convoy, with the **Welch** sitting sedately in the backs of the lorries, slipped along the coast road, the verges of which were littered with burnt or abandoned Italian vehicles: big diesel jobs—Fiats mostly, and Lancias. Engines purred and hummed, running like a dream, and the road's tarmac surface, compared with rough desert tracks, was like a springboard. The Mediterranean, sometimes grey and tumbled but hyacinth blue and apple green on sunny days, was often at the drivers' elbows and as they drove they sang; and so they came to **Derna**.

Viewed from the top of the escarpment, down which the road wound in serpentine loops, the little town resembled a clutch of snow-white eggs in a green nest. Poplars, palms, and eucalyptus sprouted between the villas, which, formerly the homes of wealthy officials, were deserted now or occupied by British troops, their broken windows and chipped balconies—the Arabs had played a short, forceful, and enjoyable innings, scoring freely—looking out on trampled gardens.

The next morning a **Junkers 88** bombed and machine-gunned the convoy for a few seconds, and for hour after hour a grey sky pelted it with rain, both doing something to dispel the holiday feeling. However,

the green, hilly country into which the convoy had climbed on leaving **Derna** was lovely in our drivers' eyes after the desert, and they came happily to Giovanni Berta, a small Italian settlement that boasted a castle. Here the regiment went into bivouac for a few days.

The people of Berta, depressed and bewildered after changing their masters three times in one year, seemed never to be quite sure which salute was now in fashion. Usually they gave the wrong one.

While the regiment patrolled the surrounding country—a party of Germans was supposed to be at large—a few of our drivers empurpled themselves with some new wine discovered in a deserted factory. Once a Junkers 88 dropped bombs uncomfortably close to the transport, and always the rain fell, turning the scrubby meadows into bogs.

No one was sorry to leave Berta behind and enter the Green Mountains (Jebel el Akdar) at the top of the **Benghazi** bulge. Now our drivers were in true New Zealand country, and the modern village of D'Annunzio, named after the Italian poet, the hero of **Fiume**, might have been a large and rather beautifully designed butter factory. It was square like a factory and tall and white like a lighthouse, and among the green hills it was altogether enchanting in the flashy, Fascist manner.

Late in the afternoon they came to the end of the Green Mountains and below them was the town of **Barce**, between which and the coast, eleven miles away, the plain was dotted at regular intervals with little, square, box-like farmhouses: *colonizzazione*. Beyond Barce the road ran between fields and large orchards, which sparkled with raindrops and smelt lovely under a peep of late sun. At Baracca, a tiny village ten miles west of **Barce** and between fifty and sixty north-east of **Benghazi**, the journey ended. The transport was dispersed among farms and the infantry took up positions in Tocra Pass, six miles west of the village, their boots shining as brilliantly as on the day when they stepped into the lorries for the first time. Polish was something that concerned their officers deeply, and the road to Thalata must have been strewn with empty blacking tins. They could never understand why Captain Gibson

worried so little about his drivers' boots or why he allowed them to wear bits of enemy uniform, protesting seriously only when they had neglected to remove insignia or badges of rank.

Section headquarters took possession of one of the little square farmhouses, which, like its fellows, contained four rooms and adjoined a sizeable outbuilding. Like its fellows it was empty. Many of the colonists had left with the retreating army; the rest—old men mostly, and women and children—had moved to the village, where they lived in pathetic squalor and discomfort. Each night a large number barricaded themselves in the church. It was not the British they were afraid of but the **Senussi**, who, if they were to be believed (and their panic was most convincing) had been terrorising the entire district, shooting, looting, burning, raping, and generally paying the Italians back in their own coin—or, rather, visiting on them the sins of their soldiers.

These sins (as those of us were aware who had read that delightful book *Desert Encounter* by Knud Holmboe, a copy of which was going the rounds of A Section at that time) were not light. The sect of the **Senussi**, which was originally based on extreme asceticism and a return to the pure teaching of the Koran, was founded more than a century and a quarter ago by Mohammed Ben Senussi, who claimed descent from the Prophet. When the Great War broke out the **Senussi**, by then several million strong, turned on the Italians and drove them almost out of **Libya**. Next, flushed with success, they moved against Egypt and were decisively beaten on Christmas Day 1915 by a small mixed force that included the 1st Battalion of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, Sikhs, and British Yeomanry. Later they were defeated again and, after the war, when the Italians regained possession of the fertile strip along the Libyan coast, an agreement was concluded whereby the Grand Senussi, Sayyid Idris, was given rulership under the Italians of all the oases along the 29th Parallel and of **Kufra** to the south. In 1926, after careful preparation, the Italians attacked the oases and the remnants of the tribes fled to **Kufra**. The next attack came four years later, and **Kufra**, on which the Italians converged from three sides, was the scene of a

horrible massacre. Under Graziani ('the Butcher') the survivors were ruthlessly repressed and their lot was not alleviated until **Mussolini** proclaimed himself the Defender of Islam and made Balbo Viceroy of **Libya**, ordering him to placate the tribes. His efforts, so far as our drivers could gather, had been unsuccessful.

Their sympathy, naturally—for they saw the pale, pretty children and the frightened old women and the broken old men—was with the settlers, and to give it practical expression they mustered a dozen head of cattle—miserably lean beasts that the settlers had been afraid to go into the fields to look after—and drove them into the village for distribution among the hungry. Most of them were slaughtered immediately by the non-stock-breeding members of the community.

After a day or two the drivers came to be looked on as protectors and when one of them fell ill he was taken into an Italian cottage and nursed with great tenderness.

In their snug farmhouse Captain Gibson and the drivers of Section headquarters had a pleasant time. They did little except repair the fire that burned all day and most of the night in the enormous open hearth and watch the fierce rain dash against the windows. Sometimes, catching sight of a broken toy—a child's blue go-cart—which, tidy it away how they would, reappeared continually, a death's-head at the feast, a few of them had moments of uneasiness. They wondered how homeless Italian children fared in **Libya** in winter. Mostly, though, they were comfortable and content.

On fine days—there were one or two—they went mushrooming, returning home with sackfuls of delicious fungi (which everyone felt almost sure *were* mushrooms) for the cooks to fry for breakfast. Duck-shooting, in spite of the scarcity of ducks and shotguns, was another popular diversion.

An order forbidding anyone to walk abroad unarmed added a spice to these expeditions, and indeed, whenever **Senussi** were encountered, our

drivers felt the sound sense of this edict, for the tribesmen, to judge by appearances, had drifted a long way in the last century and a quarter from the pure teaching of the Koran and the principle of extreme asceticism.

Lorries went sometimes to **Barce** but there was little there. Once, perhaps, it had been a pretty country town; now it was indescribably shabby and bedraggled, its general appearance suggesting the aftermath of a drinking bout. It was permeated through and through by a nauseous reek of arrack, the sale of which, together with that of dusty boiled sweets and small looking-glasses, appeared to be its sole means of subsistence.

There was talk of our drivers staying with the **Welch Regiment** for an indefinite period and that was what both wanted, but on 10 January Colonel Crump, accompanied by our old friend Selwyn Toogood (who was a captain now), arrived with orders for the section to pack up. Goodbyes were said and meetings in **Cairo** arranged, our drivers little guessing that Rommel, who had just withdrawn from **Agedabia** to **El Agheila**, almost another 100 miles, would in rather less than three weeks sweep forward and engulf **Benghazi**, involving the **Welch Regiment** in fighting only less bitter and costly than that which it had seen in **Crete**.

The section pulled out from Baracca the next morning—and *pulled* is the operative word, for some areas were so muddy that the lorries had to be coupled together like a goods train. The return journey was diversified by a visit to **Cyrene** (birthplace of that Simon who was made to help carry the Cross) and Apollonia, the port of **Cyrene**. Above the ruins of the old city and the broken pediments and capitals of the Grotto and temple of Apollo, from which Italian archæologists had fled in haste, leaving some gear behind, grave cypresses stood sentinel, and down the precipitous hillside, haunted by spirits of grove and fountain, a cascade tumbled, spreading a green mist and a green murmur. All over the hillside were the houses of the Roman dead.

On 17 January the section joined us at Bir el Thalata.

We left Thalata a week after A Section's return and 25 January found us at **Acroma**. By this time Rommel was nearing **Benghazi** and petrol was needed to extricate British transport. A convoy under Captain Ward was rushed to **Derna**, where part of the load was dumped, the rest being dropped off by the roadside on the way back. The entire trip was made in something like thirty-six hours, but at the cost of many broken springs.

By the beginning of February we were back at Thalata and for the next two or three weeks our transport was employed at the railhead in unloading trains. C Section, which had been brought up to strength partly with some of our own spare men but mostly with drivers and vehicles borrowed from other units, left for **El Adem** on the 15th of the month to join yet another Composite NZASC Company formed under Captain Roberts to serve the 5th Brigade, which had returned to the **Western Desert** from the Canal zone.

In the Thalata area we played '500', did a little desultory training, listened to our thrice-blessed wireless sets (on some days we got 'Elmer's Tune' only five times and 'Kiss the Boys Goodbye' only four: often it was the other way about), and always we talked and talked on and on and on and round and round and round, mostly about nothing or about private matters—rows with the Old Man, victories in love long forgotten by everyone, incidents in the past that formed the basis for great rambling chapters of autobiography: 'I've seen me go down to the boozer Saturday mornings....' But it didn't matter. Nobody was compelled to listen: we knew each other so well.

Meanwhile our side was losing the war, though we were too stupid or too ill-informed or too steadfast to realise it. We were concerned only with our little setback in **Cyrenaica**. What was going on in the **Far East** was largely concealed from us by the determination of press and radio to put a brave face on matters. **LITTLE ENEMY RESISTANCE TO OUR WITHDRAWAL** ran a headline in a **London** newspaper: the story referred to the British retreat in the Malay Peninsula. **Singapore**, we were told,

was impregnable.

At that time **Germany** was broadcasting a weekly programme entitled, if memory serves, 'From The Enemy To The Enemy'. It was extremely popular with the Ammunition Company, chiefly because the Master of Ceremonies made free use of Vera Lynn's best records. The general idea was that a number of jolly, laughing British prisoners were being entertained in the studio by their German hosts, the atmosphere being conveyed by bright music, tinkling teacups, and gay asides. Most of the asides were made by the MC, a light baritone of peculiar ease and charm.

'Well, I've just been having a yarn with 3456789 Bombardier Jock McGregor. Jock hails from Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbright. Jock has just bet me a fiver that **Singapore** will hold out until the cows come home. Well, I'm afraid we don't agree about that. My own idea is that the Japs will be in **Singapore** in less than a fortnight. I'm going to collect that fiver when this tiresome war's over—by the way, I see old Jock's having a bit of trouble with his raspberry jam, ha ha!—and I'm going to have a lot of fun spending it in **Scotland**.'

Never in our wildest nightmares did it occur to us that there might come a time when the old smoothie would be in a position to pollute Kirkcudbright, but we should have enjoyed the joke more if the Japanese had not entered **Singapore** on the 12th of the month and captured it just three days later.

Ah well, we reasoned, things couldn't be too desperate. Australian and New Zealand beer was coming forward from Base in comforting quantities, we were getting our mail regularly, Wickham Steed sounded hopeful, and leave had started.

We were looking forward to our own leave. Nor was it far away.

On 23 February, leaving Captain Butt and C Section with the Composite NZASC Company, our unit turned its nose towards the coast road: first stop, Barrani. As we drew near the coast we entered a sea of

poppies in which there were islands of yellow and blue spring flowers. For those of us who had not visited the mushroom country it was like finding a pound note.

The next night found us near Mersa Matruh and on the 25th we set out for **El Daba**.

Most of the lorries were loaded high with salvage and forty-six of them were towing other vehicles. It was a common enough sight at that time, for the campaign had been cruelly hard on transport and on everything else. At least a quarter of the vehicles heading east were towing one or more wrecks and half of them were loaded with broken or worn-out gear. It was a matter for pride that all our lorries were returning under their own power.

We spent a night at **El Daba** (A Section casting sentimental glances towards its old area) and a night at **Amiriya**, and then set out, as we thought, for **Mena**. The Major, however—we should have blessed him had we known—went on ahead to try to arrange for us to go straight to **Maadi** and for a guard to look after our vehicles that night so that everyone could have leave. He was successful and we carried straight on, grinning delightedly as we passed **Mena** and turned sharp left near the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Now we were bowling along a splendid boulevard, region of rich pashas and fat beys, but there stole to meet us, from the great hot heart of the city, the old mocking, familiar, fascinating stench of red pepper, caraway-seeds, stale urine, arrack, dust, sweat, coffee.

We passed the zoo, crossed the bridge over the **Nile**, and turned right into the **Helwan** road. Soon we were passing the old wharves, where feluccas were drawn up, their great wings furled, their slender tapering masts, like trout rods from Brobdingnag, bending above the water as they had bent since the world's childhood, when there was no **Athens**, no Rome, no **London**, and certainly no **Berlin**. Presently we swung into the Mad Mile—madder than ever it seemed after our desert solitude: more clamorous with excited *wallads* shouting their joy and derision at the

sight of so much good prey returning from the unprofitable wastelands; more crowded with gesticulating fellahin trying to sell us melons and lemonade while we struggled with insoluble traffic problems—nightmare problems presented by minute donkeys from Goblin Market dragging carts with wheels twice as high as themselves, by donkeys moving like sections of hedge under shaggy masses of green-stuff, by long flat carts loaded with patient wives, shapeless in black robe and yashmak, sitting back to back (like sacks of coal except for a glint of orange or yellow gold from tooth and wrist), and by swarms of blue Fiat taxicabs, all of the same model (an old one) and each with a mechanic lying out on the off mudguard and tinkering with the carburettor—problems that might just conceivably have been solved but for the assistance of the Egyptian police, who looked warm to the point of melting in their thick black serge but were probably, in spite of their fierce excitement, quite cool.

We beat clear of it at last—that storm of donkeys, hookahs, *galabiehs*, camels, café tables, chickens, water-melons, sheep, cooking stoves, dust, trinkets, smells, and enormous bare feet—and swam, as through backwaters and calm reaches, down a long gracious avenue with the Nile again at our elbows; and so we came to the Maadi turn-off. We passed the opulent, creeper-hung villas, the carefully-tended *midans*, the Maadi Tent—still, we never doubted, unrivalled in all Egypt for ices, cakes, and salads—accelerated for the rise, got caught as usual by the bump at the railway crossing, passed the check post, entered the camp.

Under the bright desert sun Maadi Camp looked more than ever like a clean but uncomfortable palanquin on the back of an enormous, shabby, dusty camel. It was so forbiddingly neat and decorous that we took pleasure in our stained battledress, tattered shirts, bone-white boots.

News of our coming must have gone ahead of us, for hardly had we switched off our engines before the drivers from Bardia and those who had been in hospital were around us like flies. After the storm of handshaking, back-slapping, and all-in wrestling had subsided a little,

everyone began to talk at once with no one listening. In the centre of one congratulatory group was Bruce Morice ¹² whom we had seen last in Greece. Doubtless he was dying to tell us—we were dying to hear—how he and twenty others had tried to sail to Crete in a rudderless schooner, how he had lived for several weeks in a cellar in Piraeus and then for three months in the house of a Greek dentist, how at last he had been taken to Marathon and had embarked with other fugitives in a Greek schooner, reaching Turkey and finally Smyrna where he had been taken care of by the British Consul. But he was sworn to secrecy and so was Stan Barrow who had escaped from Crete to North Africa in an open boat.

To set the seal on our contentment word went round that we would be paid and there was leave to Cairo until one in the morning. Our first thought was to get cleaned up and everyone made a bee-line for the shower-house, carrying armfuls of fresh clothes hoarded for just such an occasion. It was wonderful to stand under hot water again, though that first shower did little more than transfer the outer coating of dirt from our skins to our clean towels. Boots were polished, some pairs sucking up a whole tin of nugget, and there was a demand for needles and thread.

After we had been paid the cooks provided a meal but few of us bothered to eat it. Already many were on their way to Cairo; others were waiting for the beer bar in the NAAFI to open at six o'clock. At once, with no preliminaries or organisation, a big reunion party got under way, and it grew progressively larger and merrier until closing time. It continued in the training area and towards midnight shots were fired (enemy weapons were being tested and demonstrated) and the sky was bright with flares. The Major intervened and some arrests were made. It was a night to remember.

A postscript to the campaign is provided by the last paragraph of a report submitted by the Major to Colonel Crump:

Although some of the moves entailed long hours of driving, and, quite often, driving all night, nobody complained and all the officers,

NCOs, and men did everything they were asked to do and the general standard of work and conduct was such that it is difficult to discriminate individually.

¹ Capt A. M. W. West-Watson; branch manager; [Auckland](#); born Carlisle, England, 31 May 1918.

² Dvr D. Falconer; truck driver; born [Glasgow](#), 30 Apr 1914.

³ Dvr L. De Pina; motor driver; born NZ, 2 Sep 1917; wounded Dec 1941.

⁴ Dvr C. L. Collie; barman-porter; born Sefton, 31 Oct 1914; died of sickness 4 Dec 1941.

⁵ WO I O. A. Wahrlich, EM and clasp; lorry driver; [Dunedin](#); born [Dunedin](#), 11 May 1910; p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

⁶ Dvr O. L. Blomfield; butcher; Waitoa; born [Te Kuiti](#), 28 Feb 1914; p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941; evacuated to [Italy](#) 15 Dec 1941.

⁷ Dvr P. A. Dooley; farmer; [Wyndham](#); born NZ, 28 Aug 1913; p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941; evacuated to [Italy](#) 15 Dec 1941.

⁸ Dvr W. J. Gamble; storeman; Otahuhu; born NZ, 15 Feb 1916; p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941; evacuated to [Italy](#) 15 Dec 1941.

⁹ Dvr G. F. Jeffrey; truck driver; Matamata; born [Kakahi](#), 30 Jul 1913; wounded and p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941; evacuated to [Italy](#) 15 Dec 1941.

¹⁰ Dvr J. S. O'Connor; painter; born NZ, 15 Feb 1915; p.w. [Bardia](#) 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942; died of wounds, 14 Jul 1942.

¹¹ Cpl J. B. Moore; carpenter; **Cambridge**; born **Cambridge**, 26 Jan 1909; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941-2 Jan 1942.

¹² Dvr J. B. Morice; truck driver; **Opotiki**; born **Opotiki**, 7 Dec 1916; posted missing, **Greece**, May 1941; later escaped to **Egypt**.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 12 – SYRIA

CHAPTER 12

SYRIA

THE next morning we were on the road again, threading our way through the Dead City, which was joyously alive in comparison with some of us, skirting **Cairo** and **Heliopolis**, and turning right into the **Suez** road. **Fayid**, near the **Great Bitter Lake**, between **Ismailia** and **Suez**, was our destination, and there we went under canvas.

During the fortnight we were at **Fayid** the transport was overhauled thoroughly, most of the attached personnel left us, and the unit was reinforced to a strength of 515 all ranks and reorganised to include an extra working section—‘platoon’, rather, to use the new term. It now consisted of Company headquarters (two officers and 25 other ranks), four transport platoons (each of two officers, 85 other ranks, and five sections of six load-carriers), Workshops platoon (one officer and 51 other ranks), and two ammunition platoons (each of one officer and 34 other ranks). A Section became No. 1 Platoon, and so on.

When the new platoon was formed everyone whose standing with authority was at all shaky was panic-stricken by the prospect of being drafted into it. With a few exceptions, however, only non-commissioned officers and key men were affected and on them devolved the not unflattering task of teaching the young idea how to shoot, the young idea being drivers from the former 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Section, NZASC (who needed no teaching), NZASC Base Transport, Base hospitals, and like sources. The platoon was commanded by Captain K. E. May,¹ under whom were Second-Lieutenant Fitzgerald² and Sergeants Athol Buckleigh and Morry Evans.³

From the start No. 4 Platoon had a personality, but not, so it seemed to many of our grave and reverend signiors, a pleasant one. As they saw it, their comfortable and well-ordered home had been invaded by a noisy and rather ill-conditioned nephew. The platoon was up early in the morning, it was much underfoot during the day, and it was pining, they

suspected, to lay grimy and destructive hands on the precious transport. It had none of its own yet and they foresaw an evil day when it would be permitted to play with theirs. The policy of keeping it quiet with hard training and unending guard duties had their complete approval.

Within the platoon, too, there were misgivings. Its toilsome days were ordered by Sergeant Buckleigh's whistle, which blew continually, in and out of season. The owner of the whistle, probably, was not unpopular—his nature was as immutable as his opinions and we had found him fiery, approachable, and a disrespector of persons—but for the whistle itself the rank and file conceived an immediate and immense distaste. It blew for parades, for fatigues, for inspections, and often, so it seemed, for the sheer pleasure of blowing. In the evenings its victims gathered at the **NAAFI**, where they cemented old friendships and formed new ones, discussed the Whistle in all its aspects, and decided that their future was not necessarily of an unrelieved bleakness. The Whistle might break or get lost. Schemes for breaking or losing it had been formulated already. In the event, however, desperate remedies were not necessary. Buck and the Whistle were marched out to the NZASC Training Depot at **Maadi**, and Ted Black,⁴ a man who played no musical instrument, was promoted to fill the vacancy.

The newly-formed Ammunition Platoon—there were two but we denied them their plurality, and so after a while did the unit log—left us unmoved. It was no noisy nephew to interfere with our peace or threaten our possessions. It lived, as it were, beyond the baize door. Its duties, which in **Greece** and during the Libyan campaign had been performed by spare drivers, consisted in the main of sorting, stacking, guarding, and issuing ammunition, and they were as dull as they sound. As its personnel was constantly in a state of flux it had no chance of developing a corporate personality, and for many months it served chiefly as a clearing house for drivers for whom there was temporarily no place in the platoons and as a convenient threat. It was a limbo to which you were consigned permanently, or a corner in which you were stood for a period, according as you were hopelessly, or only for the time

being, lazy, intractable, or incompetent. From the start many of its members were men of skill and conscience—they needed to be—and later all were to do difficult and occasionally dangerous work, but that time was not yet. For the present it was enough that they had no designs on our transport. No. 4 Platoon had.

Its first driving job, for which it borrowed No. 2 Platoon's lorries, was to take us to **Cairo** for a formal Christmas dinner at the National Hotel. We pretended to be terrified. Returning home late that night, we added to simulated terror fatigue and a degree of fretfulness. The dinner had been beautifully cooked and served but we had found it on the dainty side for our desert appetites and there had not been a great deal to drink.

The next day, 10 March, A Section—no, we must get used to calling it No. 1 Platoon—embussed troops of the 6th Brigade and set out for a far country, leaving us impatient to follow. Our appetite for the joys of **Cairo**, immeasurable in the desert but always easily sated when it came down to brass tacks, had been allayed by a week's leave, and what we wanted now was the open road. The wind on the heath would blow with a pleasant astringency after the debilitating atmosphere of the New Royal, the Blue Nile, the Globe, and the Pam Pam. No skull-capped pander, walking backwards in front of us, would extol its beauty and cleanliness, and no legion of filthy imps would badger us into buying worthless imitations.

Satisfaction was universal when we pulled out from **Fayid** behind the Supply Column on 14 March, with the sun shining brightly. At noon we crossed the canal near **Ismailia** by pontoon bridge, and then we were in the **Sinai Desert**, on which the sun blazed down with passion. The surface of the road, where it was not covered by drifting sand, was like old-fashioned liquorice, only softer and stickier, and the prospect on either side of it was exactly what you would expect to see in a desert if your knowledge of deserts was drawn solely from fiction. Former subscribers to *Chums* or to the *Boys' Own Paper* felt at home at once. The two tastefully-arranged palm trees were missing and the sailing ship floating upside down in the sky and the despairing footprints

disappearing over the nearest sand dune, but the shimmering whiteness was there and the wind-ribbed surfaces and the aching distance. Beyond the tarmac the sand was so soft and deep that when a **Petrol Company** vehicle ran off the road the united efforts of three breakdown vehicles were necessary to recover it. After a while the landscape became less like the illustrations in the *Boys' Own Paper* and more like the kind of desert we were accustomed to—wadis and sandstone ridges—but ever and again it would flick back into pure adventure story.

Just before dusk we halted at Abu Aweigla, having travelled 165 miles. We had reached our staging area, and, wonderfully, there were shower baths.

The next morning we crossed into Palestine and drove on through country that reminded us of the illustrated Bibles of our childhood. On either side were gentle, rounded hills the colour of pea-soup—the kind of hills on which the sermons were preached and the multitudes fed—and down them, dressed as the disciples were dressed (the same kind of striped gingery blanket and head-thing), and disputing, perhaps, as the disciples disputed once, came familiar figures, padding through the grey dust. By wells we went, wells from which the water (for the homeliest, pleasantest miracle) might have been drawn for the wedding feast, and through little villages, catching glimpses of the kind of kitchen in which Martha was careful and troubled over many things.

We travelled through **Beersheba**, which name, starting a string of others—Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Elijah—came droning down to us from the sleepy schoolrooms of our boyhood; through Gaza, where Samson (someone attempted to argue in all seriousness that his name was Simpson) was bound with fetters of brass and did grind in the prison-house, and so to Qastina, which said nothing to any of us. Here we spent the night in an Australian barracks with a cinema and a **NAAFI**. We had covered 110 miles.

The next day we passed through Masmiya, Gedera, Ramle, Lydda, and Petah Tiqva. It was like skimming through an examination paper

the answers to which, tauntingly familiar, for the moment elude you, and it was a relief to pass **Haifa** and then **Acre**, history's **Tobruk**, with its wider selection of memories—memories of Saladin, Richard Lionheart, and Napoleon. Finally, at half past two in the afternoon, after travelling 112 miles, we halted at **Ez Zib**, on the coast.

Early the next morning we crossed the Syrian frontier into the **Lebanon** and soon we were skirting **Tyre**, from which for so many aeons the ships of Tarshish and the Greek and Roman galleys and the high-prowed vessels of the Phoenicians sailed the **Mediterranean**, loaded with precious woods, jewels, ornaments, and fabrics marvellously dyed, drawn by no other magnet than that in obedience to which the ships leave 'Frisco, **Sydney**, and Deptford Pool. In the early afternoon we reached **Beirut**, which was crowded with people of an interesting appearance, few of whom it was easy to identify with anything so innocent and prosaic as clay-pigeon shooting, clerical vacations, or honourable retirement after forty years as a lady governess. There we refuelled, and at half past ten that night, dead-tired after travelling 142 miles, which brought our total for the journey to 529, we reached our destination, which was an area twelve miles north of **Baalbek**.

It was not until the next morning that we were able to form an impression of our surroundings. Then we saw that we were camped in a great, wild valley. Our area, which sloped gently to the road, was covered with short, scrubby grass and outcroppings of rock. (Later, when we tried to dig cesspools and rubbish pits, we had to call in the engineers.) Facing us was a mountain which rolled away towards **Baalbek**, a mane of snow flung over its huge shoulders. In the foothills, tucked away in fold and crevice, were secret villages—huddles of whitish buildings that resembled the nesting places of large, untidy birds. The scene was austere beautiful, but somehow, uncooperative. It did not look as though it had contributed greatly to the world's fruitfulness. It did not look as though it intended to. The mountain's attitude towards the meagre flocks that fossicked miserably on its lower slopes was that of a St. Bernard with fleas.

It seemed that we should be here for some time. Tents were pitched for living in, messing in, cooking in. There was talk of paths, sanitary arrangements, and regimental guards. It sounded like a lot of work of a peculiarly dull kind. Those who had vehicles could hope for transport jobs, but those whose duties were ill-defined—the drivers of No. 4 Platoon for instance—prepared for the worst. Their forebodings were fully justified.

In the shadows of the tremendous mountain, which must have frowned down on many comparable scenes in ancient times, when the Roman legionaries, under the cold surveillance of the centurions, dug fosses, erected earthworks, exercised their arms, the work went forward, the spare drivers participating fully, the rest occasionally and under protest. With the guard duties, which called nightly for one sergeant, three corporals, and forty-eight men, and daily for half that number, everyone assisted. Our camp, which our neighbours referred to as Stalag 69, was one of the best-guarded spots in the **Mediterranean** theatre. However, the approach of spring, an abundance of sport, a fairly liberal allowance of day-leave to **Baalbek**, together with an exhilarating sense of grievance, enabled us to keep happy.

Meanwhile, at **Aleppo**, some thirty miles south of the Turkish border, No. 1 Platoon's drivers were enjoying themselves thoroughly. The Vannièrè Barracks, on the outskirts of the city, provided them with a good home, and their duties, without being burdensome, kept them busy. Under the command of the 6th Brigade they were employed in carrying supplies from **Aleppo** railway sidings to neighbouring depots, delivering flour to native villages, and providing transport for the infantry. Nearly every lorry was on the road nearly every day, but Captain Gibson allowed his men to make what arrangements they liked about working day on and day off and there was leave every evening for almost half the platoon.

The one fly in the ointment was that our drivers' financial resources were by no means commensurate with the amount of leisure at their

disposal. Their pay—nine Syrian pounds a week—gave only an illusion of wealth. One pound would buy one bottle of beer or the first two courses of a daintily-prepared but not very substantial three-course meal. However, there were entertainments at **Aleppo** that were not charged for. Inter-platoon Association football matches in which an extremely catholic interpretation of the rules was permitted were contested free of charge on the fine sports ground adjoining the barracks. No charge was made for long hours of uninterrupted sunshine or for the soft Syrian evenings, through which, after collecting leave passes, our drivers set out for **Aleppo**.

The city was rich in historical associations, but that was a kind of riches in which few were interested. Our drivers contented themselves by observing that the old castle on the flat-topped hill resembled a dusty and battered decoration on a crushed birthday cake. All but one candle—the famous minaret—had disappeared. They were pleased—soldiers on active service are always touchingly pleased by any evidence of what they call civilisation—to find shops, cinemas, and American bars in the main street, and they were prepared to forgive the city its many mosques, quiet courtyards, and mysterious alleys. Shuttered windows and doors heavily bolted against the intruder told stories of old **Turkey**, but the stories fell mostly on deaf ears, and the listeners were soon bored when sad-eyed Armenians, wearing shiny, navy-blue suits and burning to discuss the Armenian question, spoke of atrocities. Behind such doors, they said, their elderly relatives had been massacred by Turks and Kurds, and even today, behind those shuttered windows, while enlightened elements in **Aleppo** were wearing their blue serge and going to the pictures and speaking American, plump Turkish ladies were removing their veils to masticate confectionery, and a deadly, soft-footed dullness scented by rose water and interrupted only by indigestion was dragging on in exile, as indifferent to wars and revolutions as to Bing Crosby.

In the poor quarter of the city, where the bazaars were situated, the drivers felt at home. Here was the kind of churning, squabbling, gesticulating life with which Egypt had made them familiar. Here was a

corner of the world that could risk comparison with any section of Wogdom—the riot in the quality of its confusion, the livestock in the quality of its liveliness, the vegetables in point of size (cauliflowers like medicine balls: leeks you could have played golf with), and the platters of food in the richness and variety of their colouring. It was fascinating to see a stout French officer, like someone out of *Beau Geste*, sitting down with a sheik complete with burnous and jewelled scimitar (pure Ethel M. Dell) to a meal like a Cathedral window—a window decorated with snails and purple slugs. A taste for snails, to tell the truth, was something that several of our drivers acquired at [Aleppo](#). Frogs' legs were popular too.

And so were the wines of the country. They were many but our drivers recognised only two types: 'Woof-Woof' (white wine) and 'Purple Death' (red). Arrack could be bought on the sly but the old ruffian was generally avoided as being too unpredictable a companion for a quiet evening, and the same applied to kummel, chartreuse, curaçao, and a fiery abomination that tasted like curried lollipops.

Naturally no one drank wine or liqueurs in preference to beer. But beer, of which two brands were sold in [Syria](#) (one was quite good, the other was barely drinkable), was expensive and difficult to obtain except in the [Aleppo NAAFI](#). This, in consequence, was our drivers' favourite resort.

Almost as popular as the beer—more popular towards the end of the week because it cost nothing—was the [NAAFI](#) orchestra, which was led by a talented Russian violinist, who claimed to have had an international reputation. Towards closing time he must often have thought nostalgically of the concert halls and conservatoires of [Europe](#), where matters, no doubt, were arranged differently and the rule was one tune at a time. Doubtless it distressed him to have to saw his way through the Vienna Woods or tell tales of Hoffman while half his audience was deep in its deep purple dream and the other half was coming round the mountain for the twentieth time in succession and plainly intended to go on coming round it until someone put the lights

out. He had one method of creating concord, however, and that never failed. He would strike up 'The Red Flag'. The Moscow front had held, the Germans had been forced to retire, and the patrons of the **Aleppo NAAFI**, like the rest of the world, were dazzled by Russian courage. Gladly they forsook their mountain and their deep purple dream to unite in proclaiming that the Workers' Flag was deepest red. Nor was their pleasure in the performance lessened by its spice of unconventionality. The singing of 'The Red Flag' was not at that time completely hallowed by custom, and only a year before such a demonstration would have been inconceivable in a British canteen and few would have thought it desirable.

'The Red Flag', 'The Marseillaise', 'Old King Farouk'. 'God Defend New Zealand', 'God Save The King', and again in response to repeated demands ('Once more, you jokers! Give her the tit, Maestro!') 'The Red Flag', and another evening is over. Our drivers straggle out into the night, over the old bridge, across the railway tracks, and up the hill through the oats, while the stars shine down with unimaginable brilliance and fireflies, star-like themselves, swim past on tiny, earnest missions. The hill seems unaccountably steep and more than one reveller, risking the imputation that he's cast, lies down in the oats to cool off. By the railway tracks someone is howling 'Yours', and at the entrance to the barracks, grouped round the embarrassed sentry in his little box, friends of the Soviet Union are giving 'The Red Flag' a final flutter, while others, debating across the vast breadth of an invisible rose-lit forum, assert their complete and unalterable solidarity on some point that was at issue earlier in the evening when judgments were less mellow.

'You were right, Snow. Jacobs was the name of that joker who ran the boxing down your way.'

'Yes, Jacobs. That's the name—Jacobs.'

'Bill Jacobs. Yes! That's the joker—BILL JACOBS.'

'Yes! OLD BILL JACOBS!'

In the graveyards of Aleppo dogs howl with incredible mournfulness and down by the railway station the French guard fires a few bursts from his tommy gun. The French take their guard duties seriously and at night they are best avoided. In the oats it has turned cool, and the sentry in his little box is becoming restive.

'O.K., you jokers—fair go. Better get along in, eh? Yes, she's apples. Everything good as gold. Better get along in, though.'

And off to bed they go, leaving Aleppo to the dogs, the wandering fireflies, the French patrols.

The reason for our presence in Syria was not, as some were inclined to suppose, that we were in need of a holiday in novel surroundings. The Division was there in the first place because Germany was expected to make a thrust either through the Caucasus or through Turkey, and in the second to foster friendly relations with the people. To accomplish the latter task we did not rely solely on our charm of manner. We came with schemes for the control of malaria and as dispensers of free medicine and distributors of free food. In all these activities the Ammunition Company took part.

For over a fortnight Corporal Owen Miles ⁵ and eighteen others worked under a British political officer, operating first from Homs and then from Hama, towns on the main road between Baalbek and Aleppo. For the most part they were employed in delivering wheat and dates to a tribe that claimed descent from the children of Ammon. The tribesmen boasted that they could muster 800 horsemen, and their camp, some eighty miles from the main road, was the largest in the district. To come on it suddenly at the end of the day's journey was like driving into the book of Exodus. The tents—there may have been three thousand of them—were woven from goat hair and no doubt they were identical with the ones that St. Paul made. Black they were and of no uniform design, their shape and size depending on the number of crazy flaps and wings spread

round them. It was as though in the middle of that vast plain a great flock of pterodactyl, young ones and old, had been gorgonized in the act of alighting.

With the sun burning on the horizon like a blood offering and the air pungent with the smoke of fires, great flocks of sheep and goats would converge on the camp, the shepherds and the dogs leading them in (like all the shepherds in the Bible) and not, as in New Zealand, driving them. In the deepening twilight the camp fires glowed orange and ruby red—there was no nonsense about a blackout—and from the multitudinous dark life, squatting close in the tents, came a continual low murmur as of bees. Every now and then it was drowned by louder noises—the whinnying of a horse, a man's angry shout, the squalling of a hurt child—but it was there always, gentle and monotonous. So must the Israelites have murmured in the camps of Moses, of Joshua, and of Gideon.

Watching and listening, the visitor from beyond the wilderness was conscious of glimpsing the world's infancy, and the shock was considerable when a sudden spurt of flame illuminated two elegant saloon cars of an expensive French make parked nonchalantly near the Sheik's tent. It was like seeing alligators in a village duckpond or opening a Crusader's tomb and finding a cigarette lighter. And the thing became stark nonsense when a bearded patriarch, who might have been old Ammon himself, bent down to remove the ignition keys, and tested, with sandalled toe, the tire pressures.

These visits to the camp were a fascinating experience for our drivers and they were lucky in having Owen Miles with them, for he could speak good colloquial French. On arrival they would be offered minute glasses of sweet tea or thick black coffee—the smaller your glass, apparently, the warmer your welcome. Later they would be shown to a cushion-filled tent, which gave them unlimited opportunities for improvising on the Sheik-of-Araby theme. Often they were invited to dinner *en famille*, an ordeal that demanded a strong stomach and exceptionally graceful manners. The whole family—men, women, children, and dogs—would squat round an immense bowl filled with a

savoury grey mess from which sheep's eyes peered glutinously. In this everyone plunged a hand, which as often as not came straight from fondling a mangy dog or a scrofulous child. As long as it was the right one—the left was an inferior member—no one minded.

The better our drivers came to know the country the more they were astonished, not by the difference between themselves and their hosts, which was vast, but by the many and often humiliating points of likeness. In incident after incident there was a homely ring. The Sheik, for instance, was open to those suspicions that sadden the lives of the best quartermasters, and when he was attending a conference in **Damascus** our drivers understood at once why they were asked not to dump their loads outside his tent as they had done in the past but to take them to remote parts of the camp. And they understood what was happening when they saw great wads of dates disappearing into private tents; and when grins of complicity were changed suddenly for ones of murderous rage, and sticks and stones started to fly, they understood that, too. Said someone: 'It was like those fights that spring up suddenly in the **NAAFI**.'

Again and again the homely ring. The chuckles of the dozen cut-throats whom our drivers taught to play '100-up', one of the more infantile card games, were echoes of their own mirth, and it was their own spirit they saw, burlesqued rudely, when the game ended at the sound of a rifle shot and the players rushed out into the night brandishing loaded Mausers. Plainly a New Zealander could become a good tribesman without much difficulty and a tribesman a good New Zealander. One man's sheep's eye was another man's toheroa.

By behaving naturally the drivers created a good impression, and when the job ended the political officer wrote to Major Coutts praising them for the tact they had shown in dealing with the natives.

Although we came to **Syria** with cornucopias, spilling dates, wheat, and anti-malarial unguents among tents and mud-built houses, the existence of the mailed fist—always extended in friendliness of course—

was hinted at from time to time. During April the 26th Battalion, in No. 1 Platoon's transport, made a leisurely 330-mile flag-march-cum-goodwill tour through northern and eastern **Syria**. The trip took five and a half days and remained a dream of beehive houses (shaped like that because of the shortage of all material except stone and mud), of sudden glimpses of the Euphrates, intent on the tremendous business of sliding from the Armenian uplands to the Persian Gulf—sliding between banks that remembered the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, the Arabs of the Caliphate the Mongul invaders, and now the New Zealanders—of slowly-circling kites impervious to rifle fire, of whirring flights of sparrows in a brutal storm of machine-gun bullets, of the black tents of the barbarians and the khaki bivouacs of the children of progress, of a little tumbledown village perched on a jagged hilltop and resembling a cluster of decayed teeth, but alive, boasting a wineshop and a tiny mosque and overlooking the ruined splendour of **Palmyra** in which history hardly remembers who feasted and who worshipped.

Doubtless these mild displays of strength together with our affable ways did much to dispose the natives in our favour, but they were a practical people and sentiment was not allowed to interfere with business. In rifling our tool and tucker boxes, in slicing the rubber mud-flaps from our vehicles, in robbing us of canopy ropes, tail-lamps, and other external trifles, they were indefatigable. When passing through a town in convoy we drove nose to tail with a lookout posted in the back of the last vehicle. Single vehicles needed a lookout in the back all the time, otherwise they were likely to arrive at journey's end an empty husk. There was a story, almost certainly true, of six drivers who went to sleep in a tent and woke up the next morning under the clouds.

The ingenuity of the natives filled us with astonished respect, and we took to sleeping with our ammunition under our pillows like love letters and our rifles in bed beside us.

With the purely military object of the Division's stay in **Syria**, which, briefly, was to establish a forward outpost near the Turkish border and a

main defensive position near **Baalbek**, our unit was concerned only indirectly. The plan of defence postulated roadblocks, strongpoints, and better communications than those that existed, so we delivered materials to the engineers and helped them to build a road by-passing **Baalbek**. Brigade exercises were held, and for these we provided transport, the tyros of No. 4 accompanying the elder platoons as spare drivers, which gave them experience of operational work and a rest from camp and guard duties. Their mentors, for the most part, were severe, shrinking in exaggerated distress when a gear was grated.

An indication of the variety of our duties in **Syria** is given by this typical entry in the unit log:

June 1, **Baalbek**: All vehicles employed today—23 on 6th Brigade exercise, 8 with NZ Engineers, 9 with Political Officer at Homes, 4 attached to forward ammunition point and 4 to 27th (MG) Battalion, 2 with **Field Punishment Centre, Baalbek**, 6 on road construction work **Baalbek** by-pass, and 2 with 19 DID, ⁶ RASC.

Our domestic labours, which devolved on those who were unfortunate enough to be without vehicles, included the construction of paths and roads, a unit swimming pool, grounds for baseball, cricket, and hockey, a **YMCA** hut (in which Padre J. T. **Holland** ⁷ worked morning, noon, and night, organising lectures, card evenings, and debates), a rifle range, a small parade ground, and goodness knows what else.

And naturally, with the transport as busy as it was, Workshops was not idle. Our lorries had already covered an average of something like 10,000 miles under vile conditions, and long hauls over the Syrian hills—the **Beirut- Baalbek** run was a particularly severe test—were causing breakdowns.

But our Syrian interlude was not entirely filled by toil. There was one day on which we did no transport work and no unnecessary camp duties. Instead almost the entire company took part in a ceremonial parade at

Baalbek at which the General presented decorations to members of the NZASC. We were pleased and surprised by the number of awards that had been won by our Corps and especially pleased that we ourselves were represented. Sergeant Bob Aro was given the Military Medal for his work with No. 3 Platoon in November 1941.

And there were holidays and pleasures. For a few there was leave to **Damascus** or **Beirut** and most of us went at least once to **Baalbek**, where, among the ruins of the Temple of the Sun, the Temple of Jupiter, and the Basilica of Constantine, Padre Holland made dry bones live. For No. 3 Platoon, which had returned from the **Western Desert** with the 5th Brigade in the middle of April, there was a belated Christmas dinner at the Palmyra Hotel, **Baalbek**, with Colonel Crump as guest of honour.

And there was bathing, baseball, cricket, football, boxing, wrestling, and some work that was pure pleasure: *24 April: four vehicles go to **Damascus** to fetch fruit and vegetables.* There were jobs that took us to **Afrine**, in the charming Afrine Valley, twenty-eight miles north-west of **Aleppo** and only a dozen from the Turkish border, across which our drivers stepped and stepped back, adding another name to their list of countries visited. A detachment from No. 1 Platoon was at **Afrine** for several weeks with the 22nd Battalion, living near a riverful of fish, which they caught in the scientific manner. The means—Mills bombs—justified the end, for what could be lovelier than a supper of fresh trout and eggs cooked by Dave Falconer and eaten in the cool of the evening?

And that is as good a note as any on which to end our Syrian chapter: the shadows advancing across the Afrine Valley, the **Afrine** trout emerging from nooks and crannies after the evening bombardment, the gentle sighing of the primus....

The war seemed far removed from **Syria**. We knew that it was still banging away in odd corners of the world—in the **Far East**, over England, and, rather feebly, at **Gazala**—and we were confident that we were still winning. Victory, we never questioned, was now only a matter of time. Some of us were anxious for just one more adventure before we

went home. Others were of the opinion that they had done enough and that to tempt Providence was foolish.

The news was soothing. **Malta** had been awarded the George Cross and doubtless she would hold out until the end unless the **Luftwaffe** sank her beneath the sea by sheer weight of bombs. **Tokyo** had been raided by American Fortresses. **Hitler** had appointed himself Supreme War Lord, and over a thousand bombers had visited **Cologne**. Our enemies couldn't stand up to that sort of thing.

Thus the news. Little was said about drowned sailors in the Atlantic Ocean, or of convoys limping into **Valetta**, Murmansk, and Liverpool. We couldn't see the great hole in the heart of Exeter or the rubbish in the streets of Bath—rubbish that was once Queen Anne houses and the Assembly Rooms—or the wounds of Norwich, **York**, and **Canterbury**, England's cathedral cities.

Then Rommel moved in **Cyrenaica** and there was a battle at a place called **Knightsbridge**, about seventeen miles west of **El Adem**. For a while the news was good. Then it was not so good. Then it was as near to being bad as news was permitted to be at that time. By 12 June Rommel had **Bir Hacheim**, a desert fortress some forty miles south by east of **Gazala**. (Don't think of frowning walls but of slit-trenches, and barbed wire and food tins, and Free Frenchmen brave as lions.) Without this he would have felt uneasy about his lines of communication. Now everything was just right—the light, the pitch, the bowling.

On 16 June all normal work was cancelled and we were told to tune our vehicles to concert pitch. In the evening No. 1 Platoon, which had returned from **Aleppo** a fortnight before, marched out to the 20th Battalion. Two days later we dumped our second-line holding of ammunition and by dusk we were packed and ready to move.

We moved at twenty minutes to seven the next morning, following the Supply Column. We crossed the Syrian border early in the afternoon, swept down through Palestine, and down and down until we were

running beside the Sea of Galilee, which danced and sparkled in the bright sunshine, and carried on until we reached **Tulkarm**. It was half past six when we got there and we had covered 197 miles. We were restless and excited, for all day long, like an extra person in the cab, mouthing and chattering, Rumour had travelled with us.

‘I reckon there might be something in it.’

‘I can only go by what Bill told me. He should know.’

‘Anyway, I'm just telling you what the Supply Officer said. He's got a case of beer on it with his driver.’

‘Hell! That would do me, eh? New Zealand!’

A driver who had left home with the 4th Reinforcements announced his intention of getting married as soon as he stepped off the boat. Basil, with the 20th Battalion, which was two days ahead of us, said that his old man had been putting aside a bottle of beer every Saturday night since January 1940. At that rate something like 130 bottles would be waiting for him.

The next day was sweltering. Our drivers opened their windscreens as wide as possible, tied back their doors to cause a draught, took off everything except their shorts. Beyond Ramle the road wound between orange groves, from which on our way to **Syria** laughing children had pelted us with ripe fruit, and between nicely ordered fields and neat houses. People waved to us. The women wore pretty flowered dresses and the children looked healthy and handsome. They were Jews but they seemed to have sloughed off the ancient burden of their race. After three months in **Syria** we had forgotten that people could look so neat, so pretty, and so clean. And our minds, with that vast complacency of which New Zealanders alone are capable, turned home.

We halted at **Asluj**, in the desert, at half past three in the afternoon, having travelled 128 miles. Under the cold showers in the staging area the drivers chattered like magpies. It was true all right. Embarkation

lists had been made out—that was definite. The Division was going home. By nightfall the names of some of the ships were known.

It was cool when we set off at half past five the next morning and presently we ran into a thick white mist. Colder and damper than the mist was the growing conviction, born somehow, somewhere, in the night watches, that it was all lies, that the goal we were racing towards had no connection with marriages and homecomings. A few inveterate optimists were still on their way to New Zealand but the rest of us were bound for a place very different, and something told us that this time it was not going to be pleasant. All but the most careless were silent and a little gloomy.

By twenty minutes past seven we were in Egypt and we crossed the **Sinai Desert** without stopping. The heat was terrific. It broke over us in waves. The horizon, the black ribbon of road, the outline of the vehicle ahead—everything was dancing in it. The bitumen melted and our engines boiled. Drivers with the 24th Battalion found it necessary to mix a little oil with their petrol to prevent it from vapourising before it reached the carburettor.

After covering 123 miles we halted near the **Suez Canal**. New Zealand was seldom mentioned that evening. The subject was attended by too much heartache. All the talk was of what lay ahead. From the wireless news it was difficult to gather what was happening in the desert, how big the battle was, and in whose favour it was going. We were wary now of retreats that sounded like advances and advances that sounded like retreats.

Very early the next morning a large party, which included most of No. 4 Platoon, set out for **Maadi** to collect 120 new vehicles, fifty-seven of which were earmarked for our unit. The rest of us moved half an hour later. We travelled swiftly and smoothly and soon we were rolling through **Cairo**. No outward signs of crisis were apparent. There was no abatement in the tide of bootblacks, beggars, café idlers, and bull-necked pashas, nor were they in more than their customary state of excitement.

As always our old sparring partners leered at us from crowded tram-cars and pointed at us from the pavements, and doubtless it was imagination that made their grimaces seem a shade more sardonic than usual, their gestures a shade more mocking and spiteful.

After we had travelled some distance along the **Cairo- Alexandria** road we halted for lunch. Traffic was very thick and nearly all of it was heading towards **Cairo**. We watched it as we munched our bully and biscuits and our hearts sank. We got on to the road again and by now the traffic was thicker than ever: a continual stream. Lorries went past loaded with troops. Nurses in open three-tonners looked strained and weary, and when we waved to them they stared straight ahead or responded only half-heartedly. There were ambulances crawling between vehicles piled high with miscellaneous equipment. One lorry was heaped with all the paraphernalia of an officers' mess, and we gave it an ironical cheer. A good many of the vehicles towed others—two, three, and sometimes four. Most depressing of all were the trailers loaded high with the wingless corpses of British fighter planes. We counted dozens of these and as each one went by the time-honoured jibe ('All our planes returned safely.') fell a little flatter. Hell, we thought, there goes our protection.

Was it now or later in the day that we heard the damnable news? It started as a chill whisper, which grew louder and louder until everyone had heard it. **Tobruk** has fallen. **Tobruk** has fallen. Rommel's in **Tobruk**.

Tobruk had been ours for seventeen months and at the time of our worst reverses its garrison had been a symbol of British tenacity. It was like Gibraltar, like **Malta**, like England herself. We couldn't believe that it was lost. We hated to believe it. We had to believe it. At every halt, above the murmur of the engines, you could hear our drivers discussing the bitter news.

We reached **Amiriya** at half past seven in the evening after covering 220 miles. Our transport had been behaving well, only one vehicle having dropped out. We refuelled and each lorry was loaded with enough

petrol for a 400-mile journey and each man issued with two gallons of water. Early the next morning we set out for Mersa Matruh.

Traffic flowed east along the coast road throughout the day: ambulances, staff cars, tank-transporters, endlessly the dirty-yellow three-tonners, dusty, battered, with torn canopies billowing in the hot wind and loose ropes trailing behind, and again and again, sending an inward groan along the whole length of our convoy, a trailer carrying a smashed fighter, great rents in its fuselage exposing internal wounds, its red-white-and-blue rondels, like desecrated flags, showing through grease and filth. The road was not wide but often there were three columns travelling abreast, two heading east and one, our own, heading for Mersa Matruh. Some of us had only to close our eyes to be back in Greece.

It was a cheerless journey. Everything—all the vehicles that went past, all the priceless equipment—looked dirty and spoiled. And everything—the wheels, the hammering pistons, the jolting trailers—was saying over and over again: **Tobruk** has fallen, **Tobruk** has fallen, **Tobruk** has fallen. Lost everything in **Tobruk**. Stores. Transport. Twenty-five thousand men. Thirty-five thousand men. Stores. Stores. The lorries rumbled it as they swept past. They screamed it in low gear on the hills. They ticked it, quietly, persistently, throughout the many hold-ups. **Tobruk** has fallen, **Tobruk** has fallen. And our own lorries took up the refrain and repeated it all the way to Mersa Matruh.

That night our transport was dispersed at Smugglers' Cove, a few miles east of the town. We were very tired. In five days we had travelled 908 miles.

During the night, for the first time in months, German aircraft circled above us. We heard the broken beat of their engines and in Mersa Matruh ack-ack coughed and flashed.

The next day was 24 June.

On the beach at Smugglers' Cove—what smugglers were those, we wondered, and what was the point of smuggling anything into **Matruh**?—

the waves folded in grave procession, curtseying and withdrawing in the bright sunlight. Beyond them the water was marvellously clear and blue except where it was stained by long streaks of amethyst or emerald. Blowing in from the sea, the breeze carried that intoxicating holiday smell of shells and seaweed and tarry row-boats. After breakfast everyone felt fine.

We put in a hard day's work on our vehicles and when evening came we had a few quiet hours to ourselves. They were delicious after the rush and bustle of the past week. We bathed, played cards, kicked a football about. It was a lovely evening.

It was a lovely evening and a new spirit was abroad. Gone was the depression of yesterday. The retreat—the withdrawal—no longer seemed disastrous and infinitely sad. It was exciting, challenging; and, anyway, worrying was of no use.

At seven the next evening the first of the new vehicles arrived loaded with ammunition (a pity this because we had already drawn our second-line holding from Mersa Matruh and now much of it would have to be returned), and by midnight sixty-two vehicles were in the area. The drivers reported that the coast road was choked with east-going transport. It was a case of every man for himself, convoy discipline being out of the question. The rest of the new vehicles arrived the next day and a detail from the **Petrol Company** issued them to the units concerned. After they had collected their brand-new three-ton Chevrolets and loaded them with ammunition our No. 4 Platoon drivers felt happier than they had done for weeks. No longer were they merely the boys around the place, fagging for the seniors. Their platoon was now a going concern and all they needed was a chance to make a name for themselves.

And the chance was coming—it was coming towards us from **Tobruk** as fast as tracks could carry it and supply lines feed it. It was coming, and we felt it as a tiny tremor in the hand and a clutch at the stomach and a restlessness in the feet.

Originally it had been the British intention to hold the frontier but lack of men and armour made this impracticable, a line not anchored firmly at both ends being an invitation to an out-flanking movement unless there was a strong mobile force in reserve. A line based on Mersa Matruh was open to the same objection (besides there was no time to organise one) so General Auchinleck decided to make a stand sixty miles from **Alexandria** where his right flank would be protected by the sea and his left by the **Qattara Depression**. When it came to naming the new line no difficulty arose. Less than a mile from the road there was a cluster of stone buildings, a water tank, and a railway station, called, simply and rather beautifully, **El Alamein**.

That was the position on 27 June when we pulled on to the main road shortly before midday and headed east under Captain Sampson.⁸ No. 1 Platoon, though its return was expected hourly, was still with the 20th Battalion, so its ammunition was left at Smugglers' Cove with Second-Lieutenant R. K. Davis⁹ and a small picket.¹⁰ The signal to move had given no clue to our destination, the arrangement being that a guide was to meet us on the main road. The main road was ominously empty, and when they came to a deserted **NAAFI** our drivers were able to stop, one after another, continuing on their way the richer by cases of Canadian beer and cartons of English cigarettes. It was **Greece** all over again except that there were no Stukas or Messerschmitts to worry us.

After a fairly quick run, the convoy dispersed in a vacant area between **Qasaba** and **Fuka**, waited there until four in the afternoon, and then headed inland, halting an hour and a quarter later some eighteen miles from the coast road. Workshops was missing, and Captain Sampson, not knowing that the platoon had been ordered farther to the rear, was worried. Later in the evening Second-Lieutenant Davis and the picket arrived from Smugglers' Cove to report that it had been necessary to destroy No. 1 Platoon's second-line holding to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. With the help of engineers they had managed to destroy all but a few cases of small-arms ammunition. The enemy had been very close at the time.

After dark Nos. 3 and 4 Platoons—it was the latter's first important assignment—moved out to establish ammunition points, and half an hour later Company headquarters and No. 2 Platoon moved to an area south of **Fuka** where they spent what was left of the night. The other platoons reported the next morning with the news that it had been impossible to establish ammunition points because of the enemy's swift advance and the movements of the Division.

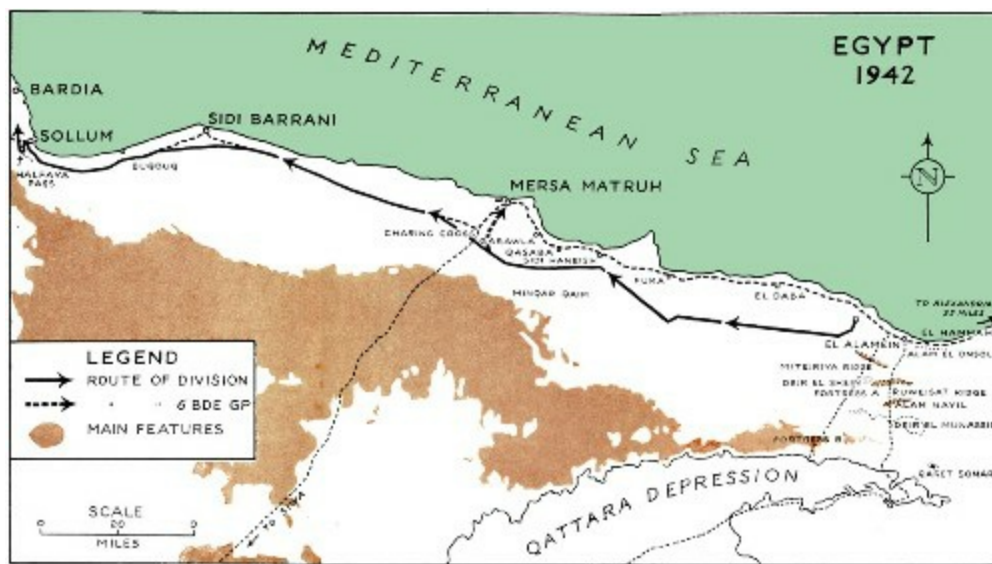
At half past nine Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons left under the officer commanding the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** to serve the 4th and 5th Brigades (if they could be found: they were known to be heading east with the Germans after them), and an hour later, travelling behind Rear Headquarters, 2nd New Zealand Division, the rest of the unit set out for Fortress A (again don't think of a fortress), roughly in the middle of the new line, where the 6th Brigade, a centre three-quarter with the sun in his eyes and the play coming fast down the field, was standing ready. By half past eight that night the transport was dispersed in the fortress and everyone who was not on duty turned in. We were dead-tired but some of us found it hard to sleep. It was the night of 28-29 June.

After the twilight the moonlight. The full moon, with a bland and beautiful idiocy, lit everything up, making the lorries throw shadows that might have been cut out of black cardboard. By pulling the blankets over your head it was possible to ignore the moonlight, but you couldn't shut out, nor was it advisable to, the dread sound, something between a hum and a sob, of approaching bombers. They came over about nine and circled round. They sounded as though they were directly above us, but they were some distance away. When the bombs fell there was an interval of several seconds between the flash and the thud. A vehicle was set alight in the Supply Column's area and more bombers were attracted. From start to finish the raid must have lasted forty minutes, and we heard afterwards that in the Supply Column's area alone fourteen men had been killed. It was a token of what we ourselves could expect.

We were fairly busy on the 29th, very busy on the 30th. By evening we had replenished all the field regiments and No. 3 Platoon had established a Corps dump in the 6th Brigade's area. Workshops, after four days with the Supply Column, had rejoined us that morning, and all the platoons were accounted for except No. 1, which was still, we supposed, with the 20th Battalion. The unit was now operating from Qaret Somara, twenty-six miles south-east of Fortress A.

That afternoon Rommel had arrived in front of the Alamein Line and the issue was now a straight one. They were met together, Rommel and Auchinleck, to find out which of them had the better army, and to decide, perhaps tomorrow or in a week's time, which was the stronger: the little good we believed in and were now defending or the dark, tortured spirit of our enemies. The odds were ascertainable and they were very even. We no longer thought, any of us in the **Eighth Army**, that fate or Providence had predestined us to victory. We understood now that it was possible for **Britain** to lose every battle, even the last. We should win only if the courage and endurance of our infantry and gunners, our tank crews and air crews, could equal and outlast, now in this stretch of desert, not yesterday or in a year's time, German courage and endurance, which was known to be very great. And we of the **Army Service Corps**—British, South Africans, Indians, Australians, and New Zealanders—knew with humility and pride that upon our faithfulness in supply the fighting man with his unappetising rations, his shells and bullets, his petrol and water, the issue depended also. It was **Britain's** hour, and the infantry's hour, and it was our hour, too.

And that was how matters stood on the last day of June, while the temperature rose and the flies multiplied, while Axis sympathisers in **Alexandria** baked cakes and formed reception committees, while **Cairo** waited, while Shepherd's watched.



Map of Egypt 1942

- 1** Capt K. E. May; clerk; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 21 Jun 1909.
- 2** Capt J. M. Fitzgerald; civil servant; **Wellington**; born **Gore**, 19 May 1917.
- 3** Sgt M. G. Evans; clerk; **Auckland**; born **Wanganui**, 8 Jul 1917.
- 4** L-Sgt E. Black; tramway employee; **Papakura**; born **Scotland**, 28 Feb 1901.
- 5** Cpl O. W. Miles; school teacher; born **Dunedin**, 16 Dec 1911; killed in action, 14 Jul 1942.
- 6** Detail Issue Depot.
- 7** Rev. J. T. **Holland**, CF; clergyman; **Christchurch**; born **Newcastle-on-Tyne, England**, 31 Jan 1912.
- 8** He commanded the unit between 21 June and 7 August while Major Coutts was at General Headquarters, Middle East, supervising the delivery of vehicles and ammunition to the

Division.

⁹ Maj R. K. Davis, m.i.d.; clerk; Eureka, **Waikato**; born **Auckland**, 2 Mar 1917.

¹⁰ The chief appointments on 27 June were: Company headquarters, Maj P. E. Coutts (with GHQ, ME), Capt S. A. Sampson, Lt O. W. Hill, WO II J. S. Bracegirdle (appointed 14 Feb 42); No. 1 Platoon, Capt R. C. Gibson, Lt T. A. Jarvie (attached 25 Dec 41); No. 2 Platoon, 2 Lt J. R. Arnold (posted 3 Mar 42), 2 Lt R. A. Borgfeldt (posted 19 Jun 42); No. 3 Platoon, Capt W. K. Jones (posted 19 Jun 42); No. 4 Platoon, Capt K. E. May, 2 Lt J. M. Fitzgerald; Workshops, 2 Lt (T/Capt) A. G. Morris; Ammunition Platoons, Lt G. P. Latimer (attached 25 Dec 41), 2 Lt R. K. Davis (posted 23 Nov 41). The following had left us: Capt D. C. Ward (posted to Base Training Depot, 1 Jun 42), Lt (T/Capt) F. G. Butt (posted to Base Training Depot, 26 Apr 42), 2 Lt W. S. Duke (p.w.), 2 Lt A. M. W. West-Watson (admitted to hospital, 11 Jun 42), WO II Dillon (posted to OCTU, 24 Feb 42).

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 13 – WHILE SHEPHEARD'S WATCHED

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WHILE SHEPHEARD'S WATCHED

THE sun beat down on ruined Mersa Matruh, drawing a hot reek, sweet and sickish, from crumbled masonry and dirty sand. No. 1 Platoon's drivers lay half under their lorries to get shade and a little draught. They wondered if the platoon from the **4th Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** would arrive in time to relieve them, and sometimes they hoped it would but mostly they hoped not. They eschewed heroics and they had seen enough action to know how unwise it was to covet honour, but, on the other hand, here was the curtain rising on one of the great dramas of the war, and—well, they were as good as the RMT, weren't they? 'Those 20th jokers,' they told each other, 'reckon we'll do them. They're not fussy.' Our drivers were beginning to fancy themselves in a troop-carrying role.

It was 25 June and they had been with the infantry eight days—five on the journey from **Syria** and three in an outpost near **Charing Cross**, ten miles south-west of **Matruh**. The battalion had been relieved by Indians early that morning and now it was standing by in **Matruh**, waiting to move back to the **Charing Cross** area to cover a mine-laying party.

Two o'clock came, and as there was still no sign of the RMT the infantry boarded No. 1 Platoon's lorries and the convoy set out for **Charing Cross**. Detachments of the British advanced screen—**Sidi Omar** and **Sollum** had been evacuated by now—were moving east along the main-road and the 20th Battalion seemed to be the only unit not in retreat. Often the road was choked by four lines of traffic, three of which, like rubbish in a chute, crashed and tumbled along in no sort of order. It was as though the desert had been tilted sideways and the British and German armies were obeying the law of gravity.

They wouldn't admit it, of course, but it was impossible for our drivers not to take a lonely pride in the situation. To be skinning her

along towards Rommel, the old bull-bitch, the old Chevvy, while all the other stuff was high-tailing it for Alex—that was something. Our drivers were anxious to do well, and if for a single presumptuous moment they saw their common dust, the grey-yellow dust that spurted from beneath their wheels, mingling with the immortal spray from an armed merchantman, the slipstream from a doomed fighter, they held their peace, saying only: ‘Curse those RMT slugs!’—though meaning, perhaps: Come then: let us to the task, to the battle, to the toil—‘They certainly put it across us that time, those RMT jokers. They did that all right.’

The convoy passed through **Charing Cross** and drove along the **Siwa** road, halting fourteen miles south-south-west of Mersa Matruh. The infantry took up defensive positions and at 6 p.m. men from the 6th and 7th Field Companies started their job, which was to close a four-mile gap in an old minefield. Indian sappers, working from the north end of the gap, were out of sight, but our drivers could follow the New Zealand vehicles as they crawled across the perfectly flat desert. Every once in a while there was a flash and a gusty cough that told its own story. They watched breathless, and it was as though each vehicle carried a small part of them, which was felt as an ache, an absence, somewhere between heart and stomach. They did not know it, but a section from No. 4 Platoon was with the sappers.

The work was not finished until after ten, by which time four vehicles had been lost on our own mines. No one had been injured, though, and the sappers were just beginning to congratulate themselves when a 30-cwt. truck loaded with 350 mines passed over a bump and blew up, killing two men and wounding six others. For some moments a column of black smoke, much darker than the night and hooded like Death or Famine in an old print, hung in the sky, while behind it German flares blinked and spurted. The cause of the explosion was not known—then or later.

Soon afterwards the 20th Battalion withdrew through a narrow gap in the minefield and set out across country for the 4th Brigade area, ten miles south by east of Mersa Matruh, the journey, which so far as our

drivers were concerned was an aimless succession of stops and starts, taking all night.

The intention was now becoming plain: our Division, less the 6th Brigade, was to fight a delaying action in front of the Alamein Line.

All reports showed that the enemy was advancing fast, and at five on the afternoon of 26 June the 4th Brigade moved ten miles south to higher ground. Two hours later the 20th Battalion was told to move north to meet an enemy formation that had broken through the [Siwa](#) road minefield.

With the sun setting, the infantry climbed into the covered lorries and our drivers closed the tailboards and sat waiting for the signal to move. There was a hum of engines, and more than twenty bombers, unidentifiable for a moment, flew out of the gold light and turned to place the darkening east behind them. They were Junkers 88s and they came in to attack at medium level. Except for the ack-ack crews, which met them with machine-gun and Bofors fire, nearly everyone was caught napping, and when the bombs began to fall some of the infantry were still in the lorries. Soon the whole area was covered by a pall of smoke through which came bursts of machine-gun fire and more bombs. Ragged lines of tracer struggled up in reply and Bofors shells blinked redly above the murk. By the time the planes left it was almost dark.

At first it was thought that the casualties had been sickeningly heavy but a check showed that four men had been killed and twelve wounded, which was less than anyone had dared to hope. None of our drivers was hurt and only two lorries were out of commission.

It was half past nine before the battalion moved, and an hour and a half later it halted and dug in. Flares were the only sign of the enemy, but later in the night our drivers heard firing close at hand. New Zealand gunners were engaging a patrol, the first to make contact with the Division. Early next morning infantry and transport moved again, halting in the brigade area in sight of an escarpment. At no time during

the past twelve hours had the battalion been far from a place called **Minqar Qaim**, twenty-four miles south of Mersa Matruh, but our drivers didn't know where they were. They were relieved to hear that the rest of the Division was in the neighbourhood, for the hard, clean desert was very lonely and there was no pity in the clear outline of the escarpment.

While they were enjoying a cup of tea—enjoying it in spite of the brackish water from their camel tanks—a large concentration of enemy transport was seen on the horizon some miles away. Then lorried infantry and twelve tanks appeared and the battalion moved to a position below the escarpment, where it dug in as quickly as possible. The shelling became heavy just before noon.

Sheltering beside their lorries, which in some cases were parked only a stone's throw from the gun positions, which in turn were only about a hundred yards behind the infantry's slit-trenches, our drivers saw pillars of dust and smoke from our own shells form a high ragged wall along one sector of the front. Presently it started to walk towards them, halting after a while and then withdrawing.

The enemy fired back and it became dangerous to move. None the less, at one time or another during that endless afternoon, most of our drivers had to leave their slit-trenches, frenziedly hacked, scooped, chiselled in the rocky surface, to fetch ammunition, to collect wounded, and, very often, just to move their vehicles. Alan Falconer and 'Titch' Maybury, paying the price for distinguished company, had to drive out in front of the foremost slit-trenches to enable Captain C. H. Upham, VC, ¹ to perch on top of their cab and direct machine-gun fire.

There were other jobs that were hardly less pleasant. When Les Howarth and Harry High, ² of No. 1 Section, which was serving A Company, were sent to the 5th Brigade's area to pick up a load of small-arms ammunition, it took them two hours to cover two miles and they were under fire all the time. The ammunition, when they found it, was a chain in front of the firing line and one end of the stack was burning. However, they got their load.

Early in the afternoon tanks, guns, and lorried infantry started to close in on the New Zealanders, the attack developing simultaneously from north and south. The Germans tried hard to silence the 25-pounders, and shells and mortars landed all around them. Often, peeping from their slit-trenches, our drivers were unable to see the gunners for dust and smoke.

‘They kept on firing though,’ said George Searle,³ ‘not giving a damn. My lorry was about 300 yards from the nearest gun, but Jack McDonald’s⁴ was a good deal closer than that and one of his wheels was blown off. He had to crawl out of his slit-trench to try to fix it.



CONVOY TO SYRIA ‘Beyond the tarmac the sand was soft and deep’ —page 200

CONVOY TO ‘Beyond the tarmac the sand was soft and deep’ — page 200



BAALBEK, SYRIA ‘Tents were pitched for living in, messing in, cooking in’ —page 202

‘Tents were pitched for living in, messing in, cooking in’ — page 202



Kaponga Box after a raid
Kaponga Box after a raid



Burning lorry, Kaponga Box
Burning lorry, Kaponga Box

Desert Grave



Desert Grave

‘Later we watched Charlie Upham at work. We saw him standing on

top of Alan Falconer's cab and directing anti-tank fire. Once, when a hidden spandau was giving trouble and our jokers couldn't find out where it was, he jumped up on the cab on purpose to draw fire. The range, though, was too great for the Brens, and finally a 3-inch mortar did the trick.

'The attack got fiercer, and a German troop-carrier, a half-track job, came tearing towards us. The anti-tank boys stopped it with a direct hit and as the old Jerries came tumbling out our Brengunners got stuck into them. Most of them put their hands up, but one tough Jerry was out of that carrier in a tick and down between the front wheels with his spandau going. A good boy, I should say.

'The day was hot and by this time I was as dry as a wooden god. The infantry had their tongues hanging out too, so whenever there was a lull I put the billy on in the cab, keeping the old lorry close to my trench.'

Other drivers did the same, dishing out half a mug here, a third of a mug there, or a billy-full to a platoon or a gun crew.

Meanwhile, in spite of repeated attacks, the infantry were still hanging on below the escarpment. The enemy was shooting with 210-millimetre, 105-millimetre, and 88-millimetre guns, and with captured 25-pounders. Much of the supplies and equipment lost in the last fortnight was being used against us. German soldiers with British shirts on their backs, British bully in their bellies, and Capstan cigarettes in their mouths, were driving Bedfords and Chevrolets distinguishable from ours only by a black cross painted on the door or by a piece of cloth marked with a black cross and fastened to the radiator.

As the day wore on, the area in which the 4th Brigade was fighting contracted, and at length guns, vehicles, and aid posts were crowded together much too close for safety. Here and there fires were burning, but as yet none of No. 1 Platoon's vehicles had been badly damaged, though several were out of commission with cut wiring, punctured tires, and pierced radiators, which our drivers tried to repair whenever they

had a chance. When expert help was needed Sergeant 'Dad' Cleave and Norm Hague ⁵ (the LAD crew) seemed always to be at hand.

Most of the damage, as always, was superficial. Lance-Corporal Jock Letham ⁶ and his driver, for instance, were pinned under their lorry for half an hour by a storm of anti-tank, mortar, and machine-gun fire, but it was hit only twice: once when an anti-tank shell carried away part of the superstructure, and again when a burst of machine-gun bullets drilled a row of holes in the tray.

Soon after half past three the sector held by the 20th and 28th Battalions was approached from one direction by twenty tanks and 200 vehicles, and from another by twenty tanks. They were engaged by the 4th Field Regiment and help was asked for from the 6th.

It was this (or an earlier threat) that caused a sudden ebb among No. 1 Platoon's headquarters' transport, which left the ack-ack lorry high and dry. Before anything could be done a pick-up squealed to a halt ten yards away and an Artillery officer got out of it, saying to 'Crassi' Cliff ⁷ and 'Pop' Cannell ⁸: 'I want to use your bus as a screen. You chaps lie down by the wheels and I'll look after what's worrying you.' Shifting from foot to foot so that his head and shoulders were never a still target, the officer peered over the tray of the lorry and gave fire orders to his wireless operator, who was crouched in the back of the pick-up. Bullets hit the lorry and whizzed past the officer's head, but he continued to give orders and perform his clumsy dance. One bullet drilled a hole in the lorry's drive-shaft and a twist of copper-coloured metal landed in 'Crassi's' lap.

'Hi!' said 'Crassi', and the officer looked down for a second. 'How much longer do you reckon you'll be wanting us?'

'Not a lot longer,' said the officer. 'We'll get on to them any time now.'

He was a big, boyish-looking man with sandy hair and ('Crassi' thinks) spectacles.

Every now and then the wireless operator said 'Rounds fired', but among the medley of sounds it was impossible to tell where the rounds were landing or from where they were coming.

At last the officer said: 'Thanks very much. We're getting out of here now. I wouldn't hang about too long if I were you. See you again, eh?'

'Like hell you will!' said 'Pop', but 'Crassi', who had no nerves, only smiled, pushing his Australian wide-awake farther back on his head and feeling for his tobacco.

The pick-up raced off and the ack-ack lorry followed, 'Pop' going through his gears in two quick rips. As soon as they were safe 'Crassi' and he found a quiet spot where they could boil up. Later they made their way back to platoon headquarters—cooks'lorry, orderly-room lorry, water cart, LAD, staff car—which was again in danger. After being cursed by several drivers (not No. 1 Platoon men) 'Pop' had to be content with a position that was far too exposed to excite jealousy. ('Pop,' said 'Crassi', 'they want you to go and park with the bloody Germans.') A vehicle still farther out in the desert came under heavy mortar fire and was set alight. Then the enemy turned his attention to the ack-ack lorry, bracketing it with bombs and finally landing one by the tailboard. 'Crassi', sheltering under the rear differential, was lifted from the ground and slammed down again unhurt.' 'Pop', lying between the front wheels, was wounded in the head. Black smoke hid the lorry, which hissed air from a punctured tire and dripped water from a pierced radiator and petrol from a pierced tank.

The fire shifted to another target and 'Pop' was taken to an Advanced Dressing Station. In spite of pain and disappointment he was able to remember in which secret corner he had cached a bottle of Scotch whisky against a rainy day, and before he lost consciousness he made 'Crassi' a present of it.

'Pop' was our third casualty. The others were Ed Child ⁹ (No. 2

Section) and Pat Wells, whose section (No. 4) was serving D Company and had spent most of the day 400 yards in front of the 25-pounders and 100 yards behind the infantry. Ed was wounded slightly in the calf, Pat badly in the foot. 'C Jay' O'Brien, who could hardly be classed as a casualty, though he received medical attention, could show a paybook in two halves, a smashed fountain pen, and a spectacular graze immediately above the heart.

Not knowing how lucky the platoon had been as a whole (for the sections, of course, had stayed near their respective infantry companies all day), our drivers worried about their friends, and they were anxious, too, about the general situation. The Division, from all accounts, was encircled, 25-pounder ammunition was running low, and **General Freyberg** was wounded.

But dusk, thank goodness, was not far away. Dusk meant relief from tension, a cup of tea, a chance to stretch your legs. As the sun dropped towards the horizon the fire slackened and by sunset it had almost ceased. Sometimes there was a rattle of machine-gun fire from an outpost (one of those *I'm-still-here* rattles) and sometimes an armour-piercing shell, glowing red among the shadows and sending off showers of sparks when it bounced, plunged in from the surrounding gloom. Burning German transport, twinkling like camp-fires, traced a ragged circle round the beleaguered position.

Slowly, grudgingly, as though in the celestial store they were short of nights and the Divine Quartermaster was reluctant to make the issue, the darkness deepened, and presently it was as dark as it would get. Our drivers were out of their slit-trenches by now and gathered in small groups, starting at every noise. At first they were almost shy—'How d'you make out, "Pork"?'—'Not bad, eh?'—'Get a puncture?'—but soon they were talking thirteen to the dozen. Out it all poured—the bottled-up comments, suggestions, criticisms, hopes, fears, stories. It was as though an invisible butler had passed around, giving everyone just two cocktails.

'Reckon old Jerry took a hiding worse than what we did.'

'See that Jerry car get it early on? She comes bowling along the escarpment, game as one thing, and then she stops it. One of our anti-tanks, eh? Reckon they never knew what hit them.'

'Saw a two-pounder get a Jerry motor-cycle and side-car. Just blew it to nothing.'

'One Itie they reckon—Harry saw it—came into our lines on one of those motor-cycle combination things. He has his hands in the air and all he can say is "Momma! Poppa!" Riding along gripping the thing with his knees saying "Momma! Poppa!"—the poor bastard.'

'They reckon Inglis ¹⁰ took over after "Tiny" was hit. Handed over the brigade to Colonel Burrows ¹¹—that's our 20th joker.'

'Hell! What's the difference? They'll get the lot tonight or tomorrow. We're surrounded and we've got no 25-pounder left. It came over the German radio.'

'If anyone's in the bag it's bloody Rommel.'

'Look, boy! Rommel's just the best general....'

Thus the talk, while four drivers crouch over a tin of bully and six over a tin of sausages. Round a tent, like spokes round a wheel, men lie on stretchers, blankets covering them. Every now and then one of them is picked up by two orderlies and taken inside. Sometimes an orderly glances at a man's face and pulls the blanket right over him. There is little noise—only the low murmur of voices and the hiss of primuses hidden in cabs or in the backs of lorries; only the scrape of metal against metal, the clatter of a dropped spanner, the thud of steel on rubber as groups of drivers, hot and swearing in the darkness, change tires, patch radiators, fix a drive-shaft. The ack-ack lorry is repaired and driven to a safer place. An hour later 'Dad' is able to tell Captain Gibson that all the lorries are mobile except one, which is on tow.

Captain Gibson goes round platoon headquarters, warning his men that an attempt to break out will probably be made during the night. They had better try to get some sleep.

You fetch blankets from your lorry and lie down in your slit-trench among puddles of moonlight and bars of shadow. In the distance shovels make tiny scraping noises, and 'Baldy's' pickaxe, striking hard rock, ticks steadily—like a watch under your pillow. You look up and see the thick tire, the heavy tow-bar, the ugly radiator, you smell the congealing oil drained half an hour ago from the sump (remember to enter oil-change in *AB Four-One-Two* tomorrow) and are comforted. Comforted, you fall asleep.

The orders were: 'Brigade night attack. Battalions in the following order: 19th Battalion front, 28th Battalion right rear, 20th Battalion left rear.' The intention was to break through into the open, the leading battalion's task being to clear a narrow neck of high ground to make a path for the transport. Zero hour was half an hour before midnight, and after the break-through had been made the transport would move forward to embus the infantry, the 5th Brigade following.

The transport started to form up at 11 p.m., and for ten, twenty, thirty minutes—time was difficult to reckon—all you could hear was a deep, angry growl that seemed to be coming from the earth, from the sky, from the four corners of the desert. Chequering the bone-white battlefield with swaying shadows, lurching over rocks, swerving to avoid, often unsuccessfully, shadowy slit-trenches, the transport formed up in column of route on a wide front. The growl sank to a mutter—suck of intake, rap of tappet, putt-putt of exhaust—but still you could hear nothing else.

Our drivers sat quietly in their cabs, not talking. Time passed and a battalion formed up in the open desert. The officers were speaking—you could sense it—and the men listening.

The battalion melted away and our drivers sat on, straining ears and

eyes. Engines had been switched off in obedience to an order passed down from the head of the column and it was very quiet. Marvellously this great mass of transport—it seemed to be fifty or sixty yards wide and its length was impossible to judge—had attracted no fire. A flare went up and hung yellow in the sky for some seconds but no shells or bullets followed. What was wrong with Jerry? Surely he had heard the transport moving? Surely he knew what was going on? There was nothing to do except wait quietly under the moonlight, sitting tense in your cab or standing beside it and shifting from foot to foot.

When the success signals were seen the transport moved forward through the gap and halted. One of the first shells that landed hit No. 1 Platoon's ack-ack lorry. It was an armour-piercing shell and it struck the tow-bar side on, twisting the thick steel as though it had been tinfoil and biting a great piece out of it. From the engine came a smell of burning, and fire extinguishers were torn from the nearest vehicles. A blaze was what everyone dreaded most and our drivers would have beaten out a fire with their bare hands had that been necessary.

Mortar bombs and anti-tank shells, fired wildly and at long range, came in from the flanks, and a spandau opened up only a short distance ahead, the bullets springing from the ground and going high. Some men lay down between the lines of transport; others bustled around finding things to do, because it was easier for them to keep calm if they were busy. 'Dad' and half a dozen helpers changed the off front wheel of the ack-ack lorry in less than five minutes and Bernie Caddy ¹² backed his water cart to take it in tow.

By this time the infantry had started to embus. Discipline was good though some of the men seemed almost drunk with excitement and some were wounded. For these there was no special transport and room was found for them where they were most likely to be comfortable. Everything had to be done in haste, for the weight and accuracy of the fire, though not considerable yet, was increasing momentarily. There was no avoidable confusion and soon the leading vehicles began to move. The whole mass surged forward.

In Thessaly, in the bright sunshine, our drivers had seen the shadows of aircraft run before them on the white road, the first warning of danger; in Libya they had been driven towards the guns like pheasants; but nothing that had happened to them before was as strange or as wild as this mad dash. It was experienced as a 'mad dash' and that is how people remember it, though in point of fact the column was moving almost sedately—probably at not more than twelve miles an hour.

The dust was so thick that at times it was difficult to see the vehicle in front, though it was never more than a few yards away and seldom more than a few feet. Bursts of light, their glare muffled by boiling dust clouds, showed where mortar bombs were bursting, but the explosions were not heard, for the long shriek of vehicles moving in low gear drowned everything. Bullets passed unnoticed, and afterwards our drivers found neat holes in trays and canopies. On the flanks splashes of orange and yellow showed where the infantry were making a running fight of it, firing rifles and Bren guns from behind cabs or from the backs of the lorries and drawing answering fire.

When a vehicle was knocked out or developed engine trouble or collided with another, telescoping fan and radiator, it was abandoned at once, drivers and passengers jumping on the first vehicle that slowed down.

And so it went on—not for a long time according to the clock but for ages as dreams go, and this was a kind of dream and therefore not really frightening: less frightening, our drivers were to find, than lying in a slit-trench with the lorry ten yards away and a dixie of stew cooling on the flat, ugly mudguard and the Stukas coming. There was no background of normality, no touch of every-dayness, to make a nightmare out of a dream. It was Cowboy-and-Indian stuff: a picture, a story, a play—almost, in its rush and wonder, a poem.

And in the boiling dust, superimposed on the dun clouds and the

wagging tailboard ahead, our drivers saw everything: all the scenes of the day, all the scenes of the night. They built them from quick phrases, chopped sentences, gabbled words; from the glimpse of a bayonet dark and bright with blood ('I tol' you I'd use 'er—I was determin' to use 'er.');

from a field dressing all one stain of blood. They saw Captain Upham standing with his hands in front of his face after throwing a grenade into the back of a lorry; and ten terrified German lads, like the ten little nigger boys, shot all together in the one big bed they were sleeping in for warmth and company; and the tracers flowing shin-high above the desert and the infantry skipping to avoid them; and a fat German officer kneeling in the back of a staff car and trying to fire his pistol. And they knew (from shouted question and answer) who was wounded and who would not be wanting, ever again, the camera safe under the seat, the zip-fastening-despatch case in the tool box wrapped in rags.

After a mile and a half had been covered the head of the formation met enemy transport in a wadi and swung south to avoid it. That concluded the Cowboy-and-Indian phase. The shooting stopped as suddenly as it had started, leaving a few fires, rapidly fading in the distance, to prove that it had taken place. Soon the last fire was out of sight, but the great mass of transport, still moving in a cloud of dust, still close-packed, pressed on at the same speed. Later it sorted itself out and the drivers settled down on an eight-vehicle front and tried to dress by the centre. Once, towards morning, the head of the formation had to swing south to avoid a concentration of enemy transport, but soon it was heading east again, making for the Alamein Line. Jumbled together in the backs of the lorries the infantry slept like logs. Only the wounded were awake.

The stars paled and a streak of primrose light appeared far ahead. Light, grey and frozen, flooded the whole desert, making it possible to see the drawn, dirty faces of the men in the lorries. The tires—the thousands of tires—made a crunching noise as they turned against the hard surface.

As soon as it was light the transport moved into desert square

formation and halted, while portées with anti-tank guns, and towers dragging Bofors, hurried towards the perimeter. The enemy was not far away.

The lorries were widely dispersed, and men with biscuits and lumps of bully in their hands went over to each other, meeting between the lines to exchange news. A few of our drivers, it was found, had been borrowed by the 5th Brigade, which had broken out on its own (delay in launching the attack had caused an alteration in the programme), but as far as it was known everyone was safe except Corporal 'Snow' Weir.¹³ He had been missing when No. 4 Section formed up for the breakthrough, and Frank Humphreys,¹⁴ his driver, after searching everywhere, had been forced to leave without him.

At seven o'clock, after an hour's halt, the journey was continued, the transport travelling in desert formation with the guns on the outside. There was no stop for lunch as the enemy was known to be following.

The day was hot and several of the wounded became feverish, and everyone, being over-tired, had a headachy, sickish feeling. Our drivers shared the general malaise but they were well content. It was over now and they had memories comforting to their self-esteem. 'Every man,' says Doctor Johnson, 'thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier.' Every soldier, he might have added, thinks meanly of himself for not having been under fire. Our drivers were proud of their unit and they would not have chosen to belong to any other, but all the same it had sometimes occurred to them—and they were sensitive on the point—that belonging to the Ammunition Company was not quite the same thing as belonging to the Black Watch. No. 1 Platoon would feel easier from now on while any spoke that fought upon St. Crispin's Day.

At nine that night—it was 28 June—the 4th Brigade reached its destination: Fortress A, Alamein Line. The wounded were evacuated to hospital, the infantry dug in, and the drivers serviced their vehicles. Then, with the guns sounding in their ears, they fell asleep.

For many days the platoon listened to the guns—our own and Rommel's. Sometimes the sound was no more than a dull rumble in the distance: often it made the air tremble. Wherever the 20th Battalion went the drivers went too, withdrawing behind the nearest cover as soon as the infantry had debussed and then standing by for the next order. There was ammunition to be fetched, hot stew to be taken to outposts, and at any moment the transport was liable to be called forward to embus the battalion and move it to another sector. It was No. 1 Platoon's testing time.

The general position on 29 June, the day after the break-through, was that the 30th and 13th Corps were hurriedly strengthening the Alamein Line while the following units, reading from north to south, were barring the advance: 1st South African Division (**Alamein Box**), 18th Indian Infantry Brigade (Deir el Shein), New Zealanders (Fortress A), and 19th Indian Infantry Brigade (Fortress B).

The 29th was a quiet day for our drivers. During the morning gunfire could be heard from the direction of **Fuka**, where infiltration along the railway and the coast road had prevented the British from standing, and in the afternoon the 20th Battalion moved a mile or two south and dug in. The Luftwaffe was overhead all night long.

Early on the following afternoon Rommel arrived in front of the Alamein Line. The 20th Battalion was now near Deir el Munassib, twenty miles south of **El Alamein**, and the main attack was expected to develop during the night at a point twelve miles northeast of its position.

The attack was launched the next day (Ash Wednesday they called it in **Cairo**, mocking the smoke rising from army and ministerial chimneys), the first and fiercest blows being struck against the South Africans in the coast sector. The 18th Indian Infantry Brigade was heavily engaged at Deir el Shein, south of the **Alamein Box**, and during the afternoon tanks and infantry converged on Fortress A. When the artillery opened fire the enemy decided that the weak spot he was searching for was not there. The tanks sheered off and the infantry

climbed back into their lorries. At half past six in the evening the 6th Brigade's guns opened fire on a large enemy column, which then withdrew out of range. A report from the coast sector said that the enemy was retiring west leaving burning vehicles. The last news of the day was bad: the 18th Indian Brigade at Deir el Shein, after fighting splendidly all day, had been overwhelmed, and there was now a gap in the line.

That night our drivers heard heavy bombing. The Royal Air Force was attacking panzer divisions in laager.

Rommel started 2 July by throwing the 90th Light Division, three armoured divisions, and most of his Italian infantry against the South Africans and the British 1st Armoured Division. He was trying to enlarge the gap south of the **Alamein Box**. The battle raged all day, and at one time he was so sure of success that he issued a communiqué in which he spoke of pursuing the defeated British towards **Alexandria**. The German radio said that he would lunch there on Friday.

That evening after a long, anxious day—the battalion had moved north-north-west to harry the enemy's rear and had come under shellfire—our drivers heard news of a big tank battle. The enemy was said to be retiring.

It was true. The bombing of the panzer laagers, the gallantry of the 1st Armoured Division, and the dogged resistance of the South Africans had saved the day. On 3 July Rommel tried again and the next forty-eight hours were desperately anxious. Both sides were drunk and poisoned with tiredness but they fought like lions—the Germans because they were good soldiers and the prize was in sight, the Allies because it was the last ditch and it was better to die now than to be ashamed always.

They fought in the stinking heat and through the cold darkness, and on the third morning tens of thousands of men, packed like people in a city between **Alexandria** and the Alamein Line, between the sea and the

depression, came out of their tents, threw off dewy blankets and climbed from their slit-trenches, hoiked in the sand, scratched themselves like dogs in the sunlight, and looked around. And they said: 'She's going to be all right. I think we've done it. I reckon she's going to be all right.' They turned to their breakfasts and their tasks, forgetting their anxiety in a few hours, not remembering, after a few days, the times when she was all wrong.

No lunch for Rommel in **Alexandria**—not this week. **Mussolini** and his white charger could go back home and stay there until they were sent for. The Eighth Army, after being beaten at Knights-bridge, after losing **Tobruk**, after abandoning Mersa Matruh, after failing to stand at **Fuka**, after seeing the new line—the last line—bend and begin to crack, was holding fast. No one could call it a great victory, but you could, if you liked, call it a miracle. Not because the Germans were much stronger than we were—they weren't—not because they had more and better weapons—they hadn't—but because somewhere on a tarmac road between **Tobruk** and **El Daba**, for ten minutes, for an hour, for a day—all who saw it will know the truth—a great army had streamed east, reeking of defeat, breathing the sour air of defeat, sick with defeat.

It was a scene best forgotten and No. 1 Platoon's drivers forgot it as soon as anyone. They were becoming used to this mobile column business and the men they carried were now their friends. The RMT could take over if it liked—but there was no tearing hurry.

And then, to spoil everything, the Stukas came.

They came in fives, in tens, in thirties, and they came every day and several times a day. They would circle above the transport and fall out of the sky one after another, screaming. And after they had gone, before the smoke had cleared or the sand settled, the ambulances would come scuttling across the desert, making for the flames and the smashed lorries. The Luftwaffe was trying to hamstring the mobile columns by knocking out their transport.

On 4 July the 4th Brigade area was raided four times. In the afternoon several lorries were damaged and two were destroyed. 'Owie' McKee, ¹⁵ sheltering in a deep slit-trench, was buried alive beside his burning lorry, and his friends dug him out with bare hands and steel helmets. He was unconscious when they lifted him into the ambulance.

Mail arrived in the evening and the last raid of the day took place while our drivers were reading letters from home by the fading light. Frank Humphreys' lorry was destroyed, Frank being badly hurt by blast when a bomb landed on the edge of his slittrench, and George Searle's lorry, loaded with mortar bombs, sticky bombs, and hand grenades, was set on fire. After George and the others had dug out an Artillery driver who had been buried in his slit-trench they shovelled sand on the flames. Ammunition was exploding, but that did not stop Corporal Arty McDonald ¹⁶ from jumping on the tailboard and clearing it of a box of smouldering sticky bombs, which, by some miracle, was still intact. Half an hour from the start of the raid the fire was under control. The tires had gone from the back wheels and at first glance it seemed as though the lorry would have to be written off. But our drivers, knowing that transport was precious beyond price, set to work, and by ten that night, when C Company was due to move, the lorry was again mobile.

Shortly before noon the next day, while the 4th Brigade Group was shifting from east to west of the fortress, aircraft appeared out of the sun, roared down the lanes of transport, and dropped bombs from about 1000 feet. A glitter of wings, black blobs falling, an eruption of the desert, and it was all over. In the centre of the formation, where a jeep had been overturned beside a staff car, there was a bad mess, and word flew round that Brigadier J. R. Gray ¹⁷ was dead. Also among the dead, it was learned later, was the Brigade Major and four men attached to brigade headquarters. The 28th Battalion, which had come under the command of the brigade group the day before and was travelling on the right flank of the convoy, had lost one major, one lieutenant, and fourteen men.

After the wounded had been taken away the convoy travelled on, reaching its destination at three in the afternoon. The Luftwaffe appeared almost at once and there was a short, sharp raid. Digging was difficult and the third raid of the day caught several drivers with their slit-trenches unfinished. At 6 p.m. some sixteen planes bombed the brigade area, and the last raid, made by Stukas and Junkers 88s escorted by Messerschmitts, took place at dusk. Claude Cameron ¹⁸ was injured by blast from a 500-pound bomb and three tires were blown off Captain Gibson's staff car. Other damage was slight.

And it was like that every day. The Stukas seldom diverged from their timetable. They could be expected early in the afternoon, during the evening meal, and at sunset. Even when they failed to appear the feeling of suspended doom was almost as bad as a raid.

For a while No. 1 Platoon had a run of luck. There were no more casualties, and although several of the vehicles became like sieves none was immobilised for more than a few hours—thanks chiefly to ‘Dad’ Cleave and Norm Hague, both of whom earned the Military Medal for putting the job first and their lives second.

Except in an emergency, moves for which transport was needed were made only at night, and during the long, cloudless days the drivers had little to do except watch for Stukas. Most of them were very tired, but when they slept in the daytime their nerves stayed awake. Everyone developed a *listening* expression. Conversations would end suddenly and eyes go to the horizon. Ears would be cocked for the noise of engines, the thump of guns. When it was a genuine alarm Bofors started coughing in the distance, marking the course of the bombers with a mass of white puffs, thick near the centre of the target, scattered on its outskirts, like the marks on a dart-board. Our drivers seldom heard the beat of engines. As dogs in lonely districts pass on from farmstead to farmstead the chorus of warning and mad rage, drowning the step, the sly rustle, that first caused it, so the Bofors, in area after area, barked furiously, until at last the guns with the 20th Battalion were barking

them all down. 'Crassi's' spandau, a Pomeranian among wolfhounds, barked too, but you couldn't hear it.

Sometimes the Stukas dropped their bombs and went away. Often they would dive and scream among the smoke for what seemed an eternity. After they had gone our drivers would rise from their slit-trenches, stand upright in them for a few moments (as you might stand in a bath before stepping out of it) and grin shakily while they counted the fires, watched the ambulances at their grim tasks, and noted how the desert was splashed with greyish-white streaks. These were caused by small bombs that had exploded before piercing the surface.

Everyone owned that he was afraid and everyone either had a charm against fear (which sometimes worked and sometimes didn't) or was trying to find one. It helped to count the planes and watch the bombs falling. It helped to dig your slit-trench to a specification: so many yards from the lorry, so many feet deep, so many feet wide. It helped, when the planes were coming, to have a pet jingle you could let loose in your head—nonsense:

Down where the waistline's a little longer,
Down where the soup stain's a little stronger,
That's where the vest begins....

Or something charming from childhood:

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes—and back again.

It helped, perhaps, to pray: to pray that nothing irrevocable would happen (as yet, though people were dying around them, none of our drivers had been killed or mutilated), or to ask, with a diminution of self-respect, for the RMT to be sent.

But the RMT, the slugs, didn't come. There was no talk of the

platoon's being relieved, and the Stukas went on observing their timetable.

It was hot all day, but towards evening (Stuka-time) it became cooler. The sun retracted its fierce heat and curled up in a great glowing ball, dazzling westward-gazing eyes and hiding the Stukas. After the Stukas had gone for good, the night, cool and lovely, rushed over the whole desert and flowed right to the sunset, little and distant now, like the mouth of a cave. Our drivers opened tins of pears, laughing and talking. Later—between nine and ten probably—the transport would form up in column of route, move after a wait of anything from one to four hours, and travel, most likely, all through the night, stopping and starting, while in the backs of the lorries the infantry lolled and dozed, their faces drawn and corpse-like under the moon.

All day long under the sun, under mortar bombs and shellfire, they had lain in slit-trenches, with little water and nothing to eat except biscuits and bully. But they were always cheerful—cheerful when they gave our drivers their cameras and other treasures to look after, saying 'Hang on to it if anything happens'; cheerful when you boiled up for them ('Hell! You'd think we was Father Christmas!'), cheerful and angry when they went out to die (angry with the Germans, with the authorities, with themselves for being such fools), cheerful and even happy sometimes under the hot sun, under the cold moon, under the stars.

Ruweisat Ridge, fourteen miles south of **Alamein**, was the most important of a series of roughly parallel ridges cutting both the German and British positions. Whoever held it securely could sweep the coast with direct fire and operate from good cover against an exposed plateau to the south. Its capture was worth many lives.

The 4th and 5th Brigades held a ridge six miles to the south, **Alam Nayil**; the 5th Indian Brigade held the east end of Ruweisat and the Germans the west, which was the New Zealanders' objective. The battle was planned for the night of 14-15 July.

On the morning of the 14th the men of the 20th Battalion were in their slit-trenches, revelling in the spreading warmth after a bitter night. Greatcoats and blankets (one each) had been sent up to them the day before but had failed to keep out the cold. Since the afternoon of the 11th, when our drivers had seen them moving steadily forward into a storm of shellfire and mortar fire, there had been no extra cups of tea for them—only hard fighting and discomfort. The transport was with the B Echelon near **Alam Nayil**.

Shortly before noon enemy bombers escorted by fighters passed overhead on their way to bomb the Divisional replenishment area. Our drivers saw the black smoke, but it did not occur to them that as a result of that raid two men from their unit were dead, two dying, and six wounded.



Hailstones in the desert, south of Alamein

Hailstones in the desert, south of Alamein

Digging slit-trench, Kaponga



Digging slit-trench, Kaponga



Rest area near coast, Burg el Arab

Rest area near coast, Burg el Arab

Wheel tracks, Alamein



Wheel tracks, Alamein

Twelve Stukas had dived out of the sun to bomb and machine-gun No. 2 Platoon at the ammunition point. Corporal Owen Miles was killed instantly when a lorry loaded with gun-cotton, gelignite, and ammonal received a direct hit and blew up, Bob King ¹⁹ was killed by shrapnel while sheltering under a pick-up, and Doug Henderson and Jacky O'Connor were wounded mortally by shrapnel. Dave Gordon ²⁰ was wounded in the face, and Bob Towart, ²¹ his mate, was wounded in the back and legs and pinned to the ground by the differential of his lorry, which was let down by the collapse of all four tires. When he had wriggled clear Dave and he began to throw cases of mortar bombs from the back of the burning lorry. Their friends had to make them stop, and after a while the lorry blew up. Second-Lieutenant Borgfeldt, ²² who had been lying beside Bob King, was wounded in the head and body, Sergeant Andy Andrew ²³ (Ammunition Platoon) was hurt by blast, Joe André ²⁴ had a compound fracture of the leg, and Len Skilton ²⁵ was injured in the head. Two three-tonners were completely destroyed; another, which was used for carrying stores and canteen goods, had to be written off; and two vehicles, a three-tonner and a pick-up, were badly damaged. Three men who had been drawing ammunition were dead, and in all, according to the 5th Field Ambulance war diary, twenty-one deaths, had occurred in the replenishment area. Forty were wounded.

Our No. 1 Platoon drivers did not hear of the tragedy until later in the day (14 July). Headquarters 20th Battalion was bombed once during the day and the 4th Brigade area came under shellfire, but no damage was done to the transport and none of our drivers was hurt. Our own field and medium guns pounded the enemy for hours, preparing the way for the attack, and at dusk the firing quickened.

Zero hour was 11 p.m., but by then our drivers were asleep. What happened that night is not their story. They heard about it when it was over and they set out with sad hearts to collect what was left of the 20th.

They stayed where they were that night and the next day, and the

news that came back to them was all bad. The battalions had gained their objectives but were in trouble with tanks. The Indians, attacking on the right, were held up. Supporting arms were unable to come forward because of tanks, and something had gone wrong about our own armour.

Our drivers thought of the infantry up there on the ridge—the tea-drinkers, the cheerful fighters, the good friends—but they had troubles of their own. The brigade area had been under shell and mortar fire since dawn, and at eleven o'clock the first bombers came over. There were ten of them and they hit No. 1 Platoon's water cart and killed Bernie Caddy in his slit-trench. Jack Voice,²⁶ Bernie's mate on the water cart, was wounded in the back and hurt by blast, and Lenny Hay²⁷ died later in the day.

It was the first time that any of the platoon's drivers had been killed violently in front of the others, and this long run of good luck had given them a sense of immunity. Now all that was shattered. They saw Bernie Caddy—dry, humorous, resourceful, very well liked—lying beside his slit-trench, unwounded, but with the life crushed out of him. They heard how Lenny Hay, asleep in the back of his lorry, had been woken by the bombs falling and had been caught before he could get to his slit-trench. He had wanted to know if any of the others were hurt. Then he had said he was hot and would like his jersey taken off. We heard afterwards from a New Zealand doctor that if courage could have saved him he would have lived.

Possessing no unusual gifts, unless a genius for friendship is a gift, possessing no unusual virtues, unless happiness and high spirits are virtues, consciously contributing nothing to the sum of the world's treasure, he was the one we could spare least. He was like Stevenson's man—an extra candle in the room. When they heard that he was dead, his friends knew then, as so many had known before them, and so many others would know later, that the war had lasted one day too long, had killed one boy too many.

The rest of the day was bad. The platoon's vehicles were parked near

some abandoned German guns which drew bombs like a magnet. There was another sharp raid before lunch, and at three in the afternoon the area was raided by twenty-four bombers. Three lorries were hit—they were not ours—which brought the total for the day to six. Throughout the afternoon the area was under fire nearly all the time, but there was a lull in the bombing as soon as sixteen British fighters appeared. They patrolled the sky until shortly before sunset. After they had gone, twenty-four bombers, preceded by fighters, came out of the east. The bombers went away after dropping their loads, but the fighters stayed and were joined presently by eighteen bombers, one of which dropped twelve bombs in a row.

At dusk there was a double issue of rum and our drivers drank it gratefully, feeling the treacly fire warm and comforting all the way down to their toes, ironing out creases, steadying nerves, melting the stone under the heart. The news was shocking: [Ruweisat Ridge](#) lost, the 4th Brigade overrun, the 20th Battalion with 50 per cent casualties, the Brigadier ²⁸ and his staff missing, and also Captain Washbourn, ²⁹ Captain Upham, Captain Maxwell, ³⁰ Lieutenant Moloney, ³¹ Second-Lieutenant Cottrell ³²—men whom our drivers had come to know in the last fortnight, know and trust.

Later that night all the transport in the area moved a short distance to Headquarters 4th Brigade. There it formed up in three lines and everyone rested. German flares lit the sky but our drivers were too tired to worry. Most of them were asleep in their cabs.

The convoy moved off between three and four. Some of the lorries carried men but most were loaded only with ownerless gear, of which our drivers were the unwilling legatees. At three the next day, after a slow, roundabout journey, the brigade halted near Point 102, only a little more than ten miles east by north of [Alam Nayil](#). The 20th Battalion was ordered to hand over all arms for delivery to the 6th Brigade, which was moving up from [Amiriya](#). The drivers heaved sighs of relief. They had had enough.

The next morning the area was covered with neat piles of equipment, most of which was the property of dead, missing, or wounded men. From the air it must have looked like a supply dump. At all events, when the bombers appeared, which they did shortly before noon, they made straight for it. There were twelve of them and they came in at a low level, dropping bombs and strafing. Four or five bombs fell round the platoon's ack-ack lorry, which had all guns firing, and 'Crassi' Cliff dropped at his post, badly wounded in the back. Second-Lieutenant L. N. Cording, ³³ who had been speaking to 'Crassi' when the raid started, was hit by a chunk of shrapnel, which almost severed his left leg. Cliff Brown ³⁴ was unconscious and dying from blast. Ambulances arrived before the smoke had cleared and the wounded were taken to a nearby dressing station.

With heavy hearts our drivers heard that the platoon was to report to the 28th Battalion. They yielded to none in their admiration of the Maoris, but they could think of no people whose company they wanted less at that moment. The Maoris were seven miles north-west by west of Point 102 and the move was made late that afternoon. In the evening the sky was smudged with bursting shells and full of scudding aircraft.

Early the next morning the Maoris were taken to Point 102 where they were handed over to a platoon from the 6th Reserve Mechanical Transport Company. Our drivers made no pretence of feeling anything but relief. By tea-time they were back with the unit, which was now eighteen miles south-south-east of Alamein and sixteen miles from the coast.

We stared at the lorries as they moved into the area. Some of them were like sieves. No more would people say, with a suggestion of a sneer, that No. 1 Platoon was lucky. But the drivers were not comforted. They would rather have stayed safe and undistinguished, with Lenny, Bernie, and Cliff alive and well, and Second-Lieutenant Cording still able to play football, and Frank not dangerously ill in Helwan hospital. They would rather that no shadow had fallen on shining memories of good times at

¹ Capt C. H. Upham, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Government land valuer; Conway Flat, Hundalee, North Canterbury; born **Christchurch**, 21 Sep 1908; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² Dvr H. E. High; labourer; **Timaru**; born England, 23 Apr 1912; wounded May 1941.

³ L-Cpl G. D. Searle; contractor; **Waipukurau**; born Owaka, 12 Aug 1914.

⁴ Cpl J. McDonald; farm labourer; **Eastbourne**; born Makarewa, 14 Aug 1914.

⁵ Cpl N. Hague, MM; truck driver; **Cambridge**; born **Te Aroha**, 3 Dec 1914.

⁶ Sgt J. D. Letham, m.i.d.; tractor driver; Dromore, Canterbury; born **Scotland**, 25 Jun 1909.

⁷ Dvr C. V. Cliff; station hand; Omana, **North Auckland**; born England, 24 May 1903; wounded 17 Jul 1942.

⁸ Dvr R. W. J. Cannell; farmer; Lepperton, Taranaki; born NZ, 1 Apr 1904; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

⁹ L-Cpl G. E. Child; farmer; Maungakaramea, **Whangarei**; born Maunga-karamea, 20 May 1916; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

¹⁰ Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, * m.i.d.; barrister and solicitor; in First World War commanded company in NZMG Corps; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; commanded at various periods 4 and 6 Bdes, 9 Bde, 4 Armd Bde, and was GOC, 2 NZ Div, Jun-Aug 1942 and Jun-Jul 1943. Since 1945 has been in

Germany as president of a military legal court and was recently appointed Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in the British zone.

* **First World War.**

11 Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Rector, Waitaki Boys' High School, **Oamaru**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; CO 20 Bn 8 Dec 1941-27 Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 27-29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul-15 Aug 1942; CO 20 Bn and Armd Regt 16 Aug 1942-12 Jul 1943; comd Adv Base 24 Jan-11 Feb 1944; 5 Bde, 29 Feb-30 Mar 1944; 6 Bde, 1 Jul-22 Aug 1944; 5 Bde, 22 Aug-4 Nov 1944.

12 Dvr A. B. Caddy; farm labourer; born **Thames**, 12 Jun 1914; killed in action, 15 Jul 1942.

13 Cpl A. McK. Weir; timber worker; born Rawene, 12 Dec 1913; p.w. Jun 1942; died while p.w., 3 Dec 1942.

14 Dvr F. R. Humphreys; motor driver; **Hamilton**; born **Wellington**, 7 Oct 1915; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

15 Dvr O. R. McKee; mill worker; **Auckland**; born Takapuna, 19 Dec 1916; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

16 Cpl A. G. McDonald; bricklayer; Papatoetoe; born **Tonga**, 24 Oct 1910.

17 Brig J. R. Gray, ED, m.i.d.; barrister and solicitor; born **Wellington**. 7 Aug 1900; CO 18 Bn 5 Jan 1940-6 Nov 1941, 28 Mar 1942-29 Jun 1942; comd 4 NZ Inf Bde 29 Jun-5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

18 Dvr C. L. Cameron; garage attendant; Takapuna, **Auckland**; born NZ, 24 May 1916; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

19 Dvr R. King; tractor driver; born **Christchurch**, 25 Sep 1904; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

20 Dvr D. E. Gordon; labourer; Pukeatua, **Te Awamutu**; born Kawhia, 20 Jun 1917; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

21 Dvr R. Towart; salesman; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 13 Feb 1908; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

22 Lt R. A. Borgfeldt; draper; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 8 Sep 1910; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

23 Sgt A. L. Andrew; salesman; **Auckland**; born Waipawa, 20 Apr 1905; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

24 Dvr J. L. André; truck driver; **Hawera**; born **Auckland**, 11 Sep 1916; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

25 L-Cpl L. A. K. Skilton; motor driver; **Palmerston North**; born **Wanganui**, 21 Sep 1914; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

26 L-Cpl J. D. Voice; lorry driver; **Invercargill**; born Gore, 24 Nov 1918; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

27 Dvr L. E. Hay; carpenter's labourer; born NZ, 16 Oct 1917; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

28 Brig J. T. Burrows. He returned to the Division on 16 July.

29 Capt G. W. Washbourn; bank clerk; **Christchurch**; born **Timaru**, 13 Jul 1916; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

30 Capt P. V. H. Maxwell, DSO; manufacturer's representative; **Christ-church**; born Londonderry, **Ireland**, 14 Feb 1906; p.w. 15

Jul 1942.

³¹ Lt D. A. R. Moloney; insurance clerk; born NZ, 11 Aug 1910; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

³² Capt A. I. Cottrell; solicitor; **Christchurch; born Westport, 10 Feb 1907; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

³³ 2 Lt L. N. Cording; accountant; **Wellington; born **Wellington**, 21 Mar 1917; wounded 17 Jul 1942.**

³⁴ Dvr C. S. Brown; farmhand; born NZ, 20 Aug 1913; died of wounds 17 Jul 1942.

³⁵ Our casualties between 29 June and 17 July were: killed in action, 7; wounded, 15; missing (later posted p.w.), 1.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 14 – A STUDY IN DISCOMFORT

CHAPTER 14

A STUDY IN DISCOMFORT

NEITHER side wanted a sit-down war—not with the sides as they were arranged now, anyway. Rommel had a reputation to preserve and his supply lines were too long. As for the British, they were bottled up in their own penalty area and they couldn't move without treading on one another's toes. At present, however, both armies were too weak to attack. General Auchinleck made the attempt on the night of 21-22 July, with Indians and New Zealanders striking the main blow in the centre, but it failed because our armour was not in a position to help at the critical moment. The same thing happened four nights later when he tried again with British, Australian, and South African troops. This time we lost a thousand Australians and seventy tanks were destroyed or put out of commission.

Rommel, who was overdue at Shephard's, was equally unhappy, but there was nothing he could do about it. Until one side had more of everything than the other it would have to be a war of patrols and artillery, of ships, planes, and factories.

Minefields were extended and defences improved. Again it was the worker in **Essen** against the worker in Detroit, the Ruhr coalminer against the Welsh coalminer, the Neapolitan stevedore against his brother in Wapping.

From an hour after sunrise until about an hour before dark we sweated all the time, even when we were in the shade. How we were able to sweat so much when we drank so little was a problem that baffled us. For a while the ration of water for each man was half a gallon a day. You got a quart (one full water bottle) to do what you liked with and the rest was pooled for the cooks. From somewhere—often from your private supply—water had to be found for your radiator. When it leaked or boiled over, no rare occurrence, there was nothing for it but to behave nobly—pour the last drop of liquid down your horse's throat, like the gentleman

who brought the good news from Ghent to Aix. You got a cup of tea, not always a full one, three times a day, but the water it was made with was so brackish that it curdled the condensed milk. We were thirsty all day long and at night we had the Lemonade Dream, the hangover one, in which you swill glass after glass of something ice-cold and delicious without its doing you the least good.

Later the ration was doubled and then we were able to have an occasional wash, several drivers using one basin of water for their bodies and the same one for their socks; but the quantity was still so small that when you visited a friend for morning tea you took your water bottle with you, just as in England diners-out were careful not to forget ration cards. There was no water, of course, for washing up, but that didn't matter as dixies and frying-pans could be scoured with sand.

With chins unshaven and shirts black with sweat we resembled filthy beach-combers, but in point of fact we were cleaner and far sweeter-smelling than we should have been if water had been plentiful and the weather bitterly cold. There is a cleansing element in hot sunshine.

Worse than the lack of water were the flies.

The foul and dismaying thing about the **Alamein** flies was their oneness. None was separate from its fellows any more than the wave is separate from the ocean, the tentacle from the octopus. As one fly, one dark and horrible force guided by one mind, ubiquitous and immensely powerful, they addressed themselves to the one task, which was to destroy us body and soul. It was useless to kill them, for they despised death and made no attempt to avoid it. They existed only in the common will, and to weaken that we should have had to destroy countless millions of them. None the less we killed them unceasingly. We killed them singly and in detachments with fly swats, and the dead lay so thick in our lorries that we had to sweep them out several times a day. We set ingenious traps for them and they filled the traps, the living feasting ghoulishly on the dead. We slew them in mounds with our bare

hands until the crunch of minute frames and the squish of microscopic viscera, felt rather than heard, became a nightmare. But what was the use? Their ranks closed at once and they went on with the all-important task of driving us out of our minds.

Although they had a common brain and a common purpose not all were identical in appearance. About one in a thousand was larger than his fellows and of a lovely bottle-green colour. These, so the story went, and doubtless it was true, were corpse-fed. One could only suppose that the Intelligence in charge of the operation had introduced them for their moral effect, which was considerable.

Flies are attracted by any light surface, and our towels and the sun-bleached canopies of our lorries were speckled as with black confetti. Flies crave moisture, and you knew from watching your friends—and the knowledge was disproportionately humiliating and disgusting—that you too were walking around with half a hundred miniature old-men-of-the-sea clinging dourly to the back of your damp shirt. And when you shut your eyes—this is the plain truth—flies tried to open them, mad for the delectable fluid.

We couldn't always be killing them, but we had to keep on brushing them away, otherwise even breathing would have been difficult. Our arms ached from the exercise, but still they fastened on our food and accompanied it into our mouths and down our throats, scorning death when there was an advantage to be gained. They drowned themselves in our tea and in our soup. They attended us with awful relish on our most intimate occasions. They waited until our hands were full—they liked us best when we were lying beneath a lorry busy with spanner or grease gun—and then they rushed us, feet and suckers working furiously, inflicting a hundred pricks and stings.

Some of us excavated dugouts, made them fly-proof with mosquito netting, and lay grilling below ground until we could bear it no longer. Some of us wore veils, with an opening for pipe or cigarette, but there again—who wanted to wear a veil when beard and baked skin were

already maddening excrescences? The best plan—the only plan—was to open the canopy of your lorry at both ends, seal the openings with netting, and turn the lorry into the hot current of air that did duty for a breeze. This made life just bearable. Unfortunately nets were scarce. Many were torn badly, some had been sold in [Syria](#), and some had been lost. Anyway, one net was not enough for the job, so there was really no escape. The Intelligence had foreseen everything.

On 29 July while the plague was at its peak—a peak that was to be maintained effortlessly for more than two months—we were visited by a swarm of mosquitoes. For some hours we waded through a warm, whirring mist, every particle of which was able to raise a blister. This would surely have driven us mad before long, but the wind changed and the mosquitoes went away, leaving the field to the flies.

To the flies and the desert sores.

The satanic cunning ('But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh') was evident in these noisome ulcers. The least scratch was enough to cause them and they took rather less than a fortnight to expand round a suppurating centre to the bigness of a slice of lemon. They were irksome and humiliating rather than painful ('My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken and become loathsome') and they took weeks, months sometimes, to heal, and when they did they left scars that remained for over a year. Nearly everyone you saw had an arm or a leg bandaged and the knuckles of both hands ringed with filthy scraps of sticking-plaster. After breakfast and before tea 'Doc' Turner's pick-up was like a lazaret, but he was impatient only when someone failed to report for a dressing.

And there were sandstorms and dust-storms. Frogs and locusts we were not troubled by, nor was there need for them. We were ready to cry 'Enough', load our lorries with Israelites, and drive them to [Tel Aviv](#).

Until now many of us had liked the desert and some of us had loved it. But the desert had grown smaller and it had grown dirtier. In fact,

robbed of spaciousness and cleanliness, it was desert no longer. It was a big sand-pit in a big slum—the kind of nightmare playground you find sometimes in great cities; sandgrey like asphalt, clumps of toddlers squalidly underfoot, rickety urchins quarrelling round swings and sweating in hot, dark clothes, the grease of poverty on everything, and the sun shining. A vast army was boxed in between the Alamein Line and the Delta. Every horizon was dotted with guns, tents, or transport, and wherever you looked there was a moving vehicle cloaked in its private dust-storm. Claustrophobia is not a disease of the desert, but many of us, cabined by the great heat, encompassed by armies, wrapped in our foul garment of flies, came near to suffering from it.

A high standard of cleanliness was expected and as far as possible enforced, but in every unit there are a few men to whom decency and order mean nothing and collectively they are formidable. Unburied tins and refuse lay among the legitimate lumber of the battlefield, adding squalor to desolation. Some men—some units—would live for a month in one area and leave it spotless. Others would stay for two hours, conduct a vast disorderly picnic, and move on, leaving behind them the kind of sour patch you find on shifting a chicken run. Near busy road junctions and the entrances to supply depots sand turned to dust—grey, clinging dust—and in this the flies multiplied. Wild animals make only a little mess, but man, divorced from his cesspits and sewers, turns all to filth.

Even under these conditions food continued to be important to us and much time was spent in grumbling about the meals. They were adequate but unpleasant, and stew—bully stew, fresh meat stew, tinned meat-and-vegetable stew, sausage stew—was nearly always the main dish. It was not a cooling diet. The daily ration of bread was grey and unpalatable and sometimes weevily, and our fresh vegetables were no longer fresh by the time they reached us. Fortunately our platoon canteens were fairly well stocked with tinned fruit at this time, so we had something good to eat. Anyway, it was no weather for gorging.

Nor was it weather for work—but it was work that saved us, giving us a sense of purpose and responsibility and something to think about

beyond ourselves. The field regiments were constantly in action, and although we were now stronger by a platoon we had to borrow transport from other units to keep pace with their demands. Supplying the 25-pounders with ammunition was our greatest problem and to this No. 1 Platoon devoted all its time. The other platoons dealt in mixed loads and took turn and turn about at the ammunition point, which did not settle down in a permanent area until 17 July, when it was formed five miles south of [Alam Nayil](#), staying there until early in August.

Whenever an unusually heavy demand for 25-pounder was on the cards, vehicles from No. 1 Platoon were sent to the point with as many loads as were likely to be needed, and this system worked fairly well. Much time would have been saved, though, if the Artillery had been able to give their orders by wireless or telephone instead of having to depend on messengers. As it was, vehicles were often standing idle at the ammunition point when they were urgently needed for other work.

The point was replenished from the unit area, the empty lorries reloading at the 86th Field Maintenance Centre, near [El Hammam](#), some twenty-five miles north-east by north of the area, or, less often, at the Burg el Arab railhead, ten miles farther on. The round trip between the unit and the field maintenance centre was something like eighty miles and it was rough going all the way. To save time and to avoid congestion the lorries travelled singly or in small groups.

The Sun, Moon, and Star tracks, the Bottle, Boat, and Hat tracks—how well we got to know them! We drove through a hot, ochrous haze, sometimes bumping over a mile-wide pattern of ruts, sometimes ploughing between high sandbanks that the bulldozers had thrown up to make a road through the soft sand. Here the wheels, sinking a foot deep in dust before finding the buried army-track (heavy-gauge wire-netting), threw powdery bow waves, which hushhushed under the mudguards and fell back whispering. Often there were traffic blocks, and then, while the air trembled with heat and flies in their hundreds came from nowhere, driving you from the cab, you could hear, in the uneasy silence,

radiators gurgling like kettles and the grease frying on the manifolds. You swore fiercely at the delay, forgetting how urgently only five minutes ago you had craved release from the hot prison of the cab, and how since early afternoon, like a dead slave on an oar, you had been jerked and wrenched by the steering wheel, its sudden, spiteful twitches jarring you from wrist to shoulder.

With evening some magic came back to the desert. Sweat dried on face and body, the engine sweetened, and the tin of American beer hanging in a wet sock from the bracket of the driving-mirror (no money could have bought it) cooled rapidly. The lorry's spiked shadow—blunt spike of canopy, spike of cab, spike of headlamp—ran beside you, shortening and then lengthening with each lurch. The twitch of the steering wheel was a friendly nudge now, almost a rough caress, like the touch of the dust and the warm air flowing under the windscreen.

To complete this study in discomfort one would like to be able to say that we were bombed constantly, but that was not the case, though some of us were so shaken by our recent experiences that we viewed every plane with distrust and suffered vicariously when neighbouring areas were raided. We saw many Messerschmitts but they left us alone. Dog-fights took place high above us and we heard the tiny stammer of machine guns, like argument in Heaven, and watched while the aching blueness was cut by vapour trails—perfectly described arcs and segments, beautifully simple and remote: Euclid drawn large for children. Often a parachute opened like a white flower, opened and drifted to earth in a slow curve, swinging a black dot, a comma, a tiny man, while the flames crackled behind the hill and the scream still rang in our ears and the gout of black smoke, sudden as a splash of ink, drew all eyes and fingers. Ours, we wondered, or his?

Although we lived always in the shadow of the **Luftwaffe** we came to no harm. Individual drivers were frightened while on jobs and one day two old transport planes, Bombays, were set on fire by Messerschmitts as they were landing near the unit area, but for most of us the **Luftwaffe** was only a minor worry and vexation, taking its place somewhere

between desert sores and curdled condensed milk. Other units were less fortunate: so much damage was done during July that we were ordered to dig bunkers for our lorries and sandbag their vitals.

Increasingly, though, the sky was filled with our own aircraft. We counted the bombers as they flew west and we counted them on their way back, and it was seldom that one was missing. The promise was coming true: 'We shall fight, with growing confidence and growing strength, in the air'.

The author of this promise visited the **Eighth Army** early in August. Then he went to **Moscow** to see Stalin, who had lost Sebastopol and Rostov. Then he returned to Egypt and paid a visit to the New Zealand sector of the Alamein Line. A reception was held and among those who attended it were men decorated in the desert. We were represented by Bob Aro.

One result of Mr. Churchill's earlier visit was a reshuffle of Generals. Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery was given command of the **Eighth Army** and two days later General Auchinleck was succeeded as Commander-in-Chief, **Middle East**, by General Sir Harold Alexander, famous at **Dunkirk** and in **Burma**.

We heard of these high matters and we were not encouraged. Only yesterday press and radio had been reminding us of our confidence in 'The Auk' (which was what we were supposed to call him) and saying how much he meant to us. Now they were saying the same thing about his successor, whom we were to refer to affectionately as 'Monty'. Hell!

Although it would be idle to pretend that our morale was high, at this time we were nowhere near—nowhere remotely near—breaking point. Work was still our antidote to discomfort and depression, and during the third week of August we struck a particularly busy period. At a time when we were even busier than usual it was decided to dump enough ammunition in the forward areas to last the Division three days in an emergency. While we were helping with this task a British brigade

arrived in the field without any first-line ammunition, and we were told to supply half its immediate requirements.

Thus our days. As for our nights, they came with the blessedness of a recurrent miracle. They damped the flies and the dust, they hid us from the Messerschmitts, they bathed us in coolness. Then we could enjoy our tinned pineapple and pears and gather round the platoon wireless sets. Then we could sleep, dreaming of downs and lakes and the woolshed back home, dreaming until the first fly, rising earlier than any lark, stepped delicately across an eyelid, or dipped to drink, with tiny, filthy proboscis, at a desert sore.

If you have read Kingsley's *Water Babies* you will remember with what pure delight young Tom, Grimes' the chimney-sweep's boy, tore off his sooty rags and tumbled into the stream. So we tumbled into the **Mediterranean** on 24 August when the unit moved to an area six or seven miles from the beach and twenty-two miles from **Alamein**. It was our eighth move since the beginning of July (though a month had been spent in one area), but the others had meant only more digging.

From then on we bathed daily and whether the salt water did more for body or for soul it would be hard to say. Our spirits revived in one leap, our sores started to heal, our appetites came back, and the dirt peeled off us. Only No. 2 Platoon, which had been at the ammunition point (twelve miles south by east of **Alamein**) since 5 August, carried on as before.

Thus marvellously recovered we heard the rumour with equanimity: Rommel was about to attack. And plainly it was more than a rumour, for men on leave were recalled to their units and everyone was ordered to be dressed and armed a quarter of an hour before sunrise as a precaution against paratroop landings.

On 30 August our fighters were unusually active, and the next day we were told to send 10,000 rounds of 25-pounder to the ammunition point. No. 1 Platoon set out with half this amount and vehicles from

Nos. 3 and 4 Platoons with the rest. On their way forward our drivers passed heavy guns that were being dug in on the left of the track.

As soon as it arrived at the point No. 1 Platoon came under shellfire. This stopped before any damage was done and then there was a vicious bombing raid on transport in the next area. Our drivers looked at one another. 'The old Rommel,' they said, and they might have been speaking affectionately of a headstrong uncle who had overstepped the mark, 'he's away again.'

Rommel had said on the 30th: 'Today the Army, strengthened by new divisions, is moving into the attack for the final annihilation of the enemy.' But Alexander had said earlier, and Montgomery in a special message to the **Eighth Army had repeated it: 'We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER.'**

In the small hours of the 31st Rommel had started to lift the minefields in front of the southern sector of the line. By midday his main columns were through the minefields and then one column swung north to contain British and New Zealand troops which had been bypassed by the advance. So far the enemy had met with no opposition except from light mobile forces that had been ordered to inflict as much damage as possible before withdrawing under pressure. Rommel was using the cream of his infantry, between three and four thousand lorries, a huge number of guns, and nearly all his armour. It was the real thing.

But nothing invites disaster like a *Blitzkrieg* geared down, and on this occasion Rommel was never able to shift out of second. The story of the next three days is the story of his finding himself enclosed, and in danger of being embalmed, in a coffin-shaped salient between twenty and thirty miles deep, of his lacking room to manoeuvre, of his failure to force the British armour to give battle under conditions of his own choosing, of the ceaseless bombardment of his troops, tanks, and transport from the air and by artillery, and of his finally realising that if he stayed where he was he was likely to be destroyed piecemeal.

One of the chief obstacles to an orderly withdrawal was the presence of the New Zealanders at the end of the road back. From the start our gunners had been pouring shells into the enemy's transport as it went past, and on the night of 3-4 September British and New Zealand troops launched a three-brigade attack, the object of which was to narrow Rommel's escape route and gain ground from which our artillery could inflict even greater damage on his retreating columns.

Unhappily the British units were cut to pieces by mortar and machine-gun fire, which made it impossible for the New Zealanders to consolidate their gains. A new line was formed, and it was held throughout the next day in the face of determined counterattacks, but the escape corridor remained wide open.

Pushed from behind by two British armoured brigades, Rommel made haste to use it, and by 5 September he had come to the conclusion that he had intended only 'an armoured reconnaissance in force'. By the 7th he had completed his withdrawal and the demand for ammunition was back to normal.

He had gained a little ground but he had lost a large number of admirers on both sides. In fact, a legend had been shattered.

September the 7th was a fine, cool day, the 8th was fine but dusty, the 9th windy and wickedly dusty, the 10th—the 10th could have been the worst day of the year and we should have approved of it still, for at 9 p.m. the Division was relieved by British and Greek troops. By then a large number of us were on the beach near Burg el Arab, nearly thirty miles from the front, a smaller party was guarding the vehicles in the Swordfish area (between [Amiriya](#) and Burg el Arab and about sixteen miles inland) where most of the Divisional transport was parked, and the only platoons working were Nos. 3 and 4 at the ammunition point, which was to be kept open until the 12th. We had been paid and had been promised leave.

All but the domestic vehicles had been left in the Swordfish area, so

the beach party went to bed that night under the stars, which crowded Heaven like a rash—a sort of silver chicken-pox. In their dreams our drivers heard the waves folding on the beaches and the breeze stirring the marram grass.

For a week we made holiday. Four-day leave parties (eight officers and 198 other ranks all told) left for **Cairo** or **Alexandria** on three successive mornings, and for the rest there was day-leave to **Alexandria**. Some of us chose to spend all our time on the beach and it would be hard to say who had the best of it.

Cairo and **Alexandria** were as gay and as expensive as ever. They alone in a world of worn-out playthings and depleted store cupboards had avoided the chill touch of austerity: everything was to be had at a price. All the pimps and hucksters in the **Middle East**, knowing they had only a few hours in which to indemnify themselves for our long absence, were at the service of the New Zealanders. In Alexandria, no doubt, there were great killings, but in **Cairo** it was less simple, for the genius who had organised the leave transit camp at **Maadi** had foreseen what would happen and had made his plans accordingly. Transit camps, as we knew them, were dusty purgatories occupied by slowly-shuffling queues of hungry and exasperated men, but this one was different. On arrival you were led to a long counter piled high with clean clothes and invited to peel off your dirty ones. Delicious meals were served at all hours and the beer bar was never closed. If you wanted a bed for the night you could have one. If you wanted to spend the night in **Cairo** that was all right too. You did just as you pleased, treating the camp as an hotel.

But on the beach at Burg el Arab there was bathing from sunrise to sunset and you didn't have to wear clothes. There was peace and freedom and something lovely to look at all the time. White sand, blue sky, blue sea, dark-green fig trees—the scene had a boldness and economy, a clear-cut beauty, that was breathtaking. It was so simple and at the same time so clever that a man who had never handled a brush in his life might say to himself: 'I could paint that. Couldn't miss. Couldn't go wrong.' There was plenty of beer and the meals were first-

class. Indeed, they made us ask ourselves if we had been quite fair to the cooks during the past two months. That extra halfcrown a day no longer seemed a large sum when we remembered the heat, the flies, and the roar of the petrol burners, above which it was impossible to hear aircraft. 'Cook's neck' we called it, that special stiffness that came from constantly glancing skywards.

The cooks, if anyone, had earned a holiday. Well, so had we all. Between 29 June and 11 September, we had issued, among other things, 243,000 rounds of 25-pounder, 3,200,000 rounds of rifle and machine-gun ammunition, 84,000 rounds of Bofors ammunition, 345,000 rounds of tommy-gun ammunition, and 30,000 grenades. The heaviest issue of 25-pounder on any one day had been about 12,000 rounds. We had met demands for fifty-nine different commodities, which was going two better than [Heinz](#).

On the last day of our holiday we had a second chance to see the [Kiwi Concert Party](#), which had performed in our area on the 14th. The desert had seen wonders and absurdities before—tank battles and air raids—but nothing quite so incongruous as this. Under the blazing sun, in the middle of the wilderness, a half-circle of brown, up-turned faces (intent one moment, the next convulsed with laughter) gazed fixedly at a small, gaily-decorated stage, centre of all the beauty and merriment in the world. And all around was simmering, staring emptiness. Tanks on Saturn, battles on Mars—yes; but when a clown in a red coat and a bow tie, with yellow hair falling over his forehead, takes his quips to the moon, dances on the edge of a volcano, deluges the dead rocks with laughter, then, why then, something notable has happened.

The sweat poured from actors and audience alike and hands fluttered without ceasing, brushing away flies. But no one noticed the flies and the desert was not there—gone, vanished, along with everything else ordinary and horrible. In the suburbs of [Stalingrad](#) men were fighting like mad beasts, and all over the world, from [Russia](#), from [Germany](#), from [Italy](#), from bombed [Britain](#), the cry was going up: 'How long, O

Lord? How long?’ But in one bare acre of desert where Theatre had drawn its charmed circle, excluding the world's grief, none heard it. The actors worked and sweated on the small, gay stage, and the audience, forgetting all else, lived for a short hour in a country where everyone can dance and play the accordion and where no one opens his mouth except to sing golden notes or to be excruciatingly funny.

Our holiday ended and on 19 September we went back to the Swordfish area where we had left the lorries. We were glad to see them again, though only a week ago we had wished them at the bottom of the sea. We went over them with spanner and grease gun, feeling in our hands that skill and knowledge, almost that tenderness, that an ostler feels when he runs his hands over a horse.

By midday on 24 September the unit was near the Divisional exercise area, thirty miles south of Burg el Arab, where the New Zealand Engineers had laid dummy minefields and dug gunpits for a mock battle—a dress rehearsal, had we known it, for the Battle of **Alamein. Live ammunition was used and we established ammunition points.**

We stayed in the same area until the middle of October, enjoying a thorough rest. The days were still hot and the flies were still with us, but we minded them less now. Possibly we had become used to them, like the Egyptians. One afternoon the sky clouded over and a north wind got up, exhaling a brown breath. Next the heavens opened and pelted us with hailstones as big as hens' eggs, and in a moment the desert was sprinkled with crushed ice. The stones rattled against the lorries like buckshot, cracking windscreens and drumming madly on taut canopies. On one pretext or another (there was a rifle to be rescued, a tool box to be covered) we put on our steel helmets and rushed out into the storm, loving it for its strangeness and wonder as children love snow. It stopped as suddenly as it had started and the sun shone brilliantly, melting the prize hailstones even as we unpacked our cameras. Presently there were only puddles to show where they had shone and sparkled.

The most important social event that took place while we were in

this area was a party to celebrate the third anniversary of the **First Echelon's** entry into camp. Once enough beer had been secured the preparations were simple, all that was needed being an old canopy, four lorries from which to suspend it, and some empty jerricans for seats. Speech-making was barred, but the customary toasts were allowed, and our absent friends were honoured with more than usual solemnity, for among them (to use Henry James's phrase) were some who had achieved the extremity of personal absence. The beer worked out at about eight bottles a head, which was plenty. The first two were consumed quickly and decorously ('Later, you jokers—a man can't sing when he's stone cold.') but there was music in the third and fourth. 'Sheriff' was not there to give us the 'Pokeydoke Blues' (a lugubrious ballad about a gambler who loses his coat, his hat, and his straight-laced shoo-OOO-oos) but Basil, our crooner, sang 'The Old Rocking-chair'—in fact he sang it twice—and the rest of our star performers sang the particular songs that custom demanded of them. The fifth bottle brought new talent to light. One of the visitors sang 'Stick To Me, Bill', a genuine tear-jerker, and 'Poop-Quail' went one better with a song all about Confusion and Shame and his having only one mother. The sixth bottle, as always, had the disconcerting effect of convincing everyone whom bashfulness had prevented from singing earlier in the evening that now—this minute—was the moment for his contribution. Six singers struck up at once, each of them taking it for granted that the cries of 'Fair go, you jokers!' and 'One at a time, eh?' were meant for everyone except him.

From that point the party drifted through a golden mist to its last stage, which was reached when a small cluster of die-hards realised that all the others had wandered away to bed or to suppers of oyster and whitebait fritters, leaving them alone with the empty bottles, the upturned jerricans, the increasing chill.

'Once more, you chaps. The old "Sheriff's" song. The old "Pokeydoke Blues".'

Ah thought Ah was er gambler—

**Ah broke every joint in town
Until Ah met-ter gambler
Whose name was Appledown....**

Gallantly they struggled on, but it was no good. Something had happened to the golden mist. All the gold had gone out of it and it was an ordinary mist now, and a mighty cold one at that.

The hour was approaching fast. Drivers back from leave spoke of shiploads of American Shermans, of airfields that had sprung up overnight, of pale divisions fresh from England, and of masses of guns and transport that were moving into the desert.

On 9 October seventy-two lorries loaded with 25-pounder ammunition set out under Captain May for a secret destination. The drivers had been told to say nothing to anyone about what they saw and did. The following evening found the convoy on its start line, and punctually at half past seven (timing was of the first importance) it moved west along the coast road, passing [Alamein](#) and halting two or three miles from the front. Here it was divided into groups of three, each of which was led to a gun site by an Artillery officer. The average distance from the road to the gun sites was a mile and a quarter, and an hour and thirty-five minutes was allowed for the round trip. The guns were not in the line yet—they were to be brought forward secretly two nights before the attack—so as soon as the ammunition was off-loaded all hands set to work to dig it in and camouflage it. There was no time to waste, for the transport had to be east of the start line before daylight.

Over 48,000 rounds were dumped for the ninety-six 25-pounders with the New Zealand Division (seventy-two of these were the guns of the 4th, 5th, and 6th Field Regiments), and the job was completed on the fourth night without the enemy's being aware of what was going on. On the fifth night an extra 160 rounds were taken forward for each of the New Zealand guns and 8000 rounds of Bofors ammunition were dumped for the 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment.

On 16 October we moved to the Swordfish area, Captain May's detachment joining us at lunch-time. The afternoon—the ancients would have taken it for an omen—we were enveloped by one of the worst sandstorms in our experience. It was impossible to read without a light, and to walk more than a yard or two from your lorry was to get lost. At tea-time the cooks of a section of the **Petrol Company**, our next-door neighbour, hit on the idea of using an air-raid siren as a dinner gong, but the experiment was only partially successful, as half the men in the queue were found to be members of the Ammunition Company. The intruders, indistinguishable from one another and from anyone else under their yellow masks, had thought they were at their own cookhouse.

The next day was nearly as bad but the 18th showed an improvement. In the afternoon Captain May's convoy of seventy-six lorries set out for the Artillery waggon lines with 160 rounds a gun for the New Zealand 25-pounders, returning on the afternoon of the 19th. We moved five miles south on the 20th, and on the 21st 218 vehicles from various British and New Zealand units came under our command for the move to the Divisional assembly area, which was at Alam el Onsol, about twelve miles behind the front. At half past three that afternoon we moved towards the coast, halting in a dispersal area seven miles south of Burg el Arab.

We had a scratch meal, and shortly before half past eight the leading vehicle in our convoy passed the starting point for the night march. There were 398 vehicles under Major Coutts's command and they formed a column nearly ten miles long. On reaching the coast road we turned left, halting soon before midnight at Kilo 58, where we dispersed. The move had gone like clockwork, but most of us, conscious only that we had stopped and started a great deal, had mistaken it for another army muddle. We had enjoyed it, though. Moving under the moon in the right direction was a rare pleasure.

The next day we said goodbye to seventy-five men (drawn from

Headquarters, Workshops, and the Ammunition platoons) who were to stay behind at Kilo 58 to form an administration post, and at half past seven we started the second stage of the move, reaching the Divisional assembly area before midnight.

We slept soundly that night and when we woke up the next morning it was Friday, 23 October 1942. In the course of the day the platoon commanders assembled their men and read them a personal message from General Montgomery.

When I assumed command of the **Eighth Army** I said that the mandate was to destroy Rommel and his Army, and that it would be done as soon as we were ready.

We are ready NOW.

The message concluded: Therefore, let every officer and man enter the battle with a stout heart, and with the determination to do his duty as long as he has breath in his body.

AND LET NO MAN SURRENDER SO LONG AS HE CAN FIGHT.

Let us pray that the Lord mighty in battle will give us the victory.

After the line had been breached, the New Zealanders, now under the command of 30th Corps for the assault, would join 10th Corps for the break-through and pursuit. There was a chance, therefore, that the supply columns might have to operate for a short time without full protection, as they had done in November. At all events we were to be prepared for anything.

What we were not told officially we learned from our grape-vine. On the northern sector, from which the 30th Corps would launch the main thrust, over 800 guns were in position. The barrage would start at twenty minutes to ten that night.

The afternoon dragged past under a sky filled with our fighters and bombers. When dusk came we made our beds so that we should be able

to watch the barrage without leaving them. The nights were fairly cool now.

The moon came up unbelievably large and yellow, like a stage moon. You could have read a newspaper by it easily, and to get to sleep you had to pull the blankets over your head. We were used to turning in early because of the blackout, so when the barrage started many of us were asleep, but it woke us immediately. The horizon was on fire and it threw back a continuous hollow roar. Giants were striking matches, matches as big as pine trees, on the rough desert, and a roaring wind was blowing them out at once. The roar and the dancing flashes went on and on, and we lay in our sandy beds or stood huddled in blankets in the backs of our lorries, which were dark mouths in the silver desert, and watched and wondered.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 15 – OUT OF THE SLOUGH

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OUT OF THE SLOUGH

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, Straining upon the start.

AFTER the enemy's batteries had been shelled for a quarter of an hour the barrage was switched to his front line. At 10 p.m., under a full moon, with bayonets gleaming, our infantry walked forward to the attack.

During the next twelve days both sides fought bitterly, the British to carve a pathway for the armour, the Germans to cripple the operation then and there.

As the days went by we waited patiently in our area for the advance to begin. Eagerly we grabbed at every crumb of news that came back to us. [Miteiriya Ridge](#), in the northern sector, was ours, but the armour was not through yet. We had driven a large salient into the enemy's defences and he was counter-attacking fiercely but unsuccessfully. The Royal Air Force had smashed a concentration of tanks and armoured vehicles. Now the Australians were fighting on the coast sector. They were doing splendidly but still the armour was not through.

Although we were seldom well-informed about what was going on we had become adept in sensing an atmosphere, and by the end of October we knew that the position was critical.

One comfort we did have. The skies, beyond a doubt, were ours. British fighters and bombers were overhead all day long, and only at night, at dawn, and at dusk, was the [Luftwaffe](#) in the least active. On the evening of the 26th a single plane dropped bombs in a minefield on the edge of our area, setting off two mines and puncturing a tire, and at dawn the next day the same plane (so we believed) almost succeeded in dropping bombs in the same holes. A driver had just lit his primus to make morning tea, earning himself considerable unpopularity. Later in

the day we heard that two drivers at the administration post had been wounded by strafing, though not badly enough to warrant their leaving the field.

There was one particular plane—we swore it was always the same one—that used to annoy us every night. It would fly round in great circles, passing over our area at intervals of about a quarter of an hour. When the moon was bright it was visible as a black lozenge, low and menacing. It dropped an occasional bomb and fired an occasional burst of bullets, but its main object, we felt certain, was to disturb our rest. In this it was eminently successful and we spent many sleepless hours in devising suitable tortures for the pilot. Once, to our joy, it was engaged by a British night-fighter, but it got away after a long chase.

A little earlier in the night, it or another plane had been using a bomb that exploded in the air with a kind of gobbling roar and a series of flashes, prompting the **Petrol Company** diarist to make reference to 'infernal machines'. These were butterfly bombs, a weapon the Germans had been experimenting with for some while and had lately brought to perfection. In the course of time we were to become painfully familiar with them.

The principle was as ingenious as it was simple. A large container opened in mid-air like a pod to disgorge twenty-four anti-personnel bombs, the outer casing of which split into four quarters and became a propellor, unwinding a safety device. The fuses were of several types, so some of the bombs exploded in the air, some on contact with the ground, and some at intervals throughout the night. The delayed-action type were credited with a horrible propensity for rolling into slit-trenches.

The nights passed slowly and the days, too. We were busy, but hardly as busy as we had expected to be, for although the artillery was using a great deal of ammunition there was none of that fret and delay that at other times had added so considerably to our labours. Every detail of supply had been planned with meticulous care.

On 2 November No. 2 Platoon established an ammunition point one mile west of [Alamein](#) station, and later in the day twelve vehicles from No. 4 Platoon under Lieutenant Fitzgerald opened a forward ammunition point nine miles farther on. The latter was in range of German 88s and during the day and a half of its existence it came under fire several times, two vehicles being slightly damaged by shrapnel.

Business was brisk from the moment the points opened, and no wonder, for at one the next morning every gun on the Corps' front opened up and in four and a half hours 150,000 rounds were fired.

On 3 November we were rushed off our feet. As soon as our vehicles arrived at the ammunition points Artillery vehicles backed up to them, tailboard to tailboard. In the course of the day we sold something like 10,000 rounds of 25-pounder.

At a quarter past three in the afternoon there was a call from the 4th Field Regiment for thirty-three loads of 25-pounder, and these were sent forward at once, but as it happened there was no need for them. The enemy was already broken.

Early the next morning, 10th Corps, with the New Zealand Division under its command, began the chase.

The New Zealanders, with the British 4th Light Armoured Brigade and the remnants of the British 9th Armoured Brigade, drove through the gaps in the minefields and headed south-west. Their objective was the high ground west of [Fuka](#) and their intention was to cut off the enemy's retreat. His columns were reported to be fleeing along the coast road ten-deep under a rain of bombs and bullets.

By noon the bulk of our unit was at the ammunition point near [Alamein](#) station. The area was very crowded, for the party from the administration point had rejoined us the day before and, since the beginning of the month, twelve 4th [Reserve Mechanical Transport Company](#) lorries had been attached to us to carry extra ammunition.

This was because we could expect to be cut off from our supply dumps during the first stage of the advance.

The overcrowding was of little moment, for at four in the afternoon, leaving behind Headquarters and one platoon of Workshops under Lieutenant Hill, ¹ we moved off in column of route behind the Major's car, heading west and a little north to hit the Boomerang track. On the way we picked up the vehicles at the forward ammunition point and the 523rd Company RASC (serving the 9th Armoured Brigade). It had been under command since 21 October.

From the New Zealand Division's headquarters the Major had received no detailed instructions about the move. He had been told to find the tail of the 6th Brigade and tag along behind it. Not knowing where the 6th Brigade was, he went forward to Divisional Headquarters for further instructions and was told to move along the Boomerang track for a few miles and then travel on a given bearing until he caught up with the tail of the brigade. On the Boomerang track we were at once enveloped in clouds of blinding dust. All the transport in the world seemed to be moving west and it was impossible to keep the convoy together.

The track and its verges had been swept by the engineers but mines were still a danger. The Germans had a trick of burying them one on top of the other with a layer of sand in between, and it sometimes happened that the bottom one was overlooked. Odd mines were buried deep enough to escape detection and these would not explode until the sand above them had been packed hard by perhaps a hundred or more vehicles. Such a one cost Les Howarth his back wheel, and shortly afterwards a wheel sailed past Major Coutts's car while a cloud of dust enveloped a 15-cwt. truck, the driver of which had been talking with the Major about mines only a few minutes before. He was injured fairly severely, and his load, part of which was **General Freyberg's personal equipment, was transferred to one of our vehicles.**

Most of us had long since removed the sandbags from the inside of

our cabs—a protective measure adopted earlier in the year—and we felt our way forward in the greatest trepidation. We could be seen crouching over the steering wheels in stiff attitudes as though by not sitting back and making ourselves comfortable we were somehow reducing the total weight of our lorries.

Slowly and with many halts, while the dust clouds boiled about us and all we could see was the swaying canopy of the vehicle ahead and perhaps a dozen yards of deeply-rutted desert, we drove into the sunset. At six the convoy turned left off the Boomerang track and travelled for a further two miles at about a mile an hour. By then part of No. 3 Platoon and the whole of No. 4 Platoon and the 523rd Company had been cut off in the dust and darkness, so the Major decided to halt for the night, hoping that by morning it would be possible to travel at a reasonable pace. Before we bedded down we were told to be ready to move at first light. Except for the banging of a single gun, which seemed to be firing across the line of our advance, all was quiet. The moan of transport was so much part of our lives that we did not count it as a noise: it was like our own breathing.

Before dawn Captain Sampson was away to round up the missing vehicles and with the first glimmer of light we moved, halting for breakfast after travelling a few miles. Before the meal could be eaten we were off again, heading south-west. It was a beautiful morning, cold and bright, and never in the unit's history had spirits been livelier.

The desert was littered with burnt transport and smashed tanks and guns, and yet, for miles at a stretch, it was clean and almost virgin. Plainly but one battle had been fought there and that a short one. Nor was it long over. Smoke was still coiling from some of the charred wrecks, and groups of Italians, their natural gregariousness heightened by danger, were moving across the desert in tight little phalanxes, protected collectively by white sheets and individually by pathetic scraps of once-white linen and even by old newspapers. They had been disarmed, or they had thrown away their arms, and in most cases they were unguarded. Rommel, we learned later, had left five Italian divisions

to their fate.

Treasure was all about us—shirts, uniforms, brand-new anti-tank rifles, berettas, and even cameras—and good eyesight paid handsome dividends. We were travelling at a fair pace now and there were few stops, but no one ignored a pistol or a camera even if it meant pulling out of convoy or simulating a petrol blockage.

Our day's march ended at six o'clock when we halted about eight miles south of **Fuka**. By now most of the missing vehicles had caught up with us, and the unit was complete except for Captain Morris ² and about six Workshops' vehicles and the party that had been left behind under Lieutenant Hill. Shortly before dusk we heard gunfire, but presently all was quiet.

That night it rained.

We woke in the morning—those of us who had not been woken earlier by leaking canopies—to a prospect of puddles. We cursed bitterly as in the mind's eye we saw the enemy speeding along the coast road and our lovely Shermans floundering in a quagmire. There was still, if it cleared quickly, a hope, but it showed no signs of clearing.

After breakfast we pushed on, but much delay was caused by bogged vehicles and by hold-ups ahead of us. The large party of prisoners we passed at lunch-time served only as a reminder of the larger number whom the elements were helping to escape. We drove under louring skies, and during the afternoon intermittent squalls gave place to a steady downpour. At a quarter to five we halted for the night on the outskirts of a large German airfield five miles south of **Sidi Haneish**. **Fuka** was now fourteen miles behind us.

Torrential rain fell during the night.

It was still raining at dawn and showers alternated with down-pours until the middle of the afternoon, by which time the desert had turned into a morass. Our officers ranged the neighbourhood in search of

negotiable routes but found none, and the transport stayed where it was all day. For most of us the waiting hours were ones of extreme exertion. In every quarter of the area, especially in that occupied by the 523rd Company, ³ which had single-drive Bedfords, vehicles were in distress. Some listed at alarming angles; others, like plesiosaurs aspiring from the primal ooze, pointed towards the sky, their hinder parts buried deep in wet sand; still others, travelling at a hundred yards an hour, crept agonisingly towards firmer ground while their engines screamed in anguish and their wheels ploughed parallel trenches across the desert.

During the day we were joined by Captain Morris and five Workshops' drivers. They had travelled some ten to fifteen miles along the coast road between **Daba** and **Fuka** and they were able to tell us what it was like. The verges and the road itself in some places were littered with abandoned gear and transport. Some of it was undamaged—there was a *volkswagen* that looked as though the driver had pulled up at the curb and hopped out to do some shopping—but most of it was burnt and twisted and peppered with bullet holes. For a mile and a half at one stretch there was nothing but tangled metal.

The Opel staff car that was splashing backwards and forwards through the area at a high speed with Captain Morris at the wheel had been captured after an exciting chase and some shooting. With it three German prisoners had been taken.

Throughout 7 November the New Zealand Division and most of the flanking armour was anchored to the desert as firmly as flies to flypaper, but the 8th, a Sunday, dawned dry and clear. The sun came out and sparkled in all the puddles and made the canopies steam. The desert was still in a foul mess but it was drying momentarily and we had hopes of being able to move soon. The damage, though, was done now. Rommel had been given a day's respite both from pursuit and from bombs, and his army, fleeing along the tarmac coast road, had made good use of it.

We moved at two in the afternoon, the Major's instructions being to get as far as he could towards **Sidi Barrani**, which was not yet in British

hands.

The desert was like soggy gingerbread and vehicle after vehicle became bogged, causing much back-breaking work with shovels and the sacrifice of many German overcoats and uniforms. These were thrown under the churning wheels to give them something to grip on. Convoy discipline was in abeyance, the speed and direction of each vehicle being determined by the kind of surface it was crossing.

We skirted **Sidi Haneish** airfield and gazed gloatingly at the wrecked, burnt, and grounded planes. On one landing-ground we counted thirty wrecks, and were convinced, for perhaps the first time, that a great victory had been won.

As dusk gathered the going became steadily worse and when we halted shortly before nightfall we had covered only eighteen miles; the leading half of the convoy was on high ground and the rest was floundering in the mud two miles behind. Nothing could be done in darkness, so it was decided that the two halves should bivouac where they were.

Over our late tea we could speak of nothing except the great news: American and British troops had landed on the coast of French North Africa. To most of us, in the first flush of our enthusiasm, it seemed that the war was as good as over and our long journey towards Christmas as good as ended.

Bringing the convoy together was a formidable task even in daylight and it was after nine before we were ready for the road. For two hours the going was good and then we were held up while the 6th Brigade passed through a narrow gap in the minefield. Tired of waiting, the Major found an alternative gap, which led us directly to the **Siwa** road. The coast road was reached at half past four in the afternoon.

German and Italian equipment—objects as gross as tanks to others as small as shaving brushes—burnt, broken, and wasted, was jumbled in a black mass, among which, disgustingly mutilated sometimes and

sometimes lying like men asleep, were figures in olive grey. It was certainly a notable victory.

At five we halted three or four miles west-north-west of **Charing Cross**, and for the first time since the start of the advance the cooks were able to give us a hot meal.

While we were enjoying it Lieutenant Hill's detachment arrived. Delayed by breakdowns and bad going, the drivers had found the journey a hard one, but at least they had seen something missed by the rest of us: the coast road between **Alamein** and **Daba**.

'The wreckage was all mixed up,' said one of them, 'with one wreck on top of another or so shoved against it that you couldn't tell which was which. There were plenty of dead Jerries and dead Ities about, and plenty of live ones too. Their arms had been taken away, and all they wanted was water and directions to the nearest pen. The Italians were much worse off than the Jerries. After the rain fell we saw them on their hands and knees in the desert scooping the stuff up from puddles. Most of them had no boots and they'd wrapped sacking round their feet, making us believe it was true what they told us: the Jerries had taken away their boots and transport and left them in the front line with only small arms.'

We were away early the next morning, passing through **Sidi Barrani** at noon and stopping for lunch half an hour later. It was after three before we moved again and from then on we travelled very slowly. The road was crowded with transport now and we watched the sky. During the morning some Messerschmitt 109s had swooped out of the sun and machine-gunned the tail of the convoy, damaging No. 3 Platoon's wireless set and slightly wounding two drivers with splinters from explosive bullets. At half past four we halted near **Buqbuq**, dispersing for the night among low mounds.

That evening there was a small delivery of New Zealand mail and parcels. Always when mail arrived the orderly-room clerks stood in the

backs of their lorries and called names (as they were doing now under ragged clouds turning black and a sky almost drained of colour, the sea being black already), and then you could tell from our drivers' looks all that letters from home mean to soldiers, and hear, blowing through vanished barrack-rooms, blowing through a hundred thousand haunted squares in **France**, in **India**, in Egypt, in **Africa**, the old bugle call clear and cynical, mocking human needs: 'There's a letter from Lousy Lucy—there's a letter from Lousy Lou!'

The next morning we moved slowly along the coast road, dodging bomb craters and smouldering wrecks. The Sollum escarpment was ahead, and as we drew near it the press of vehicles became greater, till at last we were travelling almost nose to tail. By eleven we had reached the foot of **Halfaya Pass**, up which an endless stream of tanks, guns, and transport was slowly winding.

The pass had fallen during the night to a surprise attack by 110 men from the 21st Battalion ('Valiant unto Death' was the motto of the Italian division to which most of the 612 prisoners belonged) and it was quite clear now, though the occasional crack of a rifle and the duller and louder explosion of a grenade made us think that stray Axis soldiers were still being winkled out from its seamed face.

The seashore and the wide flat were dotted with the guns and transport of other New Zealand units (most of which had precedence over us), and we dispersed off the road as best we could, the ack-ack crew setting up its guns. There were one or two alarms but mercifully no heavy raids.

Six vehicles were allowed to go forward at one in the afternoon, but the rest of the convoy had to wait for another four hours and it was twilight before we started the long crawl. In many places the road had been damaged by shells or bombs and for yards at a stretch the concrete fence was down. With a sheer drop on one side of us we remembered how earlier in the day we had seen a British tank swerve off the road and go rolling down the face of the escarpment like a huge boulder. Tremendous

wedge-shaped shadows, tongued like pennants, went streaming past us, merging and spreading at the bottom and covering the whole flat. Great foreheads of rock, full of madness and menace, overshadowed the slender roadway and frowned down on the labouring vehicles as though willing them to usurp control and dash like the Gadarene swine down a steep place.

By the time we reached the top our radiators were boiling and our engines running with that false sweetness that follows a long climb. Darkness had fallen before the tail of the convoy was clear of the pass and only half of us reached our destination that night. It was the junction of the Trigh Capuzzo and the **Bardia** road, eleven miles south by west of **Bardia**, which, with **Sollum**, **Capuzzo**, and **Sidi Azeiz**, had fallen without fighting. The rest of the convoy bivouacked at the top of the pass.

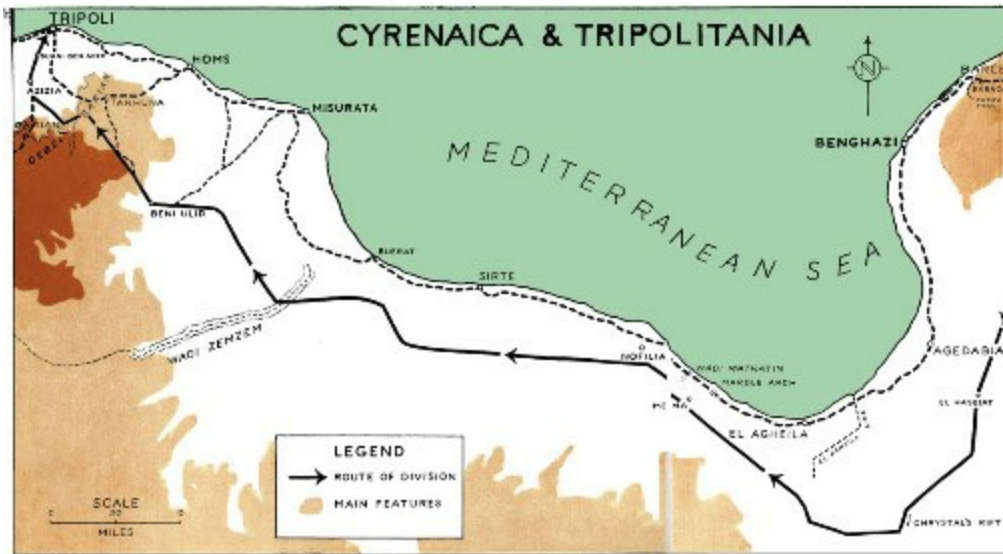
During the day—it was Armistice Day—the Battle for Egypt had been won. The Eighth Army, after advancing 278 miles in eight days, had driven the last Axis unit across the frontier.

The convoy was complete before breakfast the next morning and we moved to an area about six miles east of **Sidi Azeiz**, reaching it in time for lunch. The next day, travelling in desert formation, we set out for Bir el Chleta, twenty-five miles west-north-west of **Sidi Azeiz**. For an hour we made good time and then we halted. We got out of our cabs for a stretch and a smoke but kept near them, for we knew these halts: they might last for two hours or for two minutes. This, however, was a long halt. It lasted until 5 December.

While the New Zealand Division trained and rested near **Bardia** the **Eighth Army** continued its advance. **Tobruk** was entered on the 13th of the month, **Derna** on the 15th. (In Britain the church bells were rung for the first time since June 1940 and our **Second Echelon** drivers wished they had been there to hear them.) **Benghazi** was entered on the 20th, **Agedabia** on the 23rd. In twenty days the **Eighth Army** had advanced 778 miles and by the end of the month Rommel was behind his old line

at **El Agheila**.

And the press said it and the radio; the fighter-bombers, homing through the dusk like thunderbolts, roared and screamed it; and we said it to ourselves comfortably over the primuses at night: 'He will not pass this way again.'



Map of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania



Flooded at Fuka
Flooded at Fuka

Removing the rims from a 3-ton lorry tire, Bardia



Removing the rims from a 3-ton lorry tire, Bardia



A bath at Bardia

A bath at Bardia



Lorries on the skyline, south of Bardia

Lorries on the skyline, south of Bardia

¹ Maj O. W. Hill; salesman; **Napier**; born **Auckland**, 16 Jan 1917.

² Capt A. G. Morris, m.i.d.; cycle and motor dealer; **Ashburton**;
born **Picton**, 17 Feb 1913.

³ It ceased to be under command on 11 November.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 16 – JOURNEY WITH HALTS

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JOURNEY WITH HALTS

WHERE we halted we stayed—one mile east of **Sidi Azeiz**. Morning and evening the shadows of the fighter-bombers rushed over our area, brightly while the weather was still fair and then vaguely under grey skies. A cold wind blew out of the west and it was winter. Like the ghosts of aircraft flashing over a grave the shadows went by in the desert, flicking the officers' mess, the shelters built by the cooks, the porcelain bath salvaged from **Bardia** by No. 2 Platoon. We had been told we should not be moving for some time and we had made ourselves comfortable.

The shadows brushed over the sand-filled trenches and the crumbling walls and the rusty wire at **Sidi Azeiz**, and over the blackening skeletons of the Chevrolets and the armoured cars. Survivors of the battle were in demand as guides and they would say, pointing to a heap of old iron with no paint on it: 'That was Don's lorry and that one there would be old George's.' One man went straight to where he had buried his diary a year before and a crowd gathered round while he turned the yellowing pages and tried to make out the brownish-grey writing, faint like veins.

The shadows shot past on their way to **Benghazi** and **Agedabia** and points west, and we looked up from the lecture, the route march, the parade—a training programme was in full swing—to see the avenging aircraft dance out of sight like liver spots, heading for a war only heard of now over the radio and through the newspapers. Those of us who had bad colds looked westwards through rheumy eyes, thinking: 'We'll follow soon. I'll hit the old cot straight after lunch and maybe a man'll be all right tomorrow.' But those who were sickening for jaundice shook their heavy, bursting heads and said to themselves: 'If I'm the same tomorrow she's a sick parade job. What a bastard at this stage of the piece!' There was no temporizing with yellow jaundice. Its victims experienced all the tortures of the bad sailor and the alcoholic, and if they reminded one of Mrs. Gummidge it was owing to her noisy optimism.

The weather mended towards the end of the month, but it was still very cold, especially at dawn and after sunset, and we were grateful for an issue of battle dress, winter underclothing, and extra blankets. It was perfect weather, though, for football. We managed to field a promising Rugby team, and in the first round of the Divisional knockout competition we defeated the 6th Field Regiment by 3-nil, but the **Petrol Company** beat us in the second round by an unconverted try after an extension of time. Inter-platoon matches were played as well.

In the evenings, except when the YMCA Mobile Cinema visited us, we played cards, cooked oyster fritters (150 bags of parcels arrived on the 26th), or listened to the platoon wireless sets. However wet or cold it was, few of us missed the news bulletins. Nowadays they were all good. The tide had turned at **Stalingrad** and in the Caucasus; French West Africa had come into the war on our side; French sailors had scuttled their fleet at **Toulon**, preventing the Germans from seizing it.

December came and Lieutenant Latimer ¹ (attached) and Lieutenant Hill left us to join the 2nd New Zealand Ammunition Company, ² which was being formed at **Maadi**. Suggestions from the Artillery that this was an offshoot of our unit and not an entirely different firm under an entirely different management were received coldly; nor were we pleased when we heard that we had a new name: 1st New Zealand Ammunition Company. With the war drawing to a close we regarded changes of this kind as unnecessary.

Grey day, bright blue day, day of burnished metal, whirling ginger day—they came in quick succession. Christmas, like a buoy we were for ever rounding, was in sight again, but we were destined to spend it a long way from **Sidi Azeiz**.

The El Agheila line, protected frontally by salt marshes and a system of strongpoints and minefields, and on one flank by the sea and on the other by soft sand, was a formidable barrier, and **Hitler** had ordered Rommel to defend it to the last man. A frontal attack on its own was unlikely to succeed, but it was felt that a left hook by the New

Zealanders, coincident with a frontal attack, might turn the trick.

Our unit moved on 5 December, heading for the Divisional concentration area at [El Haseiat](#), thirty miles south-east of [Agedabia](#) and about a hundred from the [El Agheila](#) line. For three days we travelled in desert formation while the black diamonds that marked the route—they were cut out of tin and mounted on iron rods—flicked past the vehicles in the centre, and we saw, on the first day, only grey rain weeping on grey flats, then [Bir Hacheim](#), where there had been bitter fighting in June. Here the sand had already half-buried the smashed and burnt-out tanks, guns, and lorries, as it had already buried once on the way to [Siwa](#), too deeply for any to find, 50,000 Persians with all their arms and equipment. On the second day we followed the black diamonds across broken rocks, and on the third we passed at a good pace over flats dotted with scrub. Late in the afternoon of the fourth day we reached the concentration area. We had travelled 360 miles and none of the vehicles had given serious trouble.

On 13 December, thoroughly rested, we moved again, the black diamonds leading us south. For mile after mile there was nothing but rolling sand dunes, repeating themselves in a nightmare pattern of desolation with not even a sprig of camel-thorn to break the monotony. Just enough rain had fallen the day before to enable the leading vehicles to roll out a firm track and the going was good on the whole. We bivouacked for the night after covering sixty miles.

During the next day we touched the most southerly point of the advance, passing quite easily through Chrystal's Rift, sixty-five miles south-east of [El Agheila](#), although, as we heard later, it had been expected to give endless trouble. For a while we were hindered by thick mists and afterwards by units ahead of us. The speed of the march was being conditioned by the ability of the petrol convoys to supply the leading vehicles and by the progress of the tanks of the [Royal Scots Greys](#), which were under the command of the Division.

Soon after lunch we left the soft sand behind and came into rocky

country, and from then on we bumped through narrow defiles and laboured up and down steep wadis until we reached what was known as the Red Desert, where the going was fairly good. By four in the afternoon we had covered seventy-five miles, and after a halt for tea we went on through the darkness, travelling slowly on a narrow front. A burning petrol lorry spread a glow that could be seen for miles, making us wonder if all the elaborate precautions—the wireless silence, the driving away of enemy reconnaissance planes—had gone for nothing.

When we stopped for the night, after covering twenty miles since tea, we were due south of **Marble Arch**, which marked the Tripolitanian frontier, and well beyond the enemy's southernmost outposts. During the day the radio bulletins had said that Rommel was withdrawing from the **El Agheila** line.

The next day was the 15th. Following behind the 5th Brigade, we travelled slowly through the morning mist, heading in a north-westerly direction, which confirmed our opinion that the Division was making straight for the coast to try to cut off the enemy's retreat.

We were unaware of it then, but armoured cars, poked ahead of the main force like crabs' eyes, had enemy positions and troop movements under observation, and secrecy was no longer of the first importance. Wireless silence had ended at eight in the morning and although there is no record of our sending any messages we were now in a position to do so. A wireless transmission set, answer to a prayer first uttered a year ago, had been issued to us the day before.

During the afternoon and evening we travelled beside the 4th Field Regiment, halting at seven and then moving a mile and a half to clear the gun positions. We had covered ninety-five miles and were now near Merduma, more than fifty miles west of **El Agheila**. The sea was only eight or nine miles away.

Elements of the German 90th Light Division had been seen on the northern flank in the afternoon; the enemy was expected to try to break

through from the east during the night, so we dug slit trenches and the guard was doubled. At half past six the cooks gave us a hot meal and then we turned in, dead-tired. In the distance we could hear the rumble of bulldozers and we thought: 'They're digging the guns in.'

At eleven we came under the command of the 5th Brigade. Some reports said that the 6th Brigade had managed to cut the coast road but these were untrue. The road was under fire but still open.

After breakfast the next morning, as no move seemed imminent, some of us decided to go to sleep again, but this proved impossible. Guns started to bark in the distance and soon they were joined by the 25-pounders of the 5th Field Regiment, which was still in the same position. Now we knew what was happening: Rommel's rearguard was trying to escape west.

The guns went on firing, and presently we saw a column of transport and armour on the horizon. Individual tanks and lorries (which was which it was difficult to tell though some of our drivers said they could) showed as dark, podgy shapes moving steadily among puffs of smoke.

'From Workshops' area,' said Sergeant-Major Noel Campbell, ³ 'we had a good view. We could see his transport and stuff cutting away west and our 25-pounders getting on to it. Some high explosive shells were coming back, and once we saw what looked like a German tank sneak in and have a go at a New Zealand battery. Several shells landed near our area and the closest one was only a few hundred yards away. We saw one lorry—an LAD job belonging to the Artillery—get a direct hit, and later the driver of it came over and asked us to fix him up with a new radiator. We also saw what we thought was a direct hit on one of our gun emplacements. By lunch-time everything was quiet.'

Everything was quiet, but elements of two panzer divisions and of the German 90th Light Division had escaped almost unscathed. Part had got away along the coast, and the rest—a column of thirty or forty tanks and two or three hundred vehicles—had driven swiftly and with good

dispersal through a seven-mile gap between the 5th and 6th Brigades.

Next the Division tried to prevent Rommel's rearguard from escaping from **Nofilia**, some thirty miles along the coast. The village was strongly held, doubtless to give the German armour and transport more time to get away.

We moved late on the morning of the 17th, following the 6th Brigade and passing through winding wadis. In the afternoon No. 2 Platoon came under fire, probably from German 88-millimetre guns, but no damage was done, and at half past ten, after travelling forty-one miles, we laagered eleven miles east of **Nofilia**.

That night the Division had another disappointment. The 5th Brigade managed to block the coast road but not before the enemy rearguard had escaped.

At dawn we moved one and a half miles south-west to give the 6th Brigade more room, dispersing in a shallow wadi pleasantly speckled with green. We were there for three days, and on the 21st we moved to an area overlooking the sea. As soon as camp was pitched we were given permission to bathe.

The water was bright and chill and it glinted like steel. The feel of it and the news we had just heard (we were likely to stay in the area for some days) reminded us of Christmas at **Fuka** a year ago. Here was the same sand, the same bright and chilly water, the same coastline, and, a little farther along it, the same enemy. One Christmas of this kind was enough: two suggested the beginning of a nightmare pattern that might go on through a grey lifetime interminably repeating itself. But no—that was nonsense. What stretched in front of us was the bright thread of victory, leading to **Tripoli**, to **Tunis**, to Rome—not, of course, that we should see Rome.

In one of its objects, to cut off Rommel's panzer army, the left hook had failed; in another it had succeeded brilliantly. Without a fight and at little expense to British arms the Germans had been forced to

abandon positions loudly advertised as impregnable. The next natural line of defence was at **Buerat**, about 150 miles away. Rommel reached this on 26 December leaving behind delaying forces, and three days later the leading elements of the **Eighth Army** were in front of it.

Notwithstanding the speed of the advance—between 15 and 26 December 248 miles were covered—it is possible to think of the **Eighth Army** as an enormous caterpillar. When it was at full stretch, as it was when its horns (or whatever they call those things that caterpillars have) were resting on the **Buerat** line, it was incapable of making another lollipop forward until it had drawn up its middle and hind parts, which were labelled Petrol, Ammunition, Rations, Workshops.

While this gathering together was in progress, the Division rested on the coast near **Nofilia** and it was here that we spent Christmas. A Corps dumping programme was started almost at once and Christmas Eve found us bringing forward supplies from the neighbourhood of **El Agheila**. However, thanks to the cooks, who travelled with their platoons and spent half the night building ovens, everyone had a wonderful Christmas dinner: roast pork, plum pudding, a bottle of beer, and a double issue of rum. Those who were in the unit area at **Nofilia** were visited by the Colonel, who congratulated us on our 'splendid work in recent campaigns and particularly on the dumping programme carried out before the offensive at **El Alamein**'. He said also: 'I hope that by next Christmas you will all be back in New Zealand.'

We hoped so, too, for we were neither comfortable nor over-happy at this time. Often it was bitterly cold and sometimes there were blinding sandstorms that made driving a nightmare. We used the coast road, collecting our loads at the 107th FMC, ⁴ near **El Agheila**, or the 108th FMC, near **Marble Arch**, where the platoons had their headquarters, and unloading either at the 109th FMC, on the coast beyond **Nofilia**, or at the 110th FMC, twenty-odd miles inland from Headquarters' area. The drivers with the platoons averaged 140 miles a day, and they spent their nights sometimes with Company headquarters and sometimes at **Marble**

Arch—Arae Philaenorum to the Italians. (It was not made of marble, but it was imposing enough and even beautiful, as a design in the middle of nothing—any design—can hardly avoid being. Bas-reliefs glorifying Fascism and **Mussolini** covered the inside of the arch, but its long shadow fell on Douglasses and Baltimores, which were using the great Axis airfield.)

The coast road was bad and the desert was worse, and round **Nofilia** there were mines. An NZASC driver was killed only a mile from Headquarters' area and the next afternoon a No. 4 Platoon vehicle, which was returning from the replenishment point with rations, was extensively damaged.

The New Year came and brought with it a raging sandstorm. Sand collected in deep drifts on the floors of the cabs and round the engine blocks. It stopped our noses and our ears and we could feel our lungs filling up like hour-glasses, but there was no slackening of effort, for the next move was now very near.

By the evening of 5 January 1943 our second-line holding was again on wheels. We had rations and water for eleven days and in our tanks and jerricans there was enough petrol to take us more than 400 miles. Before noon the next day we were in the Divisional concentration area south of **Nofilia**.

'How many miles to **Tripoli**?' we asked. It was three hundred as the crow flies.

'We shall be sent home,' we said, 'when we've seen **Tripoli**.'

The task of capturing **Tripoli** had been given to three divisions: the 51st (Highland) Division, the 7th Armoured Division, and the New Zealand Division (with the **Royal Scots Greys** under command). These composed the 30th Corps. Rommel was still occupying the **Buerat** line, and the plan was for the Highlanders to attack on the coast sector while the New Zealanders and the British armour, travelling inland, advanced along the enemy's right flank. If the Highlanders had no success and the

armour was held up by artillery, the New Zealand Division would make another left hook.

That was the position on 10 January when we moved again, travelling west-south-west for eighty-one miles. We rested on the 11th and on the 12th travelled forty miles due west. We made hardly any progress on the 13th but by the next night we had covered a further sixty miles. We were now twenty miles east of **Wadi Zemzem**, which ran south-west behind the **Buerat** line. That night we heard the rumble of gunfire and at dawn we dispersed our vehicles.

It was now the 15th—a fine, warm day. We were on a moment's notice to move and we knew that something important was afoot. Sounds of firing came from the north-west and aircraft dropped bombs in a neighbouring area. We had an early lunch, but still there was no order to move, and the day, which had started with an air of bustle and a suggestion of great events, degenerated into a vast yawn.

The order came at last and we set off at half past three in the afternoon but travelled only two and a half miles before halting until six. Then we moved a few more miles, laagering at eight under the protection of the 28th Battalion. Carefully we collected and collated scraps of information. The Highlanders had attacked on the coast and the 7th Armoured Division on our right, but the latter had been held up by cunningly-sited guns and tanks, so the New Zealanders had been given the word *Go*. In the late afternoon the **Royal Scots Greys** and the 4th Field Regiment had moved round the south flank of the German line (which ran south-west from **Buerat** for about fifty miles, parallel with, and a little in front of, **Wadi Zemzem**), and shortly before dark the Shermans had gone in. Now the enemy was fleeing west again.

The next nine days remain for most of us a memory of grey dawns, and green and grey dawns, too, and dawns flecked with red like inverted sunsets, when we got up, still muddled with sleep, from our sandy blankets, and hurried to start cold engines so that we could disperse the lorries before daylight; of hasty and often unfinished meals eaten in the

cab or in company with the rest of the sub-section in the back of somebody's three-tonner, with half-empty tins of bully and margarine covering every flat surface, and the billy boiling on the primus between two boxes of charges, and the water waiting to froth up in a brown cream and dribble all down the sides when the tea-leaves were thrown in; of early morning drives when the steering wheel was a circle of ice, and the gear lever a stick of ice, and your breath clouded the windscreen; of long night drives under the white ball of the moon through moon-country; and of long halts in the sunshine while the war went on ahead or seemed to have stopped altogether.

While the Highlanders advanced along the coast, clearing mines and skirting obstructions, the Armoured Division and the New Zealanders headed west through the desert, widening the distance between themselves and the northward-bending coast and hurrying along the enemy's flank. Every day the scenery was different. The afternoon of the 16th found us moving through tall scrub: a young forest you could almost call it, for the trees—bushes—were between twenty and thirty feet high. They were not much to look at and some heavy shelling had not improved them, but they were welcome after the stony wilderness and they sheltered us while we ate our tea. Glancing through their meagre branches, we saw two Messerschmitts overhead with puffs of ack-ack on their tails. When we laagered that night, again with the 28th Battalion, the moon was very brilliant and bombs could be heard rumbling in the distance. Most of us dug slit-trenches.

For the greater part of the next day—we travelled four miles before lunch and two in the afternoon—we were near a large airfield. The story was that it had been captured only that morning, but by midday convoys of lorries were passing through our lines and turning into it, and early in the afternoon great transport planes started to arrive. They landed, unloaded, and took off again.

After tea we travelled north-west until three the next morning. For most of the way the moon positively blazed, doing fantastic things to

the rough, wild country. Boulders became silver nuggets and the dry river-beds looked as though they had been ploughed out of glittering metal. The flats were milky and faintly gleaming, so that they seemed like still lakes studded with misty islands and bounded by cliffs of silver. Only ourselves and the transport suffered no silver change. Dirty, unshaven faces took on a leprous tinge, and the lorries, as they lurched and staggered up steep tracks or scuttled across the open, were for all the world like beetles in a treasure-house.

The next day we came to inhabited country. Stunted, mud-coloured children and their sinister-looking parents, the women black bundles and the men a flash of ravenous teeth and a length of gesticulating black arm, pestered us for food. The children, with their cropped heads and bony knees and elbows, were hard to refuse; nor was there any need to refuse them, for most of us were carrying more army biscuits than we should ever eat. ‘*Biscotti! Biscotti!*’ they cried, and ‘Bull-biff, Johnny! Bull-biff!’—pursuing us with despairing wails long after we had passed. They fought frenziedly among themselves for handfuls of biscuits thrown from the cabs, and even when their tattered and filthy nightshirts were stuffed with treasure they continued to cry, automatically and despairingly: ‘*Biscotti! Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!*’ (One had ceased to be George, apparently, on entering **Tripolitania**.) Sometimes we caught glimpses of their homes: miserable, tumbledown leantos and crazy boxes, half tent and half hutch, made of petrol tins, scraps of old matting, and other rubbish. We halted early in the afternoon about five miles east of **Beni Ulid**, which was eighty miles south-south-east of **Tripoli**.

We did not move again until late the next day and then only as far as the **Beni Ulid** road. Again we saw transport planes, Bombays, landing on a nearby airfield. That night we heard that the Germans had left **Tarhuna**, between fifty and sixty miles north-north-west of **Beni Ulid**, and were burning supplies in **Tripoli**.

Travelling by a road that was dusty and deeply-rutted and flanked on either side by burnt-out guns and transport, we reached **Beni Ulid**, an

oasis and Italian outpost, the next morning. It was a pretty town of high, white-walled houses, of cave-like shops (dealing, so far as we could see, only in vegetables of the onion family and quoit-shaped loaves), and of teeming, crumbling, stinking buildings that were like nothing so much as gigantic portions of gorgonzola cheese. Bluegums grew among palm and olive trees, the grey dust, or the whitish, endlessly-trampled sand, lapping their roots. Leaving the village, we went down the steep side of a wadi, bumped for another fifteen miles over dust-filled ruts, still passing burnt-out transport, and dispersed off the road, by which time everyone, clown-like, wore a pallid mask. We were now some thirty miles south of **Tarhuna**.

The next day—21 January—the Division began to cross the **Gebel Garian** range, which separates the desert hinterland from the plain of **Tripoli**. Following Rear Headquarters of the Division, we moved three miles along the **Beni Ulid** road in the direction of **Tarhuna** before turning off into the desert and forming up on a fifteen-vehicle front. A long halt followed, and then we travelled parallel to the road for a short distance and stopped for the night. Darkness came down, and ahead of us, about twenty miles away, guns were in action. During the night dozens of bombers passed overhead, keeping us awake.

On the 22nd, while the leading elements of the Division debouched on to the plain of **Tripoli**, we moved slowly in the direction of the **Gebel Garian** range, passing first through deep wadis and then through extremely soft sand. We covered three or four miles in the morning and rather less in the afternoon, but after tea we moved off in column of route along a track that took us quickly to a good road, which was reached as darkness fell. We followed it for a few miles and then turned off on a rough track, which plunged us at once into the hills. These must have been the foothills of the **Gebel Garian** range. The going was terrible, but we were helped by brilliant moonlight, and we staggered on, twisting and turning but heading more or less in a north-westerly direction. After we had cleared the hills we were held up by units ahead of us, so we bedded down where we were. It was now midnight.

Early next morning, following elements of the 7th Armoured Division, New Zealanders entered **Tripoli** from the south while, almost simultaneously, troops of the 51st Division entered it from the east. Since leaving **Alamein** on 4 November the **Eighth Army** had advanced 1450 miles—roughly the distance between **London** and Istanbul.

For others—and we grudged them nothing, for theirs had been the greater danger—the supreme moment of marching into the fallen city to the skirl of pipes. Our own unit began to wriggle towards it with the extreme diffidence of a very young puppy approaching a dead rat.

When we moved the next morning we needed to cover only about nine miles to reach the **Tripoli- Garian** road, which ran due north to the city. We managed four of them. On the 25th, some time before noon, we struck the road at Kilo 65 and headed towards **Tripoli** in column of route. We passed **Azizia**, noticing what a pretty place it was, and carried on as far as Kilo 27. Here we turned left off the road into an Italian farm. Company headquarters chose an area close to the house and the platoons dispersed nearby. Compared with the interminable wadis, the oceans of stone and sand, the scene was charming. There was a little well, full of clear water. A froth of blossom clouded the peach and almond trees, so we supposed that it was spring. For many, many months all we had known of the seasons, except that they were either too hot or too cold, was about as much as prisoners in the Bastille knew of time. No wheatfields had ripened in Fortress A, no leaves had fallen at **Alamein**, no peach trees had budded at **Marble Arch**.

But now it was spring and we had reached **Tripoli**.

¹ Capt G. P. Latimer, m.i.d.; company manager; **Dunedin**; born Kaitangata, 20 Mar 1910.

² The chief appointments on 17 December were: Company HQ, Maj P. E. Coutts, Capt S. A. Sampson, WO II I. McBeth (appointed 15 Oct 42); No. 1 Platoon, Capt R. C. Gibson, Lt A. R. Delley (posted 18 Jul 42); No. 2 Platoon, Lt J. R. Arnold, 2 Lt J. D. Todd

(posted 3 Dec 42); No. 3 Platoon, Capt W. K. Jones, 2 Lt R. G. Sloan (posted 19 Jul 42); No. 4 Platoon, Capt K. E. May, 2 Lt J. M. Fitzgerald; Workshops, Lt (T/Capt) A. G. Morris; Ammunition Platoons, Lt R. K. Davis. The following had left us: Lts O. W. Hill and G. P. Latimer (posted to 2 NZ Ammunition Company, 4 Dec 42), 2 Lt R. A. Borgfeldt (admitted to hospital, 14 Jul 42), WO II Bracegirdle (posted to OCTU, 22 Sep 42).

³ Capt R. N. Campbell, m.i.d.; motor mechanic; Eureka, **Waikato**; born **Kaitaia**, 27 Jul 1915; wounded 23 Dec 1940.

⁴ Field Maintenance Centre.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 17 – FEEDING A CATERPILLAR

CHAPTER 17

FEEDING A CATERPILLAR

THE ugly, snub-nosed lorries, their camouflage paint subdued to a pallid fawn by dust and heat and hard service, their mudguards dented, their canopies torn and patched, but their engines still growling strongly, could be seen everywhere. They bowled along the splendid seafront and down the opulent boulevards lined with acacias and palms; they swished past offices, public buildings, and hotels (not too badly damaged), through streets of grand shops (shuttered from caution or because there was nothing in them), through parts of old **Tripoli, Turkish and squalidly magnificent, and out into the surrounding country, where the tender but hectic green of the young fruit trees was interrupted by water towers and pylons, exclamatory in ferro-concrete over the marvels of Fascism, and by patches of primal desert, red sometimes and sometimes greyish yellow, the colour of an old camel, which mocked the new green varnish of Balbo's *colonizzazione*.**

Of those lorries that were marked with the New Zealand fernleaf a large number were marked also with the 69 of the 1st Ammunition Company, for at that time we were doing the most work of any NZASC unit in **Tripoli and perhaps of any transport unit in the **Eighth Army**.**

When that familiar number flashed past, those who were on day-leave in **Tripoli would almost wish they were working, for **Tripoli** was a disappointment. There was plenty to see, of course, but soldiers, apart from an earnest minority, soon weary of *seeing* things, and to interest them for long it takes more than a fine seafront, an equestrian statue of *il Duce*, some houses of disrepute, and one of **Count Ciano**'s summer palaces. After you had seen these and had drunk tea at the Count's place, which had been taken over by the **YMCA**, your problem was how to fill in the time until six, when the transport left for camp.**

When a thousand soldiers go on leave some seek female companionship, a larger number seek liquor, but all, including the most

earnest sightseers, require an appetising and substantial meal —if possible with three eggs. Of wine and women there was a small supply in **Tripoli** (of indifferent quality and uncertain effect), but of food there was scarcely a vestige. To protect the civilian population General Montgomery had forbidden the **Eighth Army** to buy meals, though probably none could have been bought anyway, for the Axis had emptied the city of supplies and most of the inhabitants had only their meagre ration.

Consequently, long before six o'clock, our drivers were hungry and discouraged, and they would speak wistfully of returning home and putting the billy on. But returning home when he still has money to spend is anathema to the average soldier. Realising this, a handful of philanthropic New Zealanders had organised two-up schools in convenient side-streets. These gentlemen, apart from one or two unfortunates whom unfair competition at **Maadi** had forced into the field, were not the ones who had battened on us at **Helwan** and in the bar of the New Zealand Forces Club in **Cairo**. They, bless them, had long since retired on their savings and taken their neuroses and fallen arches back to New Zealand. The new *banditti* were different. To give them their due, they were in the game as much *pour le sport* as for profit, but that did not prevent them from doing uncommonly well. Every day a vast sum of money changed hands under their supervision and went on changing hands (in spite of the fact that two-up, unlike Crown and Anchor, is a perfectly fair game) until it reached that limited number of pairs to which all money naturally gravitates. From these it was transferred to the limited number of paybooks and there it stayed.

In quiet courtyard, then, or in shady side-street, the ring was formed, its presence being advertised by a hedge of soldiers and by the practised voice, loud but confidential, that spoke from the midst of it as from the bush on Horeb: 'I want a quid in the guts, gentlemen. I want a quid in the guts to see him go. Right, then! Are we all set? Are we all set on the side? Come in, spinner. And a good spin too. She's out the monkey, gentlemen—she's out the monkey. Right, then. I want a quid in

the guts....’

Black faces, lit by goggling, amethyst eyes faintly stained with saffron, formed an outer ring—not that there was anything to prevent natives, if they were men of substance, from joining the game—and Italian colonials in off-colour ducks looked on with benevolence, enacting their admiration when our drivers plunged recklessly, their sympathy when they lost.

‘I want a quid in the guts, gentlemen....’

‘Hell, let's go back to the YM—get some more *chai*.’

‘No. Let's bludge a ride home. Get back, eh, and boil up? Open a tin of tongues, eh?’

Yes, **Tripoli** was a disappointment. It was the kind of place where you couldn't get a good feed anywhere, and that kind of place, as everyone knows, is the New Zealander's idea of Hell.

You could, though, get a drink—not in the bars and cafás, but from a local wine factory, where the purple grape (*Vino Rosso* 1942) concluded a mad rush through a system of cylinders and metal pipes by gushing from a faucet. It was fresher than new-laid eggs and the amount you could take away—for a while at any rate—depended on the number of jerricans in your possession. It was remarkable, we found, more for its strength than for the delicacy of its flavour, especially if the cans in which we took it away had once contained high-octane petrol. It was the genuine article, though. We spoke of it as being of the port type, but it was rather more than that, for it implanted a purple stain (which wore off in the course of time) on lips and tongue, and given a few weeks it was quite capable of gnawing its way through the compressed steel of the stoutest jerrican. It was mentioned respectfully in routine orders and indeed it deserved to be. Healthy people, we found, went into a decline after drinking it, and we were forced to conclude that something had gone wrong during the period of its manufacture. A cylinder, perhaps, had been functioning incorrectly, or a pressure gauge had given a wrong

reading.

We had little time, however, for carousing or for indulging our disappointment in **Tripoli**. The Eighth Army, that insatiable caterpillar, was waiting to be fed.

On previous occasions it had been necessary to feed the caterpillar from its tail or from points (**Benghazi**, for instance) in the neighbourhood of its midriff; but now, thanks to our having **Tripoli**, the vital supplies could be injected at a point somewhere near its right shoulder—if caterpillars may be allowed to have shoulders.

The port had been badly damaged by bombs and the Germans had carried out extensive demolitions, but almost at once with the help of landing craft, it was possible to start unloading cargoes.

These had to be cleared from the wharves the moment they were landed and taken to dumps in and around **Tripoli**.

We started work two days after arriving at Peach Blossom Farm, and on 5 February (on the 4th 180 of us had attended a parade for Mr. Churchill) Captain May took over the duties of dock transport officer. By the 8th of the month all four transport platoons (with a vehicle availability of 120) were employed at the docks, and from then on, though detachments from other NZASC units and from the 51st Division helped us, the job was mainly our concern.

It was not practicable, of course, for the platoons to operate from Peach Blossom Farm, so they were packed as closely as possible about a square of barrack buildings some two miles from the docks. Here our drivers were very comfortable, the barracks providing many with sleeping quarters and all with a place to store their gear—the beds, boxes, and tins of which it had been necessary to strip the transport.

Captain May, controlling matters from his office with the help of a Don R and a jeep, sent the transport to the docks as it was called for. After loading, the drivers would go independently to dumps in and

around **Tripoli**. The loading and unloading, until 11 February, was done by Highlanders. Then it was taken over by 3000 men drawn from the 5th and 6th Brigades and the Divisional Artillery. By the 14th of the month 200 vehicles, British and New Zealand, were employed at the docks under the command of our old friend and new major—Major Sampson. Major Coutts had left us on 27 January to fly to **Cairo** to take command of the 18th Tank Transporter Company, NZASC.

During the second week of February the transport began working in two shifts and an improvement was seen at once. On 14 February 18,471 tons were lifted, of which our unit and the detachments under our command handled 1651 tons, using 195 vehicles and travelling 10,806 miles. Between the 15th and 23rd our transport alone lifted 14,745 tons (an average of 1581 tons every 24 hours), and during the 24 hours that ended at half past five on the afternoon of the 19th we achieved a record by lifting nearly 3000 tons.

By now Company headquarters and one section of Workshops (the other was with the transport platoons) had moved to an area near Suani ben Adem, thirteen miles south by west of **Tripoli**. Our second-line holding of ammunition went with them and this had to be carefully guarded, as did everything at that time.



Desert formation—left hook at El Agheila

*Desert formation—left hook at **El Agheila***



Ruins at Cyrene
Ruins at Cyrene



Noflia signboard

Noflia signboard

Tripoli cookhouse



Tripoli cookhouse

We had no reason to suppose that either the Italians or the natives were unfriendly towards us—the former affected to look on us as protectors and the latter as liberators—but we knew from bitter experience that both were highly acquisitive. Only once was there a suggestion of something worse and that was when a mysterious fire broke out in the barracks. A party of Workshops' drivers did their best to put it out, but the local fire-engine—a very old lorry equipped with a pump and a tank—had to be sent for. The fire, though small, burnt with unnatural fierceness, and the subsequent discovery of an artificially contrived draught seemed to suggest that it had been started maliciously, perhaps as a guide to aircraft.

The Luftwaffe, of course, was taking more than a passing interest in what was going on at the docks, but its efforts to interfere, thanks to the deadly efficiency of the anti-aircraft barrage, were unavailing. Through star-filled skies, night after night, the searchlights' tapering beams swept, steadied, and swept on, making it seem as though a phantom ship, with booms a million times bigger and busier than those working in the dark harbour below, was softly unloading stars. Then the ack-ack would start up—odd cracks first, as from a recalcitrant motorcycle, and then a deafening acceleration of sound that reached its climax in a few seconds and stayed there. Columns of coloured balls, toppling a little at the summit, came from a hundred places, and strings of red beads from smaller and faster guns were flung all over the sky. It was hard to believe that anything could live above **Tripoli**, and we were not surprised when we heard that six planes had been shot down in one night. Once we saw a plane get a direct hit and fall out of the sky like a comet, lighting the whole city.

Accurate aiming was certainly out of the question, and although bombs fell near the docks and in the harbour, we never heard, while we were there, that any ships had been sunk. The harbour was full of wrecks but they belonged to **Italy** and **Germany**.

Only once were our drivers in real danger and that was on the night

of 24-25 February when a solitary plane glided down to drop bombs on the docks before the ack-ack could open fire, and then came in again, flying low. Bombs showered down on our barracks, wiping away the roof and the front of a garage occupied by Workshops, and blowing in windows and doors and scattering tiles around. One driver was blown five yards into an air-raid shelter, another was blown against a palm, and another woke up with a tree across the foot of his bed and a window frame round his neck. There were many cuts and bruises, but only one man was hurt badly enough to need more than first aid, and he was back with us within a few days.

The damage to the buildings mattered little, for we had done with them. The attached drivers returned to their own units and by eleven the next morning we were all together in the area near Suani ben Adem.

Vehicle maintenance, a good rest, a game of football, a picture show in the area, and it was the end of the month. On 1 March we drew six days' rations and put our second-line holding on wheels.

The caterpillar had been fed.



Map of Tunisia 1943

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 18 – THE END OF THE FIRST HALF

CHAPTER 18

THE END OF THE FIRST HALF

AFTER losing **Tripoli**, Rommel had been driven back 200 miles to the **Mareth Line**, once known as the 'African Maginot', which stretched for about twenty-two miles from the sea to the **Matmata Hills** in the west, and gave him a firm base from which to take the offensive. Soon the Americans were in trouble in western **Tunisia** and the **Eighth Army** was forced to return to the attack.

The danger then was that Rommel would break off the earlier battle, regroup quickly, and catch the **Eighth Army** off balance. By the end of February this seemed to be his intention, so the New Zealand Division was called forward.

The leading units moved early on 1 March, No. 1 Platoon of the Ammunition Company and ten vehicles from No. 4 Platoon travelling with the 5th Brigade. The rest of us moved at seven on the following evening and drove steadily through the night along the coast road. It was pitch dark but we were allowed to use lights.

Our first halt was for breakfast, which we ate on the Tunisian frontier. We were off within the hour and before noon we had passed through **Ben Gardane**, sixty miles south-east of the **Mareth Line**. We halted twenty miles farther on, and by half past one all the vehicles were dispersed in the new area. Sand was underfoot and wadis and bare hills surrounded us. We might have been back at **El Alamein**.

That evening Nos. 2, 3, and 4 Platoons moved out to open an ammunition point in the Divisional area at **Medenine**, fifteen miles behind the front line. Here they were awaited by No. 1 Platoon. Before them, on Rommel's right flank, were the **Matmata Hills**, which rose and fell like the tracings on a temperature chart—a record, it seemed, of the Tunisian fever.

The next day the fever mounted and both sides were active in the

air. From the ammunition point we saw two Focke-Wulfe 109Fs, the new and alarming fighter-bombers the Germans were using, shot down in flames. The demand for ammunition was normal and we issued small quantities of all types including some 'beak' shells for the 'pheasants', the new 17-pounder anti-tank guns. (These remarkable birds, conspiratorially muffled in canvas and surrounded by a cloak-and-dagger atmosphere, had been arriving at the front for some while.) During the day Company headquarters joined the platoons at the ammunition point.

Throughout the 5th (while No. 4 Platoon started the two-day job of carting 25-pounder from the 115th FMC at **Ben Gardane** to the 116th FMC at **Medenine**) tanks, transport, and coveys of 'pheasants' flowed along the coast road towards **Mareth**. Plainly the crisis was at hand.

Rommel struck the next day. As the morning mist lifted columns of tanks and infantry came out of the hills. Three thrusts were launched, the most southerly against the junction of the 5th Brigade and a British brigade. None succeeded. In the afternoon a second attack on the New Zealand sector was smashed by our guns, and it was the same story all along the front. By the end of the day Rommel had had enough and that night he withdrew behind the **Mareth Line**, leaving fifty-two tanks and some dead and wounded.

Beaten on the ground he tried to make himself felt in the air and throughout the 7th the skies were dangerous, especially for the drivers at the ammunition point, which now made a very attractive target. (On 1 March we had been joined by a platoon from the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** carrying surplus ammunition, and later by three **Royal Army Service Corps** detachments, which had been formed into a platoon to serve British units under the command of the Division.) During the morning fighter-bombers dropped bombs all round the ammunition point, doing no damage beyond marking a few vehicles, and that evening Workshops was machine-gunned from a low level. Two bullet holes in two bivouacs was the total damage, but in the next area the 1st New Zealand Petrol Company lost a lorry and a dump of 680 gallons of petrol.

The 8th was a quiet day in all respects and on the 9th the ammunition point closed down, the platoons joining Workshops in the unit's original area. Three days later we were told about the Division's next move.

Again it was to be a secret one. On reaching the assembly area ninety miles almost due south of **Gabes**, transport would move in daylight only when it was absolutely necessary and there would be no fires between dusk and dawn. Wireless silence would prevent us from employing our two wireless trucks—the one with Company headquarters and another that had joined us early in March for use at the ammunition point.

We reached the concentration area early on the 14th after travelling 120 miles, and that evening every vehicle set out for the Corps roadhead at El Dehibat, some sixty miles to the south-east. During the next twenty-four hours we were employed with other NZASC units in carting ammunition, petrol, and supplies to a field maintenance centre near the concentration area. It was dusty, windy, and cold, and we rested only when we were waiting for night to fall so that we could cover the last sixteen miles to the field maintenance centre without being observed.

During the 17th we reloaded our second-line holding and serviced our vehicles, and on the 18th we slept. After dark we moved two miles to form up behind the 5th Brigade for the coming move.

There was talk of **Gabes**, a coast town twenty miles behind the **Mareth Line**, and of a narrow gap that was to be stormed by infantry and armour after another left hook. This gap, though we knew little or nothing about it at the time, was between the northern end of the **Matmata Hills** and the southern flank of the **Djebel Tebaga** range. It was some thirty miles south-west by west of **Gabes** and had once been walled up by the Romans.

We set out for the **Tebaga Gap** on the 19th at 7 p.m. It was a lovely

night, fine and warm. Following the 5th Brigade and steering by the provosts' dim green lanterns, we travelled slowly on a nine-vehicle front, heading north through the Dahar, a rough, scrub-covered wilderness, totally uninteresting, that lay between the Matmatas and the Sahara. When we halted at half past one the next morning we had covered twenty-seven miles and were seventy miles south by west of **Gabes**.

The New Zealand Corps (the temporary designation of the force under **General Freyberg**'s command for the left hook: it included the 8th Armoured Brigade, General Leclerc's Fighting French, and British medium, field, and anti-tank regiments) was now on the line reached by the Fighting French. Apart from their remarkable achievement in penetrating 1500 miles from Chad, their home territory, the French were of interest to us at that time because the day before Second-Lieutenant Todd ¹ and twenty-eight of our drivers had been attached to them to carry ammunition for a flying column whose task was to protect the Corps' flank from patrols and reconnaissance parties.

After dispersing at dawn on the 20th we were told to be ready to move at half past eight that morning, the difficulty of deceiving the enemy any longer having made **General Freyberg** decide to push on towards the **Tebaga Gap** at top speed.

We did not move until after lunch—the story was that the advance had been held up by enemy guns—but throughout the afternoon, in spite of wadis, enemy minefields, and patches of soft sand, we made good progress. We stopped for tea after covering twenty-three miles, and an hour later pushed on over appalling country, travelling until half past ten at about two miles an hour. That night, for the first time since leaving the **Medenine** sector, we were kept awake by bombs. Flares lit up our neighbours, but we stayed in merciful darkness. We were now between twenty and twenty-five miles south by east of the gap.

The next day—the 21st—the **Luftwaffe** tried desperately to interfere with the advance, and while moving ten miles north-west in the afternoon our convoy was attacked twice by Messerschmitts. No damage

was done.

We halted soon after dark and presently the moon rose, revealing desolate country and the outline of the **Djebel Tebaga** range. Here, surely, was the utmost bound of the everlasting hills spoken of in Genesis. In that timeless presence it was useless to make any distinction in period between a Roman wall and an armoured brigade. Only yesterday the horsemen had waited where we were waiting. They had ridden away, those Berbers, on their rough, strong horses and the tanks had come, and in between the mountains had scarcely found time to sigh. The echo of hooves had died away in the hills, there was a birth in Bethlehem, Titian and **Shakespeare** lived, Liebig discovered chloroform and Diesel invented a new kind of oil engine, and again an army stood at the **Tebaga Gap**.

Gunfire reverberated among the hills and there was a demand for ammunition. The night before the **Eighth Army** had launched a frontal attack on the **Mareth Line** and now the **New Zealand Corps** was playing its part. By morning success leaned towards us for the enemy had lost Point 201.

During the next four days the demand for ammunition increased steadily. We dumped our loads at the guns, reloaded at the field maintenance centre, and returned to the unit area—a round trip of 120 miles. A few hours' sleep and we did the same thing again. On the down trip we carried prisoners.

After moving back three and a half miles on the second day to allow the 5th Brigade to occupy our area—a report said that a panzer division was attempting an encircling movement—the unit stayed where it was, No. 1 Platoon moving forward two miles on the afternoon of the 26th to open an ammunition point.

Enemy nuisance raiders came over in daylight in twos, threes, and fours but our Bofors were too much for them. At night the **Luftwaffe** had things more its own way. It bumbled around dropping flares and

butterfly bombs, and often we awoke in our slit-trenches to find the area lit up like a city street. Above us would be globules of yellow light, which dripped smaller globules like golden tears, and we would lie still while the wind swept the flares away or they faded with agonising slowness. We hated those butterflies with an intense hatred and it was almost a relief when the Germans dropped bombs of the good old-fashioned kind.

Then it was our turn. Throughout the night of the 25th-26th our bombers shuttled backwards and forwards, plastering the enemy's defences and filling the sky above them with clusters of golden flares. As they descended and faded others appeared over them. From where we were it seemed as though blocks of flats, unimaginably brightly lit, were being dropped by parachute. During the morning of 26 March we heard that the 1st Armoured Division had arrived. It was part of the 10th Corps, which had been switched from the **Mareth** front where the **Eighth Army** had gained and lost a bridgehead before the enemy's main position.

At half past three in the afternoon, Spitfires, Kitty-bombers, and Hurricane tank-busters came over in relays, and half an hour later the barrage started. Heavy fighting went on through the night and all the news was good. Hundreds of prisoners had been taken, many of them German. The tanks were through. They were pouring through. They were on the outskirts of **El Hamma**, less than twenty miles due west of **Gabes**. The Tebaga Gap was in our hands.

On the evening of the 27th we moved off in column of route, picking up No. 1 Platoon as we passed the ammunition point. The darkness and some patches of soft sand gave trouble but we followed the provosts' lanterns and passed safely through the gap in the minefields. We could not see the hills but we could feel them all about us. At half past two in the morning, after travelling about twelve miles, we reached the main road to **El Hamma** and here we halted, right in the gap, dispersing as best we could on a narrow tongue between the road and some white tapes that indicated mines. The moon was struggling over the hills, glinting on wrecked tanks and burnt-out transport. The sand round us

had been scuffled up, and every yard of ground (though nothing was broken because there was nothing there to break except small stones) had that smashed and tormented look that tells of heavy and prolonged fighting. Metal embedded in the sand tinkled as we dug our slittrenches, and the Djebel Tebagas, only four or five miles away now, scowled down on us.

That night the enemy evacuated the **Mareth Line**. The 30th Corps started to push towards **Gabes** along the coast and at dawn the advance to **El Hamma** continued.

It was windy in our area and blankets of brownish dust flapped disconsolately among the transport. After an early lunch No. 1 Platoon and six vehicles from No. 4 Platoon set off under Captain Gibson to join the 5th Brigade, with which a third of our second-line holding was to travel. The rest of us, thoroughly impatient now, moved at half past two, following the **Divisional Reserve Group** for ten miles along the road to **El Hamma** and dispersing before nightfall.

The next day we were told to join the 5th Brigade, which was advancing on **Gabes** by a route roughly parallel to the one the main body was following. By this time an out-flanking movement had caused the evacuation of **El Hamma**, and during the afternoon we heard that a British patrol had entered **Gabes** at midday.

We were off again at two in the afternoon, heading for **Gabes** behind the 5th Brigade. Most of us were nervous about mines, for we knew that tapes could be torn down and that even the most conscientious sweeper was fallible. During the day a Don R light-heartedly directed two No. 1 Platoon vehicles on to a minefield, on the far side of which sappers were busy with spades. They said to the drivers: 'We're burying one of our cobbles. He was talking to some infantry jokers about mines and he went into that field you've just crossed to get one. He got one all right.'

We halted at dusk and waited for almost three and a half hours with our vehicles jammed nose to tail. Then we dispersed for the night. After

dark Captain Gibson's detachment pulled out with the 5th Brigade (which was again on the main axis of the advance and had been ordered to move ahead of the 6th Brigade), and the rest of us reverted to the command of the **Divisional Reserve Group**.

The next morning Major Sampson had trouble in finding where we were to go and we did not move until late in the afternoon. After travelling along the main axis for a mile we turned north to by-pass **Gabes** and follow a narrow, winding track that took us up hill and down dale and through fields of green corn. It was warm and sunny and the crops were still wet from rain that had fallen the night before. Tanks and lorries had cut swathes through them and the smell from the crushed stalks was sweet and fresh.

We reached our new area, on which Captain Gibson's detachment was converging also, shortly before dark, dispersing among peagreen hills. Four Junkers 88s were dropping bombs about a mile away and ack-ack guns were barking, but over everything there was a sort of peace.

It was that kind of evening.

The battle swept ahead but not out of hearing.

By the end of March the **Eighth Army** was in front of the enemy's next line, which was at **Wadi Akarit** some twenty miles up the coast from **Gabes**. Here the Axis made a last effort to prevent the British from linking up with the Americans. Though not as formidable as the **Mareth Line** the position was a strong one, its left flank being protected by the sea and its right by the now familiar salt marshes. A frontal attack was called for and while this was being planned the New Zealand Division rested.

We had day-leave to **Gabes**, seven miles away, and there one could bathe and listen with a mixture of envy and admiration to small children speaking their native language—French. Our welcome from the inhabitants was warm and pretty girls gave us flowers, but the Gulf of **Gabes**, in which we were encouraged to bathe, was cold, and as there

was nothing to eat and hardly anything to drink most of us went only once to that dusty, pretty French town with the bombed jetty, the shabby, charming houses, the dilapidated green shutters, and the rusty iron balconies. It was the same at **El Hamma**.

In any event we were too busy for holiday-making. In four days we dumped 350 rounds of 25-pounder at each of the New Zealand gun positions—from the unit area to the field maintenance centre and back was a trip of ninety miles—and then we served a regiment of the 50th Division. That brought us to the night of 5-6 April.

In the small hours of the morning an intense barrage started and it was still going when we woke. We were under an hour's notice to move and several times we got as far as warming up our engines, but when dusk came we were still in the same area. We spent the night there, moving on the 7th behind the 6th Brigade.

The enemy was on the run now, with the armour and the leading units of the New Zealand Division in hot pursuit, but there was still a vast array of transport and fighting vehicles to move ahead of us through the narrow gaps in the minefields. By tea-time we had covered less than six miles. We were away again at a quarter past five but progress was still slow and there were enemy planes about. They had been worrying us in daylight for a week past.

We struck the **Gabes- Gafsa** road (**Gafsa** being eighty miles north-west of **Gabes**) at half past seven, forming up in column of route before crossing it because of minefields. We had lanterns to guide us now and the going improved. There were halts and during one of them an enemy plane dropped flares right above us. Friends could be recognised fifty yards away and the lorries stood as though in a lighted garage, casting huge shadows across the desert, but for some reason there was no attack.

We halted at half past one and bedded down for the night. Before we turned in we heard that British armoured cars had linked up with the

Americans during the day.

The pursuit went on throughout the 8th but we covered only seven miles. We were now thirty miles north-north-west of **Gabes and five from the coast.**

The 9th, the 10th, the 11th—the next seven days in fact—stay in our minds as an interminable series of stops ('Don't wander away, chaps—they're finding out what's going on ahead.') linked together by little journeys of a mile, two miles, ten miles, all made in low gear. But little journeys add up. Following the 6th Brigade, we moved north and north-west, not always patient but happy all the time except once or twice at dusk when the Bofors barked furiously, or at night when we woke up and saw the yellow globules drifting towards us and heard the butterfly bombs gobbling in the distance.

With every mile the fields became greener and gayer. Scarlet poppies and enormous ox-eyed daisies, wild yellow pyrethrums, dandelions, mauve-coloured thistles—they spread a pinafore prettiness over the cornfields, delighting us after our arid diet of wadis. On the night of 9-10 April we dug our slit-trenches in soft turf among rabbit droppings and Kate Greenaway flowers and great clumps of furze, which later, when the flares started to fall, shrouded us in grateful shadow.

****Sfax**, eighty to ninety miles up the coast from **Gabes**, had fallen, and we travelled through wheat and barley and over rolling downland and then through olive trees—mile on mile of olive trees all so symmetrically planted that whichever way you looked you were gazing down endless avenues. We halted among them that evening—we were now twenty-two miles north-west of **Sfax**—and were told that we should not be moving for several days, so the next morning, after servicing the transport, we did our washing. A canvas lean-to appeared against the side of Headquarters' orderly-room lorry and courts were convened to inquire into two recent accidents.**

But before the washing was dry or the findings could be promulgated

we were moving through the olive trees in three columns with an air raid flashing behind us and lines of tracer showing pink in the fading light. We passed a burning lorry with a jeep on the back of it but we could hardly take our eyes from the olives. They were growing in pure white sand, smooth and tidy as a tennis-court. It lapped their roots like a clean coverlet, giving them the appearance of gnarled old paupers in a shining white hospital at evening. Their branches crackled against the canopies and our wheels ploughed tracks in the crisp sand as we pushed, like robber bands, through the strange forest.

Tall barley brushed us the next day and when we stopped for the night we were in a cornfield. As we lay in our slit-trenches the cool green stalks bent over us, dropping beetles and fat grubs into our eyes. Being four feet high, they made our slit-trenches seem seven feet deep, which gave us an illusion of safety when the western sky started to flash and gobble.

Sousse, over seventy miles north of **Sfax**, had fallen, and we came by rough tracks to El Djem, thirty-six miles south of **Sousse**, where there was a Roman amphitheatre marvellously well preserved. Here we joined the El Djem- **Sousse** road, which we followed for some miles before halting and dispersing early in the afternoon.

The next morning—it was 14 April—we skimmed along the main tarmac road for half an hour, stopping two miles south of **Sousse**. The platoons pulled off the road to left and right and settled down among trees. It was the perfect area. Sunlight struck through the branches and fell in golden pools on patches of wild flowers and on grassy paths. Doves cooed softly and fell in succulent bundles or fluttered away to safety as a brisk volley rang out.

While the billies boiled they cooed in the woods, gently and reproachfully, in the sunlight.

O! wither'd is the garland of the war.

The soldier's pole is fall'n.

From coast to coast the enemy was facing Allied armies and behind him was the sea. His positions at [Enfidaville](#), eighteen miles from [Sousse](#), were about the same distance from [Tunis](#) as ours had been from [Alexandria](#), but there the likeness ended. He had good cover, and peaks and spurs rising behind the front line provided him with observation posts.

At once we set to work to bring forward the ammunition. Before dawn on the 16th a convoy of 240 vehicles (half were ours and the rest came from the 1st New Zealand Supply Company and an RASC Company) left the unit area for a field maintenance centre near [Sfax](#), from which 21,600 rounds of 25-pounder were to be brought forward to another centre near [Sousse](#). The roads were good and by ten that night half the ammunition had been shifted. The greater part of what was left was diverted to our area the next day to meet a sudden demand from the Artillery.

On the 19th the unit moved forward to join No. 2 Platoon at the ammunition point, which was now a mile south of [Sidi Bou Ali](#), twelve miles north-west of [Sousse](#). [Enfidaville](#) was thirteen miles north-north-west of [Sidi Bou Ali](#).

Our new area was as pleasant as the old one—the trees were as shady, the doves as abundant. Raised paths divided it into little squares of flower-filled orchard, like sunken gardens, each of which made a snug harbour for two or more lorries. Nearby, hidden by great cactus hedges, were fields of peas and beans with the pods ripening on the vines. These, we took it, went with the area. Dove and green peas—could anything be more delicious?

The ammunition point had closed on our arrival but No. 2 Platoon reopened it the next day in an area ten miles north-west of [Sidi Bou Ali](#) close to a large lake. Here the country was open and one looked across

an undulating plain towards **Takrouna**, three or four miles west of **Enfidaville**, and the enemy-held hills on either side of it, pale green and primrose in the evening sunshine. Gunfire sounded hollowly among them and in places they were shrouded by a grey mist. Already the Allied general offensive was nearly sixteen hours old, and at that very moment in the hilltop village of **Takrouna** a small party of New Zealanders was holding a pinnacle in the face of mortars, machine guns, and grenades.

Under gathering rain clouds the hills turned to purple. Presently they were swallowed by the night but the battle went on and on, flashing and rumbling in the rain and darkness.

For a day and a night and another day the 25-pounders, jerking and smoking in the cornfields, sent over an endless stream of shells towards the hills, and endlessly our lorries shuttled backwards and forwards between the ammunition point and the unit area, the unit area and the field maintenance centre near **Sousse**. We carted 5152 rounds of 25-pounder on the first day and 9832 on the second.

The barrage died down and we relaxed into routine. Heavy rain had fallen, but now the weather was fine and warm and every leaf and flower was in a perfect frenzy of expansion. None of us had seen anything like it before. Here was no slow unfolding, no tentative putting forth. The flowers leapt out of their buds and were off with the first breeze—like birds. The fat pads of the cactus, obscenely glossy, morbidly succulent, seemed to be in danger of blowing up, vampire-like, and deluging everything with green blood; but already some pads had hardened and dried, horribly suggesting withered and desiccated flesh.

Plainly this spring would be over in a few hours, so we turned our attention to saving the peas and beans. After our own estates had been stripped fatigue parties were taken in lorries to a large field in the neighbourhood of the ammunition point, and here, too, the harvest was gathered in.

Picking and podding beans and peas for the community and cooking

them privately in billies—with margarine they made a delicious meal even without the flesh of doves—took up a great many of our off-duty hours, and the rest were spent in bathing, for which transport to the sea was provided, and in clearing cricket and football fields. In this work a battered diesel lorry, which was in fairly good order except for a weakness of the stomach that prevented it from holding down either oil or water for any length of time and from keeping them in separate tubes when it was holding them, was of the greatest help. It pattered up and down for hours, spouting a mixture of hot oil and water and dragging a harrow made from tow chains. Like its counterpart in Workshops, another trophy of the chase, it was in demand when unofficial transport was required, and its official owner was seldom in a position to disclose its whereabouts. Often it was in **Sousse** or in Hammam- **Sousse**, three miles nearer. Not that there was much to see in either town; the former was full of bomb holes, broken glass, and vaguely deprecatory Frenchmen; the latter was a maze of small, hot alleys overhung by tall buildings and crowded with open-fronted shops in which tiny meals, compounded chiefly of garlic and olive oil, were perpetually sizzling over braziers. Or it would be fetching loaves and rock-cakes from the New Zealand Field Bakery Section, in which No. 1 Platoon had some good friends.

Sometimes our routine was interrupted by a heavy demand for ammunition or by a special job. On the morning of 27 April, for instance, 144 lorries went to the ammunition point and from there were guided in batches of sixteen to the gun positions, at each of which 400 rounds of 25-pounder were required. Dust attracted attention and there was some shelling by 88s, one of the Artillery guides being slightly wounded. In general, though, no exceptional efforts were required of us, and the days that followed, ending April and launching us into May, were lazy and pleasant.

Daily there was more heat in the sun. The flowers had faded now, peas and beans had become scarce, and the crops were the colour of new gold. The cactus leaves were powdered white with dust. Dust lay in warm

drifts beside the tracks and when we returned from the ammunition point we were as white as millers.

Except for No. 4 Platoon and small detachments from Nos. 1 and 2, which were now at the ammunition point, and for Second-Lieutenant Delley ² and ten others who were detached with the 1st New Zealand Mule Pack Company, newly formed to supply our troops in the hills, the unit was complete at this time, the drivers who had been with the French flying column having returned to us on 23 May. (Against all expectation they had few adventures to relate: there had been one air raid, one lorry had hit a mine, the French had been careless about lights.)

As always when we were together in a pleasant area and there was little work to be done the platoons were drawn close by organised games, a constant exchange of visits, and the necessity of killing time.

Time killed is time forgotten, but certain memories stand out clear and bold: evening, and Neil's old Opel Blitz and the Italian Spa from Workshops lurching towards each other across the ruts and the footballers in the back bouncing about like peas and laughing and calling out as the lorries pass ... afternoon, and masses of khaki shirts and clean boots and a long wait for the Hon. F. Jones and people asking: 'I wonder if he'll say about going home? I wonder if the cooks are keeping the tea hot?' ... morning, and ugly hammer-headed mules hitched to our olive trees and their masters telling us about their points and boasting of them and abusing them at the same time ... night, and the fat thunder drops pattering on canopies and bivouacs and the warm darkness growling above the olive trees. And little things: cactus pads squashed flat by wheels, telephone wires tangled in a white hedge: the winding, crumbling road to the ammunition point and a load of salvage leaping and jangling: a Berber in a straw hat expertly fingering an army blanket: a puncture in the dust: sunshine at breakfast: beans.

May the 5th. After the hot day the cool evening. Near the ammunition point the slim flamingoes settled on the lake's edge in a

scarlet cloud. Gunfire no longer worried them. What they hated was being used for target practice by returning fighter planes. In the unit area there was music. A Strauss waltz played by the 5th Brigade Band stole among the olive trees, misty now with dancing midges and mosquitoes, themselves making music—a tiny, persistent shrilling. At the forward ammunition point, twelve miles west of the other point, No. 1 Platoon's drivers had finished digging their slit-trenches and some of them were making for the low hills that bounded one side of the area. From these they would get a good view of the gun flashes.

They had reached the area at lunch-time after travelling slowly along a bad road that had taken them through green and yellow hills to a wide plain. Here their lorries stood axle-deep in corn and in front of them were the wild mountains in which the fighting for **Zaghouan** and **Pont du Fahs** would take place.

The day before—the 4th—the Division had started to concentrate in the neighbourhood of **Djebibina** on the left flank of the **Eighth Army**. Its role in the coming assault was to support a French drive in the direction of **Pont du Fahs**, thirty miles north-west of **Enfidaville**, while the Americans attacked in the north, the **Eighth Army** in the south, and the **First Army** struck the main blow in the centre.

The fighting in the mountains began that night, and the next morning we were ordered to dump 163 rounds of 25-pounder at each of forty-eight gun positions. All the lorries in the unit area left for one or other of the ammunition points and at three in the afternoon they started to go forward to the guns. It was no country for motor transport, and long strings of mules loaded with ammunition and supplies for the Fighting French were plodding along the rocky, winding tracks with an air of patient disgust, which changed to anger when a gun went off near them or when one of our lorries avoided hitting them by a hair's breadth; then they snorted fiercely and erected their long ears, framing for an instant a distant foothill or a 75-millimetre gun in a gaping V-sign, which was what the French were doing, good-humouredly, with stubby fingers. The latter, in a foreign sort of way, looked extremely business-

like in spite of their beards, their bizarre equipment, and the faintly exclamatory air with which they did everything, whether it was kicking over a motor-cycle engine (*It marches!*), making the V-sign (*Bravo, my old ones!*), or flogging a mule (*Species of an imbecile!*).



Transport near Wadi Akarit

Transport near Wadi Akarit



Dispersal, near Wadi Akarit

Dispersal, near Wadi Akarit



Tunisian barley-field
Tunisian barley-field

The heights of Takrouna



The heights of Takrouna

Some of the gun positions were under observation from the enemy, and as these could not be approached until after dark it was very late before many of our drivers got home. Most of them, probably, were on the road again within a few hours, for during the next three days the demand for ammunition was heavy and continuous.

When we were not working we seemed always to be congregated in or around the platoon orderly rooms, infuriating busy clerks and making them wonder why on earth it had ever occurred to them that orderly-room lorries were good places for platoon wireless sets. On Friday, 7 May, we heard that the French were in Pont du Fahs and that **Bizerta**

and **Tunis** were on the point of falling, and on Saturday we heard that they had fallen the day before.

Throughout Sunday, under a hot blue sky, our lorries went backwards and forwards between the ammunition point and the unit area and the field maintenance centre, passing and repassing in a flurry of white dust; and from daylight until dark heavy traffic moving up to the forward point laid a smoke-screen across the cornfields.

The news on Monday the 10th was that large forces of the enemy, including our old friends of the 90th Light Division, were surrounded in the hills in front of the **Eighth Army**, British armour having swept round behind them and cut them off from the **Cape Bon** peninsula. During the afternoon No. 1 Platoon closed down the forward ammunition point—it was not needed now, for by this time the Division had moved back to the **Enfidaville** front—and relieved No. 4 Platoon in the area near the ravaged beanfields and the lake with the scarlet flamingoes.

That night a battle started in the mountains. They threw back the long echoing roar of the bombardment, and from the ammunition point our drivers could see the small foothills leaping out of the darkness as the guns flashed. The noise and the flashes went on hour after hour, and the next morning the guns were still firing. They fired throughout the day with only a few pauses, and the enemy guns answered valiantly. After dark our drivers could see the yellow flash of our guns and the reddish flash of enemy shells exploding near them.

And the next morning they were still firing. It was Wednesday, 12 May, and it was the day of the races.

After lunch half the company was taken in lorries to **Sidi Bou Ali** where the New Zealand Mule and Donkey Turf Club (incorporated with the Mule Pack Company) was holding its first and last spring meeting. Wearing our new summer clothes (and our new summer clothes were garments in which Frankenstein's monster might have hesitated to appear in public), we milled around with five thousand other New

Zealanders, shoving bundles of notes through the windows of the totalisator, losing money on Imshi (ridden by 'Sheriff' Davies) but recovering a little on Packdrill (Lieutenant Delley) and Doubtful ('Tiger' Tarrant ³) and spending a thoroughly hot and happy afternoon. And in the distance, never quite drowned by the voice of Captain Toogood, which the public address system was diffusing over the whole field and among the olive trees, was the voice of the guns. We listened to them with quiet satisfaction, as schoolboys on the last evening of term listen to the slamming of desks. We might never hear guns again.

Von Arnim, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, African Army Group (Rommel was safe in **Europe), had been captured during the day and the enemy forces in the hills had no hope of holding out much longer, but when darkness came the guns were still firing.**

Near the ammunition point, where the YMCA Mobile Cinema was screening *Something to Sing About*, a white cone of light shone steadily on the side of a three-tonner. Innumerable red pinpoints, wavering a little, glowed softly in the blue darkness, and when matches were lit sections of the audience, close-packed on rocks, on cushions, on empty jerricans, sprang out of the night haphazardly. Music and rasping dialogue competed with the rumbling of the guns, and beyond the screen, beyond the caperings of James Cagney, wild-fire flickered in the mountains. The audience took little notice of it, for the film was banal beyond belief and the business of not enjoying it occupied nearly everyone.

The film ended and the gunfire died down a little, and at a quarter past nine it was announced by the **BBC that all organised enemy resistance had ceased in **Tunisia**.**

The guns fired fitfully through the night but by ten the next morning all was quiet. An hour and three-quarters later, Marshal Messe, Commander of the Italian First Army, surrendered unconditionally to **General Freyberg. It was the 13th of May.**

We were ordered to close the ammunition point, and for the last time No. 1 Platoon took the crumbling white road to **Sidi Bou Ali**. Heading in the same direction and riding for the most part in their own transport were thousands of prisoners. Even the drivers were prisoners in many cases. The Italians, naturally, seemed quite at home under these circumstances—they were hooting their horns in an easy civilian way and slapping along with a good deal of flash gear-changing—but the task sat oddly on the Germans. Their young, sunburnt faces were serious under the white, peaked forage caps of the **Afrika Korps**, and they drove slowly and conscientiously, intent on the job in hand. It seemed important to them not to scrape a mudguard.

In the backs of the lorries some of the prisoners were singing, but again steadily and gravely. They were singing, perhaps, the old battle song of the **Afrika Korps**:

With clattering trucks,

With engines roaring,

Panzers roll forward

In Africa.

One or two of our drivers waved to the prisoners, and many waved back, though a few were sullen.

After the surplus ammunition had been fetched from the gun sites there was no work for us. We played cricket or went swimming or stood under the olive trees near the road and watched the lorries go by. Often a lorry pulled up to allow the prisoners to get out and walk over to the ditch. It was as though a whistle had shrilled and the players were mingling on the field at half-time.

The opposing team was of enormous size, and when dusk fell the lorries were still going past our area, crushing the cactus pads deeper in the white dust by the roadside as they rolled forward in **Africa**.

That evening there was an issue of two bottles of beer a man. The tires hummed on the road and the mosquitoes echoed their humming in a higher key and the shadows became one shadow. And we drank our two bottles of beer slowly and appreciatively, as players, at half-time, suck lemons.

On 15 May, at ten minutes past seven in the morning, we set out for **Maadi Camp**, 1864 miles away.

Engines warming up in the darkness, the shiveringly cold darkness, and moves before daylight. Overcoats shed as the sun rises, then jerseys, then shirts. Warm, dry wind blowing against bare skin and the tires on the hot bitumen making a noise like sticking-plaster being ripped off. Punctures and blowouts and plugs oiling up and bearings giving trouble.

Through Kairouan—the Prophet's barber lived there—through **Gabes** and the **Mareth Line**—a cool, green gap between the sea and the hills—through **Medenine** and **Ben Gardane**. Near Tripoli we spend the second night. The next day we dump our ammunition at a depot and then load petrol, which we are to carry for the Division. We spend two days near **Tripoli** and in the evenings the **Kiwi Concert Party** performs in our area—legs kicking under black sateen lined with white, stage a red mouth in the blue twilight: ‘We're the Cancan girls from the Folies Bergères’....

Jerricans full of petrol in the backs of the lorries. Jerricans shaking loose and pushing out the sides of the canopies. Vicious tugging at jerricans to unwedge them from tight rows. Jerricans being filled from ‘flimsies’ and the petrol spilling over the warm grass. Petrol cold and greasy on shirts and shorts.

Homs passed and **Misurata**. Long delay east of **Misurata** because the road has been washed out fifty miles ahead. **Buerat** passed and **Sirte**, and

we halt near our old area at **Nofilia**. **Marble Arch**, **El Agheila**, and **Agedabia**. **Benghazi**, and we take aboard more petrol and spend the next day in the staging area, getting leave to town. **Tocra Pass**, **Barce**, **Giovanni Berta**, **Derna Pass**, **Gazala**, **Tobruk**, and more petrol. **Bardia** shining white on our left, **Capuzzo**, the border, **Halfaya Pass**, **Buqbuq**, **Sidi Barrani**, and **Mersa Matruh**. In front of the **Lido Hotel**, innocent now of rich Greeks, we splash and swim in the warm, purple water. **Garawla**, **Qasaba**, **Sidi Haneish**, **Baggush**, **Fuka**, **El Daba**, **El Alamein**, the **Matruh** turn-off, and **Amiriya**. The next morning—31 May—we set out on the last stage of the journey.

The road black and straight like a typewriter ribbon for miles, then the short steep climb, then round to the left, to the right, then down, then **Mena House** and the **Pyramids**, **Sharia El Ihrâm**, **Cairo**, the **Nile**, **Maadi**, the bump over the railway, **NZASC Training Depot** going past, the dustbowl on the far side.

The lorries halt in line, mudguard against mudguard. They sway as they halt, and one after another the hand brakes go on, croaking like frogs.

The news goes round the dustbowl like a hot wind, raising temperatures, making hearts stop for a minute and then beat faster. The lists are made out already: they will be read tomorrow; they will be read this evening; they will be read now.

Captain Gibson has papers in his hand and he begins to read:

‘The following will be returning to New Zealand under the Ruapehu scheme for three months' furlough: **Aicken R. B.**, **Annan A. E.**, **Ashton D. H....**’

The drivers sit quietly in the warm sand, hearing their names—the fortunate ones—but not feeling the happiness straight away, only the shock and the ache under the heart and the nearness of tears.

¹ Lt J. D. Todd, m.i.d.; motor driver; **Te Kuiti**; born Waipawa, 16 Mar 1913.

² Capt A. R. Delley, m.i.d.; Government land valuer; Department of Agriculture, Hobart, **Tasmania**; born Caracas, Venezuela, 2 Sep 1916.

³ Dvr J. P. Tarrant; contractor; Pio Pio, **Auckland**; born Pio Pio, 1 Jul 1913.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 19 – DISSECTION OF AN UNDERBELLY

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JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(1) THE SANGRO

(1) The Sangro

EVERY morning a sea of pewter, burnished and dully shining. Sound of water slushing lazily in scuppers: murmur of stem and bow sighing patiently through the **Mediterranean**: patter of bow-spray falling on smooth swell. Already, though the sun is hardly out of the sea, the decks are alive with soldiers, most of whom suffer from a slight, an almost imperceptible, hangover, the result of sleeping between decks, the smell of oil and soft soap, the warm stickiness of the morning, the crowd in the lavatories. A rumble, a rotary impulse deep in the ship's bowels, answers an uneasiness in their own.

Breakfast in the soupy atmosphere of the troop-decks: electric lights burning: smells of porridge and of sweat and sleep: the appalling clatter of crockery: shouting and jostling of mess orderlies: dixies, warm and slippery. After breakfast, no room to move on deck because everyone has been hounded from below to leave the ship clear for inspection. Impatient waiting for 'Three Gs' to sound. Lunch, with appetites a little keener than at breakfast, and then a long, dozy afternoon, which ends with eyes and elbows aching from too much leaning on the rail and gazing seawards. Tea, but not enough of it, for appetites are ravenous now, and, after tea, cards and an examination of the day's rumours.

In wartime each troopship carries three rumours—more sometimes, but never less than three. Do they follow the ship like three albatrosses or do they sneak aboard before she leaves port? Do they crawl from deck and bulkhead like copra-beetles, come on breezes, or does the ship herself make them up, chattering through the night with doors banging, engines murmuring, heart sighing? They seldom vary in their essentials. (1) The enemy has broadcast the ship's name and her date of sailing. (2) An infectious disease has broken out. (3) Senior officers are awaiting court martial on serious charges.

These three, especially the last, go pleasantly with the cool of evening when khaki caterpillars circulate on all the decks, when destroyers fuss around laying smoke-screens, and barrage balloons

(midget dirigibles that were silver earlier and are now dark like slugs) are hauled in. The distance between ships has lessened, and smoke from a dozen stacks, streaming astern in skeins, mingles in a grey net—grey shot with brown—that trails across the sea for miles. The spirit of protection and comradeship—the high, brave spirit of the convoys—is all about you. Silence then, and a light blinking quick and secret, and the drawing in, from all the corners of the sea, of the soft darkness.



ROUTE OF 2ND DIVISION IN ITALY FROM TARANTO TO ROME

Well, it was **Italy**. After the doubt, the certainty. After the bustle of departure, peace and restfulness—in spite of the overcrowding, the discomfort, the indefinable malaise. After the alarms and forebodings the calm knowledge that not illness, nor the vagaries of Authority, nor the malice of fate could prevent you now from seeing the new country. Doubtless you lacked some essential article of equipment. Possibly you had missed an important inoculation. Conceivably you harboured parasites. It mattered little—they would not turn back the ship.

The bustle of departure had come at the end of a long calm, a calm starting in mid-June—in mid-June because it was not until then that our 190 'Ruapehus' left us after spending a fortnight in a daze of joy and alcohol—left us to miss and envy them and lose, by the process of shifting them from pocket to pocket, sending them to the laundry with

our shirts, pulling them out with train tickets, innumerable scraps of paper bearing illegible addresses. After that, when the gale of long leave to Palestine, **Alexandria**, and **Cairo** had blown itself out, it was calm except for occasional squalls that spun us into **Cairo** for an evening's riot and sometimes into the orderly room the next morning. These occurred sporadically until our money ran out. While it lasted we were often in trouble—not bad trouble leading to courts martial but foolish trouble that caused the driver of the breakdown lorry (the unit's Black Maria) to make many trips to the Maadi Field Punishment Centre to collect people who had spent the night there. At first the provost sergeant would ask him where he came from and what he wanted. Later it was 'Huh—you again! I suppose you want T—.' T— would be led out, scratching himself and complaining bitterly of bed-bugs.

In the second week of July 102 reinforcements were received impassively, and three days later, grumbling a little, we moved to **Puttick Camp**, near **Mena** and the pyramids, where the NZASC was concentrating. An intensive training programme began but we allowed it to interfere with our calm only a little.

Each cloudless morning was announced by the Egyptian newspaper boy with his cry of 'Very g-o-o-d news'. He had said it when **France** fell; he had said it, perhaps (for he was a boy only by virtue of his calling, his filthy tatters, his mocking and mischievous smile), when the German armies were surging towards **Amiens** in 1918, adding the improbable information that **Hitler** (only it would have been the Kaiser or Ludendorf then) had contracted an unmentionable disease. Cloudless morning was followed by baking day and a programme of physical training, drill, and discipline, most of which was directed at the newcomers. Each simmering evening melted into blue night, leaving us with a restlessness and longing as old as Egypt, a dark tide in the blood obedient to some star stranger and more tormented than most, a longing to make journeys—the golden journey to Samarkand, or the journey to **Sicily**, or the long journey home.

Daily, as the heat increased or seemed to, the programme was less

arduous, and daily, as the Allies advanced in **Sicily**, where they had landed on 10 July, the very good news was better. On the 25th of the month **Mussolini** resigned, and three days later the National Fascist party was dissolved by Marshal Badoglio. On 17 August, after thirty-nine days' fighting, resistance in **Sicily** ended.

For a month past our transport had been moderately busy with trips to **Cairo**, **Port Said**, and **Suez**, and for eight No. 2 Platoon vehicles there had been a trip to **Aleppo**. Workshops, which had stayed at **Maadi** because it was easier to work there, was busy all the time. Every vehicle needed either overhauling or reconditioning.

We returned to **Maadi** on 27 August, and on 2 September we lost the rest of the drivers who had come overseas with the First, Second, or Third Echelons—fifty-one men. They went back to the **Mena** area to await their return to New Zealand under the Wakatipu scheme. The next day the Allies landed on the Italian mainland.

The segregation of the 'Wakatips', a wave of injections, the publication of the Italian armistice terms, the pervading restlessness — our peace had gone now—all convinced us that events had begun to march and that soon we should be marching too. But where? **Italy**? The war in **Italy** was nearly over. England for the Second Front? The Division had been going to England for years now and doubtless it would get there in the end—when (to borrow poetry from our newspaper boy) the apricots bloomed! Desert manœuvres? Everything pointed in that direction.

Desert manœuvres it was. That was what they told us anyway, and on 19 September Company headquarters and No. 4 Platoon moved to an area near Burg el Arab, where the Division was concentrating. The rest of the unit was to follow as soon as Workshops had finished with its transport.

The manœuvres took place without us, and what was left of September passed in a golden dream of sunshine and sea-bathing. Think

what you will of the desert, of **Cairo**, of Egypt, but look back always with the tenderest feelings of gratitude towards the **Mediterranean**—our playground, our green palace from which flies and dust were rigidly excluded, our private swimming bath, our cool, our pleasant, our unfailing friend.

Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons arrived from **Maadi** on 26 September and by the end of the month the unit was almost complete at Burg el Arab. No. 3 Platoon had only seven vehicles and the balance of its establishment (Chevrolets) was collected from **Amiriya**—and a motley collection it proved to be. Most of the load-carriers—only a few were new—had neither cabs nor canopies, and although foraging parties showed much ingenuity and some lack of scruple in making these deficiencies good the drivers were still far from satisfied.

We knew now that we were going somewhere by sea and taking our vehicles with us. The unit would be divided into three flights—two of personnel and one of vehicles. The vehicle flight, which would include rather more than one driver to a lorry, would be subdivided into smaller flights, which would sail as shipping space became available. The idea was that not more than a third of any one unit should sail in one ship.

We were issued with winter clothing, with bivouacs, with twogallon water tins, and as they handed us each article they reminded us that there would be a march of several miles at the end of the voyage. Dress rehearsals were held and they proved nothing except our inability to crawl more than a few yards under our burdens.

But where were we going? On what foreign strand were we to sink exhausted?

The answer came with October. ¹ On the 3rd the first personnel flight went to **Ikingi Maryut**, where it was divided into two groups, both of which sailed from **Alexandria** on the 6th. The rest of the unit (Company headquarters and Nos. 3 and 4 Platoons) stayed at Burg el Arab until the 12th, when the second personnel flight was divided into

two groups and sent to the staging area, sailing on the 18th.

The first, second, third, and fourth vehicle flights sailed on the 24th, the fifth and sixth on the 29th.

The drivers with the vehicle flights strolled casually aboard, glancing between the treads of the gangway at the filth and bobbing oranges in the black water, and dreaming happily of tool boxes stuffed with cigarettes, chocolate, and tinned fruit. The others went aboard sideways, hung with packs, valises, water bottles, and boots, stifled with overcoats and bedrolls, stuck with bivouac poles as with arrows.

And the Egyptians on the quay laughed and laughed, seeing no end to the capacity of the ruling race for making itself ridiculous and uncomfortable.

Well, it was **Italy**. The little ships crept slyly across the **Mediterranean**, leaving snail tracks in the silver water—beaten silver scaly with tiny hammer marks. The sea was calm mostly and the voyages uneventful, but not always. Lieutenant Davis's flight ran into rough weather and tanks in the forward hold broke loose, threatening to smash through the ship's side. The motor vessel *Lambrook*, with Second-Lieutenant Dykes's ² flight aboard, hit a mine when ten days out from **Alexandria**. A spout of water shot high in the air and came down on deck, washing an Artillery sergeant from the bridge and breaking his wrist, and soaking blankets and gear belonging to our Workshops' drivers. She limped on, with her back broken and her starboard plates rippling, to **Brindisi**, ten hours away.

But one by one the little ships came safely to port—those with personnel to **Taranto**, in the arch of the Italian boot, those with vehicles to **Bari**, high up on the back of the heel. The first personnel flight reached **Taranto** on 9 October, the second thirteen days later.

‘We pulled into the wharf,’ wrote Sergeant Greg Mowat, ³ who was with the second flight, ‘and we could see the roofless houses, the burnt-out buildings, and the piles of rubble—a sight new to the reinforcements.

Once again we piled gear on our backs, struggled up the stairway, down the gangplank, and into the new country. We left our heavy stuff on the wharf to be picked up by lorries and taken to the transit camp, which was about five miles out of town.

‘The march did not seem a long one—there was so much to see. There were real stone houses with red roofs instead of wog huts made of mud and petrol tins. There were terraced vineyards, orderly and old. Real fruit grew on the trees. Only one thing reminded us of Egypt and that was the child beggars. They pestered us for cigarettes and all were mad for chocolate. Poor little bastards—they looked as if they could do with a good feed, most of them.

‘When we arrived at the transit camp we found we had missed our friends of the first flight by two days—they had gone to an area near [Altamura](#), forty or more miles north-west of [Taranto](#). The NZASC was assembling there and we were told we should be following quite soon.

‘There was leave to [Taranto](#) during the next week but no one thought it much cop. The town was dirty and damaged, the restaurants had little or no food, and the wine, though it was only about sevenpence a litre, was terrible stuff. His first night in [Italy](#) old “Snow” came back to camp and all he could say was “Drunk for a bob! *Dead* drunk for a bob!”

‘At the end of October Captain Gibson and fifty-three other ranks moved to [Altamura](#) and the rest followed a day or so later.’

The driver separated from his vehicle knows neither comfort nor peace of mind. He misses his home, his protection against route marches and the parade ground, the little gadgets he has contrived for his convenience. In the area near [Altamura](#)—misty mornings, bare rolling hillsides, mud and chips of stone everywhere: nothing missing, in fact, except gangs of convicts wearing broad arrows—the drivers waited disconsolately for their transport.

The first vehicles to arrive were Company headquarters' orderly-room lorry and No. 1 Platoon's cooks' lorry and water cart. The last two were needed at once by Second-Lieutenant Boyce ⁴ and sixty drivers who, with the help of **Royal Army Service Corps** transport, were forming an ammunition dump at Modugno, five or six miles south-west of **Bari**. That meant that the orderly-room lorry had to be turned into a taxi-cum-carrier's cart. Forgetting its usual static dignity, it dashed about collecting pay and rations and performing a hundred and one menial tasks. It even took a leave party to **Bari**, and it was strange indeed to be travelling for pleasure in a vehicle ordinarily so unfrivolous. An alternative means of transport was provided by the 'Altamura Express', a conveyance, ancient, crowded, and creaking, that staggered along a privately-owned, narrow-gauge railway line. The engine-driver was an obliging man and for a cigarette he would stop anywhere.

Bari, with its fine harbour and magnificent buildings on the seafront, was worth a visit, and **Altamura**, eight miles south-west of our area, was like a town in an old story-book. Coming from a land that measures time by the extinction of the moa, we were impressed by its thirteenth-century cathedral and by a church even older. But our chief source of wonder and amusement was the Italian people. For the most part we behaved towards them as one does towards tiresome but rather attractive children; for like children they were greedy and emotional, and like children they snivelled one moment and laughed inordinately the next. Their charm, when they showed themselves charming, was child-like too.

Although the majority of us accepted the convention that all Italians had been bitter opponents of **Mussolini**, we remembered now and again—and the men from **Bardia** remembered more often —that every country gets the government it deserves. The kind the Italians had plumped for and remained complacent under for two decades had stood for bullying, boasting, and bad taste. Their vigorous apostasy, true, had a genuine ring, but it seemed not to occur to them that some deficiency in the Italian character might have contributed to their country's

downfall. They had an enviable knack of dissociating themselves from the springs of their own disaster and they were not in the least put out at having been beaten at their own game by every army they had met. Possibly they were conditioned to ignominious defeat as Eskimoes are conditioned to cold and Moujiks to vodka. They shrugged off—and shrugging was something they did rather well—a quarter of a century of disaster and disrepute, and seemed to consider they had done very handsomely by everyone concerned. These were our thoughts at the time, but we might have modified them if we could have foreseen the friendliness of old men and women towards British gunners who had shelled their homes. Courage, kindness, and patience were qualities older than [Mussolini](#).

Anyway, it was heart-warming to find so many Sauls among the prophets. It was quite delightful to see the Wolves of [Tuscany](#) (if that was the name they had gone under in palmier days) trotting about contentedly in British battle dress dyed green—to watch the converted Blackshirt enthusiastically at work on his wall removing a DUCE from a large black VIVA and substituting a CHURCHILL, a ROOSEVELT, or a STALIN.

With this to divert us, together with camp duties and the task of familiarising our system with vast quantities of ‘Purple Death’, the first days of November passed pleasantly by and before long our vehicles started to reach [Bari](#). Two flights docked on the 3rd, one on the 4th and the 5th, and two more on the 6th. On the night of the 6th-7th, while vehicles from Captain Delley's, Captain May's, and Second-Lieutenant Dykes's flights were being unloaded, there were six or seven alerts in the port area, three of which developed into raids, bombs being dropped among shipping and mines sown in the mouth of the harbour. Flares and ack-ack shells filled the sky and our drivers came on deck to enjoy the fun. Aboard the *Lambrook* enthusiasm diminished when a large piece of shrapnel made a hole in a temporary galley and another brought down the ship's barrage balloon. No damage was done to shipping and, except while the raids were actually taking place, the unloading of the vehicles

was carried on beneath a smoke-screen.

By the 10th, though not quite complete—it was not that until 3 December—our unit was ready to function. We drew our secondline holding of ammunition from the new dump at Modugno and stood by for the order to move.

As long as **Hitler** held Rome and **Mussolini** he could claim that the Axis was still firing on all three cylinders. At present he held both. The former had been occupied on 10 September and the latter rescued from the *Carabinieri Reali* a few days afterwards. **Mussolini's** company **Hitler** could hope to enjoy for some months, but Rome—or so it seemed in the autumn of 1943—was another matter.

Naples had fallen to the American Fifth Army on 1 October, and by early November, when the Division started to join the **Eighth Army** on the Adriatic sector, the German line stretched across the **Apennines** from the north bank of the River Sangro, 130 miles north-west of **Bari**, to the mouth of the Garigliano River, thirty-five miles north-west of **Naples**. The plan was for the **Eighth Army** to attack between the mountains and the Adriatic, the New Zealanders' task being to cross the **Sangro**, cut the enemy's line, and advance quickly to threaten communications with Rome from the east.

At 8 a.m. on 12 November, Company headquarters, No. 1 Platoon, and Workshops—the other platoons were to follow—left the **Altamura** area for **Lucera**, eighty miles to the north-west as the crow flies but well over a hundred by road. Beyond Modugno, where we turned north to follow a road running roughly parallel to the coast, the country was all new. Mostly it was planted in trees and criss-crossed by low stone walls and dotted with *trulli*, stone summer-houses with roofs shaped like pudding basins, beehives, or ice-cream cornets. We passed through Cerignola and Orta Nova—the kind of places you see peeping at you from the faded blues and greens of an old tapestry—and came to **Foggia**, twenty miles from the coast. The town had been bombed into prominence some months ago but we had not expected such complete

ruin. Whole floors—great slabs of concrete and steel—lolloped out at us from smashed factories like tongues. **Lucera** was eleven miles away and our area was five miles north-west of it.

On the 13th the 4th and 5th Field Regiments moved up to the front, and with the latter went Captain Gibson and seventeen vehicles from No. 1 Platoon and thirteen from No. 4 Platoon. Our drivers spent the night six miles north-east of the little village of **Furci** with the **Sangro** only twelve miles away. They could hear the guns. On the 14th the New Zealanders, represented by the two field regiments, and the 19th Indian Infantry Brigade (under command)—the rest of the Division was to arrive during the next ten days—took over a section of the line about thirteen miles from the sea.

Soon after two o'clock D Troop of the 5th Field Regiment fired the New Zealand Division's first round of the campaign from the neighbourhood of **Casalanguida**, five miles north-west of **Furci**. Two miles away there was a steep, winding hill, down which, in the fading light, came Captain Gibson's transport, brake-drums squeaking, rain drumming on canopies, and mud and water, the colour of weak cocoa, swishing under mudguards. Shells were landing in the valley below, and one whined over the road and hit the hillside nearby.

The enemy, obviously, was aiming at a narrow, unblown bridge at the foot of the hill, and before crossing it our drivers were warned by provosts to travel fast and at wide intervals. An artillery quad, abandoned and burning, pointed the moral. There were some anxious moments, but all got safely across, and the lorries were dispersed for the night one mile south of **Casalanguida** and about 500 yards from the unblown bridge. There was cover for most of them on a hillside dotted with scrub and oak but some had to be parked in the open. However, it was hoped that the gathering darkness and the grey curtain of rain would hide them from the enemy.

Platoon headquarters moved into a one-storied red house with four or five rooms, the cowshed being requisitioned by the cooks, who set to

work at once. By the time tea was ready a wood fire was roaring in one of the rooms and a row of boots steamed on the stone hearth. The dioxies of hot food, the loping shadows, the dancing flames lighting the drivers' faces—young, eager faces most of them—made a cheerful picture. There were cheerful noises too: the muffled thunder in the great chimney, the clink of spoons, the excited talk.

‘Jerry can't be more than a mile or two away. You could hear those guns going plain as one thing.’

‘The roar when she came over—like a train. Then the explosion right among us. We were tinny all right.’

The old hands affected indifference, or said (truly perhaps, for some of them had been in the field a long time) that they didn't like the look of things, but the newcomers were plainly delighted. Many of them had been bitterly disappointed at not being drafted to a fighting unit with their special friends. They felt better now. Driving the old lorry might not be so tame after all.

The flames died down, voices became sleepy, and in twos and threes, dashing through the wet darkness, the drivers went to their lorries, leaving the red house to Company headquarters and the Italians who owned it. They slept until half past one and then they were woken by mortars, grenades, and bursts of machine-gun fire.

By the unblown bridge Bren guns and spandaus were in angry argument and there was a confusion of tracer fire. Everyone was ordered to stand-to, and with hearts beating fast the drivers felt for weapons and bundled on their clothes. Some went to the trees and others crouched under the lorries. Rain was spilling out of the darkness and sheets of it slapped against the lorries and whisked spitefully beneath them. Soon everyone was wet through.

The action went on for about half an hour and then the Indian guards managed to drive off the patrol that had come down from the hills to blow the bridge. Our drivers, stiff with cold and too tired to talk,

went straight to bed, the newcomers, no doubt, remembering the infantry in the rain and reflecting how pleasant it was, even if a little inglorious, to have a bed to go to.

The next morning the ammunition was dumped and the convoy left for **Altamura** to reload.

On the same day—the 15th—Company headquarters and Work-shops moved from **Lucera** to an area near Larino, a small town twenty-seven miles south-east of **Casalanguida**, and during the next few days the platoons, helped by detachments from other units, cleared the old areas of ammunition, brought troops to the front, and established a reserve dump of 25-pounder ammunition four miles south-west of **Casalanguida**. On the 21st we moved to an area near there and opened an ammunition point.



Back to Base at Maadi
Back to Base at *Maadi*

Pastures at Lucera, Italy



Pastures at Lucera, Italy



Winter in Italy
Winter in Italy



Monte Maiella
Monte Maiella

These trips had been made over vile roads among mountains, the sides of which were covered with scrub oak, all scarlet and gold and orange. Yellow leaves, like largesse, drifted through the autumn air and our wheels ground them to sludge. Every hilltop supported a little village, and always from one or another of these (and at Angelus from all of them) came the sound of bells. Staggering up and down precipitous hillsides, sliding round corkscrew bends, passing everywhere reminders of Christendom's first casualty—with the Nails, the Hammer, the Spear, the Sop of Hyssop faithfully and often horribly reproduced—we drove through a mist of leaves, of bells, of rain—grey and savage sometimes, sometimes gentle and golden like autumn.

On the 25th, leaving No. 1 Platoon and Workshops to follow later, the unit moved to a windy slope about a mile from **Casalanguida**. Here, for the first time in weeks, we were able to give our vehicles more than the minimum attention necessary to keep them going. The bad weather, the late arrival of some of the loadcarriers, the appalling hills, the shifting from area to area—these had placed drivers and transport under a severe strain and we had done well to have only eight vehicles off the road since starting work.

While we were servicing our vehicles and resting—the term is comparative—the battle of the **Sangro** started. On the night of the 27th-28th, under black rainclouds, the **Eighth Army** struck with three divisions. New Zealand infantry, on the left flank of the advance, waded through the icy **Sangro** and by daylight were established firmly on the north bank.

On 3 December, while the 25th Battalion was fighting desperately in the little town of **Orsogna**, which was blocking the entire advance—it was on a ridge eight miles from the starting point—we were told to establish an ammunition dump on the north bank of the **Sangro** so that it would matter less if floods or enemy action destroyed the bridges. Two days earlier we had moved a mile or so north-east to high ground, and now we had a wonderful view of the Sangro Valley and we could see our

bombers at work. On the 3rd, then, forty-three lorries (fourteen from No. 1 Platoon and twenty-nine from a platoon of the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**), preceded by Lieutenant Todd and Second-Lieutenants Langley ⁵ and Boyce, who were to supervise the dumping, set out for the **Sangro** with 25-pounder ammunition, heading for a Bailey bridge ten miles north-west of the area. Later they were followed by a further 117 lorries.

Rain was falling and the river was said to have risen eighteen inches in twenty minutes. It was tumbling and snarling and beyond the bridge it had overflowed its banks, confronting the convoy with a formidable water hazard. Three vehicles crossed under their own power but the rest had to be winched over by a tractor. The water covered the floor-plates and whenever you stopped you could feel your lorry settling under you. The current made steering almost impossible and two vehicles came to grief. One hit a partly submerged bank, driving the fan through the radiator, and another plunged into a dip and had to be abandoned until morning. At one stage a jeep was overturned by the current.

The rain came down in torrents and everyone was soaked. Drivers floundered about waist-deep in water, and a padre, stripped off and looking the picture of muscular Christianity, did a spirited job with ropes. Finally, when all but seven lorries were across, the river became impassable and the plan of returning to the unit area had to be abandoned. Our drivers settled down for the night at the ammunition dump with the guns flashing and barking round them in the wild rain.

With its canopy drawn down, each lorry was as cosy as a lighthouse—as a cottage on the dark heath where Lear wandered mad and lost. Our drivers lay in bed warm and dry reading Auckland Weeklies and Readers' Digests by bedside lamps, a load of tinned sausages and cocoa rumbling inside them.

There was something to be said for a transport unit after all—even the newcomers admitted it.

The first attack on Orsogna ended in partial success only, and so did the second, third, and fourth. While they were being made and afterwards while the Division was engaged in what was officially known as 'offensive defence'—this period lasted until mid-January—the platoons, having completed the Sangro dump by 8 December, were employed solely in replenishing the ammunition point in the unit area from a field maintenance centre near San Salvo. It was only a dozen miles away in a straight line, but we went by a roundabout route and it took us a full day to go there and back.

This was a strange time—over us the weeping skies, under us the mountain roads, round us the ubiquitous mud. Mud was now our element. It sucked at our boots, sometimes pulling them right off; it banked up beside our labouring wheels and mounted to the differentials; it collected in pools and lay in wait for us when we stepped out of the cabs; it was thick on lorry floors and it found its way into our beds. It was so much a condition of life that we seldom thought of ourselves as dirty because we were muddy or as uncomfortable because we were conscious all the time of the feel of mud—mud wet on the handles of ammunition boxes when fingers were crushed by cold as by a vice; mud caked and dry—a woolly and unpleasant feeling—when we were warm after loading. We knew always the taste of mud, cold, mouldy, abrasive; always the look of mud, glaucous, glutinous, froggy; always the weight of mud (we were shaggy with it like old ewes), and always either the chill of mud (trouser-legs being steeped in it as in icy goulash), or the sensation of wearing (sun or primus having dried them) cardboard clothes.

But we knew other things as well—rare, bright mornings when we hurled the ammunition aboard at a mad pace to keep warm; wood-fires leaping and dancing in great hearths; the delicious drowsiness as you thawed out; the surprising friendliness of the *contadini* (the country-folk); evenings when the red wine went round in bucketfuls; birthday parties when two lorries were parked tailboard to tailboard.

On 18 December we moved four or five miles north-west to an area near the little village of **Atessa**. Here we took possession of several acres of the best mud. Cooks and Headquarters' drivers found homes in sheds and buildings but the rest had to live in their lorries—*islands of chilly discomfort in a mud ocean*. **Atessa** itself was a huddle of cold houses—cold and forbidding, that is, from the outside but within wonderfully warm and welcoming. Three houses—*casas* we had learnt to call them—were known as 'The First and Last', 'The Pig and Whistle', and 'The Family and Naval'.

The weather worsened towards Christmas and it was lovely after struggling with icy wheel-chains, after slipping and sliding for miles along greasy roads, after escaping a dozen times from being pushed into the ditch, to draw up beside a fire and take off sopping boots, and with new wine and old songs become progressively merrier until bedtime.

Christmas Eve dawned bleak and cold and in the afternoon it began to rain. We were very busy just then and most of us were out working, but everyone was in high spirits, looking forward to parties that night. Joyfully we flung on the last boxes of 25-pounder and turned home, where a heap of parcels, some private and some Patriotic, awaited distribution.

It came as a blow when we were told that a job impended and that anyone who drank too much could expect trouble. Possibly we ought to have cancelled our parties then and there but this was Christmas Eve. We compromised by saying that we should have a few and see how things went. No job materialised and things went very well.

Darkness came, and tiny pencillings of light, thin as a hair and invisible at ten yards—the old hands saw to that—showed where parties were in progress. Later the singing started.

Nowhere is the laughter louder or the company better than in the 'Family and Naval' (No. 3 Section's house of call) where old Italian Poppa—'That the feast might be more joyous, that the time might pass more

gaily, and the guests be more contented'—has fetched us his best red wine and is now making a speech, the audience applauding loudly whenever he says *Buona fortuna* (Good luck) or *Buon Natale* (Merry Christmas)—the two phrases they understand. Poppa's nut-cracker face is ready to split in half and fat Momma beams, too, and the daughters of the house, the cripple Nina and Alice whose husband is a prisoner of war, smile gently. Nicky, aged 16, has shining eyes for the soldiers.

Tiny scarlet candles burn under a picture of the Nativity and in the stable through the door sheep and great oxen sigh gustily and stamp. Pendulous shadows cast by bunches of onions and raisins nod vague approval as Poppa finishes his speech amid a chorus of *bravos* and *grazies* and then drains his tumbler. H—rises to his feet and says with a perfectly straight face: 'Thanks, Poppa, you silly old —. May your....' What he hopes for his host is indecent and not likely to happen, but Poppa, seeing no malice in any of the faces, only shining happiness and his red wine, breaks down, wrings H—'s hand, sobs ' *Grazie! Grazie! Grazie!*

The room gives a turn and a half like a dog and by the time it has settled the two girls are singing an Italian love song in sweet, husky voices—' *Ma L'Amore No*'. The visitors bawl ' **Maori Battalion**', bawl 'Silent Night'. Poppa's asleep and snoring and the room gets hotter, mistier, noisier, spinning for some, for others rocking gently or floating loose in a gold cloud. Sometimes the tiny buds of light on the red candles bloom like tulips, bloom and multiply—a bank of tulips filling one whole side of the small, drunken room. Sometimes they shrink and shrink until they are swallowed up by the gloom over the cheap fretwork shelf in the corner, and then there is nothing left of those tall tulips but two imprints on the retinas, two echoes of light, two drowning motes, each smaller than a seed.

And next, or an hour later, everyone is outside in the cold and the sea of mud, lost and drunk, with the 'Family and Naval' hidden and the lorries hidden. Old George is down and muddy from head to foot and someone else is hung up on a tent-rope. Drivers stagger round in circles,

roaring: 'Where's number one sub?' 'Where's Neil's lorry?' 'Where's number two?' 'WHERE'S MY BLOODY TRUCK?'

Silence and peace at last, and out of the cold darkness, welcomed only by a few hardened toppers garrulous over demijohns, comes a Happy Christmas, a *Buon Natale*—the fifth since 1939.

It rained on Christmas morning and the rest of the day was dull and cold, but we enjoyed it. We enjoyed the dinner and the Canadian beer and the nuts, figs, and wine bought from regimental funds. On Boxing Day the unit diary was laconic: 'Very cold. Troops recovering from Christmas.' Work started again on the 27th.

December ended in a howling gale and we woke on New Year's morning to find the world white. Fronds and feathers were swirling from a sky dark like slate and beyond the **Sangro** the **Apennines** were blancmanges and cloud-mountains.

Not all the North Islanders had seen snow before—snow falling, anyway—and some of them were tremendously intrigued and excited. The South Islanders, of course, were quite at home in a snow kingdom and their manner was proprietary.

Much damage had been done during the night by the wild weather. Workshops was flooded and tents and bivouacs were down. Many of the roads to the **Sangro** were closed and after breakfast all hands were set to work with shovels. We took jerricans of vino with us and there were snow fights, but we shovelled with a will and soon the road outside our area was open again.

On 2 January we carted 8000 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition from the Istonio railhead, fourteen miles due east of our area, to the dump by the **Sangro**, and from then on we did the same thing every day, travelling by a roundabout route. The roads were crowded and filmed with ice and each trip took from dawn till dusk, but for all that we found time to court death and disaster on home-made toboggans. The snow lay

for a week.

By the 10th we knew that the Division was to be withdrawn for a rest, and five nights later, after dumping our ammunition and removing Divisional signs, we headed north-east towards the coast with other NZASC units. It was a beautiful shining night with the road hard and frosty and a highwayman's moon overhead and the trees like lace—just the night for the Captain to stuff a brace of barkers in his skirted velvet and go riding. Our destination was secret and that gave us a feeling of adventure although we were heading only for a rest area.

We breakfasted on the coast road and then drove towards **Bari** until we reached **San Severo**, sixteen miles north-west of **Foggia**. Here we were joined by No. 1 Platoon, which had been to **Bari** for engines. The day's journey ended by the roadside three miles north by west of **Lucera** and the news flew round that nine vehicles from No. 2 Platoon had stopped at **San Severo** to load grain for **Naples**. When we asked our officers if that was where we were going they put us off. The next morning, however, they told us that we were on our way to join the **Fifth Army** and would be stationed north of **Naples**. The move was still a secret and all towns and villages were out of bounds.

We went south for about fifteen miles and then headed southwest across the **Apennines**, passing a string of places with names as pretty as girls' names— **Ariano Irpino**, Grottaminarda, Avellino. Gone were the barren, treeless stretches we had known round **Foggia** and near the coast; instead a pattern of little fields went up into the hills and mountains, stopping only where the snow started. Here the country was two months nearer summer.

The road was dry and good but we travelled slowly because other New Zealand units were on the move as well. Often we halted in crazy, charming villages that seemed to be struggling not to slip into the valleys below, and while the noses of vehicles pointed up or down at fantastic angles the villagers crowded round trying to sell oranges and apples and bad wine.

We spent the night sixteen miles east-north-east of **Naples**, and **Vesuvius** with its perpetual plume could be seen plainly. The next morning we passed through **Cancello**, whose great railway yards were in ruins, and **Caserta**, famous for its royal palace. We turned north soon afterwards, crossed the **Volturno** twice, and long before lunch were in the new area with the transport dispersed on dry, grassy slopes. We were now twenty-nine miles north of **Naples** and rather more than a mile from the little walled village of **Alife**. **Vesuvius** was hidden from us by mountains and so was another volcano destined to be famous— **Monte Cassino**.

During the next fortnight we enjoyed ourselves. The weather was warm and sunny and we played Rugby football. No. 1 Platoon did best in the inter-platoon matches and we beat the 2nd Ammunition Company 11-nil in the only extra-unit match we had time for. In the evenings, thanks to Americans of the **Fifth Army** who were using **Alife** as a rest area, we went to films and concerts. There was day-leave to **Pompeii** and on the way to it we caught glimpses of **Naples**, which was out of bounds. The little we did see was sad and shocking, reminding us of a stately mansion festering into tenements, of a lovely woman drunk and on the streets. The people who lived there—squalid children, old crones, sluttish beauties, young loafers **Sydney**-flash, miserable old men in the cigarette-butt industry—alternated between whining hopelessness and a sort of gamin gaiety, desperate and ferocious. It was doubtful which was the less pleasing. As in duty bound—starving people are intolerable to men who are getting three square meals a day—we voiced our indignation and disgust, but without inner conviction. Few of us really blamed them for having sunk low, for being so hungry that nothing mattered. We did what we thought we had to in our own way, and children and old people and cripples found us not uncharitable.

Poor starving **Naples**! She had been preyed on by the Germans—they had thought of the delightfully German trick of linking the city sewers to the water mains—and now she was the prey of Italian sharks and tigers. And all the time she was mocked by the smiling beauty of her bay

and by her jewel, **Capri**.

The towns and villages in the surrounding district were only a little better off. When we picnicked near the ruins of **Pompeii** the alternative to being stared at by a hundred yearning eyes was to eat our bread and bully in the back of a vehicle with the canopy drawn down, and it was the same at **Nola**, fifteen miles east-northeast of **Naples**, where we picked up our second-line holding of ammunition.

Alife, tucked away in the country between crumbling walls, was in better case. A crowd of women and children, each with two tins—one for meat and vegetables and another for tea and sweet things—picketed our refuse pits, but they embarrassed and annoyed us only when the meal was so good or so scanty that there was little left for them. That happened seldom. The cooks gave away a good deal and in return the men dug pits and washed up and the women washed and mended. The toddlers repaid us by lisping our Christian names and hanging around the camp.

January ended, and **Alife** and the rest of the free world (as we liked to call it) were flooded by a warmth of optimism, making us forget disappointments on the **Eighth Army** front and in the **Dodecanese**. Everyone, everywhere, seemed to expect great things. The hounds of spring were still snoring in their kennels, but sometimes of a sunny morning—those primrose mornings that blossom in late winter—it was as though one of them had put out a tentative paw, withdrawing it a moment later on finding the world not ready. Spring was what we longed for—spring and a surge forward to Rome, spring and the Second Front, spring and an end to this long war and to our long journey towards Christmas.

During the first week of February we heard that the Division would be in action soon. There was a word spoken, and it was **Cassino**.

¹ The chief appointments on 3 October were: Company HQ, Maj S. A. Sampson, Lt K. L. Richards (posted 2 Sep 43), WO II A. L.

Salmond (appointed 10 Jan 43); No. 1 Platoon, Capt R. C. Gibson, 2 Lt R. W. Langley (posted 12 Feb 43); No. 2 Platoon, Capt R. P. Latimer (posted 2 Jun 43), Lt C. H. Haig (posted 12 Sep 43); No. 3 Platoon, Lt J. D. Todd (posted 1 Dec 42), 2 Lt G. Dykes (posted 14 Feb 43); No. 4 Platoon, Capt K. E. May, Lt A. R. Delley; Workshops, Capt A. G. Morris; Ammunition Platoon, Lt R. K. Davis, 2 Lt H. W. Boyce (posted 13 Feb 43).

The following had left us: Capt W. K. Jones (Ruapehu Draft, 4 Jun 43), Lt T. A. Jarvie (posted to Base Training Depot, 13 Jul 42), Lt R. A. Borgfeldt (wounded 14 Jul 42), Lt J. M. Fitzgerald (posted to Base Training Depot, 5 Sep 43), WO II I. McBeth (Ruapehu Draft).

² **Capt G. Dykes; traveller; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 26 Mar 1915.**

³ **Sgt G. McG. Mowat; clerk; [Wairoa](#); born [Wairoa](#), 16 Dec 1914.**

⁴ **Capt H. W. Boyce; clerk; [Blenheim](#); born [Blenheim](#), 20 Dec 1920.**

⁵ **Capt R. W. Langley; clerk; [Wellington](#); born [Masterton](#), 14 Apr 1921.**

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(2) APOLLYON IN THE PATH

(2) Apollyon in the Path

Unlike El Alamein, which from being nothing but a railway station in the desert became almost overnight nearly the whole world, **Monte Cassino** had enjoyed moderate fame for some centuries before it was given the freedom of every newspaper, every tavern, and every sound wave.

In the fourth century before Christ the Romans founded a colony on the banks of the Vinius (now the Rapido) and called it Cassinum. Though destroyed by Hannibal in 216 BC it grew into a town of luxury villas, and Mark Antony for one had some pleasant nights there.

In the sixth century St. Benedict came to Cassinum, changing the statue of Apollo for the Cross and the pagan temple for a church dedicated to St. Martin. That was the beginning of the Benedictine Order and of **Cassino** monastery.

Times were no better then than now, but with two great saints to watch over it (one the patron saint of bachelors, the other of millers) the monastery could expect great things or at least a fate different from this: to be destroyed by Lombards, sacked and burnt by Saracens, besieged and taken by Normans, smashed by earthquake, pillaged by French soldiers, and at last turned into an observation post by German officers.

Sharing house-room with chalice, altar-cloth, and illuminated missal, the Germans trained their field-glasses on American positions and spoke into their telephones. Catholic gunners volunteered to bombard **Monte Cassino** but for some weeks the Allies vacillated, loath to do irreparable damage to a place so venerable and so sacred.

Fifth Army troops, meanwhile, had landed at **Anzio**, thirty-two miles south of Rome and sixty-two miles west of **Cassino**, biting into the enemy's right flank and straining towards his lines of communication. The plan was to join hands with the rest of the **Fifth Army** and capture

Rome, but success was unlikely as long as the enemy held **Cassino** and **Monte Cassino** (**Monastery Hill**).

Most New Zealanders know Peter McIntyre's fine painting of the scene. Monte Cairo of the almost perfect white cone is out of sight, but you get **Monastery Hill** (with the monastery under smoke), and you get, forward of this and a little to the right of it, **Castle Hill**. The once-white, once-bright town that straggled over the slopes in the foreground is represented by tooth-like stumps, for the painting was done after the bombardment.

This, then, was **Cassino**. Like foul Apollyon it was straddled right across the way.

The Americans had done well. They had captured at heavy cost one key to **Cassino**, Monte Maggiore, but they had failed to make headway against the town or **Monastery Hill** and now they were no longer in shape to continue the battle. Therefore, on 6 February, the **New Zealand Corps**—a strong force that had been formed recently and which included the 4th Indian Division, British, Indian, and American artillery units, and some American armour—began to take over their sector.

A few days earlier Lieutenant Delley and one ammunition platoon had opened an ammunition point thirteen miles south-east of **Cassino** on the famous Route 6, highway to **Cassino** and Rome. A plan to establish a dump only four miles from **Cassino** had been abandoned and ammunition intended for this was diverted first to the point and later, when that was choked, to our unit area. On 7 February No. 1 Platoon started to establish a Corps dump a few miles from the point, but late that night was ordered to stop, the new plan being to form an artillery dump (with the code name of **SPADGER**) in the 6th Brigade's area. This was on Route 6 and about six miles south-west of **Cassino**. The next day we moved to an area nine or ten miles west by south of **Alife** so as to be near the main road. We called it the Vairano area, borrowing the name from the nearest village. During the next four days the transport was employed in building up Spadger dump with ammunition brought from

Capua (eighteen miles north of **Naples** on Route 6) and from **Nola**, and in replenishing the point. At this time the artillery was shelling **Cassino** and targets south of it.

Our Indian summer was over now and the weather was horrible and the new areas seas of mud. The roads were in a bad state, too, and we were allowed to use them only at times laid down by Fifth Army Movement Control, convoys of from twenty to twenty-five vehicles being released at intervals of a quarter of an hour. This was irksome but it prevented accidents and saved time in the end.

From 12 February on we were able to draw ammunition from the Teano railhead, some six miles south-east of the Vairano area, and that halved our work by eliminating the long trip to **Capua** and the much longer one to **Nola**. There was no way of halving the rain or of doubling the size of our muddy and congested areas—they were small because a great mass of transport had to be parked close to Route 6—and there was no way of dealing with contradictory orders except by obeying them. They were contradictory, or seemed so, because the work of one insignificant transport unit had to be dovetailed with a large and ever-changing plan; but sometimes we forgot that. And remember, please, it was raining.

No matter. When the **New Zealand Corps** went into action against **Cassino** it would have all the ammunition it needed.

February the 15th was a fine day. The sky was egg-shell blue and against it the summit of Monte Cairo stood out like a splash of whitewash. The monastery, 4000 feet lower but still seeming to be perched among the clouds instead of on its dun-coloured ridge, could be seen clearly from the hills behind the ammunition point. Here a group of our drivers was watching with field-glasses.

The first flight of Fortresses wheeled in the sky—very slowly it seemed—and dropped their bombs. The watchers saw great white mushrooms sprout on and around the monastery and more than a

minute later they heard a sound—a hollow rumble as of thousands of tons of gravel dropping into a steel barge. Waves of heavy and medium bombers came over and the monastery was destroyed. Only its great walls were left standing.

Two nights later, while Indian troops fought in the mountains northwest of **Cassino**, Maori infantry crossed the Rapido south of it and advanced to the railway station. This was the **New Zealand Corps'** first direct assault on the **Fifth Army** front, and the plan was to take **Cassino** and **Monastery Hill** so that American and New Zealand armour could enter the **Liri Valley**, one of the gateways to Rome. All night long our artillery fired in support of the attack and by eight in the morning 17,000 rounds of 25-pounder had been cleared from the ammunition point in seventeen hours. Throughout the day the heaviest demand was for smoke shells and these were responsible for the white mist that clung to the slopes of **Monte Cassino**, blinding observation posts.

The Maoris fought in the railway station until four in the afternoon and then German tanks appeared. Our own tanks, in spite of heroic efforts by the engineers, had been unable to come forward because of demolitions and bomb craters, and the Maoris had no choice but to withdraw across the river. The Indians, after fighting supremely well, had failed, too.

Apollyon was still straddled across the way and the position of the Allies at **Anzio** was serious.

A little grimly, and with no further thoughts of an immediate dash to Rome, we settled down to hard, slogging routine. On 19 February No. 1 Platoon moved to an area next to the ammunition point, which from then on it was responsible for replenishing, each lorry fetching two loads from the unit area every day. The rest of the transport worked between the unit area and Teano railhead.

Daily we cleared 105 loads from Teano and by the end of the month the position was very sound. Besides having met the hour-to-hour

requirements of the entire Corps—with the help, of course, of the 2nd Ammunition Company and of transport attached to us—we had accumulated at the ammunition point stocks equal to our entire second-line holding.

But it was dull work and cold work. We were seldom warm and comfortable except when we were crouched over primuses or tiny charcoal braziers in the backs of our lorries with the canopy raised just enough to prevent us from being suffocated. Dry boots were the most important things in our lives—dry weather we had ceased to expect.

For some of us the monotony was broken during the second week of March by the establishment of a forward reserve dump on Route 6 about seven miles from **Cassino**. The nearest village was called **San Pietro** and the whole area was under enemy observation.

The first convoy—fifty lorries loaded with 25-pounder—went forward after dark on the 9th, the drivers taking with them enough green branches to camouflage their loads. Everything went smoothly for two nights but on the third there was a bright moon and some shelling. No ammunition was brought up on the fourth night and the transport was engaged in shifting some that was already there, neighbouring units having complained that it was too close to them. A night seldom passed without shells landing near the dump, and the party in charge of it—a detachment from No. 4 Platoon under Captain May—used to retire to the ammunition point at sunset and stay there until dawn.

On the night of the 12th-13th the weather changed. A high wind got up, scattering rain clouds, levelling tents, and playing such puckish tricks as rolling an empty hogshead all the way from Workshops to Headquarters. The morning dawned clear and sunny and the next day was even better.

The 15th was another good day, and at half past eight the bombers came over, heading for **Cassino**. They came over in tight formation, wave after wave—Fortresses, Liberators, Mitchells, Marauders. Our eyes

ached from counting them. 'Look! More Forts! Five-six-seven....' The sky sang with engines and every quarter of an hour or so we heard the long mutter—the long, collapsing mutter—of bombs. And the singing and the applause—thunder of feet and voices, far off, from some appalling stadium—went on for four hours. During that time more than 500 heavy and medium bombers of the American strategic and tactical air forces dropped over a thousand tons of bombs in an area of less than a square mile, and **Cassino**, which at dawn had been just another badly-battered town, was reduced to rubble. All artificial landmarks—Continental Hotel, Hotel des Roses, Botanical Gardens, Baron's Palace—disappeared. They lived on as names because one heap of masonry had to be distinguished from another but they weren't there any longer. There was nothing but stones and splintered wood and huge craters and rubbish.

This time the New Zealanders were to attack the town from the north, and the 5th Indian Brigade was to move in behind them and take **Monastery Hill**.

At noon, advancing behind a creeping barrage, the 6th Brigade entered the town. At first the opposition was slight, but later the Germans resisted strongly. They were paratroopers, some of the best soldiers in the world.

By evening we had **Castle Hill** and most of the town. Then it rained.

We lay in our lorries in our safe areas and it came down in bucketfuls. It thundered on canopies, rushed in rivulets between stacks of 25-pounder, filled petrol tins cut in half for wash-basins. It roared and gurgled and it tinkled like cracked bells, and we lay in our beds cursing it. We hoped and prayed that it would make only a little difference; but it made all the difference.

Instead of moonlight there was darkness and roaring confusion in **Cassino**. The Germans, who knew the town inside out, asked nothing better than this, but our men were blinded and bewildered. Engineers, struggling to bridge craters fifty to seventy feet wide to clear a path for

the tanks, found their bulldozers almost useless against rubble stiff like wet concrete.

At dawn the enemy still held parts of **Cassino**, and although the Gurkha Rifles were on Hangman's Hill, a point below the Monastery, they were not strong enough to advance. Surprise had been lost for good and with it the chance of making a quick breakthrough with armour. Now Cassino would have to be cleared house by house.

The fighting that followed was as bitter as any in the whole war. By day the battle swayed backwards and forwards under a dark pall, by night under a waning moon. Our artillery was in action all the time, shelling gun positions and strongpoints and laying smoke-screens on **Monastery Hill**. The demand for ammunition was very heavy.

While our men fought in **Cassino**, British and Indian troops repelled counter-attacks in the surrounding heights, and the **Gurkhas**, isolated now on Hangman's Hill, were supplied by parachute. From the ammunition point and from No. 1 Platoon's area we watched American Warhawks as they flew over with ammunition, water, and food. After dark we would count the gun-flashes and estimate how busy we should be the next day.

'Goin' well tonight,' we would say. 'Might stroll up tomorrow—have a couple of quickies at the Continental.'

The Continental was now as famous as the Ritz.

Vesuvius had erupted the day before and over it hung a mass of smoke, coiled and motionless and for all the world like an enormous pearl-grey periwig. **Monastery Hill**, as usual, was dotted with white puffs and hazy with the smoke of battle, but at the ammunition point all was peace under the warm, golden sunshine. Washing fluttered from clothes-lines strung between stacks of ammunition, and our drivers were taking their ease after lunch. Almost the only movement in the area was round the salvage dump, backed against which were half a dozen three-ton lorries from the 18th Tank Transporter Company. The great sprawling

pile of empty ammunition boxes and used shell cases should have been growing smaller daily—for our drivers were supposed never to go to Vairano or the railhead with empty lorries—but in practice the opposite was happening, the task of carting salvage, especially on cold, wet days when the stuff was awkward to handle, being one that nobody liked and some avoided, either apologetically by carting a token load or brazenly by carting no load at all.

March the 19th, however, was warm and sunny and the boxes were flying into the lorries with a brisk clatter.

Suddenly there was a quick, rustling sound and the whole area was fanned by a hot breath. Looking up from their books, their washing, their afternoon naps, our drivers saw that the salvage dump was a sheet of bright yellow flame. Their thoughts flew at once to the thousands of little blue and white bags of cordite—rejected or unused propellants—that were a feature of all our salvage dumps. Only cordite would burn as hotly and swiftly as that without exploding. Two lorries were already doomed, but others were moving off with a shriek of gears. One was unattended and just starting to burn, so Henry Blomfield ¹ drove it to safety, helped to put out the flames, and went straight back to the fire.

With the first hot gust nearly everyone had made an instinctive movement towards the hills—there were thousands of pounds of high explosives in the area—but after a moment of panic non-commissioned officers and drivers rallied under Lieutenant Delley and formed human chains to clear crates of 75-millimetre ammunition from stacks near the outbreak. In the salvage dump there were many rejected 25-pounder shells—the tendency, of course, had been to load empty boxes rather than boxes with something in them—and one after another these exploded, scattering burning fragments over a wide area.

The fire had started at half past twelve, and at one o'clock Lieutenant Delley and his volunteers were joined by two teams from an American fire-fighting unit stationed at Vairano. There was now every chance of confining the fire to the salvage dump and half an hour later

success seemed certain.

Then an explosion threw a burning fragment on to a stack of 75-millimetre ammunition and flames spread from crate to crate. A fire-engine was rushed to the spot, and Henry Blomfield, seizing the hose, stood within a few yards of the stack and played water on it. He was protected only by a breastwork of crated ammunition. When the flames were almost under control the water supply began to fail. It shrank from a jet to a trickle and there was nothing more to be done. The fire flared up, exploding shells and cartridges and setting alight to neighbouring stacks. From these it spread to some stacks of 105-millimetre ammunition, also wooden-crated.

By now nearly everyone had taken cover except the American firemen, Lieutenant Delley, Sergeant Bev Hendrey, Arthur Howejohns,² Henry Blomfield, and 'Brinny' Vedder.³ From the first they had been moving vehicles to safety, fighting the main outbreak at close quarters, and extinguishing many lesser fires. As long as there was work for them to do they did it, undeterred by the fate of three American firemen—two were killed and one badly wounded—and indifferent to whizzing shrapnel and showers of ammunition boxes.⁴

The rest had been ordered to safety and they watched entranced from the shelter of ditches, stone walls, and tree trunks, and from the hills at the back of the area. Because of these, and because the only track to the main road went past the salvage dump, it had not been possible to move all the lorries to safety and some of them were taking bad knocks from shell cases and lumps of shrapnel.

Other units had fared worse or better but all were now out of danger. A platoon from the 1st **Petrol Company** had got clean away from an area on the far side of the main road, which was now being swept by shrapnel, and elements of the 2nd Ammunition Company, with two men hurt, had fled from an area right by the dump, leaving four tents to the flames, some ammunition, but no transport. Two men from the 18th Tank Transporter Company had been burnt in the first minute, one of

them badly.

Behind the ammunition point there was a gentle slope, and here, hedged in by the hills and by a deep gully that separated them from the fire, No. 1 Platoon's domestic vehicles were parked. Lumps of metal had been landing in the gully for some time and now the fire began to creep towards it. Drivers who were sheltering there shot into the open like rabbits and made a dash for the hills. Then the flames leapt the gully, devouring tents and bivouacs on both sides of it and setting fire to a lorry that was under repair and immobile. The cooks' lorry was saved by 'Brinny' Vedder, who drove it far up the slope.

There was now more noise than any of our drivers had ever heard in battle. Armour-piercing shells, with a woof-woof-woof-woof, were trundling through the smoke and landing with a dull thud in fields and on hillsides a quarter to three-quarters of a mile away, most of them passing right over the transport and the heads of our cowering drivers. Jagged lumps of metal lopped branches from trees and smaller lumps hummed wickedly like spent bullets, while ammunition boxes and shell cases described great arcs in the sky or rose vertically to nose-dive into the flames. As a background to the larger effects burning small-arms ammunition crackled all the while. A great column of smoke, leaning over drunkenly at the top, had risen from the heart of the fire and could be seen for miles, and above it, slowly expanding, there was a smoke ring through which you could have driven twelve lorries in a line. At a lower level smoke covered the whole area, making a murky twilight in which flames shone luridly. Here and there this twilight was daubed with blotches of red, orange, and violet from coloured smoke shells. The earth shook; the air trembled; the atmosphere was thin and sour.

Heads popped up and down as explosion followed explosion. There was so much to watch, and through the smoke it was still possible to catch glimpses of the Americans at their heroic task. The Brigadier ⁵ and Major Sampson arrived and proceeded to stroll round the area, the former missing decapitation by inches when a square something slammed past his head.

Time wore on and our drivers spoke longingly of a cup of tea. Those whose lorries were sheltered started to boil up, and others, with a contempt for death and wounds that was pardonable only under the circumstances, dashed into the danger zone to collect primuses, tea, milk, sugar. Jerseys and overcoats were in demand also, for there was no longer any warmth in the sun and many of us were wearing nothing except shorts and singlets.

By five the noise had abated and it seemed probable that the worst was over. By a quarter to six all but a few badly scared drivers were standing by their lorries and inspecting torn canopies and dented mudguards, picking up hot splinters to see if they were hot, and waiting while the billies boiled. Ever and again they ducked as the last shells exploded in the burning stacks.

By six all danger was past. It was now possible to get some idea of the damage. ⁶ It was far smaller than anyone would have dared to predict while the fire was at its height but even so the ammunition point presented a desolate appearance. A black mess in which embers glowed redly was spread over hundreds of square yards, and beyond this the ground was littered with shell cases, ammunition boxes, and bits of metal. Where the salvage dump had been there was a pile of hot rubbish and the smoking skeletons of two lorries. Tree trunks were burnt and blackened and still ringed with little circles of yellow flame, and here and there bits of canvas and of woollen underclothing smoked and glowed with the unpleasant persistence of burning string. In Headquarters' area the small, splintered corpses of eight bottles of the best Canadian beer had been laid out in a pathetic row.

To shut out this sad scene and the smell of burning, our drivers closed the backs of the lorries before settling down to supper and the task of conducting the preliminary enquiry and making a rough apportionment of praise and blame. It was agreed that the American firemen had done splendidly and that Henry Blomfield and the others had behaved with outstanding courage. It was agreed—for tolerance was

in the air—that it would be proper to overlook the slight impropriety of their conduct in behaving in an outstanding manner when most people had thought it wiser to live privately and in retirement for a period. It was agreed that the Brigadier had narrowly escaped decapitation by a 4.5 ammunition box and that he had shown remarkable composure. It was agreed that the fire had been started by a cigarette butt, by Italian saboteurs, by friction; and it was agreed, vaguely and by implication (for the proposition was hard to frame) that it was to the credit of the company as a whole and to No. 1 Platoon in particular that ammunition should have exploded at the ammunition point rather than petrol at the petrol point or M&V at the supply point.

Everyone was cheerful and talkative. Everyone consumed rather more supper than he could manage comfortably (for the administrative sergeant had been truly generous with the rations) and then went happily to sleep. It had been a tiring day and a memorable one.

The ammunition point was open again by eight the next morning and later in the day a new salvage dump was formed four miles up the road.

By now the railhead had reached **Mignano**, which was two and a half miles closer to the front than the ammunition point and over ten miles in advance of the unit area at Vairano—an unprecedented and highly undesirable situation. Wet weather had prevented us from moving earlier, but on the day after the fire No. 2 Platoon was able to occupy an area near the ammunition point, which it took over from No. 1 Platoon on the 25th, and on the 26th the rest of the unit moved to an area two and a half miles in advance of the point. The forward ammunition point at **San Pietro** had been handed over to the Artillery two days before.

Our new area, flat near the road and terraced where it sloped up into the hills, was a pleasant place, and there was room for dispersal. We were glad of this because the rear areas had lately been coming in for some shelling. The Luftwaffe seldom bothered us now and when it did it was chased all over the sky by ack-ack gunners. Nearly every American

lorry mounted a .5-inch machine gun.

Smoke over **Vesuvius** and smoke over **Cassino**; but nature had shot her bolt and so had the New Zealanders. On 23 March the **New Zealand Corps** had been ordered to abandon the offensive for the time being and reorganise its line so that what had been gained could be held—a firm bridgehead across the Rapido, nine-tenths of the town, and **Castle Hill**.

After that we were not busy, the chief demand being for smoke shells and smoke canisters.

We had time to play football, to welcome back the first group of 'Ruapehus'—seventeen other ranks—and to climb the mountains at the back of our area and note how the white puffs blossomed on the slopes of **Monastery Hill**, the flanks of Apollyon. The 'widow-makers'—8-inch American guns—slammed their great shells through the blue sky, and ringing circles of sound, hoop upon brassy hoop, expanded and hit the mountains, smashing to pieces. Below us, on our improvised range, rifles snapped cheekily, and from the playing fields beside Route 6 a sound of cheering came to us on the stiff breeze.

And the air in the mountains was like iced soda-water and in the valleys the green leaves uncurled and there was no more winter.

¹ L-Cpl H. C. Blomfield, m.i.d.; truck driver; **Auckland**; born NZ, 21 Mar 1917; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

² Dvr A. J. Howejohns; taxi driver; born Cardrona, Central Otago, 15 Jun 1916; died on active service, 10 May 1944.

³ L-Cpl A. A. R. Vedder; boot repairer; **Thames**; born **Thames**, 12 Dec 1909.

⁴ All were commended in a routine order for their gallantry.

5 Col Crump had been promoted in September 1943.

6 Two drivers were also wounded.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(3) AND SO TO ROME

(3) And So To Rome

The walled town of **Isernia** lies about twenty miles east-northeast of **Cassino**. It clings to the side of a steep hill, and in front of it the road divides into two white twists that sinuously embrace its old walls and meet together at the top. It is just possible to drive a jeep or a small truck through the stone archway at the bottom of the interminable main street, but only at the risk of brushing pots and pans from the open-fronted shops of the copper-smiths and of overturning trays of spring onions, small crucifixes, and coloured postcards—views of **Isernia** and of **Monte Cassino**; pictures of the Sacred Heart, of Bonzo, and of Felix: fat dog and thin cat, pale forerunners of Mickey and Minnie Mouse and older than most of the New Zealanders in **Italy**.

When we saw it the upper part of the town looked as though some careless giant had come strolling down the **Apennines** in his seven-league boots, placing a casual toe on **Isernia's** hilltop. This was because American pilots had paid a visit to a neighbouring bridge.

Much of **Isernia**, though, was only chipped, and this part was crowded beyond belief, all the squawking gesticulating life from the bombed part having been squeezed into it. Even before the disaster space must have been at a premium; for the alleys were of the narrowest, the courts and squares were minute, and there was barely room for another knick-knack in the dusty painted churches or another bulging plaster cherub in the tiny theatre. But it was very much alive, this **Isernia**, and though built only for foot traffic and hoof traffic, very much aware of itself as a town. In a hundred different ways it protested its patronage of the arts, the trades, the humanities, the vices. Possibly a miniature university was tucked away in one of its small courts.

About three miles to the south-west, sitting like a poor relation on another hilltop, was the little village of San Agapito. Huddled above cobblestones, the tall houses were so old that they seemed to have grown out of the hill like teeth—grey molars and crumbling bicuspid in a green gum—and the people were so miserably poor that all their best

rooms, the ground-floor ones, were given over to the precious sheep, pigs, goats, and donkeys. To light them after dark many families had only the dancing open fire and tiny twists of wick in saucers of oil. The furniture was of rough, unpainted wood and more often than not fowls roosted above cupboards and in corners. For decoration there were cheap oleographs, telling with a wealth of haloes and thorns, of gold and madonna blue and vermilion, the story of the Manger and the Cross. At mealtimes the *pasta asciutta* was slapped on the bare board without benefit of plate or tablecloth. It was spread out like pastry, smeared with a tomato dressing, and sprinkled with tiny fragments of meat. Then, each from his or her different angle of approach, the members of the family forked their way steadily towards the centre, so that the big pancake became consecutively a ragged map of **Australia**, a map of **Crete**, a map of **Malta**, and finally vanished altogether.

The village was too insignificant to own an important bridge so not many people had been killed there—only a few men whom the Germans had taken away and shot.

Before daylight the men, women, and children of San Agapito, driving the beasts in front of them, went down by the winding, rocky lane to the orchards, potato fields, and vineyards. Some of the younger women had the downy, velvety look of a dark rose and most of them wore the traditional peasant dress, thick, pleated petticoat and bright bodice, but the old ones wore rusty black. All wore boots, mostly army boots, and all, even the ugly and old, who formed the majority (for youth flies early in San Agapito and beauty becomes a leather mask), carried themselves like queens. The children, with hardly an exception, were gay and pretty.

Spring had come to the valley, and the cherry trees were in blossom and the grass under the trees was deep green and already taller than the spring flowers. Water chuckled in the small streams and was carried through the fields by a system of channels. In the early morning birds swept through the new green leaves like bullets, scattering a spray of

dew, and New Zealand lorries, going almost as fast as the birds, rushed along the white road to the ration point, raising a spray of dust.

Our platoon areas were on either side of the road, and these, as we had seen at once, had everything an area should have: green grass, trees in blossom, a stream, and—conveniently placed for relaxation and commerce—a town. True this was likely to be tyrannised over by an English Town Major or by a diligent Provost Marshal who would delight in tearing around in his jeep and interfering with the pleasures of New Zealanders, but there were villages and hamlets in the neighbourhood and on these the hand of AMGOT,¹ with its itch for controlling the sale of liquor and plastering up out-of-bounds notices, would rest but lightly. The hilltop village of San Agapito, for instance, was almost jeep-proof.

The New Zealand Corps had been disbanded on 26 March, and by 13 April the last New Zealand unit had been withdrawn from the **Cassino** sector. The Division, now under the command of 10th British Corps, was to assist British and Polish troops in bringing pressure against the enemy in the mountainous central sector north-east of **Cassino**. Our unit had moved to the **Isernia** area on 7 and 8 April.

During our first fortnight there we had little time for exploring the neighbourhood. Having dumped their ammunition at **Mignano**, the transport platoons had to make a three-day trip to a base ordnance depot at Bitonto, near **Bari**, to replace it. This took them into the clouds on the **Apennines**—eagle country where patches of snow lay like sleeping polar bears—and put them down on the familiar plains of **Foggia**. Two days after they got back Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons, and a detachment from No. 1 Platoon, working over three days and nights, took a paratroop brigade into the line on the **Monte Croce** sector (**Monte Croce** being fifteen miles southwest of **Isernia**) and brought out the 6th Brigade. Driving at night along winding mountain roads, the new drivers (it was about now that the old hands stopped calling them new) showed how little they had to learn.

When the 6th Brigade was relieved, the 5th Brigade took over the

Terelle sector, near Monte Cairo. This was supplied from the Brighton dump, twelve miles west by south of **Isernia**, and from the Hove dump, seven or eight miles nearer the front line, the two being connected by the **Inferno Track**, a driver's nightmare of corkscrew bends, chasms, dizzy drops, darkness, and danger. Brighton dump was supplied from the ammunition point (now four miles south-west of the unit area) by No. 3 Platoon and a detachment from No. 1 Platoon, and from 28 April onwards NZASC convoys assembled nightly to brave the **Inferno Track** with ammunition, petrol, and rations.

All went well until 13 May when the Hove dump was destroyed. A shell scored a direct hit on an Artillery cookhouse and later in the day others set alight grass and scrub, the smoke showing the enemy where to aim. The dump was in a deep gully and shortly before 4 p.m. shells started to pour into it.

‘After that it was lovely,’ said Lance-Corporal Bill Frazier, ² one of the four men from our unit in charge of the ammunition section of the dump. ‘Everything started to burn—tents, bivouacs, transport, and the camouflage nets covering the ammunition stacks. Until then an Artillery officer and an other rank had been doing a nice job driving burning jeeps away from the ammunition, but now it was hopeless. Both men were wounded—the other rank badly.

‘At about a quarter to six the bastards scored a direct hit on the stack of 75-millimetre ammunition just about opposite our dugout and the wooden crates started to burn. Already shells had carried away two bivvies we had rigged up alongside our dugout, so this was the finish as far as our party was concerned. We made a dash for it and got safely to a deep ravine some distance from the dump. Meanwhile the old Jerry had scored a direct hit on the petrol section and now this was going up—between two and three thousand gallons of it.

‘We didn't want to hang around, so we made our way to a point on the **Inferno Track** where we met some machine-gunners who gave us a cup of tea and a bite to eat and some smokes. None of us had anything

except what we stood up in but I was getting used to this. I lost everything when the ammunition went up on Route 6.'

That was the end of the Hove dump. From then on the Brighton dump was the terminus for all supply convoys.

Remote from blazing dumps, shut out from the sound of guns, and with plenty of time for play, we enjoyed ourselves in our leafy valley.

They started, those golden days, with a kind of imagined click and a little whisper of wind, as though somewhere in the sky—above Carpinone perhaps—a small door had opened, not wide but just a crack. At once, with a drowsy throatiness that told of sleep-ruffled feathers and tiny yawning beaks, the first bird-calls sounded, coinciding, often, with the final despairing echoes of 'Lili Marlene' sung positively for the last time by the last returning revellers. Then the door opened wider, silently and inch by inch, and the stars paled and went out and all the birds tried over their morning songs. There was a grey moment and a green moment, and golden fingers of light rested on top of the cherry trees, and then, with a great unrolling of yellow carpets down all the western hillsides, the sun came. The birds went mad and swept through the drenched branches in clouds, and the cooks woke. They came out of their musty tents, the ones whose turn it was for early duty, and lurched into the sunshine, scratching their tousled heads and glancing grumpily at the burners. As soon as the burners were alight their hissing roar drowned everything—the bird songs and the strangled snores of the revellers.

In ones and twos the drivers who were going to **Naples** on day-leave climbed from the backs of their lorries and walked through the wet grass to the cookhouses for early breakfast, rattling their dixies and hoping it would be spam and beans and not (for the third time running) soya links. The leave lorry, its shadow on the sunlit grass a huge rhomboid, a huge square, a long spike, bumped over to Headquarters pursued by angry shouts from drivers who imagined they were being left behind. Not all who were having early breakfast were for **Naples**; some were for

Campobasso and to them time was important. They gulped their soya links, shouldered their bulging haversacks, and slipped quietly along the hedge, casting sly glances at the 15-cwt. bugs in which the officers and sergeants were still snoring. They had no leave passes.

The lorry left for **Naples**, and from the tops of all the mountains the white mists were drawn up into Heaven like the figures in the **Ascension**, leaving the whole sky one stretch of blue. One after another, with a beating of shell cases and iron pipes, with a winding of sirens, the cooks called their platoons to breakfast, the drivers who responded coming with clusters of dixies and enamel mugs in both hands. We liked to lie late even in spring but we also liked breakfast, so we took it in turns to get up.

The cherry trees were dry now and the day fairly launched. Under a fire of raillery—‘Four of our mosquitoes failed to return.’ and ‘How many d’you reckon you’ll bring down today, Digs?’—the Mosquito Men shouldered their pickaxes, shovels, spray-guns, and rubber boots, adjusted the harness of their home-made flamethrowers, and set out for the creek. Presently a column of black smoke rising above the willow trees showed where they were at work. Ever since 1 May—the start of the mosquito season—they had been grubbing up boulders in the creek so as to ensure a free flow of water, burning bushes and undergrowth on its banks, and spraying ponds and puddles with a mixture of petrol and dieselene and houses and farm buildings with liquid insecticide. Using the flame-throwers was good fun but the best job of all was spraying the houses—it was also the most rewarding. At first the villagers and farm-people had been appalled by the sight of parties of soldiers advancing on them with spray-guns in their hands and flame-throwers on their backs. Old women, with tears streaming down their leathery cheeks, had called on the Holy Mother of God to protect them, and the men had gabbled and gesticulated, protesting their innocence, their poverty, their despair. There was not, there never had been, there never would be, one mosquito in the neighbourhood. (‘No *zanzari!* *Niente—niente zanzari!*’) Kindly but firmly, and with just a touch of that smugness inseparable from entering

houses in the King's name, our drivers had done their duty—and lo, no beasts had sickened, no deadly poison had settled on the raisins and the Indian corn hanging in kitchen and bedroom. And then what a change! Now a visit from the Mosquito Men was like a visit from the painters and decorators—it increased the consequence of a household. Under these circumstances it was quite proper for our drivers to accept wine and eggs, make professional appointments, and allow themselves certain liberties.

The sun mounted higher and the circles of dark shade contracted about the tree trunks. Hell but she was a snorter! In the backs of some of the lorries poker and pontoon schools were in full swing and the sweat poured off the gamblers and ran down their chests in streams. Hell but she was dry work! 'What about playing my hand, "Grump", while I fix the billy?' And the driver-mechanics were saying, putting down screw-drivers and feeler-gauges and wiping their oily hands on their shorts and feeling for tobacco tins: 'Yes, Dig—what about doing the right thing? What about the old [Benghazi](#)?' The column of smoke over the willows had sunk to a grey haze, showing where the Mosquito Men were stretched out on the grass.

In hot bivouacs, in the backs of lorries tightly shut to keep out the sun, the revellers woke one after another, bathed in sweat. They stirred feverishly in their tumbled blankets, tore aside their mosquito nets (if they had bothered to use them) and said out loud: 'Off her. Definitely off her. Learnt me lesson.' With uncertain fingers they fumbled for the billy, the water can, the precious primus.

Standing outside Headquarters' orderly room, the defaulters—the ten o'clock men—were feeling the heat, too. Through some mistake (which they couldn't help feeling redounded to the discredit of Company Sergeant-Major Arthur Salmond ³) they had been ordered to parade in battle dress. 'Ah well,' they said. "'Gibby" won't rock it in. We must be just about his first cases.' ('Gibby', of course, was Captain, now Major, Gibson. The command of the company had passed to him on 17 April when Major Sampson had left us to return to New Zealand.) ⁴

But it wasn't really hot. Not hot unless you were bent over an ammunition box in the back of a stuffy lorry trying to figure out whether old 'Baldy' was sitting pat on a swinger. Not hot unless you were swollen with stale vino or wearing battle dress. Down in the bathing pool by Workshops' area—we had made it by damming the creek—no one was too hot. Here we splashed and swam, losing the last vestige of our winter pallor.

The sun was almost overhead now and it was lunch-time. The gongs sounded and the cooks dished out tinned salmon, chopped onion, and two slices of bread to each driver. There was also margarine, marmalade, and cheese.

'Three lorries to pick up 3-inch mortar from amm. point,' said Jock. 'Three of yours can go, "Goldie", "Parky" hasn't been out this week.'

'Don't scone, Jock,' said 'Goldie'. 'Whatever you do, don't do the scone.'

The afternoon passed slowly and time itself seemed to be resting. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a ragged thunder cloud—blue-black like a Gillette razor-blade—sailed over [Isernia](#), the skirts of its great shadow just brushing No. 2 Platoon's area.

'Seeing she's three o'clock I thought I'd bring the old mug along.'

'One load of 25-pounder and two of Mark VIIIIZ for amm. point.'

'Don't do your bundle, Jock.'

'Goin' up the hill tonight?'

Again the gongs. There was roast beef, tinned peas, tinned potatoes, and for pudding doughnuts and treacle. For dessert a mepacrine tablet.

It was cooler after tea and footballs crashed through the branches and the teams swayed backwards and forwards on the improvised playing

fields. In No. 1 Platoon's area the game was Association football without rules, the players being at liberty to come and go just as they pleased. Seldom were the sides even approximately equal.

Not all the noise, and the area was echoing with shouts and laughter, was made by the footballers. It was shower time, and George Laverick, his old felt hat on the back of his head, was standing beside No. 1 Platoon's water cart and rhythmically pumping hot water over a dozen glistening bodies, or over as many as could push their way under the single perforated jam tin that did duty as a sprinkler. Ever and again George would remove his pipe and call out in his deep, gruff voice: 'Showers on NOW! Any more for SHOWERS?'

And the shadows came together like lovers, and the sun was hidden by the trees after being tangled for one moment like a puzzle of gold wire in their topmost branches. The football ended and it was time for everyone to change into long trousers, roll down his sleeves, and smear face and hands with mosquito repellent. The footballers, flushed and sweaty, ran over to the water cart, undressing as they went and shouting to George to keep on pumping.

The mountains were jagged against the sky, and form and colour faded from the foothills, and the blue twilight came. For a wonden there were no films or **ENSA** shows to go to, but there were other ways of spending the evening. Already groups of drivers (and among them, no doubt, were some who had learnt their lesson as recently as that morning) were sitting or reclining on the soft grass like the guests in the *Rubaiyat*, wine glasses beside them and great jars cradled in wicker baskets. For an hour past, dressed in their 'Groppi mokka', others had been leaving for **Isernia** or for neighbouring villages. The four drivers who went always to San Agapito had just left. They had a tidy walk in front of them, and long before they reached the bottom of the hill the moon and the stars were shining, and the fireflies, borne on a current of warm air as on water, were swimming between the hedges and zigzagging from side to side with quick, darting movements like fish. The air was full of the sweetness of warm grass and honeysuckle and

ripening fruit, and from cottages beside the lane children came running, begging *cioccolatta* and *dolci*, and getting them because of the moonlight and the fireflies and the smell of honeysuckle. It was a perfect night, peaceful and yet exciting.

From Workshops' area came the first song of the evening, 'Lili Marlene' rendered by the Salome Gang: Bill M— (guitar), Bill S— (guitar and songs), Joe H—, 'Snow' T—, and Dick C— (general singing).

Below the bathing pool the fishermen paced beside the creek, smoking their battered pipes in slow content and from time to time casting a contemplative Mills bomb into the shining water.

George, who had appointed himself ARP warden (he knew more about bombing than most of us and German aircraft were overhead almost nightly), made a tour of the area, greeting each chink of light with a gruff 'What about the blackout, you jokers? Bit of a blackout man myself.'

The leave lorry returned from [Naples](#).

Time lapsed and the nightingales sang.

In San Agapito, high above the valley, the moon was shining on one side of the main street and on all of the main square, lighting the great, broken crucifix and the great archway, beneath which three or four drivers had gathered to discuss a last litre of *vino rosso*. The stone seat struck chill through their summer clothing and they were sleepy. Only the children of San Agapito, who seemed not to need rest or warmth, were awake and alert. They listened to the rambling talk as though it were wise and beautiful beyond parallel and they could understand every word of it.

Our drivers said goodnight to the children beneath the crucifix (bare now except for the wooden hammer, one wooden nail, and a fragment of the wooden spear) and the children said: ' *Buona notte, Pietre—Tubby—Giorgio. Ritornere una seconda volta?*'

All over this corner of **Italy** our drivers were standing in lighted doorways and saying goodnight and thank you.

‘ Buona sera, Angelo. Buona sera, Giovanni. Mille grazie.’

‘ Buona sera, Assunta.’

‘ Ritornerete... ?’

The closer they got to home the louder became the noise of singing, for No. 2 Platoon was celebrating a birthday. At midnight, after which authority could hardly be expected to continue turning a deaf ear, the singing moderated; but it kept on breaking out afresh, hour after hour, as waves of beautiful feeling (beautiful solidarity, inexhaustible mirth, welling tenderness) swept over the wine-drinkers.

The next to come was Goering's wife

And she was anti-Nazi....

O Trombettier, stasera non suonar....

The Poles, the Czechs, and **Germany** itself....

The nightingale sang too, also straining to express through his small hot throat, the inexpressible.

The party from **Campobasso**, sober now after a long lorry-ride, crept home, and at last, over towards Carpinone, high up and secret, a door opened. A cool breath set all the leaves dancing, and somewhere, drowsily, a bird chuckled.

Not all our days were like this. Mostly we were very busy, though it would be difficult to connect our work directly with any of the

momentous events that took place during May: the full-scale attack launched by the Fifth and Eighth Armies on the night of 11-12 May when troops in the New Zealand sector made feints and the Divisional Artillery supported the Poles in an attack on **Monastery Hill**; the crossing of the **Aurunci Mountains** on the Axis right flank by French Moroccan troops (the nightmare Goums); their arrival in the **Liri Valley**, and the beginning of an enemy withdrawal under this threat; the resumption of the Polish attack on the Monastery; the left hook led by the 19th New Zealand Armoured Regiment and the cutting of Route 6; the final scene on the 18th when British and Polish flags flew over **Monastery Hill**.

These were events in which we played no outstanding part. Our job was to see that the Brighton dump never lacked ammunition, and this we did with the help of the Reserve Mechanical Transport companies, replenishing it from a field maintenance centre near Carpinone, seven miles east by north of our area.

On 23 May the **Anzio** force attacked from its bridgehead, linking up with the **Eighth Army** two days later. The next day New Zealand infantry started to advance, and by the end of the month it was plain that strangers would eat the cherries ripening in the **Isernia** area.

No. 2 Platoon, with detachments from No. 1 Platoon and the 2nd Ammunition Company, made the first move on 30 May, establishing a forward ammunition point near San Elia, three and a half miles north-east by east of **Cassino**; and on 1 June the rest of the unit moved to an area in low hills three miles south-south-east of this. The whole neighbourhood was dirty and tainted under the blue sky and the golden sunshine. Empty gunpits with all their mess spoilt the clearings in the woods and used shell cases lay thick under every hedge.

Cassino was within easy walking distance, so most of us took this opportunity of visiting it while it was still, so to speak, warm. The ruins looked moving from a distance and of course they were soaked in heroism and glory, but when you got close none of this was apparent. Then they were just dirty and insulting—like a mess on the pavement.

Photographs and newspaper accounts had told us what we should see—green, stagnant pools by the Rapido, sightless houses, streets featureless as lepers, tree trunks stripped even of bark—but nothing had prepared us for the silence—the smashed stones seemed to be able to absorb sound as quicklime absorbs water—and the stench. It was not the stench of corpses, though burial parties were still busy, but of dead houses—the stifling, sweetish reek of old mortar, mice, dirty wallpaper, broken wainscots, domestic dust. Traffic rolled along Route 6 and groups of sightseers gaped at what was left of the Continental and the Hotel des Roses. Cameras clicked busily, but for all they showed afterwards they might as well have been photographing a midden.

On the day following our move to the new area the transport, helped by a platoon from the 2nd Ammunition Company, cleared the Brighton dump and the last ammunition point, and No. 1 Platoon, whose 25-pounder was more likely to be in demand than No. 2 Platoon's mixed loads, took over the ammunition point at San Elia.

When the liberation of Rome was announced we were still in the same areas—No. 1 Platoon in a green cornfield below battered San Elia, a bathing pool on its doorstep, the rest of us three miles away and getting sprayed with white dust by every passing lorry. It was 4 June, a Sunday, and Americans had entered the city at breakfast-time that morning.

The ammunition point was closed on the 5th and the whole unit moved to an area nineteen miles north-west by north of **Cassino**. Here there was a shallow stream in which we could wash our clothes and our dusty bodies, and all around us were hills with toy villages perched on them. We were now in the **Liri Valley**, and ahead of us, fifteen miles to the north-north-west, the battle for **Balsorano** was ending.

The town was occupied the next morning and the New Zealanders pressed on towards **Avezzano**, seventeen miles north-north-west of it. Again the enemy was in full retreat and the demand for ammunition had fallen off.

That evening crowds gathered round the platoon radio sets. The news was old now—the German News Agency had announced it at 9.2 a.m., **Cairo** time, and an hour and a half later it had been confirmed by the Allies—but we wanted to hear it for ourselves:

Under the command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces, supported by strong air forces, began landing Allied armies on the northern coast of **France**....

At the end of the news there were recordings of scenes at the embarkation ports. We heard snatches of ragged singing—‘You Are My Sunshine’—and snatches of conversation. The Tommy accents caused laughter and some of our drivers tried to imitate them, but not unnaturally.

In the backs of the lorries the primuses sighed and purred, and under the green tendrils of the vines the midges and mosquitoes, mixed in a grey smudge, made a noise like the highest imaginable note from a violin. And the Tommies sang ‘You Are My Sunshine’—but that was yesterday and in England.

For a long time, in the darkness, the announcer went on talking about the Second Front, making it sound grave and in rather good taste. But it was chilly among the vines and only a few people were listening.

The next morning it seemed quite natural that the Second Front should have opened—natural and indeed inevitable.

After the fall of **Avezzano** on 9 June the Division reverted to the command of the **Eighth Army** and for the time being its labours were finished. On the 13th it started to concentrate in a rest area near **Arce**, some fifteen miles west-north-west of **Cassino**. Most of the NZASC, however, was to continue working, and that suited us down to the ground. Rest areas with their unavoidable concomitants—parades and inspections—were not at all to our taste, whereas driving, oddly enough, was. A few old-timers, true, said they never wanted to touch another

steering wheel as long as they lived (though when jobs at Base were advertised we did not see them rushing to the orderly room), but for most of us the sight of the lorries lined up on a sunny morning, their canopies tied down and their engines putt-putting as they warmed up, still spelt happiness.

If that was indeed so joy immeasurable lay in wait for us. We had our first taste of it on the evening of 8 June when the transport platoons, after dumping their second-line holdings in the unit area, set out for **Venafro**, eleven miles east of **Cassino**, to report to the CRASC 10th Corps. During the next week they were employed in bringing forward petrol and ammunition from Vairano to a dump forty-five miles east by south of Rome, and from **Mignano** to one only eight miles east of the city. The time allowed for these trips was thirty-six hours but our drivers reduced it by half a day.

Company headquarters and Workshops moved from **Sora** on the 13th, and the next day the transport platoons, their work with 10th Corps finished, picked up their second-line holdings and joined the rest of the unit in the new area. It was on Route 6 and three and a half miles south-west of **Arce**.

The surrounding country was green and beautiful but we had little time for exploring it. On the 15th the transport platoons passed to the command of the **Eighth Army**, and during the next three days they were employed in bringing forward ammunition and supplies from Vairano and **Mignano** to **Valmontone**, twenty-two miles east-south-east of Rome.

Since leaving **Isernia** we had been exposed to more new impressions than we could assimilate comfortably. We had been seeing at the loveliest time of the year some of the loveliest country in the world. It remains for most of us a beautiful blurred memory of long, slate-coloured roads dappled with sunshine and leaf patterns, but here and there a scene stands out boldly: windy weather on the Campagna di Roma; rain clouds like great bruises invading the blue sky and dragging their purple shadows over the new gold of the cornfields; and—unforgettable—our

first glimpse of Rome, all her spires gleaming, the sun going down behind her seven hills, and a voice saying: 'That round thing there—you can just see it—that's the dome of St. Peter's.'

Last week in Babylon

Last night in Rome....

Rome! Except for one or two enterprising drivers who had taken wrong turnings none of us had seen her yet, and now, thanks to our duties with the **Eighth Army**, we were to live right on her doorstep. Not all of us though. The Ammunition Platoon, the Cinderella of the unit, was left to guard our ammunition in the **Arce** area.

We moved on the 18th—a Sunday of course—and drove along Route 6. When we were five miles from the city we turned right off the main road, and two more turnings brought us to a narrow lane on either side of which were the platoon areas. Rome, eight miles east of us, was hidden by a grey veil. Wind ruffled the grass—corn and rolling grassland was all we could see for miles—and it rained. But no one minded that.

Tonight in Rome!

Painfully, as though searching for enemy aircraft, we twisted our necks to observe the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Obedient as flocks of sheep we wandered over the coloured marble of St. Peter's, catching a phrase here and there ('... length 669 feet ... Michelangelo and Raphael...') and all the time thinking longingly of morning tea. The Colosseum was better, for there you could at least sit down for a moment in the cool. The Torre dei Conti, the Forum of Nerva, the Forum of Augusta, the Temple of Marte Ultore ('... delicate Corinthian columns carefully restored....')—it was educational all right and a man would be a fool to miss it, but hell it was dynamite on the old feet! Most of us wore our light sandals in Rome (for they were smarter than boots) and the protection they gave against the uncompromising stone pavements was negligible.

Standing drenched in sunlight in the Piazza Venezia, we gazed wonderingly at the Palazzo from whose small balcony the 'Bullfrog' had been accustomed to harangue the mob. (It looked—as the poor 'Bullfrog' so longed to look—clenched, massive, impervious to storms.) But what we really admired, what struck us as truly elegant, was the gold and white wedding cake built in honour of the second Victor Emmanuel. Here, we felt, they *had* something.

We admired also the shining hairdressing saloons in which flushed soldiers, faintly protesting, were being anointed with sweet oils, rubbed with unguents, assaulted with hot towels, and generally mishandled in ways that could not have commended themselves to anyone except an effeminate Latin. And we admired the shining bars and cafés whose scarlet tables and chromium-plated chairs encroached so charmingly on the busiest pavements, and we admired the shining, expensive women who looked at us with kind eyes.

For the matter of that everyone regarded us kindly, none seeming to regret that the new customers were wearing khaki instead of field grey. That we were looked on as customers pure and simple was made abundantly plain to us, and it was plain, too, that of all the new freedoms we brought the one most valued was the freedom to profiteer.

But we liked Rome. It was pleasant to feel the calm atmosphere of the buildings, their elegance, their ease, their charming disingenuousness—pleasant to walk through wide, shady streets whose creams and gentle greys were relieved by newspaper kiosks gay as bunches of flowers—and pleasant indeed to wander up the Via Nazionale, passing fine shops filled with useless and expensive gewgaws, and seeing ahead, with a recrudescence of thirst, the blue folds of the New Zealand flag.

But perhaps it was pleasantest of all, once having seen the city, to stay at home, comfortably shirtless and bare-footed. Besides we were very busy at this time.

By 19 June the **Eighth Army** roadhead had reached **Narni**, forty-three miles due north of Rome, and to this we were moving ammunition from the dump we had helped to establish near our area. The round trip, which entailed crossing Rome twice, was seldom made in less than twelve hours.

What trips they were! At every bad corner Indian drivers with smiles on their kind brown faces did their best to kill us. On all the bad hills tank-transporters conditioned our speed, cutting it down to a kind of staggering crawl. Our cabs were like ovens, and British officers, tearing past red-faced and angry in 'bugs', cast scandalised glances at bare feet poking through open doors and windscreens. There were interminable traffic blocks, and when we did reach our destination, tea-less and tired, there were long waits while fussed sergeants and corporals frantically tried to discover what we were to do with our loads. Coming home at night, more hindered than helped by a single wan beam, we scuttled along in an effort not to lose touch with the bobbing tail-light of the vehicle ahead. This was tiring work, and tiring also were our daily battles with punctured tires, worn engines, worn steering assemblies.

Man dies in full content

Of trouble past....

So does transport.

Most of our vehicles had been on the road since 1941 and now they were slipping gently westwards. A wheeziness, a puffiness, an habitual languor, an insatiable thirst for oil—with these and with kindred ailments they were paying for the over-exertions of their youth, the excesses of their middle age, and their final folly in exposing themselves to the rigours of an Italian winter when younger lorries were either in their graves or pottering around Base in well-earned retirement. From seven in the morning until ten at night Workshops laboured to keep them rolling.

Consequently, when we did get a morning or an afternoon to ourselves, most of us preferred to stay at home, though in the evenings

we often slipped away to the New Zealand flats. These, shabby-new and nominally the property of the Italians, were only a few miles from our area, and here, relaxed and perfectly at home and with no slender Corinthian columns or world-famous frescoes to reproach us, we could talk the eloquent language of chocolate and bully beef, creeping home tired and triumphant in the early hours of the morning. But not always triumphant. Sometimes there was a surly face at breakfast because she

Would not yesternight

Kiss him in the cock-shot light.

Hard-working days but happy ones! Once or twice they were varied by an organised picnic to lovely Lake Albano, near Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the Popes. This meant bathing and being able to buy armfuls of peaches at only two or three times their correct price, and a journey home along the Appian Way, and a visit to the Catacombs, where you could commune with the Christian dead or (in lighter mood) bark like a dog, stretch out in niches, humorously extinguish candles.

We returned home from one of these picnics to find that Lance-Corporal Owen Penney ⁵ (No. 4 Platoon), brother of No. 1 Platoon's Dick who was now in New Zealand, had been killed by the accidental explosion of a bakelite hand grenade. ⁶ That was the only shadow.

By the end of June the NZASC units under the command of the **Eighth Army** had finished clearing the Rome dump, and on 1 July they started carting ammunition to the **Narni** roadhead from the 21st Advanced Ammunition Depot. This was on the outskirts of a small town known to history as Antium. It was there that Coriolanus, the uncompromising patrician, sought refuge from the indignant 'plebs'. Cicero had a villa there and the Emperors Nero and Caligula were born there. Of late months the town had acquired a new title to fame under the name of **Anzio**.

Naturally it was in poor order, and so were most of the romantic coast villages on the Via Severiana. When we came home by this route—

we used to spend the night in the unit area and go on to **Narni** the next day—we had on our left the Tyrrhenian Sea, blue and sparkling, on our right smashed houses. We said little (' **Navy**, eh? A fair sort of a towelling. '), but more than one of us, seeing for a moment through the eyes of the broken and dispossessed, thought to himself: 'They paid all right, the poor bastards. They don't owe us a thing.'

But it was no time for sentiment. All over the world full payment was being exacted both from the guilty and from the less guilty. On the Eastern Front gallant **Finland** was paying the last red cent (the Mannerheim Line had been broken on 18 June); in **France**, **Germany** was paying (Cherbourg had fallen on the 27th); in England, the British people were paying (for over a week now flying bombs, putt-putting through the air like motor-cycles, had been falling on their small island); and in **Italy**, by land and by air, items were being struck daily from Marshal Kesselring's account.

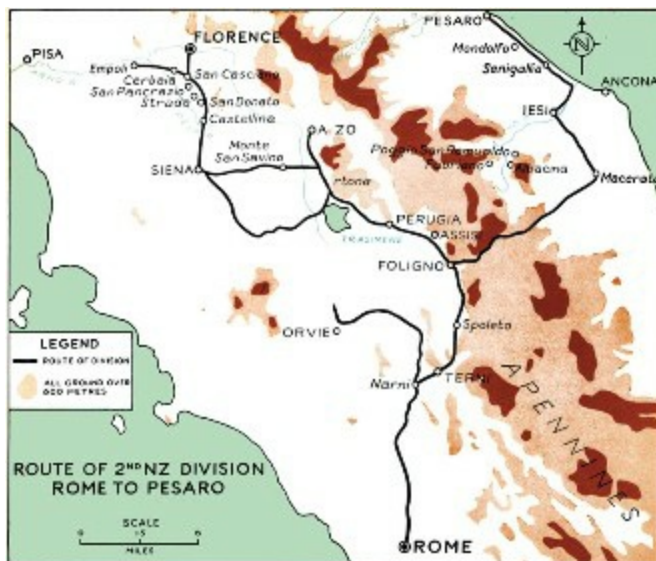
And now it was time for New Zealand to make a further payment.

We had finished the **Anzio** job the day before (6 July) and we were in the mood for a little relaxation. At midnight, when the move was announced, many of us were miles from the area. Worried corporals stumbled around in the dark and motor-cycles and at least one lorry were sent surreptitiously to the New Zealand flats.

In some miraculous way news of an emergency out-distanced the speeding messengers, beating them even to Rome, and when the load-carriers pulled out at three in the morning only a few drivers were unaccounted for.

Yawning and nodding, we rushed smoothly through the warm night, heading for the rest area near **Arce** to pick up our secondline holding and the Ammunition Platoon. The beating engines and whispering tires made their usual nonsense in our sleepy brains (anything you like: In-again-Finnigan, in-again-Finnigan, in-again-Finnigan), but it was cheerful nonsense.

The Division was going in again—hell for the fighting units perhaps, but for us (and we said it with all the apology in the world) a kind of holiday.



Route of 2nd New Zealand Division: Rome to Pesaro

¹ **Allied Military Government of Occupied Territory.**

² **Cpl W. G. Frazier; farmer; Ashburton; born Portsmouth, 31 Jul 1914.**

³ **WO II A. L. Salmond; architect; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 23 Jan 1906.**

⁴ **Capt May was in the same draft. Lts Sloan and Delley took charge of Nos. 1 and 4 Platoons respectively with the rank of captain.**

⁵ **L-Cpl O. E. Penney; freezing works' employee; born Ohaeawai, Auckland, 27 Apr 1920; died on active service, 28 Jun 1944.**

⁶ **The fire destroyed, among other items, over a quarter of a million rounds of machine-gun ammunition, nearly 6000 rounds of 75-millimetre ammunition, and nearly 500 rounds of 105-**

millimetre ammunition—a loss of £48,000.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 20 – THROUGH THE VINEYARDS

CHAPTER 20

THROUGH THE VINEYARDS

THEY were small and you knew they were not good to eat. They were dusted with silver like mistletoe and they hung in tight bunches above every ditch, tendrils half hiding them. They were delicate things to have come from such a scrawny parent (trunk twisted and branches crooked like elbows: a *doppelgänger* black and mummified) but as yet they were hard and sour—too sour to interest your wise Umbrian fox. We tried them, knowing it was a mistake, and they made our mouths dry.

Before reaching this last vineyard we had been on the move for a week, stopping a day here and a day there but making more than enough northing in the intervals to discount any benefit to our estates from the hot sunshine. Now we were eighty-six miles northwest by north of Rome and three or four miles south of **Cortona**. Near us was a corner of **Lake Trasimene**. We had been told that we should not be moving for a few days—we could rest and perhaps the grapes would ripen. This pleased us enormously, for what was the use of being in **Italy** in July if you were never in one place long enough to enjoy the wines of the country, make the acquaintance of your Italian neighbours, and get your washing done?

During the past week we had been able to do none of these things. First there was the journey from **Arce** to a staging area on the Rome-**Narni** road, to which Company headquarters and Workshops moved independently from Rome. Travelling north the next day ('*Neo Zealandese*,' the Italians murmured, brushing aside our clumsy attempts at deception), we passed through Terni, Spoleto, **Foligno**, and **Perugia**, and halted at last in an area near **Lake Trasimene**. After spending a day here we moved closer to the lake (to the relief of No. 1 Platoon's drivers between whom and a local landowner lay a little matter of some piglets), and two days later we went to the **Cortona** area, where No. 4 Platoon had established an ammunition point.

And here we were among the green and silver grapes. It was 13 July, and some ten miles to the north the 6th Brigade was fighting in the mountains above **Arezzo**. The Division, which was now under the command of 13th Corps, was to capture these so that a British armoured division and the Brigade of Guards could advance through the town and reach the River Arno north of it. The ultimate prize, of course, was **Florence**.

But Florence seemed likely to cost us dear, for time was what Marshal Kesselring wanted. All along the front the Germans were resisting stubbornly, while behind them, from Massa on the Gulf of Genoa to **Pesaro** on the Adriatic, workers from a dozen nations laboured with or without enthusiasm on the defences of the **Gothic Line**.

The severity of the fighting (partly because we had carried out a 300 round-per-gun dumping programme for the 5th and 6th Field Regiments) was not reflected in the demand for ammunition, which was slight during the three days that preceded the occupation of **Arezzo** by British armour. This happened on the 16th, and on the same day, while the 13th Corps pressed forward, the Division went into reserve.

Our sales shrank almost to vanishing point, but for four or five days we were fully employed in disposing of salvage, completing our second-line holding from a field maintenance centre twenty miles away, and bringing forward ammunition from there to another centre near **Arezzo**. Even so we had time to take proper notice of a very significant announcement: married men of the 4th Reinforcements were returning to New Zealand under the Taupo scheme. The news caused heart-burning and disappointment among our single Fourths and among some of our Fifths, but for many others, right down to drivers who came overseas with the 7th Reinforcements, it opened a door on hope. We gave the lucky ones (Captain Todd and seven other ranks) a rousing send-off, pledging them suitably.

After they had gone there was a feeling of flatness in the area, so No. 1 Platoon, partly to dispel this flatness and partly because 'Poodle' and

'Snow' had just returned from New Zealand furlough and it was 'Neil Mac's' birthday, gave a party. It began at sunset and went roaring on through the night, huge and formless. Captain A. E. Thodey ¹ (who had taken over the platoon from Captain Sloan ² less than twenty-four hours before, the latter having been posted to the 1st Supply Company) expressed mild astonishment the next morning, but little harm had been done. The haystack round which the party had pivoted had been eviscerated and for a day gloom and despondency accompanied the platoon on its journeys and stalked unchallenged among the grape vines. By the following morning, though, cheerfulness was restored, and that was a good thing, for it looked as though the Division would be moving soon. During the day—the 20th—ten vehicles from No. 2 Platoon left to establish an ammunition point eight miles north of Siena, Siena being thirty-four miles west of Cortona, and that night the 5th Brigade began to fight its way towards Florence, which had been declared an open city. The Division had relieved French Moroccan troops near San Donato, seventeen miles north of Siena.

For two days we were employed in dumping our second-line holding in an area next to the ammunition point, but all our own concerns were overshadowed by the news from Germany. A bomb had been set to kill Hitler and something very like revolution had been attempted. For a happy moment we looked out across the heaving waters and saw a flutter of white wings and a flash of green.

The dove vanished, and on 23 July, very early in the morning while all the grapes dripped dew, we left for the ammunition point, squeezed through Siena—lovely and incomparable Siena, red rose of Tuscany, flushed with a thousand sunsets and autumn fires—and pushed on through a fog of dust. It settled on our arms and faces like warm flour and lay on the white roads in drifts six inches deep. There were no vines in the new area (which made a pleasant change); instead there were oak trees and green hillsides and the lovely litter of a forest: dead branches like antlers, great, prostrate trunks grey and lichened over, last year's acorns.

As soon as we arrived work started in earnest. The demand for ammunition mounted steadily and we were handicapped by lack of transport. On the evening of the 24th No. 1 Platoon passed to the command of the 6th Brigade, and on that and the following day Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons carted petrol for the **Eighth Army**.

On the evening of the 26th—it was a terrific day with the demand for 25-pounder ammunition mounting and mounting and no chance for more than a few of us to see His Majesty drive through the Divisional area—a lorry arrived at Workshops looking as though it had been picked off a bonfire. Within a few minutes word was all round the unit that No. 1 Platoon was in trouble. The drivers, however, were reassuring. The platoon had debussed the 26th Battalion near **San Pancrazio**, eight miles north-west by north of **San Donato**, and had come under shellfire while digging in on a hillside. One lorry had been set on fire and a shell had passed through the canopy of another without exploding. The rest of the damage was a punctured radiator, and now the platoon was standing by to drive the 26th Battalion to **Florence**.

First, though, there were obstacles to be overcome. Between the New Zealanders and **Florence** lay the **Paula Line**, based on a semi-circle of hills, and as day followed day there was no slackening in the demand for ammunition.

On the 27th we moved in independent groups to an area near **San Donato**. It was on high ground and from here we could see shells landing—our own and the enemy's. The next day a section from the Ammunition Platoon opened a forward point near **Strada**, a few miles north-west of **San Donato**, and soon all first-line transport was being diverted to this, for there was not a round left in the unit area. Later in the day the rest of us moved to **Strada** and for a short period artillery lorries stood empty in our lines. As fast as we could rush the ammunition forward from the field maintenance centres it was tail-loaded on to them. Major Gibson sent an SOS to the Brigadier and before long we were being helped by transport from the 2nd Ammunition

Company, the 14th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment. By now we had a dumping programme of 400 rounds a gun to deal with. We worked all through the night and all through the next day, the Artillery grabbing our loads as they arrived. Between dawn and dusk we handled 34,000 rounds of 25-pounder. By the evening of the 30th—we issued 47,000 rounds of 25-pounder that day—we had enough of everything at the ammunition point to meet any predictable demands, but there was no question of easing up. The guns kept firing: 27,500 rounds, 45,000, 28,000....

The New Zealanders were driving the enemy back to the last ridge of hills before the **Arno** and **Florence** and it was bitter work.

No. 1 Platoon called him Paul. A member of the 4th Reinforcements, he had joined us first in the **Isernia** area, and from the moment of his arrival he had gone quietly about his business. More often than not his business had taken him to **Campobasso** or **Naples** and sometimes it had entailed his being away from us for four or five days at a time. He was a powerfully built man with a heavy, purposeful face and a slow tread. Now, wearing little except a grey top hat of a kind common enough at Ascot and a dirty khaki shirt that failed to conceal his magnificent chest and splendid abdomen, he stood at the gate of his castle to receive guests—'Goldie', Des, and 'Brinny', who, halted by provosts because the road ahead was under fire, had remembered that Paul was living close by in the battalion's B Echelon area, his lorry being loaded with signallers' gear. He was said to be doing himself rather well.

He was. He showed his guests over the castle and took them to his bedroom. He drew their attention to his four-poster, falling heavily on the rich covers to demonstrate the resilience of the mattress. He threw open his wardrobe and pressed 'Goldie' to choose one of his twenty new suits.

His guests would take something, he suggested, leading them out to the lawn. He excused himself for a moment and came back with a small table, napery, crystal, and a Borgini chianti of a good year. He said he

was quite satisfied with his cellar except that the former owner of the estate—a count or something—had quarters there. Ah well, the old fellow was no longer young and he had no wish to be unduly hard on him!

Presently his guests rose, mentioning that the quartermaster at battalion headquarters was probably waiting for his blankets. Paul went with them to the gate. They were to look in, he said, any time they were passing. There was always a glass of wine, a meal, a bed. When last they saw him he was moving purposefully towards the decanter, the grey topper well back on his fine but balding forehead, the dirty shirt flaring out behind with true aristocratic negligence.

The rest of the platoon was living more modestly but everyone was enjoying himself. The food was good—there was an abundance of potatoes, tomatoes, and fruit—and the job was interesting. Not that many adventures had befallen the platoon so far. After dropping the 26th Battalion near **San Pancrazio** it had stayed where it was until the end of the month, idle except on the 29th when it took the **Maori Battalion** into the line. On the 31st it moved a few miles to the 26th Battalion's B Echelon area, spending two days there. The drivers to whom new Dodges had been issued worked hard to turn them into homes, slinging bunks, fitting reading lamps, and building racks for 4.5 boxes. During the past week or so we had been issued with twenty-one Dodges to replace the worst of our Chevrolets, and a dozen of these had gone to No. 1 Platoon. They had glass cabs and were fast and smart, but they lacked four-wheel drive and were known to be hard on tires. In the event they proved far less serviceable than the ugly old Chevrolets.

The platoon's next move was made after lunch on 3 August. It went to the village of **Cerbaia**, where the 6th Brigade, supported by the 19th Armoured Regiment, had established a bridgehead across the Pesa River a day or two earlier. This was only seven or eight miles south-west of **Florence**, and from the surrounding hills our drivers could see those twinkling lights about which so much was being written at that time. The infantry was billeted in **Cerbaia** and the transport dispersed in the village square and along the streets leading into it.

'It was a warm, lazy afternoon,' said Corporal 'Sandy' McKay, ³ 'and the little village was curled up at the bottom of the hill asleep. There were not many civilians about, most of them having left when the fighting started, but there were plenty of soldiers—cooks sweating over burners on the pavements and Kiwis strolling in and out of shops and houses to see if the Germans had left anything behind. Most of them looked like coolies, for apart from shorts they were wearing little except wide-brimmed straw hats they had found in a neighbouring factory.

'Round about half past four, in the middle of all this peace, we heard a series of faint woomps. They were followed by low whines that rapidly became shriller and ended right among us in ear-splitting crumps. The shells came over in threes, sixes, sevens, and elevens. There was one batch of seventeen, four of which were duds. Between each batch there was a pause of from ten to twenty minutes. During the first couple of pauses the boys dashed out to disperse their lorries more widely and find safe places for them. One of the boys shifted his lorry from the square to a snug possie by the church and for his trouble got three punctures and a holed radiator and petrol tank. Someone else got a holed sump and Henry Blomfield's lorry was smacked as he was moving it from the main street. He was slightly wounded in the back but was able to carry on after he had been fixed up at the RAP. He was far more worried about a broken window in his new Dodge.

'After we had done what we could we all stayed under cover, crouching against walls and keeping well away from windows and doors. The shelling went on for two hours, filling the streets with choking dust. An anti-tank portée was hit and its ammunition exploded with the hell of a roar.

'As soon as it was safe to go out we found that about half our lorries had been holed by shrapnel, though none was a write-off. By a lucky chance all the new Dodges except Henry's were almost untouched. The infantry had lost two 15-cwt. bugs and sustained three casualties—very light, they told us, considering the stuff that had come over.

‘Our damage was chiefly to radiators—five of these were US ⁴—and tires. We had thirteen punctures all told and there were things like severed brake rods and leaking petrol tanks. This gave Jack McDonald a chance to show what a smashing LAD corporal he was. He made a trip to Workshops to get a load of spares, and then, helped by “Snow” Logan, ⁵ his off-sider, he worked flat out all through the night. By breakfast-time every lorry was mobile except “Bub's”.

‘We loaded the infantry's gear aboard and stood by to move off at nine that morning. The story was that the battalion was to act as the vanguard of a 6th Brigade advance on **Florence and everything looked pretty business-like. We had been told to roll back our canopies so that the boys could hop off quickly if we ran into any trouble. As you can imagine, we were all pretty keyed up, and then, at about a quarter past nine, they told us the move was off.**

‘We were still on a moment's notice but we hung around **Cerbaia until the evening of the 6th and then embussed the battalion and took it six or seven miles in a north-westerly direction to relieve an Indian outfit. They sent us back to the village to spend the night and the next day we were told we shouldn't be needed any more.’**

Wearing a slightly swashbuckling air induced by their straw hats, their coloured scarves, and their adventure in **Cerbaia, No. 1 Platoon's drivers joined us in an area near **San Casciano** (eight or nine miles south of **Florence**) to which we had moved piecemeal on the 3rd and 4th. During the final phase of the battle for the **Paula Line**, which had been broken on 3 August, we had built up a stock of 25-pounder ammunition greatly in excess of our normal establishment, and this accounted for our inability to move in one clean shift.**

Our new area—but why describe it? The sun-soaked grass, the big and the little hills burdened with vines and villages—they were still with us. As for the rest: either one remembers or one doesn't. Not that there was much to remember: only the ripe fruit, golden apples of the Hesperides and pears shaped like pears and not like old tennis balls or

little money-bags; only long golden days with the bees buzzing their hearts out; only short impatient nights, winecoloured; only **Italy** leaping into sunlight each morning like a dolphin, leaping into the sunlight like a free spirit who could stay up all night if she wanted to, laughing defiance at that grim wheel other countries are bound on—all bound and rivetted and with no choice but to move soberly under the sun or the grey sky and be dipped back into the darkness every night. Only that and the vines and the common cabbage-whites and the common brimstones moving in the same cloud with the kind of butterflies you see in specimen cases.

For a few days we had time for these things, our sales having declined sharply after the collapse of the **Paula Line**. The New Zealanders engaged in mopping-up operations—No. 3 Platoon supplied them from a mine-strewn area near **Cerbaia**, and one of its lorries was badly damaged—were reasonable in their demands.

The official communique announcing that **Florence** was firmly in our hands was not issued until 22 August (the enemy's idea of an open city being rather different from ours), but the collapse of the **Paula Line** had decided the city's fate, and in mid-August the Division started to assemble in a rest area near **Castellina**, ten miles north by west of **Siena**. We moved back on the 14th, occupying a sheltered, dust-free area by a small stream that was very pleasant to lie in during hot afternoons. From the 17th onwards there was generous day-leave to **Siena**, but not for the drivers of the load-carriers. Almost at once they began carting surplus ammunition from the old area to a 13th Corps dump a dozen miles west of **San Casciano**, and next we were told to provide 114 lorries to help the **Eighth Army** move ammunition from an advanced ammunition depot at Monte San Savino, twenty miles east of **Siena**, to another near **Iesi**. **Iesi** was a name new to us. We drove through **Perugia** and **Foligno**, crossed the **Apennines**, turned north, and ended up five or six miles from the Adriatic coast. After Foligno it was new country all the way, but we saw most of it through a mist of sweat drops and white dust.

Hard on the heels of this job came a general move to the Adriatic sector, and by the end of the month the unit was complete near **Iesi** and all our ammunition had been brought forward. The 220-mile journey, however, proved too much for some of the lorries and Workshops' casualty ward was full again.

We had time for a quick bathe at **Ancona**, the famous port near **Iesi**, and then those insatiable 25-pounders went into action against the **Gothic Line** in support of the 1st Canadian Corps. The plan was for the **Eighth Army** to attack in the Adriatic sector, while the **Fifth Army** was to advance over the **Apennines** to **Bologna**. The Canadians' role was to smash the defences in a narrow corridor—part of the **Gothic Line**—that ran between the mountains and the sea. One end of the corridor was guarded by **Pesaro**, thirty-five to forty miles up the coast from **Ancona**, and the other, twenty miles farther on, by **Rimini**.

On the night of 30-31 August the load-carriers set out for the B Echelon area of the three field regiments with 107 loads of 25-pounder ammunition. The drivers travelled along the coast road for twenty-two miles, turning left just as they were beginning to wonder if the intention was to lead them slap into the battle for **Pesaro**, which was flashing and banging in front of them. The convoy went eight or nine miles inland before halting and then some of the lorries were guided forward to the guns. By this time most of the enemy had withdrawn out of range.

On 2 September **Pesaro** was taken by Polish troops and the field regiments came out of the line. The next day, a Sunday, was a day of prayer and a special service was held for NZASC units. Five years earlier, on another Sunday, Great Britain had declared war on **Germany**.

Heavy thunder clouds were massing and the air was thick and clammy, and gusts of warm wind tugged at the padre's surplice, drawing attention to his khaki stockings and brown desert boots. We stood close-packed on three sides of a square, our officers out in front. On them—on the senior officers anyway—devolved the responsibility of keeping the hymns going and growling the responses, the rest of us, who could sing

so lustily round a wine barrel, being given to silence or sheepish mumblings on these occasions.

The truth of the matter was that many of us had the feeling that we were there under a compulsion as much disciplinary as spiritual, and it weighed as heavily (more heavily perhaps) on those who would have attended the service in any case as on those who regarded it as a parade. And one felt, too, that the padres themselves were not always happy about the situation—that they also were circumscribed by events. Most of their sermons were little masterpieces of tact in which the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World, the Despised and Rejected of men, became an awfully decent Padre—brainy, of course, but with no side at all. It was as though, just before the service, someone (the shade of a Chaplain-General, perhaps) had tapped them on the shoulder, remarking briskly: ‘Remember now! Nothing controversial—no dogma. Just general terms—simple, manly stuff. Remind the men of their homes, that always gets them.’ At all events there was little or no great preaching, no scourgings from the pulpit, no cleansings of the temple, no wrestlings at Peniel.

It is only fair to say that the vast majority of us would have resented it if there had been, and one should add also that most NZASC church parades were voluntary, though it was not particularly easy to get out of them. They were conducted with no more formality than decorum required, and the Brigadier, who liked to see his units all together on a Sunday when this was possible, had a pleasantly direct manner that went down well with the rank and file. In short, the anti-clericalism in our unit (and there was not a great deal of it) was caused solely by church parades. Few could criticise the way in which the padres performed their secular duties—visiting the sick, organising libraries and recreation centres, listening with patience and sympathy to personal problems. Men like Padre Holland were an asset to any unit.

On the occasion in point—our day of prayer—the NZASC Band was in attendance, so the singing was a little lustier than usual—but as always there was something missing, though three or four hundred were gathered together. Not everyone was sorry when the fat thunder drops

started to fall, and the bandsmen, grabbing their instruments, made a dash for shelter.

Later in the day the skies cleared and we beat the 1st **Petrol Company** 5-nil in the first of a series of NZASC Rugby games.

Turkey through with the Axis, the Red Army on the Prussian border, an Allied landing between Nice and Marseilles, the German Seventh Army surrounded and smashed near Falaise, **Florence** liberated, **Paris** liberated, Roumania on the side of the angels—these were our August victories and they were notable ones. But to each and all of them the enemy made reply, as Clemenceau did in the Great War when Petain spoke of defeat: ‘ *Je fais la guerre!*’

On the Italian front the answer was the same. Although the Canadians' first assault had taken them ten miles into the **Gothic Line** the enemy was fighting back stubbornly, knowing that winter was at his shoulder.

In the second week of September the Division came under the command of 1st Canadian Corps, the artillery going into action almost at once. **Rimini** was the next major objective, and this could be seen from the ammunition point established by No. 4 Platoon on the 11th. It was near **Cattolica**, a small town on the coast eleven miles below **Rimini**. Daily our drivers watched engagements between cruisers of the **Royal Navy** and the coast defences.

The rest of the unit had left **Iesi** on the 4th and was now in an area near **Mondolfo**, nineteen miles down the coast from **Pesaro** and a few miles inland. It was a pleasant spot, and the officers and drivers of Headquarters were able to put away their tents and take possession of a comfortable villa. The platoons bivouacked on the estate.

We were in this area for well over a week and although we were kept fairly busy we managed both to watch and to play a great deal of football. For a short time a dozen or more of our best players were

released from their ordinary duties and allowed to give all their time to training and getting fit, a Divisional Rugby team being in prospect. Our next favourite pastime was bathing from the white beaches of the Adriatic.

Always the sea! If you were composing a piece of music to fit our story you would have to include, as well as the purr of primuses and the fluttering beat of choked engines on cold mornings, the soft thunder of collapsing waves, the long rasp of shingle.

On the 13th of the month the Division moved to a concentration area six or seven miles beyond [Pesaro](#), and on that day New Zealand armour and the 22nd Motorised Battalion went into action on the coast in support of the 3rd Greek Mountain Brigade, the rest of the Division being held in reserve. Our unit moved on the 14th.

We drove along the coast road, stopping and starting with a long line of lorries, jeeps, and ambulances. At almost every turn-off Italian refugees, sitting in carts loaded with furniture and bedding, waited patiently for an opportunity to use the road. They looked as though they had been waiting for hours, lost and forlorn. Many of the carts were drawn by oxen or by horrible gaunt horses, awful spectres of reproach, and many were pushed by hand. In some cases oxen and horses, in defiance of the biblical injunction, had been yoked together, sharp horn neighbour to dribbling eye, fetlock to cleft hoof, ghastly jutting bone to shrunk crupper. In one cart a calm-faced woman was mending a torn sheet with an old sewing machine, putting saints and heroes to shame.

[Pesaro](#), at the end of an avenue of tall trees, had been badly knocked about and the people looked at us with dull eyes. Already, though, children were at play and women were at their immemorial tasks: fetching water from wells, spreading pulped tomatoes on boards in the sun, threshing grain on the pavement outside the cottage.

Our new area was three miles inland from [Pesaro](#) and here we camped among vines, moving again on the 17th.

The coast road took us past the old castle of **Gradara** (which had seen the tragedy of Paolo and Francesca and looked as though it had been designed by Walt Disney for Giant Despair), past the ammunition point at **Cattolica**, and over the River Conca. Half a mile farther on we turned into the hills, dispersing as best we could in that part of our area not occupied by a battery of 155-millimetre guns. They fired intermittently through the night, making us nervous, but there was no counter-shelling. Not until they moved forward on the 19th were we able to spread out a little.

Our new area covered two or more hillsides, open except for some patches of bamboo, and took in a strip of flat near a by-road. On this there was a vineyard and an ugly square villa in a walled garden. The guns sounded very close and our aircraft could be heard bombing and strafing the German lines.

After dark the sky over the front was lit by sixteen searchlights, which stared all night long at nothing. The long unwavering beams bent over the countryside like lean ghosts, their heads misty blue among the clouds, their stems blue-white and astonishing as though shot from sepulchres. Some of us tried to argue that they marked the boundaries of the little neutral republic of **San Marino**, which we knew was quite close, but actually they were to light the battlefield for night attacks. Later we heard the term 'artificial moonlight'.

Greek and New Zealand troops entered **Rimini** on the morning of the 21st and the battle moved on across the Marecchia River. Our Division was now in the thick of the fighting, and the artillery, which had reverted to its normal command, was far enough forward to need a new point. No. 3 Platoon, with detachments from No. 4 and the Ammunition Platoon, opened one a mile or two south of **Rimini**, a dangerous district because of mines and shells.

Time and time again we were called upon to act as first-line transport and deliver our ammunition to the firing line, and often our drivers had narrow escapes. One night a shell burrowed into the road and

exploded beneath a lorry, lifting it off the ground but doing little damage.

Life at **Cattolica**, though, consisted of more than work and occasional frights. There was leave to Rome and—after the 15th—to **Florence**. For the members of the 4th Reinforcements there was something better. Major Gibson and twenty-three other ranks left us to return to New Zealand on the day **Rimini** was entered. It was trying to rain as they drove off but they seemed not to mind. Only Paul—the Count—was reluctant to go. He had found at the last moment that he loved us, as a token of which he left most of his gear behind. He set out for New Zealand clad lightly in a pair of old shorts and nothing else, which was a pity, for the weather had broken.

Our new commanding officer was Major R. P. Latimer,⁶ who had joined the unit on 5 June as a captain. Each of our majors, like the fairy god-mothers in the story, had come to us with gifts—Justice, Efficiency, Good Nature, Navigational Ability. Major Latimer brought a New Broom. There were to be changes around the place—a sergeants' mess, a newspaper, a programme of entertainment. All these ideas were excellent, but alas!—ours was a venerable institution and like most institutions of that kind rabidly conservative. For the same reason that a few old gentlemen in England, survivors of an almost extinct species, continue to call a taxi a taximeter-cab and Pall Mall 'Pell Mell', some of us still spoke of No. 1 Platoon as A Section and the unit as the **Divisional Ammunition Company**.

The idea of a sergeants' mess was found to be impracticable (not that anyone except the sergeants objected to it very much) but the paper was proceeded with ('Paper? Paper? There was no damned nonsense about papers when Percy was boss.'). and in due course the *Amcoy Weekly Times* made its appearance. It was neither better nor worse than other unit newspapers and it deserved a warmer reception than it got. It appeared twice and was heard of no more.

There was one innovation, however, that did survive, and this was a

recreation centre organised by Padre D. V. de Candole, ⁷ who had been attached to us since mid-August. At first a tent was used for premises, but when the wet weather came the largest reception room in the ugly villa was requisitioned. Here you could write letters or read, and in the evenings, with the tea-urn bubbling in the corner, there were card parties, lectures, quiz sessions, sing-songs, and an occasional concert by the NZASC Swing Band. Only our 'Pell Mells' remembered those desert days when the voice of Vera Lynn or of Ann Shelton had issued from the bowels of the cooks' lorry and had been thought enough.

Inside the recreation room—the *Albergo* we called it—all was warmth and light and Scotch songs by Dave Falconer; outside, the bedraggled grape vines dripped miserably and lorries sank axle-deep in mud. The summer was over now and the grapes had been gathered in. If you wanted fresh fruit you ate persimmons: there was nothing else. When darkness came it was time to pull down the cover at the back of the lorry and begin searching for the primus pricker. Only our Romeos continued to go out at night, but it was no weather for love. At breakfast nowadays they seldom irritated us by looking smug and self-satisfied—like pleased cats.

Farther up the coast the infantry shivered in their weapon-pits, cursing the black mud and the grey rain. The turning of the **Gothic Line** had not been followed by its collapse, for the Germans were still in possession of the mountains on our left flank and from these they could dominate the battlefield. None the less the infantry pushed on doggedly, facing Panther turrets, self-propelled guns, mortars, and spandaus. The enemy fought back with skill and courage and there was truth in the subsequent verdict of a British infantryman: 'It weren't rain or bloody mountains held up advance. It were bloody Jerry sitting down behind spandau going blurp-blurp.'

By 27 September our forward troops were only 1000 yards from the Fiumicino River and the old ammunition point was too far from the front. Accordingly No. 3 Platoon returned to the unit area, and No. 4

Platoon and a section from the Ammunition Platoon opened a new point near **Viserba**, eight miles below the **Fiumicino**. Here the transport was dispersed in and around the buildings of a large linen factory with guns in action on three sides of it, the congestion being such that the ammunition had to be kept on wheels. An artillery duel took place during the night and enemy shells landed close, spattering the buildings with shrapnel. A few evenings later a plane flew over very low and dropped a stick of armour-piercing bombs 200 yards from the factory.

In spite of these drawbacks it is doubtful if the drivers at the ammunition point envied us the safety of the unit area. They were snug and dry in their large sheds whereas we were floundering in a morass with day and night made hideous by the screaming of bogged lorries. At the end of the month Headquarters forsook its sodden tents and moved into the villa, No. 1 Platoon taking over the vineyard, which, though extremely muddy, was at least accessible from the road.

Daily our transport went backwards and forwards between the unit area and a field maintenance centre near **Pesaro**, and between the ammunition point and the unit area, using Route 16 (misnamed the **Sun Track**). This was covered by a film of grease, and at times we might have been driving dodgems at a fun fair for all the control we had over our lorries. Traffic choked the road and passing vehicles flung gobbets of filth at one another. On one side of you were the foothills of the **Apennines**, pale and rain-swept; on the other was the Adriatic, glimpsed sometimes as a grey bosom heaving under wet silk and sometimes as a flurry of white spume. The drive through **Rimini** was hardly calculated to remove gloomy impressions. Much of the town had been crushed and ground into the mud and the rest seemed to have been altered by bombs primarily with a view to giving people pneumonia. Through the gaping doors and windows of once busy factories and once fashionable hotels our lorries threw sludge. Civilians, when they saw us coming, pressed tight against walls to avoid a drenching. On the coast road, just beyond the town, there were concrete gun emplacements camouflaged to look like shops or villas. One of these, with sham windows and a wicked dark

slit for a huge gun, had the word *Gelata* painted above the door. *Gelata* indeed! There was no ice-cream in **Rimini**. None for the barefoot children with pinched faces.

Perhaps, with all this rain and all this ruin, there was an excuse for depression. The heroic failure at **Arnhem**—we had built on **Arnhem**—was only a few days old, and things on our front were going, if not badly, slowly. No, certainly not badly—not badly anywhere. It was just that everything that was happening now—the advance in **Germany**, the bombing of German cities into dust—seemed, after the dramatic victories of early autumn, tame. Then we had been so certain that the Christmas towards which we were journeying and for which we had waited so long would be next Christmas. Now we were not sure.

Not that we were miserable. The word is too strong for our feeling that it was time something else happened—not victories merely but something really good, something heart-warming and exciting. German lorry-drivers had that feeling in 1940.

On 3 October something good happened for over a hundred of us. In our copies of the *NZEF Times* was a statement by Mr. Fraser. Men who had been overseas three years or more, including men of the First, Second, or Third Echelons who had returned to the Division after furlough, would be replaced progressively by men who had not yet had an opportunity to serve overseas and by those who had been overseas only a short time.

Our Fifths and our 'Coconut Bombers' (our Pacific Islanders) went around singing.

Meanwhile the infantry had reached the River Fiumicino, which in fine weather you could wade across in gumboots. Now it was capable of drowning a tall man. Here the advance was halted and the guns on both sides began a slogging match. The Germans, who seemed to have more guns than ever, were using everything from 75 to 210-millimetres, and again shells screamed over the ammunition point or burst near it. Our

drivers stayed in their linen factory and in the evening watched cinema shows in a big upstairs room.

On 11 October the rain stopped and in bright sunshine New Zealand infantry crossed the **Fiumicino**.

The Division had moved from the waterlogged coast sector and its new line of advance ran parallel to Route 9, the Great Emilian Way, which led straight to **Bologna**.

After the rain, the dust. Our drivers worked in a foul yellow fog but once off the road their wheels had only to break the surface to find mud. In the unit area we moved on piecrust.

The rain held off and our troops crossed a river, a canal, and another river. By 19 October infantry and tanks were across the **Pisciatello**, four or five miles beyond the **Fiumicino**.

A new ammunition point was needed, so No. 2 Platoon handed over the old one to No. 3 Platoon, crossed the **Rubicon** (the river **Uso**, below the **Fiumicino**, is identified with the **Rubicon** of history), turned on to Route 9, and halted near **Gambettola**, twelve miles west-north-west of **Rimini**. The large town of **Cesena**, still in enemy hands, was only four or five miles away, and again our ammunition point was surrounded by guns. The next day, the 20th, the guns moved forward.

The rest of us were still at **Cattolica**, sunk deep in routine. It was dull, dusty, and appropriate to the yellowing year—and it was rather pleasant.

The guns moved forward, and the Brigadier called a conference of company commanders. The NZASC was to be reorganised drastically. The 6th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**, 18th Tank Transporter Company, and 1st Water Supply Section were not needed any longer and would be disbanded. The 1st **Petrol Company** and 1st Ammunition Company would each lose a section—their commanding officers were to decide which one.

The next day, while the skies clouded and the wind sang in the vines, we rearranged our loads to meet the new establishment, returning surplus ammunition to **Pesaro**. No. 2 Platoon, which was to be issued with four-tonners for carrying 25-pounder ammunition, was recalled from **Gambettola**, and No. 1 Platoon, which was to be left as it was (our senior platoon smiled rather smugly) took its place. At Viserba Captain Delley broke the bad news to No. 4 Platoon. It was not wanted any more. Some drivers would be used to reinforce other platoons, but the rest, irrespective of how long they had been with the unit, would go to Base.

This was an appalling prospect—Siberia and the salt mines—but there was nothing to be said or done. Theirs was the junior platoon, and the drivers, though very bitter, could not complain of injustice. They stood around and dug their toecaps into the mud; they gathered in angry groups and muttered vague threats, but there was nothing to be said or done.

During the day two New Zealand battalions advanced to the line of the River Savio above **Cesena** and that was as far as they went. A few hours later the Division started to move back to a rest area, leaving its sector to the Canadians.

Early on the 22nd, with needles of rain pricking through the beams of our headlamps and dawn a layer of cold fat resting on the Adriatic, Company headquarters and Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons pulled out from **Cattolica**. No. 4 Platoon left independently from **Viserba** and No. 1 Platoon stayed at **Gambettola** to serve the Artillery, which was to be in the line for another day or two.

We travelled down the coast road as far as the **Iesi** turn-off and then followed Route 76, making good time. Midday found us halted near the bottom of a deep gorge, and we got out our 'Benghazis'. We were in the Fabriano Gorge but the country was all strange to us. Our destination, they were saying, was quite close. We wondered what it would be like and were not hopeful. Rest areas were all the same—the lorries would be drawn up in lines and we should be put in tents. Certainly there would be

parades and inspections, unless the Brigadier found a job for us.

The sun shone weakly, and the mountains were green at the foot and greyish yellow halfway up and purple at the top—parrot colours only more subdued, except at the bottom of the gorge where there was a wedge of sunlight, a meadow like green fire, and a flashing stream.

It was chilly and it was going to rain and we felt homeless. That was how we usually felt after leaving an area in which we had been settled comfortably for weeks; and to halt us just short of our new home (on top of an early breakfast and no wash and a long run) was the surest way of aggravating this feeling. Nor were tempers improved by the certainty of another delay while they made up their minds where they wanted the lorries parked. This was the danger period, this last mile. This was when old friends quarrelled.

‘Take her easy, eh?’

‘Who's driving this bloody truck?’

‘Well, if you feel that way, boy....’

¹ Capt A. E. Thodey; fat-stock buyer; **Morrinsville**; born **Auckland**, 16 Jul 1912.

² Maj R. G. Sloan; caterer; Bray, Eire; born **Timaru**, 15 Oct 1913.

³ Cpl G. J. McKay; storeman; **Dunedin**; born Miller's Flat, Central Otago, 27 Nov 1916.

⁴ Un-serviceable.

⁵ Dvr I. G. Logan; farmhand; Taupo; born **Waipukurau**, 20 Sep 1901.

⁶ Maj R. P. Latimer, m.i.d.; assistant company manager, **Dunedin**; born **Dunedin**, 10 Mar 1915; OC 1 Amn Coy 21 Sep

1944-2 Feb 1945.

⁷ Rev. D. V. de Candole, CF; assistant curate, All Saints' Church, Palmerston North; born Ipswich, England, 7 Sep 1912.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 21 – THE MAIALE'S CASA

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THE MAIALE'S CASA

IT was raining heavily, so the *Maiale's Casa* (which, if it means anything in English, means the Pork's House) was as good a place as another in which to hold an indignation meeting. And No. 1 Platoon's drivers were highly indignant. They were almost, but not quite, speechless with indignation, for the unbelievable had happened. They and not the drivers of No. 4 Platoon were to be sold down the river. Indignation is thirsty work and the elders of the platoon were assembled in council round a huge flagon of *vino bianco*, for which had been exchanged (it was no time for niceties of conduct) an equivalent quantity of engine oil.

The *Maiale*—the rightful tenant of the building, which she shared with an old cart, an Ariel motor-cycle, and the platoon's petrol dump—lay on her immense side and snored, presenting a soiled and impassive ham to her unwelcome guests and allowing the damp weather to draw out and accentuate her naturally powerful effluvia. Her days were numbered also. She, too, was powerless to avert fate.

Indignation or no indignation, the following morning saw the platoon's drivers preparing to evacuate their vehicles. As shopkeepers display their wares they laid out on extended tailboards any small trifles that might be expected to interest the simple villagers: German boots, biscuits, marmalade, old socks. By evening everything had been disposed of, and the next day the vehicles—the new Dodges they had worked so hard to make comfortable and keep efficient—were handed over to No. 4 Platoon. No. 3 Platoon was issued with second-hand 3-ton Dodges and No. 2 Platoon with almost new 4½-ton four-wheel-drive Dodges.

These periodic reshuffles, though we resented them on principle, were good in one way: they enabled drivers who were weary of one another to separate without fuss. If David had shared a 3-ton lorry with Jonathan, seen him morning and night, used the same soap and often

the same towel, the lovely lament might have been for Saul only.

The new hands had been dealt and No. 1 Platoon was no longer in the game. Luckily there was nothing sulky or grudge-bearing in the platoon's nature. Motions of censure had been proposed and carried (as the *Maiale* could witness) and now, free from all cares and disembarrassed of their vehicles, the drivers could concentrate on making their last days with the unit as pleasant as possible. Some of them commandeered the local police station and the upper story of an old warehouse; others found private rooms.

By now 80 per cent. of our drivers were comfortably housed. Over a hundred members of Headquarters, Workshops, and the Ammunition Platoon—were settled in the only large house in the neighbourhood, the residence of a *Marchese*. He was the *padrone* of the village. We saw him sometimes—a worried little man of no great presence—when he drove up in his baby Fiat to find out if the lavatories were blocked, if his potted palms in the conservatory were being respected, and how the drive was getting on.

The villa had pink walls and green shutters and was square, pretentious, and depressing. The *Marchese's* quarterings, surrounded by love-knots and bosomy ladies (lamentably unaphrodisiac), were painted all over the ceilings, but the general effect remained dreary. Perhaps it was because of the stone floors, the gaunt stone staircase, the chilly corridors, and the absence of all furniture except gloomy memories, sad and withering impressions, and the ghosts of a dead grandeur. There was no room in the house of which you could say with certainty: 'That was the children's room'.

Not that we criticised it as a billet. It was dry and there was glass in the windows. As for the atmosphere of the place—well, we brought our own atmosphere with us along with our blankets and 'Benghazis'. The ballroom on the first floor—few of us were affected unpleasantly by the writhing pattern of its gold and purple wallpaper—was just what the padre needed for his recreation centre.

To foregather in this room for a farewell party our former No. 1 Platoon drivers, on a showery evening, made their way towards the villa. They came up the drive between dripping laurels or let themselves in through the side door in the high garden wall. Representatives from Headquarters, Workshops, and No. 3 Platoon had been invited; No. 4 Platoon—no, we must get used to calling it No. 1 Platoon—was away from home. (Between 29 October and 7 November it was employed by the **Eighth Army**, its chief task being to stock a Polish field maintenance centre near **Florence** from depots in the **Arezzo** area. We were now, by the way, sixteen miles south-west of **Iesi**.)

The party, though tinged with sadness, was an unqualified success. When did No. 1 Platoon hold a party that was not? True, the corpulent cherubs on the ceiling had looked down on rarer wines—though the vermouth was not bad and Jock's whisky was excellent—and possibly on choicer viands—though our Field Bakery friends had done even better than usual. Perhaps they had heard wittier and wiser speeches—though none more sincere than the tribute to Sergeant Jock Letham—and perhaps lovelier singing—though members of the Salome Gang were present. What we shall not concede is the possibility of their ever hearing 'Auld Lang Syne' sung with truer sentiment. Some of us, for the shadow of a moment (but perhaps it was Jock's whisky), caught glimpses of Captain Moon and Major Gibson with glasses—not empty.

The party came to its official end and was rushed with what was left of the refreshments to the police station, where it was revived with stimulants. It died horribly in the dog-watch.

Five days later, on the first Sunday of November, while our village street was still smoking with mist after a frosty night, we said goodbye to 'Grumpy', 'Snow', 'Poodle', and George (the last of Captain Moon's chickens), to Captain Thodey and Lieutenant Langley, and to sixty-five others. Some we should see next in New Zealand. Others, and the sooner the better, would rejoin us as reinforcements.

They were driven away in the backs of the strange lorries through

the mist and the sunshine and it was the end of a chapter. The lorries went bumping and lurching down the narrow, knobbly street as long, long ago other lorries—smart Bedfords fresh from Base—had bumped over the bare hills at Ikingi and down towards the salt flats. ‘Righti-o, you jokers! You can spread out that a-ways. Get weavin’....’

The *Maiale* came out of her *casa* to see what the fuss was about. She blinked in the spreading sunlight and was shooed home.

The mist vanished and it was a lovely day, and so was the next and the next. Each morning our windows were blind with frost and we breakfasted in mist, stamping on the iron ground to keep warm. Then came the autumn sunshine, soft and golden like melted honey. Old women sat on stone seats in the open with their knitting and mending and girls took baskets of dirty clothes to the communal wash-place, where the water poured white and icy into an immense trough. They bared their plump brown arms, kilted their skirts, and rubbed and scrubbed in the bright sunshine, chattering like magpies. Golden leaves drifted down from the mountain and the air was sweet with wood smoke and the smell of bonfires and frosty haystacks.

We had decided we were going to like Albacina.

It was small and humble now, but many years ago, so the story went (though how much was history and how much legend we could never discover), streets and splendid buildings had stretched through the whole valley—a great and prosperous city. Then flood or pestilence or some other act of God had swept all away, leaving only a few houses on a hillside. Every old village whose origins are drowned in antiquity has a right to identify itself with lost **Atlantis** (‘I only am escaped alone to tell thee’), but the story of Albacina was probably untrue. Not that it was contradicted by appearances. That look, common to so many Apennine villages, of having rushed into the hills to escape something dreadful was exaggerated here. A few lean and stringy houses had struggled far up the mountain, and others, less athletic, had sought safety in numbers and were huddled together like sheep on the lower slopes. Those of a full

habit, such as the police station, which was prevented by its bulk either from climbing or from huddling, were left miserably at the bottom.

In this part of the village you could walk without bending forward, and it was here, in the neighbourhood of the *barbieria*, the *Maiale's casa*, and the largest of Albacina's four wineshops, that No. 2 Platoon was living. Workshops, by squeezing up a narrow and almost perpendicular lane (Via San Venanzio, if you please), had penetrated to the village square, much to the delight of the children, who, until the novelty wore off, were fascinated by everything our drivers did, whether it was cleaning their teeth, dismantling a gearbox, or making a cup of tea. Only Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons were left out in the cold. There was no room for them in the village and they had to content themselves with some soggy meadows between the villa and Route 76, but they joined us in the evenings.

The people of Albacina, tucked away in the **Apennines**, had seen no fighting. Soldiers therefore were less ugly in their eyes than they would have been if houses had been bombed and shelled, food and bed-clothes stolen, and gardens ground into mud. At first they were shy and cautious but after we had been in the village for a few days they began to warm to us. Perhaps it was because we were polite to the old ladies and gave all our sweets to the children and some crumbs of tobacco to the old gentlemen. Or did they believe we were poor people like themselves who would be with them not only against Nazis and Fascists but also against the larger enemies: exclusion, privilege, and bad faith?

This was the first time we had lived cheek by jowl with Italian villagers and we were able to confirm our suspicions that not all of them were dirty, cunning, and sycophantic. They treated us as guests, and as guests, for the most part, we behaved. The children called us by our first names, and their parents shared their fires with us and their macaroni and *pasta asciutta*. After that it was difficult for the young gentleman who had appropriated a sack of winter potatoes to continue to regard his act as one of pleasant daring and soldierly independence. Chickens and ducks, it was agreed tacitly, were protected birds in Albacina, and pigs

were protected animals.

Was it a beautiful village? Well, it was all higgledy-piggledy, with slatternly rooftops, like the bonnets of old crones, leaning across narrow passages, and houses treading on other houses, and every single thing either back to back, face to face, or edge to edge. The church, like a patient schoolmaster surrounded by bothersome pupils, stood in the middle of all this, square and homely. Not so the *Marchese's* villa. Sulking and exhaling damp odours, it presented the village with a gloomy pink back. In some ways it was like the *Maiale*.

And yet it was beautiful—no form but all the colour in the world and all the charm. It was warm, friendly, happy, and full of children. And more children were coming all the time.

Our duties were light while we were at Albacina. Parades occupied part of the morning and picket duties came round about once a week. The rest of the time was our own. Like most other units we were in the grip of the football fever and one of our earliest cares had been to clear a field. Inter-group matches were in full swing and so was the Freyberg Cup competition. In the latter we got through the first game successfully, beating the 1st **Petrol Company** 15-6, but two days later we were beaten 6-nil by the 2nd Ammunition Company. There was no disgrace in this, for our conquerors went on to reach the final round, which they lost to the 22nd Battalion after a hard game.

Golden, autumn days! The sun, shock-headed like a dandelion, drops gently towards the crossbar. The backs come down the field for the last time and just for a second, as the crowd gathers its breath, you can hear the slap of leather. Knock on! and the whistle squeaks, then shrills out loud and long: time! Laughing and shoving, the crowd moves over to the transport and the tailboards rattle down.

The autumn twilight goes swiftly and it's dark almost before tea is over. The polished stars come out one by one and lorries leave for **Fabriano**, the nearest large town, where there's certain to be an **ENSA** ¹

show or a picture. The card-players wander up to the *Marchese's* ballroom for '500', and the stay-at-homes (old George for one) climb into bed with their pipes and their Auckland Weeklies. But most of us go visiting. Hardly a soul but has a home to go to—a fire, fed sparingly with brushwood by old Momma, to sit by.

' *Cattivo,*' says Poppa, apologising for the sour red wine.

' *E buono, Poppa! E buono!*

But Poppa knows better. To express its wretchedness he places stiffened fingers beneath his chin-stubble and mournfully wags his old head. If it had been good he would have grinned broadly, tilted his chin, narrowed his eyes into an expression of cunning, and screwed a stubby finger into his cheek: ' *Buono! Buono!*

Few of us have 'Sandy' McKay's mastery of the Italian language and once we have commented on the depravity of **Hitler** and **Mussolini**, the beauty of the surrounding country (' *Bella, Poppa, molto bella!*') and the fact that New Zealanders at home drink little wine but great quantities of beer, the topics still at our disposal are not many. This is when the children come to our rescue. For an hour past they have been fidgetting with the desire to show off and now they burst into song. They sing charmingly: ' *Op! Op! Trotta Cavallino*'—eyes bright, small feet tapping—' *Tournerai*', ' *Nel Strada del Bosco*', and our international friend the Woodpecker. Presently they push back the heavy table and start dancing—to the *apparecchio radio* if there is one—otherwise to their own music or to tunes audible only to excited children. Big sister dances with little sister. Clumsy boots shuffle on the stone floor, and shadows, black and monstrous, slip over the white washed walls, orange now in the soft, smoky lamplight. Roasting chestnuts crack and leap on the hearth-stone and Poppa plunges a gnarled hand into the ashes to choose a big one for each guest. ' *Op! Op! Trotta Cavallino....*' The room becomes stifling, faces shine with heat, and black shadows bend over walls and ceiling and brush across the sweet childlike face of the Virgin Mary; and the tiny lamp burning beneath her image glows brighter.

Around our village, like great gentle animals, lay the mountains. The big fellow who slept beside the River Esino, his flank forming one wall of the Fabriano Gorge, was Mount Pietroso. Then came Mount Cimara (that was the one, wasn't it, with the old monastery?), Mount Sella Sporta, and Mount Maliempo.

Naturally we went mountain climbing. It was climbing weather. In a jeep or on a motor-cycle you could get to the top of the big fellow in less than twenty minutes by a rough, winding track that looked like a fire-escape and consisted of corkscrew bends. On foot it was a different matter and you needed the whole afternoon. Fields and orchards struggled with you some of the way, then left you with the underbrush and the golden bushes, where the charcoal-burner, with his little cart and old, snorting donkey, worked from daylight until dark. Higher you went, with the gorge, all splashed with sunlight and great purple shadows, yawning on your left, and Albacina below you like a child's toy (a musical box, say), its bells, far off and flat and chirrupy, mixing in the frosty silence with a sound like blowflies on a sunny window, a faint buzzing sound: lorries going up the gorge. Higher and higher you went with your ears hurting from the cold and your breath coming in steaming puffs as from a kettle. Dabs of vivid pasture (slopping in places through the stone walls that tried to grapple them to the mountain) supported an odd sheep or goat, but these became fewer as you went on, and soon you were among the clouds and the boulders with the mist damp on your face.

Then, when you reached the top, the miracle happened. It was like stepping from the magic beanstalk. The track, instead of looping itself twice round a misty crag and plunging towards sea level, straightened out and led you past fields greener than life and a choppy duckpond rough as a miniature [Atlantic](#) to the enchanted village of Poggio San Romualdo, which clung, literally tooth and nail, to its emerald plateau, while the windy sunshine, blast on blast, broke over it like spray. Nothing banged or rattled in Romualdo (for everything not snugged down as on shipboard had carried away long ago) and there was little for the

wind to play with except poultry feathers. Of these an unlimited quantity was provided by harassed ducks and chickens (perhaps it was their moulting season) and by fierce roosters whose chrysanthemum-like ruffs were giving them the same kind of trouble that old gentlemen have with umbrellas.

This mixture of wind and sunshine was headier than strong drink and it was a marvel that none of our drivers, tearing home to tea down the fire-escape in a borrowed jeep or on the motor-cycle from the *Maiale's Casa*, broke his neck.

Golden, autumn days.... A number of us had leave to **Florence** at this time, but later, when everything starts slipping into the mist, which shall we think of first when we smell wood-smoke, feel windy sunshine, hear bells: the Boboli gardens or a small Apennine village? Bells—what a place it was for them. On feast days and fast days our village was clangorous from dawn till dusk and on ordinary days, of which there were not many, the Angelus had to be dealt with at morning, noon, and sunset, and even the hours had to be rung in, with a few extra strokes for good measure. It was pleasant enough on a gentle autumn evening: it could be maddening at 3 a.m.

Bells in the mist muffled as from drowned ships ... flying bell-notes going down the wind with the last leaves ... bells merry on Sunday morning ... bells jubilant over a white village. Yes, it snowed while we were at Albacina. We woke one day—it was Friday, 10 November—to find everything white. The funny round haystacks, each with a stout pole through its middle, looked like iced cakes; shovelfuls of snow, with soft, fat sighs, were slipping from steep rooftops; children were snowballing in the main street. Joyfully the bells clamoured.

Bells had heralded our coming and bells tolled solemnly on the morning we went away. The village came into the street to see us off. Toni the policeman was there, wearing his shabby grey uniform, his beretta, his two-day beard. Assunta was there—Assunta of the dark eyes and the modest bearing whom the 'Young Doctor' had courted so

assiduously, visiting her house each evening on the pretext of teaching her English. The Monk was there, the pale young novice who had constituted himself Assunta's spiritual father and so infuriated the 'Young Doctor' by refusing him a clear field—a course of conduct that resulted in tremendous trials of patience and in late hours for all three of them. Riccardo of the baggy plus fours, the smart boy, the wide-awake boy, the boy who knew his **Naples** and had been around a bit and could put you in touch with the black market—he was there. And so was Vittoria, Albacina's plump beauty, who was never seen in public bare-headed. Her heavy black hair, which the partisans had cut off to punish her for loving a young Fascist, had been one of the glories of the village in the old days. The little *barbiere* was there and the old fat priest—kind, stubbly, rather dirty—and Maria and young Carlo and all the children. In fact everyone was there.

Only the *Maiale* and the *Marchese* were missing, but that was understandable.

¹ Entertainment National Services Association.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 22 – WHITE CHRISTMAS

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WHITE CHRISTMAS

V2 WEAPONS—stratosphere rockets—were falling on England. ‘What,’ the journalists were asking, ‘has happened to **Hitler**?’ The reunion in the Munich Bierkeller had been postponed: therefore he must be ill, mad, dead, or on his way to **Japan** in a giant submarine. In the east six Allied armies were attacking on a front stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border. Through successive issues of the *Eighth Army News* the immortal but still maiden Jane, wearing brassieres and pantomime tights, fled from the odious Baloney.

On the Adriatic front the situation had changed only a little since our departure.

From Cesena Route 9 runs west-north-west in a straight line to **Bologna**, passing through **Forli**, eleven miles beyond **Cesena**, and then through **Faenza**, a further nine miles up the road. **Forli** had fallen on 9 November and the **Eighth Army** was now firmly on the line of the Lamone River just in front of **Faenza**, the capture of which was the New Zealanders' next task. As early as the 17th our field regiments had passed to the command of the Canadians and started to relieve British artillery near **Forli**, No. 2 Platoon and a section from the Ammunition Platoon opening a point for them the next day at Forlimpopoli, six or seven miles beyond **Cesena** on Route 9. By the 23rd the rest of us had joined them in this area.

It was bleak and windswept and consisted in the main of large, sodden fields separated from one another by narrow lanes. Beside these ran deep ditches, beyond which, further protected against trespassers by barricades of wet manure, lurked farms and cottages. Farmyards provided the only firm standing in the neighbourhood and into these we managed to cram the greater part of our transport. About 80 per cent of the drivers without vehicles found billets of a kind in lofts and storerooms, sharing them with farm implements and humid odours. The

rest lived flinchingly under canvas. The skies wept, the mud slopped into our boots, and it was encouraging to learn that we should be moving to **Forli** as soon as that overcrowded town could accommodate us.

After delays and disappointments—No. 2 Platoon was dispossessed of a large factory on the northern outskirts of the town by the 2nd Ammunition Company, and 5th Corps denied us the **Adolf Hitler** barracks on the southern outskirts—we moved to **Forli** on 1 December.

The billeting officers of 5th Corps must have had a fellow feeling for the old woman who lived in a shoe, for the town was stuffed to bursting point at this time. The streets were crammed with transport and every building with a roof and four walls, or three walls and a bit, sheltered troops—Tommys, Canadians, Indians, New Zealanders, and even Italians. Our own area was pitted with bomb craters and heaped with rubble, but after the engineers had done a few hours' work with a bulldozer we found ourselves quite well off for room. By making use of side-streets we were able to map out a convenient circuit for the ammunition point, and we solved our parking problem by putting No. 2 Platoon in a nearby railway station and lining up the three-tonners beside the pavements like taxis in a cab-rank. Company headquarters and the officers took over a block of undamaged flats (formerly the abode of professors and other gentlemen of consequence) and Workshops moved into a school yard just across the way. By evening our domestic arrangements were complete and we were settled for the winter with a degree of comfort and even elegance that compared more than favourably with the damp and dismal sloppiness of Forlimpopoli.

Although the town made a wonderful target, the best the Germans could do was shell it at night and send over a few fighter-bombers at dusk. They would dash into the ack-ack barrage, bombing and machine-gunning, and slip away at rooftop level. Once an English sergeants' mess was hit by a bomb, but more often than not it was the civilians who suffered in health and property. On one tragic occasion a bomb landed on a crowded church, causing great loss of life.

Route 9, which we used when replenishing the ammunition point from **Gambettola**, was strafed fairly often, but we were lucky. On 2 December three aircraft attacked Lance-Corporal Bill Ingham's ¹ section (No. 2 Platoon) and bullets danced all along the road, but only one vehicle was damaged.

The shelling was hardly more effective than the air raids and if it worried us for a night or two it was because the situation was strange. Lying in bed on a first or second floor, you felt that **Forli** was spread out like a race card with yourself and the hottest favourite equally a target for the impartial pin. Sometimes shells landed close enough for us to hear the tinkle of broken glass, and once all our water-cart drivers were roused in the small hours and ordered to rush their vehicles to the centre of the town where a large three-storied building had been set on fire by shrapnel.

With the capture of **Faenza** the shelling stopped, and that brings us to No. 2 Platoon's small but vital part in this exploit and to the first mention of No. 8 Army Jeep Platoon.

By 8 December the 46th British Division was over the **Lamone** and had established itself firmly on the far side. The New Zealanders were on the right and their task was to cross the river and relieve the British in their newly-won positions as a preliminary to moving against **Faenza**. This meant two jobs for the engineers: building a Bailey bridge in the British area and making a mile-long stretch of road to close a gap in the prospective supply route.

In the small hours of the 8th No. 2 Platoon, which had been standing by with its transport stripped of canopies and canopy rails, loaded rubble from ruined buildings in **Forli**, and by 7 a.m. the last lorry was at the **Adolf Hitler** barracks, where 210 vehicles were being marshalled. The platoon moved off an hour later. The road under construction (the **Lamone** road) started rather more than a mile from the southern outskirts of **Faenza** and ended about the same distance from the new Bailey bridge (Hunter's Bridge).

The area in which the engineers were working was under direct enemy observation and the transport would not have been able to enter it except for a smoke-screen laid by mobile generators. The unloading was done by Basutos, the platoon having its narrowest escape when a Spitfire, harassed by German ack-ack fire, jettisoned its bombs. By four in the afternoon all the vehicles were back in **Forli**, where they reloaded.

On the 9th the platoon was held up for three hours on Route 9 by shelling, and the next day, while New Zealanders crossed the river to relieve the 46th Division, shells landed near the new road, three vehicles from a British armoured brigade being hit.

The rubble convoys were shelled and mortared again on the 11th but No. 2 Platoon's luck held. That day Canadian troops crossed the **Lamone** between **Faenza** and the coast, and our engineers, working behind a thick curtain of smoke, finished Hunter's Bridge, opening the way for the first jeep train to take supplies to the 5th Brigade in its forward positions.

The train was provided by No. 8 Army Jeep Platoon whose story opened in Company headquarters' backyard at two that afternoon under a dull sky. ² There were five sections in the new platoon, each of which was manned by a party from an NZASC unit. We contributed the platoon commander (Second-Lieutenant R. J. Hudson-Airth ³), the senior non-commissioned officer (Sergeant 'Sandy' Sanders ⁴), and a corporal and seven drivers (No. 5 Section). The men stood about in groups, strange to one another in most cases but drawn together by a common desire for information. Little was known except that the platoon was not part of the Division though it would be attached to our Workshops for maintenance and to the 5th Brigade for operations.

They waited in the yard for three-quarters of an hour (fidgetting partly through cold and partly through excitement) and then went to a nearby **Royal Army Service Corps** company and took delivery of twenty jeeps with trailers and two amphibious jeeps. These were driven to an area in **Forli** occupied by Headquarters 5th Brigade, close to which the

platoon was given billets and parking space.

No. 8 Army Jeep Platoon—the first platoon of its kind to be manned solely by NZASC drivers—started work at seven that evening when No. 2 Section under Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth set out to deliver supplies to the **Maori Battalion** and the 23rd Battalion. The drivers returned home at breakfast-time the next morning with nothing to report except that driving conditions were bad and that they had been frozen nearly to death, once while waiting for the down-route to open and again while waiting for shelling to stop.

During the day No. 2 Platoon made its fourth trip with rubble to the **Lamone** road—there were no excitements—and at five in the afternoon the second jeep train moved off. Ten more jeeps with trailers had been drawn that morning and there were twenty-two vehicles in the train. It carried stores and petrol for units of the 5th Brigade, and with it went the six jeeps of No. 5 Section.

A mile and a quarter below **Faenza** the train turned left off Route 9 and travelled by narrow, muddy tracks to **Brickworks Bridge**. This spanned a tributary of the **Lamone** and was a mile and a quarter east of Hunter's Bridge. No traffic had crossed it yet and the approaches were so steep and slippery that three jeeps developed clutch trouble. While this was being attended to the rest of the train was halted on the far side of the bridge by heavy mortar fire. An enemy patrol was reported to be near and when the jeeps moved on every driver had his weapon handy.

Soon the **Lamone** road was reached. It had been built partly across open country, partly over a minor road, and partly through houses, and though it was marked by white tapes and an occasional lantern our drivers were grateful for the artificial moonlight as they crawled over its half-finished surface. Conditions worsened when the train turned on to a narrow road leading north past the 24th Battalion's forward positions, and presently a jeep slid into the ditch, blocking the rest of the train with its trailer.

'Now Jerry began mortaring the area,' said Percy Tristram. ⁵ 'George, Merv, "Buster", and I were together, and Jim and Murray were held up lower down the line by a second jeep that had gone over the bank. For a start we sheltered in ditches and behind our vehicles, but Jerry had the road taped and things became so hot that we nipped over to a house occupied by some of the 24th Battalion. Here we crouched against a wall with stuff splintering all around us. It was half an hour before Jerry eased up enough to let us pull out the stuck jeep and push on. By now our boys had laid down a smoke-screen and this was a great help.

'Soon we ran into more trouble. Jim and Murray, who had caught up with us, swung out rather wide on a blocked corner and put their jeep into a ditch. Murray jumped out just as she started to go over but Jim hung on to the wheel and went all the way with the jeep. Neither of the boys was hurt and they joined each other on the road and guided the rest of the convoy past the danger spot.

'On reaching the turn-off to Hunter's Bridge Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth was told by our provosts that the bridge could not be used as its approaches were unsafe. The convoy was halted and a check taken, and this showed that six jeeps with trailers were missing. After that Second-Lieutenant Miles, ⁶ who was with us on the trip, went back with a provost corporal to help salvage the missing transport and bring out any drivers who were in trouble.

'It was now about twenty minutes since Jim and Murray had gone over the bank, and in the meantime a provost had come along and told them that Jerry's forward troops were only 250 yards away. They hadn't known this and they lost no time in doing what the provost suggested—getting the hell out of it back to the house in the 24th's lines. It was about 100 yards down the road, and here they were checked in by the picket and given a cup of tea beside a roaring fire. After they had been there five minutes a patrol came in and said it had been a nightmare getting past the corner by the ditched jeep. Jerry was right on to it with spandaus and mortars. Out in the road later the boys met Second-

Lieutenant Miles who told them it was too dangerous to try to do anything about the stuck jeep and suggested they hop a ride back to **Forli**. Altogether six trailers and two jeeps had to be abandoned, but we got four of the trailers back some days later and one of the jeeps—less front wheels, headlamps, and so on. The rest were destroyed by the enemy.

‘By this time it had been decided that what was left of the convoy should try to go forward by an old 46th Division route. There was an hour's wait while a bulldozer did what it could to fix the track, and it was eleven before we got to Headquarters 5th Brigade. From here the jeeps were guided to their unloading points and later the convoy reassembled. As the down-route was not due to open for another sixteen hours or so the infantry provided us with accommodation and we were able to get some sleep. We set out for home at two in the afternoon of the 13th, reaching **Forli**, after a long hold-up near the **Lamone** road, at half past five in the evening. What a trip! It had taken us a day and a night to do a job we could have done in a couple of hours under normal conditions.’

It had been a bad trip, and others of the same sort were in prospect. Against the jeep drivers were mud, cold, darkness, the nearness of the enemy, and the bad state of their transport (the previous owners had neglected it shamefully). For them were the skill of the Divisional provosts and the heroism of the engineers. On this subject our No. 2 Platoon drivers could speak with authority.

For five days now they had watched the building of the **Lamone** road under fire and inevitably they compared their own task, which consisted of slipping in one by one and unloading, with that of the engineers. The contrast was especially marked on the morning of the 13th when Shermans of the 4th Armoured Brigade started to move up to the **Lamone** under cover of a smoke-screen. While shells, mortars, and rockets from *nebelwerfers* came through and over the smoke-screen, the tanks squeaked and rattled along the new road, crushing beneath their great tracks pieces of marble mantlepiece, ornamental tiles, bits of

hand-basin—things people had built and bought and lived with. Some mortar bombs landed close but none of the drivers was hurt.

By noon eighty Shermans had entered the 5th Brigade area for the attack on **Faenza**, and it was this move that delayed the jeep train.

The next day—the 14th—was the last one on which the rubble convoys were needed. There was heavy shellfire while some of our lorries were unloading, and two Basutos and one engineer were wounded.

At eleven that night 427 guns opened fire on the **Eighth Army** front and the attack started. The plan was for the 56th Division, now in the New Zealanders' old area, to simulate a crossing of the **Lamone** while the real attack was launched west of it by the New Zealand Division (right), the 10th Indian Division (centre), and the **Polish Corps** (left). Our troops were to outflank **Faenza** and capture **Celle**, a little village a mile and a quarter west of the northern outskirts of the town.

All went well, and by breakfast-time the next morning, when the down-route opened to allow the jeep train to pass through with wounded, **Celle** was in our hands. There was bitter fighting on the 15th, but the next day saw the Germans withdrawing from **Faenza** and by the morning of the 17th it was clear.

The jeep train could travel in daylight now and use Route 9 as far as the town. On the afternoon of the 18th nine jeeps under Lieutenant G. H. Littlejohn ⁷—Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth could not be expected to command every convoy himself so our subalterns took it in turn to relieve him—travelled from **Forli** to Headquarters 5th Brigade in an hour and a half, which seemed quite wonderful. On the way home a shell landed beside Lieutenant Littlejohn's jeep and peppered him with shrapnel in the left side, making him the unit's first battle casualty in **Italy**.

By now New Zealand infantry had reached the **Senio River** a few miles above **Faenza**, and on the afternoon of the 19th six jeeps, each

carrying a gun crew, helped to take a company of the 27th Machine Gun Battalion into the line between **Celle** and the river. That night the machine-gunners fired in support of a 6th Brigade attack, the object of which was to widen the **Senio** line by clearing enemy pockets from the east bank. The attack succeeded and only one strongpoint managed to hold out.

Main headquarters 5th Brigade moved to **Faenza** on the 20th, and on the 21st No. 8 Army Jeep Platoon was told that it was not wanted any longer as the brigade could now be supplied in the ordinary way. Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth called his drivers together and thanked them for what they had done; they said it had been a pleasure to work under him. The rest of the day was spent in cleaning and checking the transport before handing it back to the RASC. Some drivers were glad but most were sorry—jeeps are pleasant things to handle and the platoon had begun to develop character.

But it was too early—and the drivers should have known this—to start grieving or rejoicing. The next morning Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth was warned that his platoon would probably be attached to the 4th Armoured Brigade, and on the 23rd, after half the drivers in each section had been replaced by others from the same units, Nos. 3, 4, and 5 Sections were posted respectively to the 20th, 19th, and 18th Armoured Regiments, which were then in **Faenza**, and Nos. 1 and 2 Sections and the administrative staff joined us in **Forli**.

The next day was Christmas Eve.

It was the best Christmas we ever had in the Army. After breakfast—the cooks had been engaged half the night with more important matters and it was a sketchy meal—we paraded outside the officers' mess, with all the bells in **Forli** ringing their heads off, and marched through the snow to the Esperia Theatre. Here an NZASC carol service was conducted by Padre Holland. The NZASC Band was on the stage and for once in our lives we made no bones about joining in the singing. Before dismissing us the Brigadier congratulated all units on a year's good work and told us

to relax and enjoy ourselves.

It was excellent advice and we took it. Each platoon had made arrangements for a sit-down dinner, and when everything was ready and the great hour arrived how gay and Christmas-like the rooms looked, their walls bright with flags and coloured streamers, their tables with oranges and silver paper and handsome chestnut and amber beer bottles!

The dinner, too, was perfect. There was roast turkey and roast chicken with stuffing, roast pork with apple sauce, mashed and roast potatoes, and cauliflower, cabbage, and green peas. Afterwards there was plum pudding with hard sauce, fruit, nuts, and chocolates. To drink there was beer, vermouth, and *vino bianco*.

Meal times were staggered to allow the Major, who had worked as hard as anyone to give us a good Christmas, to visit each mess and make the looked-for reference to the decorations, the cooking, and the year's work. No one was forgotten. Our drivers from the Jeep Platoon, bringing a present of wine with them, had dinner with us, and those who had not been able to stay over Christmas Eve were invited to stay the night.

When no one could eat another scrap and all the toasts had been drunk there was community singing, and this was followed later by solos. Presently No. 3 Platoon opened its bar to allcomers. Wise men took a turn in the astringent air or sneaked away to lie down for an hour while the afternoon, wobbling a little, slipped into evening. Evening stayed long enough to have just three vermouths and it was night.

By now **Forli** was making a considerable noise—indeed, it might have been heard in **Faenza** if **Faenza** had been making less noise on her own account. Everyone was talking at the top of his voice, and talking, for the most part, confidentially—for any number of rosy partitions were dividing even the most crowded streets and rooms into little private worlds. But speech is inadequate to express deep feeling—song's the thing. Fortunately everyone was in perfect voice, and that being so

everyone who could secure an audience—one was enough, fifty was perfect—burst out singing: not bawling, of course, but just letting it come, sort of smooth and easy. A great evening! One or two of the boys seemed to be getting a bit on the way and that was funny, for the stuff was quite extraordinarily easy to take—not a headache in a hogshead, not a fight or a word out of place. Definitely a good brew! It made you feel you loved everyone and it freed you from a sort of what-ye-may-call-it, so that you were able to tell your friends how you felt about them and say what you really thought about the platoon—the ol' platoon. 'Strornly easy to take....

Eleven and ten got a bit joggled up and it was midnight. Bell notes boomed and tinkled in the frosty dark, and the tall tower in St Andrew's Square, the tallest tower in **Forli**, which had seen so many Christmasses come and go, brooded above everything—the trampled snow in the streets, the drifts piled high at the intersections, and the smooth expanses on the rooftops speckled all over with black smuts from furiously-puffing drip-burners; the Dorchester Club in the Aeronautical College and the huge, winged statue outside it (which someone, doubtless in the name of decency, had splashed with paint), and Signor Becchi's stove factory where the showers were; the Metro Theatre and the hundreds of little homes of the patient and unconsulted; the rows of lorries and tanktransporters, and the stacks of ammunition in the side-streets, and the turkey bones and parsons' noses and paper streamers; and the empty beer bottles and half-empty glasses of vermouth, and the unwashed dixies, and the noise of people singing and being sick, and all the other manifestations of a joyous and remembering spirit paying homage to the World's Birthday. *Buon Natale!*

It is impossible to say what made this particular *Natale* so very *buono*. Perhaps it was the snow. The quantities of food, of warmth, of wine, of everything. Or perhaps we felt in our hearts that this was the last milestone of its kind in our long journey.

But did we feel that? The news was anything but satisfactory. It told of delay and loss, and even more disturbing than its content were the

doubts it gave rise to, the possibilities it opened up. Field-Marshal von Rundstedt's drive in the Ardennes was now over a week old, but before it started nothing had been written in the papers or said over the air to suggest that he was capable of launching an offensive on this scale. All the talk had been of collapse and crumbling morale and a quick end. Small wonder if we were puzzled and disconcerted.

Not that we imagined they had deliberately misled us—and by They we meant the Heads, the Experts, the Very Important Persons who were for ever stepping in and out of Lockheed Lodestars with brief-cases—but we were beginning to believe, rightly or wrongly, that They ‘just said things’.

Only our own front was making no demands on the public attention. The armies had settled down on either bank of the **Senio**, and the New Zealand battalions, with **Forli** and **Faenza** as winter bases, began working on a system that enabled each of them to spend regular periods in reserve.

The old year drew quietly to a close.

On New Year's Eve, anticipating a seasonal demand for flares, fireworks, and machine-gun ammunition, the Major posted a strong picket in the unit area, and the Jeep Platoon drivers, anticipating a demand for jeeps, took precautions also. Already they had lost one trailer and it was nothing to wake up in the morning to find a battery ground flat.

During the fighting for **Faenza**, and afterwards while the front was settling down, we had been fairly busy—before Christmas we had increased our surplus holding of 25-pounder ammunition from 14,000 to 18,000 rounds besides carrying out some heavy dumping programmes—but we had little to do in the first week of January and later we had even less. This was because a rationing system had been introduced, ammunition ear-marked for the Italian theatre having been diverted to **Greece**. Supplies of 3-inch gun, tank, mortar, and small-arms

ammunition were affected and the allowance of 25-pounder ammunition per gun per day was fixed first at six and a half rounds and then at five rounds. As a result we were idle most of the time, and the day came when No. 2 Platoon's vehicles had to be sent for a short run to keep them in trim.

Only the jeep drivers were working at all regularly and their task, after 30 December, had been simplified by the withdrawal to **Forli** of the 18th Armoured Regiment. This enabled the five sections to take it in turn to supply the two regiments remaining in the line. Even so the drivers earned every penny they got. ⁸

During late December and throughout January the 19th and 20th Armoured Regiments were employed in giving close support to the 5th and 6th Brigades and some of their Shermans were stationed in the forward defended localities. The jeep drivers had to supply these with ammunition and anything else that was needed—petrol, food, charcoal, rubble, cigarettes, beer. Also they did odd jobs—running messages, evacuating wounded, delivering mail, taking shower parties to **Forli**. Much of this work was done within range of enemy machine guns and some of it under direct observation. Jeeps of No. 3 Section, while serving the 20th Armoured Regiment between 23 and 30 December, came under shell, mortar, or spandau fire (and sometimes all three at once) on five trips out of six.

Nor when the day's work was done could they count on a sound sleep. **Faenza** was shelled nearly every night and sometimes it was bombed. There were no casualties, though, and the damage to the transport was slight.

On 30 December the jeep drivers who had been living with us in **Forli** moved to billets in the 2nd Ammunition Company's area in another part of the town where there was more room, and the next day Second-Lieutenant Hudson-Airth handed over his command to Captain A. B. Cottrell (2nd Ammunition Company). ⁹

By now jeep driving was an occupation almost as rigorous as exploring the South Pole. The weather was so cold that every bomb crater was covered with two or three inches of ice, and clothes put out to dry became as stiff as buckram in a quarter of an hour and long icicles formed on them. The taps of the water carts froze solid, and as soon as you thawed them out with hot water they froze again. On 20 January 40 degrees of frost were recorded in **Faenza** and 36 degrees in **Forli**.

Other jeep drivers—Don Rs for instance—were able to improvise cabs or all-weather equipment for their protection, but the Jeep Platoon had to keep its transport cleared for action and any excrescences that interfered with vision or with carrying capacity were frowned on. The drivers muffled themselves up like Eskimos but it was impossible to keep warm while driving—hands became numb after a few minutes and wherever there was an inch of bare flesh the frost bit and stung like iodine.

Driving was not only unpleasant—it was difficult and dangerous. The main roads were kept fairly clear of snow but side roads and rubble tracks were often in a terrible state. When the hard frosts came, sludge froze in solid lumps and ruts became knife-edged, cutting and tearing tires. Sometimes a slight thaw was followed by a day's drizzle, and then ice turned to mud, enabling jeep tires to pick up nails and pieces of shrapnel with the infallibility of magnets. No thaw lasted long, however, and again the jeeps would be jumping and bucketing among the ruts.

But our drivers did their job and they did it well. While the platoon was serving the 4th Armoured Brigade—in January alone 10,311 miles were covered—there was only one road accident, a minor collision in which no one was hurt.

At the end of the month Captain Cottrell relinquished his command to Second-Lieutenant G. R. Colston (2nd Ammunition Company), ¹⁰ and on the same day No. 8 Army Jeep Platoon ceased to exist and the 8th New Zealand Jeep Platoon was formed as a component of the NZASC and

placed on our war establishment. In effect it was one of our platoons.

The rest of us had spent January very pleasantly. There was little or no work, but who wanted work when the streets were full of snow and the temperature below freezing point? Several times a week we had lunch or dinner at the **NAAFI's** Dorchester Club—a lengthy business this because we used to eat two meals so that we could drink two glasses of beer—and in the afternoons and evenings we joined the long queue in front of the Metro Cinema. We swept snow from our ammunition and we went for walks. We constructed drip-burners of a new and more lethal pattern and in the evenings sat round them or round Signor Becchi's stoves, taking, it may be, a glass of something—a little sweet albano or some vermouth and *vino bianco* mixed. And as we sipped we talked reverently of the progress of the Russians. By the end of January they were only ninety miles from **Berlin**.

Meanwhile, less dazzlingly but quite as bravely, American and British forces had bitten into the Ardennes salient, cut it in half, struck at its base, and finally driven von Rundstedt's panzers back into the Reich under a battering from the air that eclipsed even the massacre in the Falaise Gap.

And the Americans had landed on Luzon.

No wonder we were able to say goodbye to our members of the Tongariro draft (there were 112 of them and we started saying goodbye at the beginning of February) in the quiet confidence that we should all meet in New Zealand before next Christmas. ¹¹

On 2 February Major Latimer handed over his command to an officer who was known, if not through personal contact then through story and legend, to everyone in the unit—Major Coutts. Those who had served under him before were quick to notice that he had lost none of his old thoroughness. One of his first acts was to subject the transport to a frosty scrutiny. He could find little fault with it.



*Burnt-out ammunition
dump, Vairano*

Burnt-out ammunition dump, Vairano



*Sangro mud was now
our element*
—page 323

‘ Sangro mud was now our element’ — page 323



Unbeaten that season—Ammunition Company football team

Unbeaten that season—Ammunition Company football team



Water point at Hove Dump

*Water point at **Hove Dump***

Saying goodbye to the Tongariro draft occupied the greater part of our nights and days for a week. The train was signalled but it didn't come, and the fact that the refreshment room was open all the time was perhaps a mixed blessing. No. 3 Platoon steadied itself long enough to hand in its Dodges and take delivery of thirty-three, six-wheel, 6-ton Macks, and our 'Tongariros' long enough to parade for the Brigadier. ('You're hanging together well, soldier,' he remarked mildly to a suffering member of No. 1 Platoon.) Three days later 105 reinforcements, mostly old members of the unit who had left in November, joined us from Base, and the next morning we cleared our throats for the last time, said 'Well ...' for the last time, and grinned and waved with a rather overdone heartiness as the 1st **Supply Company's lorries whisked our 'Tongariros' from sight. Sad though it was to lose them we gave a sigh almost of relief. Tottering on the brink of the platform and dashing in and out of the refreshment room had unnerved everyone.**

A good grievance came opportunely to restore our morale—nineteen members of the disbanded Tank Transporter Company joined us to take charge of the new Macks. As few of us would admit that we were incapable of driving and maintaining, or of learning to drive and maintain, anything on wheels, their intrusion was resented bitterly, though the wisdom of employing drivers who were already experienced in the handling of heavy vehicles was not questioned. Only when we

learned that no one who had a claim to stay with the unit would be sent away to make room for the newcomers were our feelings mollified.

When these excitements and distractions were over we settled down to enjoy a succession of sunny, frosty days. Business was not as slack as it had been but it was by no means brisk.

There were a few long trips during February. Early in the month Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons moved the Divisional Cavalry to an area near **Fabriano**, where the newly-formed 9th Brigade, of which it was to be an infantry unit, was assembling for training. The night, of course, was spent at Albacina, the villagers holding a dance. From then on the new brigade needed training ammunition from time to time and it was a pleasure to supply it. Towards the end of the month our Engineers, with the help of No. 4 Platoon transport, built several bridges across the **Lamone** for practice. Some of the drivers were not strange to this work, sixteen lorries from the platoon having stood by in **Faenza** between 19 and 21 December with bridging material for the 7th Field Company. The Jeep Platoon, meanwhile, was still serving the 4th Armoured Brigade, but the work was easier now that winter was nearly over.

The war, too, was nearing its end. Budapest had fallen after a long, bloody battle and the Allies were ashore at **Iwo Jima**. **Turkey** was in the war on our side and so was Egypt, Breslau was going to pieces brick by brick, the Russians were only an hour's drive from **Berlin**, troops of the American First and Ninth Armies were across the Roer, Field-Marshal Montgomery was driving towards the Rhine with more than 1500 tanks, and **Germany** was dying in terrible, convulsive pain. It was like cancer of the stomach on a planetary scale.

February had ended already and on 3 March we set out for Albacina, leaving detachments from No. 3 Platoon and the Ammunition Platoon to serve the Artillery until its relief was completed, No. 2 Platoon to return our 25-pounder ammunition to **Ravenna** and help the Engineers with bridging demonstrations, and a section of the Jeep Platoon to serve the 18th Armoured Regiment, which was to stay in the field for another ten

days under the command of the Poles. The relief was being carried out by the 5th Kresowa Division.

It was still dark when we turned into Route 9 and the people of **Forli** were just beginning to stir.

By two in the afternoon we had reached our village.

Our village hadn't changed and the people were still fond of us. A sort of frilliness had begun to cover hedges and fruit trees and the mountain was looking fine. The *Maiale* had survived Christmas and was still in her *casa*, and while we were moving into the villa the *Marchese* turned up in his baby Fiat to fuss about the electriclight bill and the plumbing. One of the toilets had been blocked during our last visit.

We were at Albacina for three and a half weeks and it was a happy time. The load-carriers did a few jobs and Workshops laboured to bring the Jeep Platoon's transport up to the mark before the next move. Attached drivers were returned to their parent units, and by the end of the month, forty-six reinforcements having joined us on the 27th, the platoon was manned entirely by our own officers and men—Captain Boyce, Second-Lieutenant Colston, and sixty-two other ranks. Also it had been reorganised on a basis of three sections of ten jeeps and given its own administrative vehicles.

We played football, beating the 1st **Petrol Company** 12-nil, drawing with the 25th Battalion 9-all, and losing to the 2nd Ammunition Company 15-3. We played hockey as well, beating 1st **Petrol Company** 5-3, 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** 5-nil, and 2nd Ammunition Company 4-1, which made us winners of the NZASC competition. We brushed up our drill and as a result did not disgrace ourselves at an NZASC ceremonial parade for the GOC and **Major-General H. K. Kippenberger**. For the rest we did picket duties, practised marksmanship on an improvised range in the hills behind the *Marchese's* villa, amused ourselves, kept out of trouble.

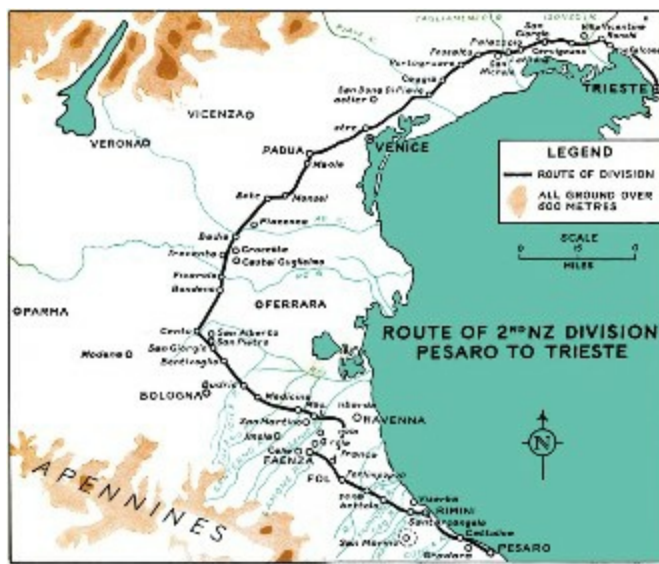
While we were doing these things the Allies crossed the Siegfried

Line, raced for the Rhine bridges, captured **Cologne**, crossed the Rhine at Remagen between Bonn and Coblenz, swept the Germans from the Saar, crossed the Rhine in three more places and drove into the Ruhr. Meanwhile Danzig had fallen and the Russians had entered **Austria**. For the wretched Germans it was an agony unparalleled in history. 'What will you have? quoth God; pay for it and take it.'

Some of the days were hot but the nights were still cold, and the drivers on picket duty were grateful when the old lady who worked in the garden came down in the evening to light a fire at the gate of the *Marchese's* villa. In the evenings the trees and brushy hedges were alive with birds and full of trapped sunlight, and the air was moist with coming or past showers, and there was apt to be a rainbow, often a double one, balancing between two mountains.

The wineshops opened while it was still light, and after tea people would go into them in groups, shaking off children at the door, and order a small jug of vermouth, which was very expensive, and a large one of white wine, which was not cheap, and mix them together. Then it was pleasant, with the children calling in the street and the cool evening coming in through the window and the air not yet thick with voices and foul smoke, to take a glass. Then it was pleasant to have your say. 'They won't fix those bloody jeeps—no show in the world!' 'The old Jerry, he hangs on, eh?' 'Jane's gone off a lot lately.'

Daily there was more heat in the sun, and the tide of spring broke over the country like green surf, with a flying of green foam and a bursting of white spray and a scudding of amber mist. The birds ran shrieking through the hedges and it was Passion Week, the time of the world's ransom and of spring offensives.



Route of 2nd New Zealand Division: Pesaro to Trieste

¹ Cpl W. O. Ingham; MM, m.i.d.; bus driver; **Auckland**; born **Albany, Auckland**, 10 Mar 1917.

² The chief appointments on 2 December were: Company HQ, Maj R. P. Latimer, 2 Lt M. L. O'Sullivan (posted 29 May 44), Lt L. A. Cropp (posted 28 Aug 44), WO II A. L. Salmond (posted 2 Sep 43); No. 1 Platoon, Capt A. R. Delley, 2 Lt A. K. Catran (posted 1 Oct 44); No. 2 Platoon, Capt B. J. Williams (posted 23 Aug 44), 2 Lt C. B. P. Hendrey (posted 20 Jun 44); No. 3 Platoon, Capt G. Dykes, Lt H. G. Littlejohn (posted 28 Aug 44); Workshops, Capt A. G. Morris; Ammunition Platoon, Lt H. W. Boyce, 2 Lt K. G. Miles (posted 18 Jul 44), 2 Lt R. J. Hudson-Airth (posted 20 Sep 44).

The following had left us: Capt K. E. May (posted to Advanced Base, 18 Apr 44), Capt C. H. Haig (posted to Base Training Depot, 7 Aug 44), Lt R. K. Davis (posted to 1 NZ **Petrol Company**, 26 Jan 44), Lt K. L. Richards (posted to 1 NZ **Petrol Company**, 17 Apr 44).

³ 2 Lt R. J. Hudson-Airth; electrical salesman; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 13 Feb 1911.

⁴ Sgt T. R. D. Sanders; farmer; Rissington, Hawke's Bay; born Darlington, England, 24 Mar 1915.

⁵ Dvr P. A. Tristram; wire worker; **Wellington**; born **Hamilton**, 2 Feb 1923.

⁶ Maj K. G. Miles; clerk; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 10 Jan 1921; Regular soldier.

⁷ Maj G. H. Littlejohn; student; born NZ, 24 Dec 1922; wounded 18 Dec 1944.

⁸ No. 5 Section spent a week with the 18th Armoured Regiment in December and after that it took turn and turn about with No. 4 Section in serving the 19th Armoured Regiment. This was under the command of the 5th Brigade, with one squadron on a gunline, one giving close support to forward infantry, and one in reserve at **Faenza**.

⁹ Capt A. B. Cottrell, MC; carrier; **Rotorua**; born **Rotorua**, 25 Mar 1915.

¹⁰ Lt G. R. Colston; clerk; **Dunedin**; born **Dunedin**, 5 Jul 1916. He was posted to 1 Ammunition Company on 19 February.

¹¹ Among them were Maj Latimer, Lt Catran, and 2 Lt Hudson-Airth. Sgt Denny Wells was commissioned in the field on 13 February, his request to remain with No. 2 Platoon being granted, and on the 23rd we were joined by 2 Lts W. A. Brown, R. W. W. Green, and F. M. Hill. Capt Morris, who had left us on 14 December, was replaced by 2 Lt E. G. Legge (posted 14 Nov 44), and while he was away ill Workshops was commanded first by our old friend 2 Lt Noel Campbell (detached from 1 **Petrol Company**) and later by another **Petrol Company** officer, 2 Lt K. R. Drummond.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 23 – ‘THY CHASE HAD A BEAST IN VIEW’

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JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(1) THE RIVERS

(1) The Rivers

WE left our adopted village on Good Friday evening with the bells ringing and the sunlight slanting across the mountain. We went first to an area a mile east of **Forli, but it was unsatisfactory, and Easter Monday found Company headquarters, Workshops, and the Jeep Platoon in a large white building, once a children's clinic, on the western outskirts of the town. Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons were in paddocks a little distance away, and No. 1 Platoon, which had stayed behind to uplift the Divisional Cavalry, was still in Albacina. Its holding of 25-pounder ammunition had been brought forward by the other lorries and dumped in an area nine miles north of **Forli** to form the nucleus of an ammunition point. This was opened by the Ammunition Platoon later in the day. ¹**

The Division was again under the command of 5th Corps, and that night the 5th and 6th Brigades relieved the 11th British Infantry Brigade on the line of the **Senio, north of **Faenza**. The situation had changed hardly at all since the beginning of March except that the ground was now dry and firm.**

During the next few days, while our infantry edged up to the south stopbank of the **Senio, the start line for the coming offensive, the drivers of the load-carriers fetched large quantities of ammunition from **Ravenna** and **Cesena**, delivering some of it to the gun positions.**

Those who were living with Headquarters in the children's clinic had little to do and the warm spring days passed slowly. There was none of that tense excitement that had gripped us before earlier campaigns, and the general feeling, perhaps, was one of yawning impatience for the last battle to begin so that we could finish a long, dirty job.

No one was allowed in **Forli**, and every evening, to pass the time away, drivers gathered at the clinic gate to exchange badinage with the *signorine* and draw conclusions from the great stream of vehicles flowing towards the river. Long after we had gone to bed the highway was loud with traffic and we would say to ourselves between sleep and waking: 'Tomorrow, perhaps'.

The day dawned like any other but by breakfast-time conjecture had crystallised into certainty. Early in the afternoon, exactly when we were expecting them, heavy bombers appeared. They came over twenty-one at a time, flying in arrowhead formation, and the roar of their engines never stopped. Sometimes they were almost transparent, like a shoal of whitebait swimming upstream, and sometimes they caught the sunlight and glittered in the clear sky like twenty-one diamonds. And with them came innumerable fighters.

Later in the day the barrage started and for a long while we listened to the big guns, thudding, thudding, thudding.

'The Two Platoon boys,' we said, 'they'll be in it.' (Four days earlier No. 2 Platoon, after leaving its ammunition with No. 3 Platoon, had passed to the command of the 5th Field Park Company and moved to a farmyard near **Villafranca**, five miles north of **Forli**. The next day it had been sent to **Ravenna** to load bridging.)

In the evening the YMCA Mobile Cinema showed a picture in the grounds of the children's clinic. It was a musical picture in colour and the attendance was large. In the darkness beyond the screen—ages ago it was African darkness and James Cagney—the horizon glowed and flickered, and you could hear, growling beyond Betty Grable's top notes, tanks moving forward to the **Senio**, night-fighters bolting through the sky, guns thundering.

It was Monday, 9 April.

On 9 April, at half past nine in the morning, Captain Williams—this

was Jack Williams who had once been our quartermaster—called his men together to tell them the story: ²

Well, it was tonight, and five bridges were going across the **Senio**: Woodville high-level and low-level (100-foot and 30-foot), Raglan high-level and low-level (100-foot and 60-foot), and Seymour low-level (40-foot). The Woodville bridges were the 7th Field Company's job, and the material for the high-level one would be carried by No. 1 Bridging Train (eighteen vehicles under Captain Williams). The 5th Field Park Company would do the Raglan bridges, and the material for the high-level one would be carried by No. 2 Bridging Train (seventeen vehicles under Second-Lieutenant Denny Wells ³).

The Eighth Army attack was a three-division job—8th Indian Division on the right, New Zealanders centre, 5th Kresowa (Polish) Division left—and the plan was to cross the **Senio** and get and hold a good bridgehead over the next river—the **Santerno**—in one operation. (Then, though Captain Williams didn't say this, the **Fifth Army** was to drive through the mountains to **Bologna**.)

The New Zealand infantry would go in at twenty minutes past seven and it was thought that the first bridging lorry would be needed an hour later. Bridging sites and assembly areas were likely to come under fire, and it was up to every man to see that he had with him his tin hat and his emergency field dressing. There would be a man with a first-aid kit in each train; if both drivers of a lorry were knocked out the second driver of the nearest lorry was to take over. If a lorry broke down it would be put on tow at once or its load transferred to an empty vehicle. Whatever happened the loads would have to be available when they were wanted. The Divisional Cavalry was providing a covering party but it was up to everybody to look after himself. Keep Bren guns, tommy guns, rifles, etc., handy. It was believed the ditches were clear of mines but it was not known for certain. Well, that was about all....

Morning and afternoon passed slowly. Loads had been checked and rechecked and the moving parts of the bridging oiled and greased. The

lorries were in perfect order and there was nothing more to do except think about the night's job.

Everyone knew in theory exactly what it would be like and everyone was familiar with the mechanics of bridging. While practising with the engineers during the winter our drivers had learnt to distinguish between grillage and panels, decking and skin-decking. They knew in what order the materials would be called for and how long it would take to unload them. The scene was plain in their minds.

After the bulldozer had carved a passage through the stopbank the first two lorries in the train, or the first three perhaps, would go forward to the bridge site. Swiftly but without bustle, accessories, timber, and base-plates would be off-loaded and stacked near the river's edge, and soon, with beautiful obedience, as though it were being not built but ordered into position, the bridge would begin to take shape. It would be dark and there would be little noise—only the ring of steel and the quiet orders of officers and sergeants. In the background, dim shapes in the darkness, creaking and grumbling, bulldozers would be at work on the approaches, biting, shoving, lifting....

But that was the picture under a quiet sky miles from the front line. How would it be with the enemy only 1000 yards away? How would it be with flares, *nebelwerfers*, mortars, bursts from spandaus, lorries blazing? The drivers remembered what the engineers had told them: 'She'll probably be a fair bastard'. This was in Captain Williams's mind when he wrote in his diary: 'Hope none of my lads gets hurt tonight'.

The silver procession of heavy bombers was a comforting sight. No. 2 Platoon's drivers were in a better position to see it than the rest of us and by three in the afternoon they had counted 1600 aircraft. When the barrage started they heard the crack and bark of the 25-pounders and the deep, mocking guffaws from the heavy guns, and they said:

“Sport” Williams reckons the artillery's laying on one hundred and forty thousand shells for the first barrage.’

'Hell, that's got [Alamein](#) beat!'

'They reckon it's going to be the biggest artillery show ever seen on any front of this size anywhere in the [Mediterranean](#).'

Tea was a hurried meal and appetites were only moderate.

At twenty minutes past five, No. 1 Train, led by Captain Williams in his jeep, pulled out of the farmyard into the Hogg route, which led to an assembly point near [Granarola](#). This was six miles northwest by north of [Villafranca](#) and about a mile and a half from the Woodville bridge sites. No. 2 Train moved out under Second-Lieutenant Wells at ten to six and went to the 5th Field Park Company's area, three miles up the Hogg route. The verges of the road were broken, the hedges battered, and the fields on either side of them white with dust.

No. 1 Train, led by six 7th Field Company vehicles carrying low-level bridging, reached the assembly point at half past six. By then the bombardment had been going on for more than three hours and the noise was deafening and almost stupefying. The countryside was alive with leaping flames and the ground beat underfoot like a pulse.

From the assembly point it was impossible to see the river, but its position was marked clearly by a great, ragged curtain of yellow smoke, among which tall columns of a darker shade aspired and dissolved. Into this dreadful pall fighter planes dived continually, and all the time, high above the tumult, like specks of soot supported by an uprush of hot air, two spotting planes hovered. As far as our drivers could see there was no enemy ack-ack fire.

When the sun was on the horizon the guns stopped firing and Wasps and Crocodiles, ⁴ crouched below the south stopbank, went into action with flame-throwers. Like small, dark dragons—some of our drivers had climbed a haystack and could see them—the Wasps breathed long, slim jets of fire, which arched over the [Senio](#), faltered or seemed to falter for an instant, and then fell in gold sheets on the far stopbank. A violet

haze rose over the river, darkening to purple as it mounted and glowing with the heat and fire inside it.

The artillery was silent, fighter-bombers flew up and down above the stopbanks through the smoke, and the infantry crossed the river. It was now twenty-two minutes past seven. The guns fired again, flashing more brilliantly than before, though only two minutes had passed and there was plenty of light left.

Soon German prisoners came down the road, their hands locked behind their heads and their safe-conduct passes clutched in their fingers. There were about seventeen in the first batch and they looked like men who had seen the Last Judgment. Some were smiling, twisting their mouths to express a kind of idiot good humour, but their eyes were empty and quite stupid. One or two of our drivers, curious to hear them speak, called ‘*Buono sera*’, and they answered, most of them, with a sort of eager gulp: ‘*Buono sera! Buono sera!*’ They had been fine soldiers once, otherwise they would not have been where they were, but nearly all the manhood had been tortured out of them.

More prisoners went past a little while later. They came padding out of the storm, their faces and uniforms stained with dirt and battle, and the horror and strangeness of their ordeal was about them like an aura. Our drivers stared and stared.

When the barrage lifted, which it did twice in the next hour and at five-minute intervals from then on, there was an instant's lull, local and incomplete, like gaps in fog. Then, until the renewed fury drowned everything, you could hear rifles snapping like kindling wood and the rip-rip-rip of spandaus and the steady hammering of Brens.

Our drivers waited beside their lorries at the assembly point, finding difficulty in keeping still. At nine o'clock No. 1 Train was ordered to move towards the site of the Woodville high-level bridge, and it crawled forward with intervals of sixty yards between vehicles, halting on a stretch of straight road about a mile from the river. Here there was

another wait.

The bombardment stopped at half past ten and it was quiet under the artificial moonlight. This started from points of dazzling whiteness and arched over the **Senio**, the beams broadening to spread a livid canopy over the whole battle area. Everything was blue-green—a cold, dead, ghastly colour that reminded you of an aquarium. Faces looked corpse-like, leaves and branches took on the brittle delicacy of coral—of fronds—and the whole strange landscape belonged not to this world but to one long drowned and forgotten.

As the drivers stood beside their lorries, talking in low voices and sneaking puffs from cigarettes held in cupped hands, they heard a low whistle, which rose quickly to a scream. There was a tiny instant of silence and then an explosion as a mortar bomb landed only a yard from Corporal Bill Ingham and his driver. They were lying flat and were not hurt, but their lorry was riddled with holes, and water started to pour from the radiator and petrol from the petrol tank. Bill took charge of the situation at once, telling the drivers of the next vehicle to take the wreck in tow. While the tow-chain was being fastened there was another low whistle, flash, and explosion. Mortar bombs and 88-millimetre shells began to land three or four at a time. Some drivers sheltered under the vehicles, heads against differentials. Others, forgetting about mines, lay down in the ditches, and a few took to the fields. Shells and mortar bombs, which seemed to be coming from the direction of **Cotignola**, a mile and a half away on the other side of the river, ranged up and down the line of vehicles, some landing beside the road, some on it. They came over with a sort of curved shriek and exploded like a box on the ear.

It was now after eleven, and the engineers' lorries at the head of the column were moving up to the low-level bridge site, which was on the left of the high-level site and only about a hundred yards from it. One of these was hit by shrapnel and the driver killed. The second driver needed help to get the vehicle moving, so Lance-Corporal Duncan McLean ⁵ (No. 2 Platoon), careless of his own safety, went to the rescue. For this he

was later awarded the Military Medal.

By now Captain Williams had a traffic problem to deal with, the lorry at the end of the low-level train having come to grief just past the last crossroads between the bridge sites and the high-level train. With two wheels in the ditch and two in the air, it was blocking the up-route and there was no room even for a jeep to squeeze past.

Being without a winch, the three-tonner from the **Supply Company** next in line was unable to help, so Captain Williams shunted it down the right-hand turning at the crossroads and brought forward a No. 2 Platoon Dodge. Working under fire and in semi-darkness and with so much noise going on that they had to bellow to make themselves heard (the barrage had started again), 'Chum' Lee ⁶ and 'Ned' Kelly, ⁷ directed by Captain Williams, tried to winch the ditched lorry hind foremost on to the road. When it refused to budge Captain Williams went forward to the bridging report centre to borrow a bulldozer.

In a surprisingly short time the bulldozer came rumbling out of the night, and with shattering roars and a sort of ponderous fussiness it started to push and shove.

It was now that an orange glow appeared farther down the road. Above it, flames lighting its rolling belly, was an oily cloud, showing that a vehicle had caught fire. It was the one that was badly damaged and on tow. Either it had been hit again or the petrol-soaked ground had been fired by hot shrapnel; anyway it had gone up in flames with a great, gusty sigh. While Bill Ingham cast off the tow-chain other drivers got to work with fire extinguishers. The same thought was in everyone's mind: 'Hell, you could just about see this from the Alps!' The enemy certainly could see it, and after battling with the flames for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour the drivers had to take cover. Some fled to a nearby house—the Villa Agrippina of blessed memory.

The Villa Agrippina was Heaven. Thoughtful German infantry had barricaded its windows with baulks of timber and its walls were

comfortingly solid. The drivers sat down on the floor in the large kitchen and never had cigarettes tasted so good. The room was full of engineers, RAP men, and tobacco smoke. At a table officers conferred and a man at a microphone spoke quietly and earnestly to someone called 'Uncle Fox-Fox'. Everyone was in high spirits and the news was good. The infantry had got across with few casualties and all was quiet at the bridge sites. The storm, though, was still raging outside: the burning lorry was still there, and the artificial moonlight, and the straight, narrow road. The idea of leaving the kitchen—the warm, cheerful, tobacco-filled kitchen—appalled everyone, and little enthusiasm was shown when Captain Williams arrived and said there was work to do.

He wanted a panel lorry to replace the one that had caused the trouble by the crossroads. Having failed to scoop it on to the road, the bulldozer had pushed it farther into the ditch (and good riddance), and the up-route was now clear in front of the burning lorry. But all the panel lorries, unfortunately, were behind it, and they could reach the crossroads only by the down-route. Getting a panel lorry on to this meant backing five lorries at the end of the train into a farmyard.

The drivers involved came out of the cosy kitchen into the storm, and when the road was clear the last panel lorry in the train, followed by three decking lorries that were needed to complete the low-level bridge, set out for the river by the down-route, Bill Ingham leading the way in Captain Williams's jeep. Captain Williams stayed behind to assess the damage to his transport.

As always on these occasions it was found to be disproportionate to the sound, the fury, and the expense of spirit. There were holes in trays, chassis, and engine cowlings. One lorry was on tow with a gash in its radiator, and the front of another was smashed. Someone had backed into it while arrangements were being made, rather hastily perhaps, to give the burning lorry more room. Two bottles of Canadian beer had been broken in a tucker box and there were six punctures, most of which had been dealt with already. 'Spieler' Sinclair ⁸ and Lance-

Corporal Sid Bracegirdle ⁹ had changed a wheel under fire in less than five minutes.

Shells were still coming over but not so often now. Two heavy shells landed near the crossroads while 'Chum' Lee and 'Ned' Kelly were making themselves useful with their winch for the second time that night, the lorry in trouble being the one with that ill-omened load of panels for the low-level bridge.

It was now after midnight, and the high-level bridging was likely to be needed very soon. As the up-route was still closed to a large part of the train by the burning lorry, Captain Williams organised a fire-fighting party. When the blaze sank to a resentful smouldering he went forward to the bridge report centre to ask for a bulldozer. One was sent down immediately, and the hot mass, flaring like a stoked fire at the first touch of the blade, was shoved into the ditch.

The lorries moved forward, passing through a fringe of flame, and at one in the morning the engineers started work on the Woodville high-level bridge. As they were called for the lorries went to the bridge site in groups of three and unloaded. Then they set out independently for the **Ravenna bridging dump to reload. It was as simple as that.**

By the river all was orderly and quiet, though two men had been killed and several wounded. The battle had ebbed north and the work went forward smoothly and quickly under the artificial moonlight. It was no different from a rehearsal except that the far stopbank was torn and blackened and you could taste all the time (now faint, now strong, now sour, now sickly-sweet, always evil and darkly exciting) the foul breath of battlefields.

Back at the crossroads the ditched panel lorry was still making a nuisance of itself, one wheel being thrust spitefully across the road. By squeezing against the tire the 3 ½-ton Dodges were just able to get past, but many of them would have ended in the ditch if it had not been for Captain Williams and Bill Ingham. They gave directions under fire, and

it was entirely due to their efforts that the bridging arrived on time. As a result Captain Williams was awarded an immediate Military Cross and Bill an immediate Military Medal.

By one in the morning the low-level bridge was finished, and on the far stopbank the bulldozers began to carve a passage for the long column of tanks that was waiting to move across the river.

Meanwhile, under artificial moonlight and enemy fire, work had been going forward on the other bridges—Seymour low-level, half a mile west of the Woodville bridges, and Raglan high-level and low-level, half a mile south-west of Seymour.

By half past two in the morning traffic was moving over the three low-level bridges and work on the high-level ones was going smoothly. The No. 2 Platoon vehicles in No. 2 Train came under heavy mortar and shell fire while waiting a quarter of a mile from the river with material for the Raglan high-level bridge, but none of our drivers was hurt.

The night passed and the sky lightened in the east and it was nearly six. In two hours the Woodville high-level bridge would be open. Already it was possible to cross the river and stand where the enemy had stood all through the long winter. 'Thus far,' he had said. 'No farther.'

By scorched and ravaged banks the **Senio** flowed sluggishly. It was narrower and meaner than our drivers had thought it would be and no sewer could possibly have looked less impressive or less worthy of a place in history. A dull gleam was on the water, and from lacerated hedge and tree, drowsily at first but louder as the dawn came and clamorously with the rising sun, birds called and answered. It was a lovely morning.

Raglan high-level bridge was opened three hours after Woodville high-level, and by noon the last No. 2 Platoon lorry had reloaded and was back in the farmyard off the Hogg route. After a meal our drivers serviced their vehicles, patched punctures, and examined, not without complacency, the evidence of their ordeal. Holes not noticed until now were examined and commented on.

Before dusk the platoon was dispersed in a railway yard at **Granarola**, and at lunch-time the next day it set out for an area two miles north-west of **Cotignola**. As they approached the **Senio** the drivers gazed gratefully at the Villa Agrippina, with interest at the burnt-out vehicle, and with solemn pride at the bridges.

That day—it was the 11th—New Zealanders crossed the **Santerno** and the engineers started to bridge it, our unit being represented by two members of the Jeep Platoon who were attached to the 6th Field Company at that time.

At half past one on the 12th, while the infantry struggled to hold their bridgehead, seventeen No. 2 Platoon vehicles loaded with high-level bridging set out under Captain Williams for an assembly point in the little village of **San Martino**, some four and a half miles north-west by west of **Cotignola** and less than a mile from the bridge site.

The vehicles halted in the village street, and there was a long wait while the 8th Field Company worked on the stopbank under fire. Sometimes a shell landed near the head of the bridging train but no damage was done.

San Martino was silent and shuttered but it was not deserted. Something—a warmth, an odour, an absence of desolation—suggested that behind barred doors and windows people were waiting and praying for the wave to break over them and wash away into the distance. A few of our drivers, voicing their contempt for all Fascists to show they were acting not from selfish motives but as instruments of justice, burgled some of the more likely looking houses and came out with clocks, chickens, ornaments, and mattresses. **San Martino**, holding its breath under the collapsing wave, kept silent.

Soon after four the first two lorries in the train were called to the bridge site and unloaded hurriedly as the front line was only a few hundred yards away. Until daybreak the lorries went forward in twos,

and by then our armour was across and what was left of the train was able to move up to the river. As long as the drivers stayed below the level of the stopbank they were safe, but the bridge site itself was still dangerous because of a sniper on the left flank. He was brave but quite fanatical, and when four of his comrades appeared on the stopbank with a white flag he fired on them. It took the artillery to quieten him.

The bridge, a 100-footer, was finished by one in the afternoon, and by five the last lorry had reloaded at **Ravenna** and was back in the platoon area.

During the day eleven No. 2 Platoon vehicles, part of a train of seventeen under Second-Lieutenant Wells, helped the engineers build another bridge across the **Santerno**. It was a quiet job, for the enemy was falling back now and preparing to evacuate **Massa Lombarda**, a fair-sized town two miles beyond the river.

Towards evening the weather turned cooler and clouds appeared. After tea, light rain fell. Being loaded with bridging, many of the lorries were without canopies, so their drivers crouched damply under improvised shelters, hearing the rain on the roof and wondering anxiously if the weather had changed sides. Our fighter-bombers, anyway, were unaffected. A ragged wall of smoke, darker than the darkest cloud, hung over enemy positions on the far side of the **Santerno**. Into it plunged a succession of Mustangs, stoking the fires they had started to new fury, so that the wall rose ever higher and blacker. They came down in fives, one on the tail of the other, and it was as though some celestial card-sharp, casually dexterous, were dealing poker hands.

By morning the sky was clear and it promised to be a lovely day. **Massa Lombarda** had fallen at midnight, and after breakfast Second-Lieutenant Wells and a sergeant left to reconnoitre the platoon's next area, returning with the news that it was pleasant enough as a place but that the drivers must expect to see some grisly sights. The platoon moved after lunch, travelling in convoy behind the 5th Field Park

Company.

Beyond the **Santerno** dead mules lay by the roadside and near them was a dead German. He was lying on his back in an orchard and he was pitiful in his meanness and ugliness. Death, which dignifies kings and statesmen, is unkind to soldiers.

The new area was three-quarters of a mile from **Massa Lombarda** (eight miles north-west of **Cotignola**) and the field regiments were dug in all round it. Like the last area, it was planted in fruit trees—long lines of cherry, peach, and mulberry—and in the spaces between them alfalfa grew. While Italian peasants spread despairing palms over the fate of their alfalfa the lorries were parked under the trees beside long-dry drains that could be turned without much trouble into good slit-trenches. Above these drains, stretched on spars between tree trunks, was a system of parallel wires. These were for vines to cling to but they did equally well as a framework for bivouacs and canopy covers.



Easter Sunday at San Agapito

Easter Sunday at San Agapito



Cassino under shellfire
Cassino under shellfire



Fiume Piave
Fiume Piave

Thanksgiving service at Perugia



Thanksgiving service at Perugia

The work of enlarging the drains started almost at once, for no sooner had the platoon settled down than it came under shellfire. Shrapnel whizzed between the fruit trees and pinged viciously against the transport, and our drivers, stopping only to flatten out when the whistles sounded very near, dug furiously, quite altering the appearance of the area in five minutes. Shells came over throughout the afternoon and at tea-time it was learned that **Divisional Headquarters** had been forced to leave a neighbouring area after sustaining sixteen casualties.

That night, while the Division pressed on towards the next river—the Sillaro—our drivers were kept awake by the artillery. The 25-pounders fired all night and shells from a battery of heavy guns roared overhead like express trains going through a station.

By dawn New Zealand infantry were across the Sillaro and late in the afternoon, when the news was of bitter fighting in a small bridgehead, two trains of eight vehicles loaded with assault bridging were ordered to stand by in the platoon area. They waited all through the night and all the next day, moving at last at half past seven in the evening. At last light the whole New Zealand line was to advance behind a terrific barrage while the 6th Field Company built two low-level bridges across the river. The sites were about one hundred yards apart and about five miles west by north of **Massa Lombarda**.

The two trains, one under Captain Williams and one under Second-Lieutenant Wells, drove through the soft spring evening to rendezvous with guides who were waiting on a stretch of straight road some distance from the river. Here the trains halted. Away on the left among trees a rifle gave an occasional crack but no one took notice of it until bullets sang between the drivers of the leading vehicles. After that everyone avoided the skyline.

At half past eight, just as the sun was going down, both trains set out for their respective assembly areas near the stopbank.

The barrage had started now and although it was no louder than the

Senio barrage (comparisons are impossible above a certain pitch) the drivers were more vividly conscious this time of the immense weight of metal screaming over them. It was like being in a high wind, and you were tempted to put your arms over your head. As night closed in the trees and houses sheltering the guns leapt out of the darkness with mechanical regularity like sky signs.

Driving along a stretch of road that ran parallel to the front, our drivers felt peculiarly exposed and naked. On their left, where the guns were firing, the whole countryside was jittering in a mad torch dance, and on their right, bathed in artificial moonlight, silver meadows and ploughed fields, newly minted, stretched away to the river. It was like driving across a stage.

After leaving the main road the trains moved slowly towards the assembly areas, taking a long time to reach them because of bad bends and the darkness. Captain Williams's train halted in open country near a farmhouse occupied by Headquarters 22nd Battalion.

The barrage was still going full blast and the sky above was in torment. In shoals, in endless processions, the shells came over, and the sound they made was almost human in its vindictiveness. They seemed to be saying, and fantastically there was a touch of Cockney in their accent: 'Yew!—Yew!—AND YEW!'

Captain Williams went from lorry to lorry, shouting: 'The show's going very well. Everything's *kapai!* The 27th boys are well across on our left and the 22nd on our right. They've got a swag of prisoners and they're doing fine.'

“‘Old Sport's” as pleased as hell,’ said someone. ‘He thinks it's just Christmas.’ The drivers grinned approvingly, grateful to Captain Williams for his habit of passing on information. Some officers treated it like racing tips.

In groups of three to indicate brigade boundaries, of ten to indicate the end of pauses in the barrage programme, red tracer shells from

Bofors swam across the sky in a perfect geometrical pattern. Brilliant against Prussian blue, unhurried, travelling with the oiled smoothness of billiard balls, they sailed over the Sillaro and vanished with a blink of yellow. This happened time after time and the fascination of it never failed.

When the barrage stopped it was followed by an uneasy silence and everyone had the same thought: 'Now it's *his* turn.' Presently shells began to land between the river and the assembly area, and next there was a pattern of crumps, and then—much nearer—a whine and an explosion. Away to the left, fifty yards from the bridge site to which Second-Lieutenant Wells's train was waiting to go forward, a Sherman tank was burning rosily.

The first lorry was called for shortly before ten and the drivers found they needed all their nerve to move steadily towards the blaze. Seated in the high cab they felt they were ten feet from the ground. The tank was lying close to the floodbank with flames and smoke spouting from its open hatch as from a **Benghazi burner. Its tracks were bordered with a yellow frill and the air was sickly with the stench of burning rubber. The entire bridge site was lit up, and when the lorry swung round to climb the approach to the floodbank its windscreen flashed brilliantly as though signalling to the enemy. For hours the Sherman went on burning with a horrible slow thoroughness, drawing shells, mortars, and machine-gun fire.**

The bridge was completed at half past one at a cost of two casualties.

Captain Williams's drivers, meanwhile, had been forced to take cover from mortaring and shelling, most of them either in the 22nd Battalion's farmhouse or under haystacks. Drivers who had been to the bridge site said the work was going fairly smoothly and there was not much danger. The track, though, was very bad. One lorry returned with four prisoners, boys who should still have been at school. They had waded through the river to give themselves up and they were shivering

with cold and excitement.

The enemy seemed to be feeling about for targets. Shells groped their way towards the farmhouse and then turned back just as they were becoming dangerous. Away on the right, where the 8th Field Company was building a low-level bridge, two men were killed and three wounded. Later, lorries from Captain Williams's train came under fairly heavy fire at their bridge site. 'Ned' Kelly and 'Chum' Lee,¹⁰ backing to avoid a Honey tank, were blown out of their cab, escaping injury by a miracle. They found two jagged holes under the driver's seat and a hole in the petrol tank. Another lorry was holed nearby.

At the very last, when it seemed as though the job would be finished without casualties, a shell landed beside a jeep carrying Second-Lieutenant K. R. C. Rowe,¹¹ the liaison officer attached to No. 2 Platoon from the 5th Field Park Company. He escaped with a scratched nose but his driver was wounded in a leg and arm.

As soon as the lorries were unloaded they left independently for **Lugo**, four or five miles east-south-east of **Massa Lombarda**, which was now their replenishment point. Lumbering through the night with shafts of artificial moonlight bending over them like boomerangs and the sounds of battle dying away in the distance, our drivers felt fine. Roaring, rattling, raising great columns of dust, shaking the whole earth, the tanks were going forward to the bridges— *their* bridges.

Spring with a green explosion had shattered our winter sleep and from all the coverts in the **Po Valley** the quarry was being flushed, but our unit was still at **Forli**.

With impatience, with envy, with an attempt at philosophical detachment—' **Forli** will do us at this stage of the piece'— Company headquarters, Workshops, and the Jeep Platoon waited at the children's clinic while the battle swept on out of sight and out of sound—across the **Senio**, across the **Santerno**, across the **Sillaro**. **Forli** was now a backwater.

No one resented this more than the Jeep Platoon drivers. They had come to look on the forward areas as their proper environment and it galled them cruelly to be left in the rear with Headquarters and Workshops. They envied No. 1 Platoon and the Ammunition Platoon their forward point near **Massa Lombarda** and No. 3 Platoon the day-and-night job of replenishing it, but most of all they envied the five jeep drivers who had been attached to the 6th Field Company since 6 April, and the two who had been attached to the 36th **Survey Battery** since the 12th. The latter returned to the unit on the 17th and were able to talk, in a way highly irritating to their colleagues, of snipers, ambushes, heavy concentrations of fire, and prisoners. ('As soon as we pulled up, three Germans rushed out of the house and dived into their dugout. When we started to close in—there were about six of us—they dropped their weapons and put their hands up. One of them, a little joker aged about 15, burst into tears and held out his wallet.')

By this time—the 17th—the New Zealanders were twenty miles from their starting point. Two days earlier they had come under the command of 13th Corps and their role was no longer subsidiary to the **Fifth Army's**: they were to smash through to **Venice** and **Trieste**. Soon no New Zealander would be idle.

On the evening of the 17th, instead of writing in his diary 'Very quiet today and I'm off to bed early' or 'Another warm day spent in loafing', Corporal Ted Paul ¹² (Workshops) was able to record:

Tuesday—We left **Forli** at nine this morning and came twenty-eight miles to an area just south of **Massa Lombarda**, getting here at midday. The loads are terrible—narrow, full of deep potholes, and covered with a couple of inches of dust. We crossed the **Senio** and **Santerno** and found both of them disappointing.

All along the road, especially near the rivers and canals, we saw signs of bombing and fighting. Huge bomb-craters, often so close together that their edges overlapped, were everywhere. Our area tonight is dirty, dusty, and stinking, and there are swarms of flies, and the

smell's anything but pleasant. The big guns have been going all afternoon and the enemy has been bombed heavily. It is now half past six and planes are going over in force and the guns are still booming. The sun is fairly high but a pall of dust has risen fog-like and it threatens to hide the sun long before it sets. No. 1 Platoon and some of the Ammunition Platoon are moving forward to open an ammunition point on the far side of the Sillaro....

Later the news was read. The measured voice that had warned us of disasters in **Greece** and **Crete** and **Tobruk** told us that American troops had reached the Czech border, that **Germany** proper was cut in two, that Marshal Zhukov was reported to be only twenty-eight miles from **Berlin**, that the **Fifth Army**, since launching its large-scale offensive the day before, had been making progress against fanatical German resistance and was closing in on **Bologna**.

In their dusty, stinking area, without a thought for the comforts of the children's clinic, the drivers made ready for bed.

No. 2 Platoon moved on the 17th also. After an early lunch it left for an area near **Medicina** (nine or ten miles west by north of **Massa Lombarda**) and travelled along the main road through open country. The beast was only just out of view, as evidence of which our drivers passed two burning troop-carriers, a burnt-out Sherman, and a smouldering Honey tank. A huge dead horse, swollen and statuesque and looking for all the world as though it had tumbled from a plinth, lay on its back by the roadside, its legs stiffened in an heroic attitude. Cattle, from which civilians were ghoulishly carving steaks, blew gas among the long grass, and nearby there were German soldiers whom none had had time to bury. A dead Tommy, his shock of ginger hair pink under its powdering of dust, lay on an embankment as though asleep. Hardly a house had escaped damage, but the fields and orchards were still fairly orderly except where an acre or so had been torn up by desperate fighting. The crops, tender and green as lettuce, stood ripening under the bright sun, and everywhere Italian farmers were going about their work, ignoring the stream of transport, the crumbling houses, the intolerable stench of

death.

Once a British spotting aircraft flew low over the fields and a little girl in a red dress, after looking round for cover, dropped in her tracks like a trained soldier. Presently she picked herself up, dusted her dress, and trotted off.

The new area, which was reached at three in the afternoon, was no different from the last—fruit trees and alfalfa.

On the 18th, while New Zealanders pushed on towards the **Gaiana River**, and during the night of the 18th-19th, while they crossed it under savage fire on a front some two and a half miles north-west of **Medicina**, No. 2 Platoon rested. On the 19th only four vehicles were employed, and on the 20th two trains of nine vehicles did uneventful jobs for the 7th Field Company. Early in the afternoon two companies of the 26th Battalion crossed the Idice River, the last and strongest barrier before the **Po**. The Germans had given it a great deal of publicity as the Genghiz Khan Line. In the evening the platoon set out for an area near **Budrio**, a small town six and a half miles north-west of **Medicina** and a mile from the river.

Every tank and lorry in **Italy** seemed to be rolling towards the **Idice** and the convoy moved through a fog of dust. The sun had gone down before the platoon was dispersed in its new area, an open field peculiarly bleak and inhospitable.

The next day was Saturday, 21 April. Poles entered **Bologna** at first light, and the **Eighth Army**, the **Idice** crossed and the Genghiz Khan Line broken, poured over the plains and pressed the enemy into the great bend of the River Reno between **Bologna** and the **Po**. It was a quiet day for No. 2 Platoon, only eight vehicles being employed in bridging the **Idice**.

At half past eight on the 22nd the platoon moved to an area seven miles north-west of **Budrio** and eight miles north by east of **Bologna**.

Beyond the **Idice** the countryside was different. So far as our drivers could see hardly a house was damaged. The tide of battle had flowed swiftly past, leaving little in its wake beyond an occasional splintered waggon or smashed limber. No longer were there heaps of rubble in which children and old men and women probed miserably for a piece of furniture or a twisted bicycle. Instead everything was neat and trim and the handsome villas were much as their owners had left them.

After travelling a few miles the convoy was shunted into a field beside the road and a reconnaissance party went forward. Some shells landed fairly close at lunch-time and Jimmy N—— was unfortunate enough to mistake a plate of herrings in tomato sauce for his steel helmet.

The new area was reached late in the afternoon. It followed the familiar pattern but a kind of sweetness was upon it. Summer, outdistancing the **Eighth Army**, had moved forward with a great leap, occupying the whole of northern **Italy**.

Soon after half past six a small bridging train left to join the 7th Field Company in the neighbouring village of **Bentivoglio**, where the Germans had blown a bridge over a canal at half past five that morning. **Bentivoglio**, it was easy to see, had once been charming, but now it was in a bad mess. In an attempt to block the main street the Germans had wrecked a granary, a children's home, and some buildings belonging to a military hospital.

Although **Bentivoglio** had had a tiring day it turned out in strength to watch our engineers at work and the bridge went across the canal to a continuous murmur of *bravos*. Plainly **Bentivoglio** thought it was witnessing a miracle.

Not everyone from the village was present. The report of firearms showed where partisans were happily hunting down and liquidating local Fascists in the surrounding fields. Once a jeep sped past, carrying in the back a man in Italian uniform, dying or dead. A gang of partisans, their

faces stained by sun and wind as by walnut juice, and grenades hanging from their belts like clusters of fruit, came into the village square with a German sniper. He was a big, lumpy youth, pale and pimply, but he had a kind of sullen courage. One of our corporals wanted to know what would happen to him and the partisans answered with gestures and gay laughter: ‘*Boom-boom-boom! Finito!*’ Their manner was expressive of so much innocent enjoyment that popular feeling—at any rate on the part of the New Zealanders—began to favour the prisoner in spite of the tufts of fresh grass that decorated his steel helmet. There was a chorus of disapproval—‘Italian partisan bastards! Game as hell now Jerry’s plucked off.’ On the corporal’s insistence the prisoner was handed over to our infantry, his pimply mask expressing neither relief nor gratitude. The partisans, sulking like children who have been done out of a treat, went away to find another German to play with.

On their way to **Medicina** to reload the drivers passed Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons, which were heading for an area a few miles from **Budrio** with orders to open a forward ammunition point by half past eight the next morning. It was not a pleasant night for anyone, for the **Luftwaffe**, forgotten for weeks, had come suddenly and disconcertingly to life. Perhaps the pilots had been ordered to use up bombs, ammunition, and petrol as an alternative to destroying them or leaving them to the enemy, or it may have been that the air squadrons in **Italy** had been reinforced to give a fillip to German morale. Aircraft droned backwards and forwards all night long, the sky twinkled with butterfly bombs, and the earth shook. Every so often there was the long, rattling roar of machine guns. None of our drivers was hurt, but the **Supply Company** suffered ten casualties in an area next to the new ammunition point.

Meanwhile a train of fifteen vehicles had been standing by under Second-Lieutenant Wells in an area near **San Giorgio**, a village two and a half miles west-north-west of **Bentivoglio**. This was to go forward to the Reno River when sent for by the 7th Field Company.

The call came at sunrise and the train moved quickly to the bridge site, which was about twenty miles north-north-east of **Bologna**. It was

still early when our drivers got there and at once they were surrounded by excited civilians, most of whom had white flags. They had gone to bed under the New Order and woken up to find New Zealanders, the 23rd Battalion and the Maoris having crossed the river before dawn. A man who was to have been sent to a labour camp that very day grabbed his girl round the waist and did a dance of joy.

The Maoris were still at the bridge site and they were enjoying themselves. In the hurry of departure the Germans had left thirty or more vehicles near the stopbank, a roast chicken, a feast of pork and potatoes, and some beautifully groomed horses. An armourer's caravan filled with spandaus and a cooks' lorry filled with beef and bacon were giving pleasure, and so was a half-tracked vehicle that had been coaxed into life and was roaring and shrieking below the stopbank. A thunder of hooves died away in the distance as Maori huntsmen disappeared after an imaginary fox.

There was no shelling or enemy activity, but the work was slowed down by the awkwardness of the bridge site and three times extra loads of material had to be sent for. In the afternoon Field-Marshal Alexander, Lieutenant-General McCreery (Eighth Army Commander), and **Lieutenant-General Freyberg**, arrived. They stood on the bridge and talked while the engineers laid skin-decking and an Italian asked innocently: 'Po-leece?' Earlier he had seen a British red-cap.

The bridge was finished at four in the afternoon, by which time two regiments of tanks at the head of a mile and a half of traffic were waiting to move across the river.

In the meantime fourteen lorries had been serving the 5th Field Park Company, and the rest of No. 2 Platoon—the domestic vehicles and two load-carriers—had moved to an area near San Alberto, five miles north of **San Giorgio**. The New Zealand Division was still well in the lead.

By now the advance had begun to show signs of turning into a triumphal procession. On their way to San Alberto our drivers saw many

partisans—here a lorry-load of men red-neckerchiefed and brandishing rifles, there a single buxom young woman with a Sten gun across her shoulders. Groups of children in party frocks held up green branches and bunches of flowers and squealed ‘ *Ciao! Ciao!*’ In San Pietro, a town south of Alberto, people were lining the main street as though for a circus and every lorry was given a special hand-clap. Truly moved, but feeling more than a little foolish, our drivers did their best to appear gracious and at ease, and it was not their fault if they resembled performing sea lions rather more closely than they did liberators.

After tea Captain Williams called his men together in the San Alberto area and gave them the latest news. New Zealanders were racing towards the **Po** with British armour on their right and Americans and South Africans on their left. **Ferrara**, thirteen miles to the north-east and the last important bastion before the **Po**, was in our hands, and there was an unconfirmed report that Americans were across the river on the Fifth Army sector. The nine o'clock news added the information that Russian troops were bashing their way into **Berlin** from the north, east, and south. Later this long, pleasant day was brought to an end by an issue of stout and beer.

After breakfast the next morning the platoon set out for an area near **Bondeno**, a small town ten miles west by north of **Ferrara** and less than three miles south of the **Po**. There was a long halt on the far side of the **Reno** and then the lorries moved swiftly along a good road through open country. It was a lovely afternoon and it had everything—blue sky, golden sunshine, rippling cornfields, a slight breeze, careful husbandry: all the ingredients of the Georgics.

The new area—green and expansive, a spectacle of smiling plenty—was dotted with large white flags improvised from counterpanes and tablecloths. These the Italians hauled down as soon as they saw our drivers. They were friendly but their manner made it quite plain that soldiers were a visitation from Heaven like blight or frost—that they trusted their liberators with tablecloths about as far as they could see them.

Earlier in the afternoon Second-Lieutenant Colston, eighteen men, and thirteen jeeps had passed to the command of the 6th Brigade, and eighteen men and twelve jeeps to the command of the 5th. Eight men and six jeeps were sent to the 21st Battalion, the same to the 23rd, six men and four jeeps to the 24th, seven men and four jeeps to the 25th, and five men and four jeeps to the 26th.

Very early the next morning (25 April) the 21st and 23rd Battalions crossed the **Po** almost without incident. Jeeps and six-pounders were ferried over in assault boats and after these came Fantails (armoured and tracked amphibious troop-carriers) and Ducks (wheeled amphibious troop-carriers). By half past three the 23rd Battalion's anti-tank platoon was on the far side of the river and with it was one of our drivers, his jeep towing a six-pounder. The driver of a second jeep would have been there too if the boat in which he was crossing had not gone aground in the mud. ¹³

Soon after 5 a.m. the 7th and 8th Field Companies began building rafts for support weapons, guns, tanks, and bulldozers, and two hours later the 6th Field Company started work on a 460-foot pontoon bridge. There was no call for No. 2 Platoon's transport. It stood by all day in the **Bondeno** area and the drivers were not pleased.

By half past five in the afternoon the pontoon bridge was finished and ready for testing, so Lance-Corporal Sid Bracegirdle and 'Spieler' Sinclair, with their lorry under full load, drove to the bridge site, expecting to see great things. When they arrived they were disappointed. The banks of the **Po** were more like a contractor's yard than a battlefield and there was nothing to see except a few wrecks, the long straight line of the pontoon bridge, and an expanse of water, pale and colourless in the half-light. Gingerly, watched by an Engineer officer, they drove on to the bridge and moved slowly across it while it bent under them like a tightrope. The test was satisfactory.

They spent the night on the north bank of the **Po**. All night long a

continuous stream of traffic flowed over the bridge and a petulant-looking moon floated in a sky like curdled milk, casting a lunar doubt on the importance of a day's history—a day's history that included the bridging of the **Po**, the battle for **Berlin**, a peasant's concern over his best counterpane, and the solemn session of the representatives of forty-seven nations at **San Francisco**.

¹ The new 6-ton Macks enabled us to carry as much as we had done before the unit was reduced by a platoon.

² The platoon's strength had been increased by the attachment of six three-tonners from the **Supply Company**.

³ Lt D. A. Wells; accountant and secretary; **Gisborne**; born **Wellington**, 21 May 1912.

⁴ Bren carriers and Churchill tanks equipped with flame-throwing apparatus.

⁵ L-Cpl D. J. McLean, MM; butcher; **Balfour**; born **Balfour**, 2 Dec 1917.

⁶ L-Cpl J. G. Lee, US Bronze Star; grocer; **Ohaupo**, **Hamilton**; born **Frankton**, 23 Feb 1918.

⁷ Dvr W. G. Kelly, m.i.d.; farmer; **Te Kauwhata**, **Waikato**; born **County Westmeath**, **Ireland**, 7 Jul 1915.

⁸ Dvr A. D. Sinclair; shepherd; **Tarawahi**, **Featherston**; born **Featherston**, 14 Oct 1920.

⁹ L-Cpl S. Bracegirdle; motor mechanic; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 12 Dec 1920.

10 For his work in this campaign Dvr J. G. Lee was awarded the United States Bronze Star.

11 Lt K. R. C. Rowe; architect; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 16 Dec 1910.

12 Cpl E. Paul; journalist; **Christchurch**; born Frankton Junction, 22 Sep 1907.

13 The jeeps towing six-pounders for the 21st Battalion were taken across by infantry.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

(2) DRIVE TO A CRICKET MATCH

(2) Drive to a Cricket Match

No. 3 Platoon's great six-tonners brushed past the bruised hedges, lolloped over potholes, loomed one after another through the dust, long, blunt, grey bonnet following dwarfed tray. The heavy tires crushed everything—spandau boxes, castaway Mausers, German overcoats, German respirators.

Our second-line holding had been doubled for the advance, and though we were helped by two **Royal Army Service Corps** platoons every load-carrier had to make two trips when the unit or the ammunition point moved forward.

On 18 April we left the **Massa Lombarda** area for one a mile and a half beyond the Sillaro.

We go forward (wrote Ted Paul), again travelling along dusty, rough roads through a badly battered piece of country. There are some great sights—houses razed, tanks shot up, masses of bomb craters. There are other sights as well and we bury three of them on arriving in the new area, which is next to a forward ammunition point established yesterday by No. 1 Platoon. There are many bodies lying in fields and under hedges near here. All have been robbed of boots and outer clothing. Many are just boys.

Later in the morning Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons and the RASC platoons brought forward ammunition from the old point, and in the afternoon a convoy of ninety-eight vehicles went to Santarcangelo, below **Cesena** on Route 9, to fetch 25-pounder ammunition. The roads were jammed with traffic, and by the time the lorries began to arrive back, after covering 140 miles, 45,000 rounds of 25-pounder had been sold from the ammunition point and a queue of twenty-eight artillery vehicles was

waiting to be served. On the 19th, 39,000 rounds were issued, and on the 20th (while **Hitler** celebrated his 56th birthday and the Division crashed through the Genghiz Khan Line) 16,000 rounds. The 21st was another busy day. For the load-carriers there was the long, dusty drive to Santarcangelo, for eighteen of the jeeps the job of bringing forward small-arms ammunition from **Cesena**, for the Axis the loss of **Bologna**, and for Captain Delley and Second-Lieutenant Miles the distinction of leading the advance for a few minutes. They set out in search of a suitable area for the ammunition point, found themselves forward of the infantry, withdrew....

On the 22nd the ammunition point moved to an area some two miles north-west of **Budrio** and the drivers of the load-carriers were again very busy. Company headquarters, Workshops, and the Jeep Platoon had a quiet day.

Clear with a cold, blustering wind (wrote Ted Paul). Two or three lots of bombers come over but on the whole there is not much doing. Late this afternoon we see two German planes and the ack-ack opens up only to close down after a few shots. It is reported that the planes carried white flags and landed on the **Forli** aerodrome. From all accounts many German flyers have been deserting like this during the last few days.

That night, while Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons felt their way along traffic-crowded roads to bring ammunition to the new point, tracers lit up the sky over **Bologna**. It was the night of the **Luftwaffe's** surprise appearance.

The unit moved again on the 24th.

Up soon after 5 a.m. (wrote Ted Paul), and away before six, We pass through **Medicina** and later through the outskirts of **Bologna** but we don't see much of it. The railway station and some of the suburbs are in a terrible mess. When we pull up in our new area near **San Giorgio** we have travelled thirty-four miles. The locals present us with eggs and *vino* and refuse payment. They take a tremendous interest in us and express

surprise at our appearance, the Germans, who left here three nights ago per bullock-drawn motor trucks, having told them that the Kiwi soldier is a black man who hacks civilians about with a knife which he carries in his mouth.

Our new area—a big yard with four two-storied brick houses—is near the ammunition point, which also moved up today. We are surrounded by tall poplars, fruit trees, grape vines, and green, green pastures. It really is a beautiful district. Today's big rumour, supposed to have come from a German officer taken prisoner, is that the German armies in **Italy** will capitulate tomorrow.

Early the next morning, while the shadows from the poplars shortened inch by inch and the engineers worked beside the **Po** and the war went on unchecked, No. 1 Platoon, No. 3 Platoon, and the Ammunition Platoon went to an area near **Bondeno** and opened a new ammunition point. The rest of the unit followed later in the day.

We drive through beautiful country and have plenty of time in which to admire it. There is a tremendous stream of traffic on the roads—lorries travelling nose-to-tail—and we take just two and three-quarter hours to cover the first eight miles. We travel twenty-one miles and get to our new area at half past three. The people here are not over-friendly but they are interested in us. The advance is going so fast that it is impossible to pick up all the waifs and strays—especially as many houses are sheltering German soldiers dressed as civilians. Two Kiwis killed by snipers today.

We are just three miles short of the **Po**. The old truck is parked alongside a hayloft and the level countryside stretches away into a dusty haze.

The field was in full cry. The scent was fresh every morning and the spoor plain. When darkness closed in the quarry could be seen disappearing among dust and shadows. *Thy chase had a beast in view.*

On 26 April the Division advanced from the **Po** bridgehead to the

Adige River, eleven miles away, and No. 2 Platoon drove over the **Po** and went five miles north, halting near the village of **Trecenta**. That night the brigades crossed the 150-yard stretch of the **Adige** and with them went amphibious tanks and Fantails. Two Jeep Platoon drivers, their vehicles loaded with ammunition for B Company of the 23rd Battalion, were taken over in assault boats.

Later, a bridging train of six vehicles from No. 2 Platoon moved with the 5th Field Park Company to a staging area near the river and stood by until daylight in heavy rain. Then the lorries were called forward to the stopbank and the engineers started to build a 40-foot raft at a point five and a half miles north-north-east of **Trecenta**. Elsewhere a pontoon bridge was going across.

At midday the rest of the platoon moved to **Crocetta**, a village three miles north-north-east of **Trecenta**, and halted in the main street. Here the Germans had left two field guns from which they had not had time to remove even the grease and brown paper protecting the breech-blocks. Nearby, anything but brand-new, squatted between thirty and forty prisoners. Our drivers, questioning them in Italian, learned that they had given their officers the slip and hidden themselves in a house with the intention of surrendering. They were Austrian mechanics—in fact fellow tradesmen—practically workmates. Photographs of girl friends and chubby babies began to circulate and cigarettes were exchanged. Soon victors and vanquished were showing the bewildered villagers how little five years and eight months of bitter warfare weigh in the balance against a shared trade, an impulse of curiosity, and the common man's feeling that after a fight it is proper to shake hands. It was as well that no wine was available. A few litres of 'Purple Death' and they would have been hanging round each other's necks and harmonising.

That night (27-28 April) the 9th Brigade relieved the 6th Brigade and the **Gurkhas** relieved the 5th. The jeep drivers who had been with the infantry returned to their platoon, but not for a rest. Late that evening nine drivers and six jeeps were sent to each of the 5th and 6th Brigades,

and eleven drivers and eight jeeps to the 9th. The next morning the 12th Lancers, followed by the Divisional Cavalry Battalion, the 27th Battalion, Headquarters 9th Brigade, and the 22nd Battalion, started for **Venice**.

No. 2 Platoon moved at 10 a.m., crossing the **Adige** and travelling by traffic-choked roads, muddy and slippery after the rain, to an area near **Piacenza**, six miles north-east of **Crocetta**, where it laagered beside a canal in a green meadow gay with daffodils. This the lorries at once turned into a morass.

After lunch eleven vehicles left to bridge a canal at a point three miles north-east of the area. A tank was at the bridge site and Gurkha infantry were in covering positions beside the road. By five in the afternoon the job was finished and the lorries, splashing through a heavy downpour, set out for Castel Guglielmo, six miles below the pontoon bridge, to reload.

While the rest of the platoon was eating its tea and shivering in the watery sunshine, an Italian civilian arrived in a great state of fuss to point a shaking finger at a large white building about a mile away and report that more than sixty Germans were in possession of it. Captain Williams, with an abundance of volunteers to choose from—no one was prepared to miss such an excellent opportunity of firing a shot in anger and collecting perhaps a German watch—organised three fighting patrols, and these set out somewhat incautiously across the sopping paddocks. A small armoured car, a Dingo borrowed from a neighbouring unit, went with them, and Captain Williams, revolver in hand, led the way. The plan, apparently, was to carry the building by assault. Talking heatedly about the importance of not bunching, our drivers advanced in tight little knots under an increasing barrage of Italian assurance that there was not a German within miles. They occupied the building without opposition and found it empty, the infantry having mopped up the district earlier in the afternoon. A little dashed they returned to listen to the news.

The news was quite exceptionally worth listening to. Himmler had offered unconditional surrender to **Britain** and **America**. **Brescia** and **Bergamo**, great cities at the foot of the Alps, were in our hands. Four-fifths of **Berlin** had fallen to Marshals Zhukov and Koniev. Graziani had been caught by partisans—so, according to reports, had **Mussolini**.

Darkness came down like a wet dishcloth and there was nothing to hear except drumming rain—no guns, no mortars, no sounds of war. During the day New Zealand motorised infantry had driven north-east, splitting the German defence, breaking the Venetian line, and for the first time finding that soft underbelly to which Mr. Churchill had referred hopefully long ago. By 1 a.m. on 29 April they had reached **Padua**, an important road centre thirty miles north-east of the **Adige** bridges and twenty-three miles from **Venice**.

At 9 a.m. on the 29th, No. 2 Platoon, following the 5th Field Park Company, plunged into the stream of traffic flowing towards **Padua**. The stream flowed smoothly as far as **Este**, where the main **Padua** road was reached, but at this point it started to clog, and soon everything on the road—lorries, guns, ambulances—was welded together in a solid line, down which each check was transmitted jarringly. At Monselice there was a long halt in the shadow of green hills, and from then on, while bursts of sunshine alternated with bursts of rain, the convoy crept and crawled, halting every few minutes. None the less **Padua** was reached before dusk.

The vehicles were parked in a side-street and the drivers told to settle down for the night. The atmosphere, though, was unsettling. In **Padua**, where St. Anthony worked and preached in the thirteenth century, partisans were busily proving that new machine guns sweep clean. Shots rang out and hand grenades exploded, and doubtless our drivers would have stayed quietly in their side-street had no one told them that there was a German supply dump only 400 yards away. Partisan guards, some of them very drunk, were turning away civilians but allowing New Zealanders to help themselves.

The inside of the building was a dipsomaniac's dream—an Aladdin's Cave of alcoholic delights. It was piled high with cases of three-star cognac, kummel, cherry brandy, *acquavita*, and eggnog. There were some disadvantages. A hunt for Fascists was in progress close by and every so often the building would be shaken by an explosion. It was not easy to see for smoke and the air was pungent with the fumes of cordite, but this was no concern of our drivers. Their business was with the free liquor. They carried it away on bicycles and in hand-carts lease-loaned by the Italians, and by nightfall a huge number of cases had been liberated as well as a large quantity of sugar. There were no interruptions, the guards being interested only in preventing civilians from taking anything. The caretaker had been liquidated earlier in the afternoon, an incautious protest having shown him for what he was—a black-hearted, collaborating Fascist.

At eight that evening the 9th Brigade reached the Piave River at a point eighteen miles north-east of **Venice**, the 22nd Battalion entering San Dona on the far bank. Blown bridges made a pause necessary, and all night long tanks, guns, and lorries drove through dust and darkness to catch up with the head of the Division. Ammunition and other supplies were far in the rear but they were coming up fast. Our own unit was at **Trecenta**, just north of the **Po**, with Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons working like tigers.

Under clouded skies No. 2 Platoon left **Padua** the next morning and passed within six miles of **Venice**, which had been liberated the day before. It drove on at a fair pace through country criss-crossed with canals, their bridges unblown thanks to partisans and to the speed of the advance. Lighters and tugboats lay deserted at their moorings with ack-ack guns pointing idly at a sky no longer menacing. The platoon halted next door to the 5th Field Park Company in an area off the main **Venice-Trieste** road. The Piave was about five miles away.

Towards evening the skies started to drip. A chill breeze sprang up and the section corporals went round with an issue of summer clothing.

Three lorries were sent to the **Piave**, where the 6th Field Company was building a 300-foot pontoon bridge, and a little of the liberated cognac was taken as a precaution against chills. A picket was posted and told to be particularly alert as a large force of Germans cut off by the advance was known to be in the neighbourhood.

The picket stalked glumly beneath the dripping fruit trees and the platoon slept. Tomorrow would be the first day of May.

There was a sound of revelry by night.

Down the breeze came shouts, bursts of laughter, singing. 'Partisans,' said the picket, and as it was two in the morning they went to wake the relief.

The first shots were fired while the relief were pulling on their boots. Probably partisans they told each other, but as the shots sounded quite close they decided to wake the officers. Captain Williams got out of his car and listened. 'Sounds like Ities celebrating,' he said. Away on the right where Headquarters 5th Field Park Company was laagered something was burning fiercely. When another fire started, Captain Williams sent Lieutenant Rowe to find out what was going on.

The disturbance was centred round a farmyard and a long L-shaped building occupied by Headquarters 5th Field Park Company. The yard was next to the main road and through it passed a track leading to No. 2 Platoon's area, between which and the road were the closely-parked vehicles of a British FBE ¹ unit. A Polish transport unit, carrying bridging for the 5th Field Park Company, was laagered nearby.

Hughie Harrison, ² meanwhile, was making a private reconnaissance. He went through the area of the FBE unit and found some Tommies in full battle order lining a ditch. They had no idea what was going on so Hughie continued towards the Field Park Company's headquarters. On the way he was joined by a Tommy and a Pole. They reached the first vehicle in the farmyard—a **YMCA** van—and crept round the corner of a building. While they were doing this a man in a long

greatcoat stepped from the shadows and said ' *Kamerad!* ' *Tedeschi!* yelled the Pole, and at the same instant the German bent over his Schmeizer. The Tommy, though, was too quick for him. He fired and the German dropped. Machine guns opened up at once and Hughie and the other two slipped away into the shadows.

He raced back to Captain Williams, and while he was telling his story there was an explosion and another fire broke out in the farmyard. Lieutenant Rowe's report also showed that the situation was serious. He had made contact with a sergeant of the 5th Field Park Company and had learnt from him that a strong German force had taken the headquarters by surprise, capturing some men and killing and wounding others. What was going on now he didn't know.

Lieutenant Rowe left to get more information and our drivers were ordered to stand-to. While they were being roused—the racket was terrific now but they were tired and the events of the past fortnight had conditioned them to night noises—bursts of tracer passed chest high between the lorries. Amazed and frightened, they prepared to defend themselves.

In the farmyard a quarter of a mile away transport and haystacks were on fire and there was a lot of noise and shouting. Tracers and explosive bullets from bredas, spandaus, and submachine guns whistled overhead, and beside these the enemy was using mortars, *panzerfaust*, and 20-millimetre guns. A continual confused shouting in German, Italian, and English made a worry of sound, like a dog-fight, but the drivers could catch a word here and there: ' *Avanti!* ' *Raus!* 'Hey, Bill!' ' *Raus!*

Rain fell steadily all the time, slanting in steely rods between the fruit trees and glistening against a fiery background. Flame-lit eameos, glimpsed momentarily, appeared and vanished: a figure stooping to pour petrol on and around the **YMCA** van; two bewildered Germans and a blue flash from a tommy gun; a group of soldiers who seemed to be wrestling among the flames.

The whistling and shouting did not stop and it was hard to tell friend from foe. In the case of the Polish drivers it was almost impossible.

Lieutenant Rowe came back with the news that the farmyard was now a scene of indescribable confusion. It and the long building were under heavy fire, the Germans having taken up positions on the floodbank of a canal on the far side of the main road. He had gone forward to the first burning haystack and had found two dead sappers beside it. A Pole had been shot in the arm while trying to sneak round the haystack. Germans were in a building on the right flank about 400 yards away and fighting was going on over a wide area.

Captain Williams decided that it was time No. 2 Platoon took part in the battle. He called his drivers together and divided them into two groups, one to defend the transport and one to go forward to the farmyard. The latter was divided into two patrols of sixteen men armed with Bren guns, tommy guns, and rifles, and these set out in open order, one advancing straight ahead under Second-Lieutenant Wells, the other swinging left under Captain Williams.

The firing and shouting had died down considerably by now but with the end of the war in sight no one was taking chances. (Our drivers, by the way, were behaving far more sensibly and professionally than they had done two days earlier in the Piacenza area.) The farmyard was reached without trouble and Captain Williams led his patrol to the back of the long L-shaped building. It seemed to be empty but when he called out 'Kiwi here!'—taking it that 'Kiwi' was a word unfamiliar to the enemy—a window opened on the top floor. He shouted 'Kiwi' twice and then fired his revolver, one driver joining in with a tommy gun and another with a Bren. An excited New Zealand voice called out: 'It's all right. You can come in. No Teds round here.'

While the building was being searched—two Germans were found but they gave no trouble—Captain Williams went into the farmyard, which was dancing and leaping in the light from five burning vehicles. Beside one of them he saw the charred body of a New Zealander. A sapper was

lying badly wounded near another and he dragged him to safety. Then he shifted a jeep that was in danger of catching alight, fired at someone who failed to answer when challenged, and removed a blazing jerrican from the tailboard of a lorry loaded with petrol. It sounds simple enough, but these acts were done in the full glare of the flames when for all he knew to the contrary the neighbourhood was alive with Germans.

By now, from asking questions and listening to excited talk, our drivers were beginning to understand what had happened. A strong mixed force (in one report 500 was the number mentioned) had come shouting and singing down the main road to open fire on Headquarters 5th Field Park Company from positions behind the canal stopbank. The engineers managed to form some sort of a holding line in front of the bridging lorries—ours, their own, the Poles', and the FBE unit's—but, being hopelessly outnumbered, were unable to take offensive action. Soon the attackers swarmed into the yard and the paddocks adjoining it, setting on fire loaded vehicles with petrol, *panzerfaust*, and grenades, and starting empty ones and driving them off. (The Germans were desperately in need of transport.) Next they rushed the farm buildings and took prisoners, first killing two New Zealanders who came out of a door with their hands raised. In this action five men were killed, six wounded, and twenty-eight captured. Several vehicles were damaged, seven had been driven away, and six were on fire.

The enemy's next move was to withdraw from the farmyard to the canal stopbank and pour fire at anything and everything. Burning vehicles and haystacks made a flame-lit no-man's-land that was impassable.

After the action had lasted about an hour and a half—roughly, that is, at half past three—the whole force made off up a narrow road on the north side of the canal, taking with it its dead and wounded, its prisoners, and seventeen vehicles, ten of which belonged to a platoon of the 7th Field Company that had been ambushed and captured nearby with the loss of three men killed and fourteen wounded. Nothing was left behind except a few weapons and an ox-cart mounted with a 20-

millimetre gun. The patrols from No. 2 Platoon arrived about fifteen to twenty minutes after the enemy had withdrawn.

While our drivers were helping the wounded and searching the building for stragglers, two companies of the 21st Battalion supported by tanks halted outside the farmyard. They had been sent to the rescue, but on finding all quiet they pushed on to relieve machine-gunners at the Piave bridge—the task intended for them originally. They left a Bren carrier to carry wounded.

Stray shots were still going off—those irritating and unnecessary shots that are always heard after the dust has settled and the danger is over—but the situation was completely in hand now and soon it would be light. Armed parties under Lieutenant Rowe and Second-Lieutenant Wells were posted on the canal stopbank and an enemy brecha was put in working order.

In the farmhouse kitchen fourteen desperately tired German prisoners—eight had been taken in the first building down the road—were standing in two groups, one comparatively bright and chatty, one hangdog. The latter was guarded by a party of engineers who seemed to be remembering the charred corpses and the two men who had been shot in cold blood.

A partisan arrived with a report that between a thousand and two thousand Germans were halted four kilometres down the road. Friends of his had them under observation and he wanted our drivers to borrow a few tanks and round them up. More partisans arrived and after holding a council of war the whole party went off on reconnaissance, the cock of their Sten guns and the jaunty swing of their plus fours expressing most plainly their low opinion of our platoon.

After such a night a bright sunny morning would have been appreciated but the skies were sullen. The fruit trees shivered in a cold wind and the sodden battlefield, breathing puffs and streamers of black smoke, was sordid beyond belief. Poking among a trail of broken and

charred rubbish a member of the FBE unit was searching for a tin mug. He had lost everything he possessed, and he had lost his best friend as well.

It was 1 May and a wet, dull morning. Below the Alps the partisans were liberating city after famous city; on the main coast road the Division was rolling towards **Trieste**; in San Dona, just over the **Piave**, a bridging train was serving the 8th Field Company, which was improvising a 250-foot floating bridge, and the rest of No. 2 Platoon was trying vainly to keep warm and dry. In the village of **Monastier**, five miles north-west of the area in which the engineers had been overrun, Second-Lieutenant Colston (attached to the 9th Brigade) was witnessing the surrender of more than a thousand Germans, the force that had caused all the trouble a few hours earlier. Near the fire-station at **Mestre**, five miles from **Venice**, Corporal Ted Paul (Workshops) was bringing his diary up to date:

Yesterday—the last day of April—was one of our best days so far. We were up early and away from **Trecenta** by five. We took an hour to cover the first seven miles and then we crossed the **Adige**. Danny missed the pontoon bridge and I very nearly found out the depth of the water. As it was our front wheel went over the side and by the time we had been towed to safety the convoy was miles ahead.

We travelled forty-three miles before halting for breakfast in a little village called Mandriola, three miles below **Padua**. We had our meal in the lovely park of a stately old house in which Victor Emmanuel III signed the 1918 armistice. After breakfast we drove on through **Padua** and here it seemed as though the entire populace had turned out to welcome us. Men, women, and children—at one point they were at least ten deep—lined the streets to give us a wonderful reception, cheer us, wave flags, and whenever the convoy halted bestow the odd kiss. All along the road we got a grand hearing. It is a great sensation to be the centre of an admiring crowd of highly-delighted people even if one has done little to deserve their admiration. We were hailed as triumphant heroes yesterday. Later we passed hundreds of German prisoners, some

walking, some riding in carts, all practically unescorted. They were a poor, dejected-looking lot.

We reached our destination— **Mestre**—at about one o'clock. We could see **Venice** in the distance as we turned into our area and naturally all feet were itching to pound the streets of that famous city. Even the drivers of the load-carriers, though bleary-eyed with weariness, were keen. Since the start of the campaign they have been grappling with a volume of work that can seldom have been surpassed in the history of our unit. No. 1 Platoon is already heading back south to pick up ammunition left at **Ficarolo**, where the Div crossed the **Po**.

We are a source of amazement to the people round here. They have been led to believe that the New Zealand soldier is a terrible nigger and that we have no motors, no benzine, no tires, few clothes, and little food. At tea-time last night we had an amazed audience while we ate roast beef, potatoes, green peas, pears, and custard. All the things they were told have been proved false and poor old *Tedesco* is now ' *molto cattivo, molto brutale, molto basso*'.

All day we saw partisans and they were doing their job like delighted school children. There were a good few parading up and down the streets of **Mestre** last night and they were armed with the wildest and weirdest collection of weapons imaginable. I doubt if some of them ever handled a rifle before as they loose off a shot on the least pretext. Ask a partisan how his rifle works and he immediately points it at something and pulls the trigger. There were bangs going on all over the place all the time and there was no feeling of security.

The news, though, was terrific—only one square mile of **Berlin** left to the Germans, a Russian spearhead believed to have reached Unter Den Linden, Mark Clark saying that the German armies in **Italy** have been virtually eliminated as a military force. Well, it was a wonderful day and I enjoyed every inch of our 70-mile journey.

May 1. We are still at **Mestre** and still looking towards **Venice**,

itching to get into it. No. 3 Platoon set off for **Ficarolo** this morning to pick up No. 2 Platoon's holding. Most of the ammunition we brought forward during the early stages of the advance is still at **Bondeno** and **Ficarolo** and it has been decided that from now on the Company will carry only its own second-line holding of small-arms ammunition and twice its establishment of 25-pounder. The rest of the ammunition in rear dumps will be handed over to Corps.

The Jeep Platoon moved to **Mestre** with us and it is very pleased with itself. At present six jeeps are with the 5th Brigade, six with the 6th Brigade, two with the 9th Brigade, and three with the 6th Field Company. Four more jeeps have just set off to join the 9th Brigade.

Our jeep drivers have been sharing the experiences of the infantry to the full—mortaring, shelling, ambushes, alarms, reconnaissance, loot. They have been carting everything from Majors to margarine.

Well, it's getting on for lunch-time. Already one or two of the boys have 'snuk' away to **Venice**. Things are drawing to a close....

Things were drawing to a close. That evening **General Freyberg** shook hands with the Chief of Staff of a Yugoslav Corps that had come over the mountains from the east, and at noon the next day the war in **Italy** ended. Under the instrument of surrender, signed on 29 April, all land, sea, and air forces commanded by Colonel-General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, German Commander-in-Chief in the South-West and Commander-in-Chief of Army Group C, had capitulated unconditionally to Field-Marshal Alexander.

The rain had ended as well and it was a sunny day. No. 2 Platoon, travelling in convoy behind the 5th Field Park Company, was enjoying itself thoroughly. Under a blue and white sky, over roads strewn with green branches and bunches of wild flowers, beneath triumphal arches whose great letters said **VIVA LA PACE E LIBERAZIONE** while groups of children and young girls stood at every cottage door and farm gate chorusing ' *Ciao! Ciao! Ciao!*', the convoy sped north-east, our drivers

sitting up behind their steering-wheels like performing sea lions, their faces as pop-eyed with anticipation as though they were expecting juicy girls to come through the air like flying-fish.

Through Ceggia they went, through **Portogruaro**, **Fossalta**, and **San Michele**, over the Tagliamento, then through **Latisana**, Palazzolo, **San Giorgio**, and Cervignano. Beyond the broad **Isonzo** there was a change in the political sympathies of the liberated. The crown of Savoy gave place to the red star. TITO! TITO! TITO! screamed a hundred posters. The triumphal arches said VIVA IL COMITATO ESECUTIVO and VIVA LA FRATELLANZA ITALOSLOVENA and VIVA IL MARESCIALLO TITO. The girls of Tito's army wore red stars in their forage caps and most of the men wore red neckerchiefs. Our drivers were inclined to bristle—not because they were opposed to **Russia** but because Tito seemed to be snapping up all the fish.

The convoy entered the town of **Ronchi**, drove through a sea of smiling faces, a forest of waving arms, a constellation of red stars, and down an avenue of chestnut trees, halting in a green meadow by the **Ronchi** railway station, eighteen miles north-west of **Trieste**. Everyone felt he had come to journey's end and there was also the feeling of arriving for the first cricket match of the season. Indeed, it was inescapable.

The close-cropped turf was slightly damp and the smell of mown grass, sweet and musty, was everywhere. White candles were on the chestnut trees, and the girls of **Ronchi**, wearing their summer frocks, stood giggling on the boundary line. High up on the right, in pearly masses rimmed and shone through by sunlight, in clumps of impenetrable blackness, thunderclouds floated. Delicate shafts of rain, as always at early cricket matches, pricked downwards and vanished, the sun triumphing. You expected to see, walking sedately across the moist turf, two umpires, white-coated, skyward-glancing, carrying stumps....

New Zealanders occupied **Trieste** half an hour after the official end of

hostilities in **Italy** and by the next day all the German garrison had surrendered.

History was erupting all over **Europe**—it was like a day out of the Apocalypse. **Hitler** was reported to have committed suicide— Goebbels, too. **Berlin** and **Hamburg**, first and second cities of the Reich, were in Allied hands and Prague had been declared an open city by the new German Fuehrer, Grand-Admiral Doenitz.

At last this tremendous day ended. The shadows flowed down the hills and it was evening. At Mestre No. 1 Platoon's drivers, back from **Ficarolo** with ammunition, boiled water for a wash and a shave. No ammunition had been issued during the day and they could hope for a good rest. In Venice it was curfew time, and all the silver and gold and diamonds had vanished from the water and the bridges and palaces were gazing at their reflections in mirrors of ruffled jade—crinkled hoops for the reflection of bridges, trembling castles of dark green for the palaces. Drivers from the company, their faces sticky from the salt air, their eyes aching from the dazzling whiteness of the buildings, glided down the Grand Canal in a gondola, wondering if they had missed the last leave-lorry. They had visited a beer garden, the Basilica of San Marco, the Bridge of Sighs, Ponte di Rialto, the House of Desdemona, and a second beer garden. It had been a tiring afternoon.

Along a fine, broad road overlooking the sea two of our jeeps rushed towards **Trieste** through the pine-scented darkness with petrol for Headquarters 22nd Battalion at the Hotel Regina. Most of the jeep drivers with the 9th Brigade had been in at the death, and one of them, serving the 27th Battalion, had captured six prisoners earlier in the day. In Monfalcone, the next town beyond **Ronchi**, it was a night of carnival. In front of the largest hotel blazed a huge red star, and the main street was lined with laughing girls as with borders of bright flowers. A travelling fair was in town and as the chipped plaster horses, the blue swans, the scarlet gondolas, stirred smoothly by golden convoluted rods, swam round in circles, a steam organ played 'The Beer Barrel Polka' and swings tipped against the sky and the crowd danced in the side-streets.

Not far away some No. 2 Platoon drivers had pacified the old people with sips of **Padua** kummel and were now flirting with their daughters, but not shamelessly. 'Watch yourself,' Captain Williams had said. 'This part of the world hasn't always belonged to **Italy** and Tito may have ideas about it. They take their politics seriously in **Yugoslavia**.' Tonight, though, except for some of Tito's motor-cyclists who were riding around as grimly as though the war had just started, no one was taking anything seriously. Noisy happiness was the keynote.

The darkness deepened. By the **Ronchi** railway station the chestnut trees were spreading their sweet English fragrance and their candles were like ghosts in the darkness; the cricket match would have been over these two hours. Now, perhaps, the groundsman's old horse, hooves muffled in great shoes, would be dragging the heavy stone roller over tomorrow's wicket. There was quiet in the area at last and the lorries stood in pools of shadow and silence. The ladies of **Ronchi**, on the discovery that a paybook was missing, had been banished in disgrace, but they were still chattering in the railway yard, their faces pale ovals in the darkness and the plainest of them borrowing beauty from the event and from the hour.

From the south-east came a long column of prisoners. They sang no songs—neither the ' *Horst Wessel*' nor ' *Stille Nacht*'—and they gave no greetings and received none. There were thousands of them and the rhythm of their feet was like surf.

Yugoslavs were firing flares and in places the sky was crimson above **Monfalcone**. Away in the hills, with a sound strong and lonely—wing-tips lashing Lake Ellesmere as the swans rush into the sky—heavy machine guns were in action. But the war in **Italy** was over. The chase had ended and the beast was in chains.

¹ Folding Boat Equipment.

² L-Cpl H. Harrison; carpenter's apprentice; **Tauranga**; born **Te**

Puke, 1 May 1921.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER 24 – ‘...AND THE REAR PARTY WILL CLEAN UP’

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'...AND THE REAR PARTY WILL CLEAN UP'

ON 3 May, while the Reich Chancellery burned, while Allied forces in the west swept through **Germany** and took 412,000 prisoners, the 1st Ammunition Company moved from **Mestre** to occupy an Italian barracks at **Villa Vicentina**, five miles west of **Ronchi** and a mile from the main road. The next day it was announced that the **Fifth Army** and the United States Seventh Army had joined up in the **Brenner Pass** and that all German resistance in **Holland**, north-west **Germany**, and **Denmark** was at an end. On the 5th organised resistance ended in the south-western sector of the Bohemian Redoubt, where the Nazis had planned to make a last stand, and on the 6th, a Sunday, Czechoslovak flags flew in Prague for the first time in six years. In Germany prisoners flowed into the cages so fast that it was impossible to count them.

The next day, at 2.41 a.m. (French time), Colonel-General Gustav Jodl, the German Chief of Staff, signed the instrument of his country's unconditional surrender. The war in **Europe** had ended after lasting five years, eight months, and five days. It was announced in **London** that the 8th would be treated as VE Day.

On VE Day the 1st Ammunition Company was at **Villa Vicentina**, with No. 2 Platoon close by (the 5th Field Park Company having moved from **Ronchi** to Vicentina on the 5th) and No. 3 Platoon on the road between **Mestre** and Cervignano with a load of petrol.

The long brick building occupied by Company headquarters contained many high, cool rooms, most of them empty. Their redtiled floors, dusty and paper-strewn, were stamped with oblongs of sunlight from windows and with wedges of sunlight from half-open doors. The building was on one side of a grass square; on the others were sheds for the transport. The grass was still tall in places, but it was in process of being trampled flat and the sun was turning it into hay. It was very hot in the sheds where the lorries were parked and the dusty country lane

that went past the two main entrances to the barracks was soaked in sunlight. Little familiar noises—the tinkle of a dropped spanner, the rattle of dixies, an oath and laughter—came muffled through the hot air. Girls in bright dresses cycled slowly up and down in front of the barracks and it was drowsy and quiet, except when a Yugoslav motorcyclist, always with an air of having ridden direct from **Marshal Tito's** headquarters, roared by in a cloud of dust, making the dogs bark and scattering the scrawny chickens.

Only a few drivers gathered in the afternoon to listen to Mr. Churchill's speech. Many had gone to **Grado** for a swim—it was there that Captain Boyce, Lieutenant Hill, ¹ and Second-Lieutenant Colston had taken the surrender of ninety-seven Germans two days before—and many had gone unlawfully to **Ronchi, Monfalcone, or Trieste**. Many were resting in their lorries, doing a little reading, a little talking, a little smoking, a little drowsing—a combination of activities that never failed to produce the very essence of boredom but was yet, in a headachy sort of way, quite pleasant. Not more than a dozen drivers were lying in the hot grass by Headquarters' wireless set.

This was the news and this was Pat Butler reading it. In England it was now possible to report the weather while the country was actually having it. There was bright sunshine in England. Admiral Doenitz had told the German people that the foundations on which the German Reich was built had gone and they must tread the road ahead with dignity, gallantry, and discipline....

After the news a military band played 'A Life on the Ocean Wave'. Then Churchill spoke:

Yesterday morning at General Eisenhower's headquarters General Jodl, representative of the **German High Command**, and Grand-Admiral Doenitz, designated head of the German state, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German land, sea, and air forces in **Europe** to the **Allied Expeditionary Force**, and simultaneously to the Soviet High Command....

At the end of his broadcast Mr. Churchill, shouting through all that sunlight, shouting into the dark night ahead, cried: 'Advance Britannia! Long live the cause of freedom! God save the King!'

Cease Fire was sounded by buglers of the Scots Greys and as our drivers got up to go they heard singing: 'Praise, my Soul, the King of Heaven'.

The hot day passed and twilight came, deepening to violet, to purple. Lights popped on in barrack-rooms and glowed softly in the backs of lorries and the King spoke:

Today we give thanks to God for a great deliverance. Speaking from our Empire's oldest capital city, war-battered but never for one moment daunted or dismayed—speaking from **London....**

In Villa Vicentina primuses hissed and purred. Our drivers lay on their beds in the lorries while their friends lounged against the tailboards talking and waiting for the tea water to boil. They spoke of the favourite for the Two Thousand Guineas at Newmarket next Wednesday, of Old Ted the late enemy, and of going home.

The night was warm and lovely, and there was little to drink and it was too early to go to bed. On such a night as this (thought our drivers) it would be just the job taking out the old man's V8 and sending her along and hearing the loose gravel spray up under the mudguards—yes, and watching the telephone poles flick past and seeing the rabbits and hares, silly in the dazzle, run every which way. On such a night it would be all right taking the girl into town for the dance and nipping out around supper-time for the odd rigger. Strolling home on such a night and seeing the old woolshed come up black against the hill would be just the gear—it would be all right in fact.

With the war in **Europe over we had a right to expect that the rest of our stay in **Italy** would be all pleasure and profit, but almost at once—almost before a member of No. 2 Platoon had time to make a present of**

a heavy machine-gun to a party of Yugoslavs whom he perceived to be poorly equipped—a new cloud showed over the horizon.

Tito wanted the **Venezia Giulia** (**Trieste**, the Istrian Peninsula, and some of the territory behind the peninsula) and he also wanted a part of **Austria**. Well, no one had expected him to want less—much less, anyway—but instead of waiting for his claims to be examined at the Peace Conference he was behaving in the best traditions of the dictators.

Soon Trieste was an armed camp with Tito's men stopping New Zealanders in the street and demanding their leave passes. The Union Jack and Tito's red-starred tricolour floated from adjoining buildings and British and Yugoslav patrols passed one another in silence. British Honey tanks manned by Yugoslavs faced British Shermans manned by our own men, and Yugoslav guns pointed at British 25-pounders. Between Villa Vicentina and **Ronchi** the bridge over the **Isonzo** was guarded by **Gurkhas** and Yugoslavs. All units in Vicentina posted strong pickets at night and everyone kept his weapon handy.

On 21 May Marshal Tito started to withdraw his troops from **Austria** but in **Trieste** there was no lessening of the tension. The day before our transport had begun work at the docks, carting ammunition and **Allied Military Government** supplies to dumps in **Udine**, some forty miles north-west of **Trieste**, and on the 22nd Lieutenant Miles and a party from the Ammunition Platoon formed a port detachment in the city. No. 2 Platoon passed from the command of the 5th Field Park Company on 25 May, and by the end of the month our load-carriers had shifted 5800 tons and travelled 212,050 miles—only 16,950 less than the distance from the Earth to the moon. They worked day and night and there were several accidents, most of which were caused through over-tiredness.

In spite of long hours and the Tito crisis we managed to have a surprisingly good time. There was day-leave to **Udine** where some of us met Primo Carnera ('Old Satchel Feet'), the only Italian ever to win the world's heavyweight boxing championship. Primo, whose home was in Sequals, a town on the far side of the Tagliamento, had suffered no

extraordinary privations during the past few years and was in excellent health and spirits, though he liked it to be known that he had dropped twenty pounds during the war and now weighed only 240. Extending a hand like a paddle, he said it would be a pleasure to coach any New Zealander who was interested in boxing.

For some of us there was leave to **Venice** where the world-famous Danieli's was now the New Zealand Forces Club. ('But,' exclaimed an English major, his horrified gaze resting on dusty, travel-stained privates, 'I spent my honeymoon there. *My honeymoon!*'). There were day trips to **Klagenfurt** in **Austria** and four-day tours of northern **Italy**, and at **Mestre** the Major opened a unit rest camp. This, unfortunately, was found to be outside the Divisional area, and it had to close down just as it was becoming popular.

Some members of the Jeep Platoon, meanwhile, were touring **Italy** in their private sports cars—that was what it amounted to. A party of three travelled a thousand miles in search of a district suitable for mountaineering and ski-ing, finding one near Madonna di Campiglio, a village in the southern Dolomites.

And so May turned to June.

On that last May evening **Villa Vicentina**, soaked in summer and peacefulness and good sense, seemed remote from a world troubled and dangerous—remote from **Damascus** where French shells had started two great fires, from Westminster where a caretaker Government was in office pending the first general election in ten years, from Tito's Yugoslavs who were still tentatively building roadblocks on the far side of the **Isonzo**, and remote—ah, infinitely remote and separate—from *Nuova Zelanda*.

Warm rain had fallen during the afternoon and the evening was heavy with magnolias and blown roses. Headquarters and Workshops were holding a supper-dance and music beckoned from the large upper room that ran nearly the whole length of one side of the square. A

sergeant from Headquarters, 'mokka'd' up in his 'Groppi', came down the stone staircase with a *signorina*. It was too dark to see what kind of a girl he had got but as he was rich and could speak passable Italian the chances were that she was lovely. The sentry at the barracks gate, seated comfortably on a low stone wall, his tommy gun between his knees, whistled as they went past.

Crunching over the gravel, drowning the music with their deep grumble, No. 3 Platoon's lorries—they occupied two sides of the square—drove one after another through the barracks gate. Elbows juttied white and sharp as the drivers struggled with their steering wheels at the corner and then the lorries gathered speed. This was the platoon's second trip to **Trieste** that day and none of the drivers had had more than a few hours' sleep. One driver, as he passed the sergeant and the *signorina*, flicked his ignition switch so that the engine back-fired, making the sergeant start and his girl jump into the ditch. Soon the last lorry was a red pin-point of receding tail-light and the lane was empty except for dust—a soft, sweet-scented cloud that remembered the warm rain.

With the lorries gone you could hear clearly all the noises of the dance—violins screaming, drums throbbing, saxophones wailing, girls laughing, dresses rustling. They mixed in the warm air with burnt petrol, magnolias, mosquitoes, and the soft, the rain-remembering dust.

For a week a fight seemed almost unavoidable, and then, on 9 June, the American, British, and Yugoslav Governments signed an agreement at Belgrade giving Field-Marshal Alexander jurisdiction over **Trieste** and the western half of **Venezia Giulia** and Tito jurisdiction over **Fiume** and the eastern half. On the 11th the Yugoslavs began to withdraw from the Allied zone. They marched through the streets of **Trieste** singing the '*Bandiera Rossa*' ('The Red Flag'), but the crowds shouted '*Viva la Liberazione! Viva i Neo Zelandesi! Viva gli Alleati!*' What they meant of course—all the pretty girls, the old women, the children—was 'Long live the landing craft and the flour and sugar! Down with looting! Down with arrests and bullets! Down with stinking politics!'

Between four and five, when No. 2 Platoon drove to the central railway station to collect 700 Italians who had arrived from prisoner-of-war camps in **Germany** and were to go to **Mestre**, the streets were full of trampled flags and flowers but almost empty of people. The crowds gathered again with the cool of evening but now it was the Communists' turn. Armed with Sten guns, rifles, and grenades, bands of Yugoslavs, with men from the Garibaldi Division and the Guardia di Popolo, marched through the main streets firing on the hated crest of Savoy and injuring civilians. *Viva la Liberazione!*

With Tito gone from **Trieste** the atmosphere was much more holiday-like. The transport platoons were not working so hard now and the jobs they did do were often delightful. No. 3 Platoon penetrated deep into Tito's territory to take AMG flour to Pola, near the tip of the Istrian Peninsula, and No. 2 Platoon unloaded bridging for the **Royal Engineers** at three points on the **Trieste-Pola** road.

If the period that followed was not a proud one in our history it was at least an understandable one. Discipline was relaxed—or were the authorities unaccountably blind?—and as for the moral law, of all the circumstances likely to contribute to its violation no one was wanting. We had the time—too much of it; the opportunity—no human frailty that was not catered for in **Trieste**; and the money—the closing stages of the campaign had been swift, arduous, but highly lucrative.

Although there was plenty of official leave many of us went away for weekends, or for a week even, just as the spirit moved us, and more than one driver kept his own establishment in **Trieste**. The first and last commandment of a transport unit—Your Lorry Must be Ready for the Road at All Times—was still obeyed by the majority, but there were two drivers to each vehicle and as long as the section corporal was friendly the absence of one was not noticed. And so the days slipped past, with Youth at the helm and Folly, in contravention of standing orders, at the prow.

Fortunes amassed during the advance came to an end at last but with agents of the black market prowling everywhere it would have been foolish to draw pay—foolish and rather priggish; for public opinion had removed the stigma of criminality from the sale of petrol and jeep tires and had even glamourised transactions of this kind, making them seem daring and clever. Hence, when you spoke contemptuously of the driver who dropped off a sack of AMG sugar in **Trieste**, or of the black-jowled gentleman in the wineshop who sprayed you with garlic and multiples of a thousand, you criticised Robin Hood.

Most of us were content merely to keep abreast of our obligations but there were some who saw in the situation a chance to provide for their old age. Their chief problem, and it worried them day and night, was how to convert lire into pound notes. They bought money orders at first and when that avenue was closed to them they bought watches, cameras, and jewellery, sometimes spending as much as 40,000 lire—the lira was worth rather more than a halfpenny—on a single article.

Others spent their money on *vino* or wasted it in ways even less rewarding. A minority stayed at home, stifling a sense of wasted opportunities.

The war in **Europe** was over and it was time to make an end. Our special function was already largely redundant, and soon the unit would be disbanded and we should be scattered to the four winds. There was no likelihood of our being reinforced and sent to the **Far East** as the 1st Ammunition Company, nor was that what we wanted. No, it was time to make an end.

In spirit we had broken up already. That unit consciousness, that feeling of solidarity, which for so many years had made each one of us quite certain in his own mind that the 1st New Zealand Ammunition Company was the best transport unit in the Division, had vanished some time ago. Now it was the clique that mattered—the gang, the private circle of friends. Gradual at first, the change had started when our 5th Reinforcements left us. That void in our communal life had not been

filled by the replacements, many of whom came to us with loyalties older than those they owed to the Ammunition Company. A large part of No. 3 Platoon, for instance, though it worked well with the rest, was really a branch of the 18th Tank Transporter Company's Old Boys' Association. Only in No. 2 Platoon, on which, so some of us contended, the mantle of A Section had fallen, was the old spirit discernible.

And good friends were dropping out all the time. On 25 May we lost four officers and nine other ranks when members of the 6th Reinforcements (Hawea draft) left us for **Bari**, and on 17 June they were followed by a further thirty-four other ranks, members of the 7th Reinforcements (**Waikato** draft). The Sevenths were taken to **Bari** by No. 1 Platoon.

In the last week of June we delivered our ammunition to the 3rd Advanced Ammunition Depot, **Udine**, and were glad to be rid of the damned stuff. Glad, yes, but tugged at by cords of habit. Those boxes had been our constant companions, our only furniture, for Heaven knew how long. Seated on them we had played cards, stretched on them we had slept, round them we had eaten. Filled, they had been our tables and our chairs; empty, our cupboards, wardrobes, larders.

July came, and the crops stood stiff and golden in the fields and waggons piled high with maize held up our convoys in the narrow roads. The threshing machine near No. 2 Platoon's area hummed all day long and often half through the night.

There was little work to do and most of us were tired of leave—even the quota for **Venice** was hard to fill nowadays. We played cricket in the field behind the barracks and we bathed daily. In the evenings we drank vermouth and soda in one of Vicentina's three wineshops or took cushions with us and went to No. 2 Platoon's area for the pictures, a pleasure we shared with about a hundred village children.

There was talk of a new area for the Division near **Lake Trasimene**, and on 23 July, at seven in the morning, we pulled out from the

barracks, heading south. It was a short convoy because Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons were staying to help shift the 6th Brigade and the Jeep Platoon had only its domestic vehicles and about six jeeps, the rest having been handed in at **Cesena** early in the month. There was leave to **Mestre** that night, to **Bologna** the next night, and to **Fabriano** and Albacina the night after that. Our village welcomed us with open arms but was sorry to learn that it might never see us again. (Dear village! Possibly it remembers us still, shaking all its bells with laughter at the thought of our execrable Italian, our inexhaustible supplies of barley sugar, our prodigious thirsts.) The journey ended the next day in an area six miles from **Lake Trasimene** and four miles west-south-west of **Perugia**, that charming hilltop town built round a corkscrew. Gentle slopes, studded with rocks and generously shaded by oak trees, went down to a small creek. Goal-posts were there already so we got out the footballs.

The oak trees spread club-shaped shadows over the rough grass and children came from nowhere to watch the game—to watch it for a while, and then, timidly at first, later with growing confidence, take part in it.

The Japanese ignored the **Potsdam** declaration. On 5 August one plane dropped one bomb and **Hiroshima** was destroyed.

When we heard about it our area was almost empty, the transport platoons having gone to **Bari** with married members of the 8th Reinforcements (Tekapo draft)—we lost three officers and twenty-five other ranks. The Jeep Platoon's transport—what was left of it—was at **Madonna di Campiglio** with eight drivers.

On 8 August **Russia** declared war on **Japan** and the huge Red Army in the East poured into **Manchuria**. An atom bomb fell next day on **Nagasaki**. On 10 August **Japan** offered to accept the **Potsdam** terms if she could do so without prejudicing the prerogatives of her Emperor.

At midnight on Tuesday, 14 August, the surrender of **Japan** was announced in simultaneous broadcasts from **London**, **Washington**, **Moscow**, and **Chungking**. Most of us heard the news at nine the next

morning from the British Forces Station in **Italy** and no work was done that day. Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons were back with us now but No. 2 Platoon was still at **Bari**. There the drivers built a bonfire and sat round it singing songs and drinking an issue of beer. In the Trasimene area, too, there was singing and drinking. The stories from **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki** were like reports from Hell.

On 20 August the Jeep Platoon was disbanded, the drivers being distributed among the transport platoons as the Ammunition Platoon drivers had been after our second-line holding was handed in. By the end of August there were several lines of transport parked mudguard to mudguard in Workshops' area on the far side of the creek—cooks' lorries, orderly-room lorries, and staff cars and pick-ups handed in by officers who had gone home.

Our single Eighths—forty-four other ranks—joined the Tekapo draft on 10 September and the next day we lost 'Parky' Neighbours,² our star footballer, who was one of the thirty-nine players chosen to fly to England to train for the New Zealand Army Rugby football team. Soon afterwards Charlie Porter³ and another driver were posted to the New Zealand Selection Camp in **Austria** for training and later Charlie was sent to England.

We were busy during the first three weeks of September. No. 3 Platoon carted **YMCA** stores from **Bari** to Rome and took infantry to the Divisional rest area at **Mondolfo** on the Adriatic coast; No. 1 Platoon took leave parties to **Venice** and Madonna di Campiglio, staying with them while they were there; and No. 2 Platoon, which was still at **Bari**, took parties to Rome, **Florence**, and **Venice**. Drivers without vehicles were employed in ferrying transport from **Foligno** to **Trieste** for UNRRA,⁴ **Yugoslavia**.

When we were not working we played cricket on our private sports ground. Our oak trees were golden now where once they had been green, and evening by evening the shadows lengthened earlier. For most of us the journey would not be over before Christmas.

No. 2 Platoon came back from **Bari** on 27 September, a Thursday, having spent the night before at Albacina. This was our last contact with the village. On Friday morning the Major was told to disband Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons, and the drivers spent the day in checking their transport and returning stores to the quartermaster. That night there were farewell parties but the lush sentiment usual on these occasions was missing. We should be meeting again in the Division's next area and most of us would go home in the same ship. Nothing of value was being broken up—only an arrangement of names and numbers, only lorries and tents, only somewhere to eat, to sleep. In every important sense the unit had come to an end some time ago—on a February morning or a May evening. Just when was a matter of opinion.

On Saturday Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons were disbanded and their transport was lined up in Headquarters' area. The drivers, many of whom had sore heads, hung about looking lost and sheepish.

On Sunday morning—in the New Zealand Division everything happened on a Sunday—thirty-eight of our drivers and a party from the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company** set out for **Trieste** with Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons' transport. It was to be handed over to UNRRA, **Yugoslavia**. Of the drivers without vehicles eighteen were posted to No. 3 Platoon, fifty-seven to the 1st **Petrol Company**, forty to the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**, and twenty-eight to the 1st **Supply Company**. Our unit consisted now of Headquarters, Workshops, and No. 3 Platoon, the bulk of which was ferrying troops to **Florence**.

By nightfall it was known that Headquarters and No. 3 Platoon would be disbanded on 6 October and Workshops attached to the 4th **Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**. Already a large part of the area was dark and quiet where once it had been lighted and noisy, and everywhere there were signs of packing. Great mounds of gear—everything from meat hooks to tommy guns—almost concealed the quartermaster's tent, but even so they were not as high as they ought to have been. They contained roughly the right number of straps, supporting, web, and

helmets, steel, Mark I, but there was a distinct shortage of boots, ankle, and an absolute dearth of blankets, woollen. Our new quartermaster-sergeant was only mildly concerned, giving it as his opinion that we couldn't be worried over trifles.

That was the last day of September, and at sunrise the next morning, though it was lovely later, there was a sharpness in the air that told of a new month.

Monday 1st (ran the unit diary). Location: **Perugia**. Weather: fine. Unit busy preparing to hand over vehicles to NZOC, ⁵ **Assisi**, on 6th.

(‘I brought this old bitch over from Egypt. She's got pistons you could tie knots in.’)

Tuesday 2nd. Location: **Perugia**. Weather: hot morning—fair afternoon. Workshops preparing to go to 4th Reserve MT Company tomorrow night. It will be attached to that unit for **UK** leave scheme.

(‘Recovery work, eh? We'll be strung out—sections of us—all across the Riviera and **France**. Forte dei Marmi, San Remo, Aix. Oo! La-la!’)

Wednesday 3rd. Location: **Perugia**. Weather: fine but windy. Unit will not move to **Florence** on 4th as previously instructed but will be wound up in present area on 6th when remaining personnel will be posted to 1 Supply and 1 Petrol Companies. Workshops will stay with unit until transport has been handed in. Anti-gas equipment and web gear returned to QM.

(‘She's all there, Ray, and you know what you can do with her.’)

Thursday 4th. Location: **Perugia**. Weather: cold. OC returned from memorial service on **Crete**. Officer postings received from HQ Command. ⁶ OR postings received—seventy-three will go to **Petrol Company**, forty-two to Supply.

(‘Better give us your address as we're gonna be split up. Supply should be all right, though. “Bub's” there and “Hawk” and Old Harry.’)

Friday 5th. Location: Perugia. Weather: fine. Transport lined up on football ground for checking and classing by Workshops before being handed in tomorrow. HQ domestic vehicles stripped of fittings.

(‘You’ve had your little desk, Charlie. No more charge sheets to fill in.’)

Saturday 6th. Location: Perugia. Weather: fine. HQ and 3 Platoon vehicles marched out at midday for handing in to NZOC, Assisi. Drivers brought back to unit area by Petrol Company transport. Workshops marched out complete. Drivers on last ferrying detail reported in after dinner and were then marched out to Petrol Company. OC left for Florence to report to HQ Command. Rear party under Lt Wells to stay behind to clean up and await return of vehicles still on detail.

(Only two tents were left in the area. In one of them Headquarters had held a party the night before and the Major had played his accordion. Now the area was quiet and only in two places splashed with light.)

Sunday 7th. Location: Perugia. Weather: fine. One lorry from Petrol Company returned G.1098 equipment to NZOC and another took unit sports gear and wireless sets to Florence.

(These were the cricket bats we had used for the great North v. South match, the cricket balls Ray Bilkey ⁷ had spun so cunningly. These were the wireless sets that had given us Command Performances, Forces’ Favourites, the speeches of Winston Churchill.)

Monday 8th. Location: Perugia. Weather: fine. Balance of G.1098 equipment returned to NZOC.

(‘*Due mila, Pop— due mila per tutto.* If you don’t want the goods, Pop, don’t handle’ em. *Due mila finish.*’)

Tuesday 9th. Location: Perugia. Weather: fine. Final clean up of area

and preparations completed for move of rear party to **Florence** tomorrow.

(‘ *Sessanta mila*, Pop. *Sessanta mila* and they're yours. And a good bet to you, Pop. *Grazie.*’)

Wednesday 10th. Location: **Perugia**. Weather: fine. Rear party moves out at 1100 hours to join **Petrol Company** in Divisional area at **Florence....**

After the rear party had moved out the Italians moved in to search the ditches and rubbish pits. They found little of value and after a while they went away. Only the children stayed, twittering like birds and recalling where this cookhouse had stood and that vehicle had been parked. They threw sticks and stones into the tall walnut tree that had sheltered Headquarters' orderly-room lorry and the ripe walnuts pattered down, bouncing on the baked earth. When evening came there were still children in the area.

The shadows from the oak trees flowed down the hillside, bridging the creek and poking long fingers across the football ground. When it was quite dark and the goalposts could be seen no longer the children went home—to dream, perhaps, of the strange, friendly soldiers, the *Neo Zelandesi*, who had come, had stayed for a little while, and had moved on. And after a few months, after the weather had removed all traces of the camp and the last biscuit had been eaten and the last tin of marmalade had vanished from Momma's shelves, and the small cut foot had healed, and the bandage provided by the New Zealanders had been washed and washed until it was of no further use, they forgot. For the world was full of soldiers and they stayed for a little while and they went away.

The children forgot, yes, but not at once and not completely. Between them and the migrant soldiers there was a bridge, a bond, some fragments of a common language. They sensed, it may be, that soldiers were no different from themselves in some ways, that they, too, had a kind of innocence, and were not, in a world abounding in meanness,

mean. Careless perhaps, destructive certainly, but not—not in the last resort—meriting hate and terror from children, even from burnt children in **London, Naples, Rotterdam, Berlin, Hiroshima.**

So the children came back for a night, two nights, three nights, to the place that remembered the soldiers and their lorries and their gear, and played until the walnut tree was deep blue in the sweet, heavy evening and the hills were purple and the stream flashed under the stars like dark silver.

¹ Lt F. M. Hill; civil servant; **Christchurch**; born **London**, 15 Apr 1912.

² Cpl A. S. Neighbours; brick and pipe maker; **Waimangaroa, Westport**; born **Westport**, 23 Feb 1922.

³ Dvr W. C. R. Porter; grocer's assistant; **Palmerston North**; born **Wanganui**, 10 Jan 1918.

⁴ **United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.**

⁵ **New Zealand Ordnance Corps.**

⁶ Maj Coutts and WO II Salmond (posted to 1 **Petrol Company**, 9 Oct 45); Capt H. A. Wilson, Lt (T/Capt) Legge, and 2 Lt Wells (4 Reserve MT Company, 16 Oct 45); 2 Lt E. J. Stenbridge * (1 **Supply Company**, 6 Oct 45). The following officers had left already: Capt Littlejohn (posted to 1 **Supply Company**, 30 Sep 45), Capt Langley (1 NZ Graves Concentration Unit, 26 Jul 45), Lt Miles (4 Reserve MT Company, 30 Sep 45), and Lt Brown (NZ Maadi Camp Composite Company, 10 Aug 45).

* Posted to unit 10 Aug 45.

⁷ Cpl R. Bilkey; corset cutter; **Northcote, Auckland**; born

Rotorua, 13 Dec 1919; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

ROLL OF HONOUR

ROLL OF HONOUR

KILLED IN ACTION

(includes Died of Wounds)

Dvr W. V. Mosen 14 April 1941
Dvr A. N. Bradbury 26 April 1941
Dvr A. H. Storey 26 November 1941
Dvr G. B. Drinnan 27 November 1941
Dvr N. J. N. Orsborn 27 November 1941
Dvr J. D. B. Clifford 28 November 1941
Dvr A. B. Meiklejohn 28 November 1941
Dvr C. Cameron 5 December 1941
Cpl O. W. Miles 14 July 1942
Dvr D. C. Henderson 14 July 1942
Dvr R. King 14 July 1942
Dvr J. S. O'Connor 14 July 1942
Dvr A. B. Caddy 15 July 1942
Dvr L. E. Hay 15 July 1942
Dvr C. S. Brown 17 July 1942

DIED AS PRISONER OF WAR

Cpl A. McK. Weir 3 December 1942

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Sgt A. Morton 25 December 1940
Dvr C. E. Ross 17 November 1941
Dvr C. L. Collie 4 December 1941
Dvr R. Baker 21 January 1942
Dvr W. Wood 7 March 1942
Dvr R. A. Duley 29 June 1942
Dvr D. H. Elder 29 June 1942
Dvr J. T. Meaton 24 January 1944
Dvr A. J. Howejohns 10 May 1944
L-Cpl O. E. Penney 28 June 1944
Dvr J. R. Kinross 11 March 1945

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

HONOURS AND AWARDS

HONOURS AND AWARDS

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Major S. A. Sampson 5 January 1945

**MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH
EMPIRE**

Major P. E. Coutts 7 January 1944

MILITARY CROSS

Captain H. A. Rowe 10 April 1942

Second-Lieut. J. R. Arnold 5 March 1943

Captain B. J. Williams 18 October 1945

MILITARY MEDAL

3519 Dvr R. S. Grant 20 September 1941

12103 Sgt R. G. Aro 27 March 1942

3438 Sgt V. J. Cleave 11 December 1942

3453 Dvr N. Hague 11 December 1942

43496 Cpl W. O. Ingham 18 October 1945

264447 L-Cpl D. J. McLean 13 December 1945

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

3470 Cpl W. S. Aitken 7 January 1944

25529 Cpl J. C. Connelly 5 October 1945

UNITED STATES BRONZE STAR

477423 Dvr J. G. Lee 3 June 1945

MENTIONED IN DESPATCHES

Major P. E. Coutts 8 January 1943

Captain S. A. Sampson 6 August 1943

Captain A. G. Morris 3 March 1944

Lieutenant A. R. Delley 15 February 1945

Lieutenant J. D. Todd 8 August 1945

3545 Sgt S. H. Matthews 8 July 1941

3435 Sgt N. K. Michael 23 October 1942

21615 Dvr G. M. H. Bell 8 January 1943

3564 S-Sgt J. H. Skeates 8 January 1943

18753 WO II J. G. Pearson 6 August 1943

3579 Cpl C. R. Turner	3 March 1944
22008 Dvr D. C. Harrison	19 May 1944
21631 Dvr L. J. Moore	19 May 1944
36058 Cpl J. R. Benfield	15 February 1945
28672 Dvr H. C. Blomfield	15 February 1945
82612 Dvr J. J. Downes	15 February 1945
17056 Sgt J. D. Letham	15 February 1945
14029 Sgt S. W. Barber	8 August 1945
16722 Sgt I. C. J. Craig	8 August 1945
46681 Cpl N. Dunn	8 August 1945
42214 WO II D. S. Finlay	8 August 1945
3595 WO I I. McBeth	8 August 1945
42080 Cpl H. K. Wallace	8 August 1945
43496 Cpl W. O. Ingham	24 November 1945
43501 Sgt L. C. H. La Roche	29 November 1945
237781 Dvr C. C. O'Hara	29 November 1945
83311 Dvr J. L. Cowan	23 May 1946
19788 Cpl W. A. Ford	23 May 1946
286496 Dvr W. G. Kelly	23 May 1946
28939 Dvr J. W. Donnelly	29 August 1946

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS

COMMANDING OFFICERS

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Major W. A. T. McGuire, ED	3 Oct 1939 - 3 Oct 1941
Major P. E. Coutts, MBE, ED	4 Oct 1941 - 26 Jan 1943
Major S. A. Sampson, OBE	26 Jan 1943 - 17 Apr 1944
Major R. C. Gibson	17 Apr 1944 - 21 Sep 1944
Major R. P. Latimer	21 Sep 1944 - 2 Feb 1945
Major P. E. Coutts, MBE, ED	2 Feb 1945 - 6 Oct 1945