

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

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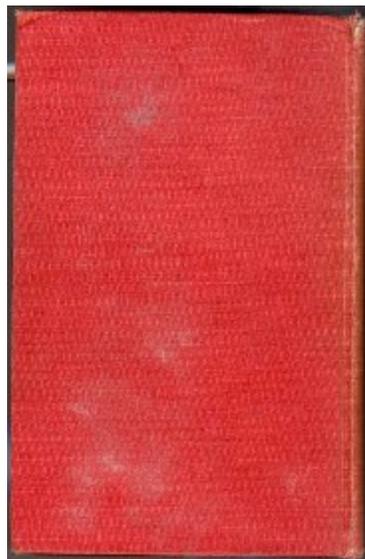
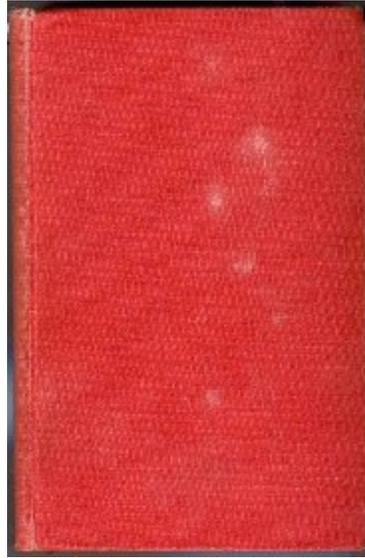
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[COVERS]



4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

R M T

R M T

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[FRONTISPIECE]



The Desert Road: Cairo to Alexandria

The Desert Road: Cairo to Alexandria

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[TITLE PAGE]



Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45

R M T

**Official History of the 4th and 6th Reserve Mechanical Transport
Companies, 2 NZEF**

JIM HENDERSON

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

1954

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

FOREWORD

Foreword



WINDSOR CASTLE

BY

I AM glad to have the honour of writing this foreword to the history of these two fine units, because in doing so I am able to pay a tribute to their work in the **Middle East** and **Italy**.

The 4th Reserve Motor Transport Company went overseas with the First Echelon, and was in fact one of the first units of the New Zealand Division to take the field in Lord Wavell's victorious campaign in the **Western Desert** in 1940. Later they took part in the disastrous Greek campaign. When Greece was lost, in common with all technical units, they lost their vehicles and heavy equipment. In Crete they fought as infantry. When Crete was evacuated they were re-equipped at El Maadi, and from then on they fought through the North African and Italian campaigns. The 4th RMT continued right to the finish, and took a leading role in the advance that captured **Trieste**.

The 6th Reserve Motor Transport Company was formed before the Libyan campaign in 1941, and fought through the **Western Desert** campaigns, and in the battles in **Italy**, up to the period of the fighting near **Rimini** in 1944, when owing to manpower shortage this unit was disbanded.

I AM inclined to think that the New Zealand Division's greatest contribution to the Allied war effort was in the North African campaigns during 1941-2-3. Fighting in the **Western Desert was essentially a war of movement. Mobility played a decisive part. New Zealanders were ideal men for this class of warfare. They found their way by night as well as day across the unmapped featureless desert with accuracy and skill and, as it were, almost by instinct.**

In this volume is the story. It tells us how these two units were formed and of their work in training and in battle.

It is a tale that should be recorded. It deals with our triumphs and disasters. It is a fine story of two of the most efficient operational units in the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

I hope that this book will have the circulation that it deserves, and that military students will study it and get from its pages the numberless lessons that are to be gathered.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[QUOTATION]

He was on his way to fight in battles as great as any in the histories. But these would appear to him mere welters of nasty, complicated, tiresome activity. Only in after years, reading books describing the scenes in which he had been engaged, would he begin to think of his battles as Battles. Only then, when the heat of youth was gone, would he come to warm himself with the fanned-up glow of the memory that he, too, had fought on Saint Crispin's Day.

—Herman Wouk, *The 'Caine' Mutiny*

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[DEDICATION]

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4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 1 – THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER 1

The Beginning

THIS is the RMT —the 4th Reserve Mechanical Transport Company. ¹ This day, 9 December 1940, it will drive into its first action. The RMT is the first company of the 2 NZEF to go into action in the Second World War.

The 4th RMT Company's story goes back to that first Tuesday in October, in the ripe spring of 1939. That was when the First Echelon marched (and, in some cases, was assisted by more sober comrades) into New Zealand's three main camps: Ngaruawahia, Trentham, and Burnham. These men, volunteers for our Special Force, as 2 NZEF was called in the beginning, wore civilian clothes and carried small suitcases or sugar-bags. The old soldiers shook their heads....

The quartermasters handed out tin plates, pannikins, and clumsy knives, forks and spoons coated against rust in a loathsome grease. Each man picked up a sacking palliasse and stuffed it with straw. For candlesticks, old triangular bayonets, salvaged from heaven knows where, turned up. Old, too, were many of the khaki serge uniforms of assorted shades and sizes, their folds filled with flakes of naphthalene, their four-starred brass buttons heavy with green. Greatcoats in two sizes (too big or too small) were mustard-coloured survivals from 1916, some with disturbing bullet holes. But the black boots and the grey blankets were good, very good. All this and a lot more had to be carted to the six-man tent (huts were not ready for everyone then), which took some finding for a start.

‘Sorry. I'm a stranger here myself.’

Shuffled from queue to queue in that first dazed week, paraded for gear, for meals, and for paybooks, mystified by bugle calls, ² asked for name and number at every turn, thankful they had brains enough to avoid such an organisation in peacetime, detailed for fatigues in cookhouse (those great bloody gauze bags of raw mincemeat) and latrine

(the horror of the first cigarette butts), commanded to swing-those-arms-keep-in-line-pick-it-up-pick-it-up-watch-your-dress- ing, volunteers consoled themselves by reminding each other of the only thing the Army could *not* do: it could not make a man a mother.

But after a while the unit began to shake itself out of this mess. The 4th RMT Company, scattered among the three training camps, would not meet up together until Egypt was reached. In the meantime in each camp was a little pocket of RMT: A Section (now moved from **Ngaruawahia**) in **Papakura** and commanded by 'the boss', Captain 'Granny' **Whyte**,³ with Lieutenant **Muller**⁴ helping him; B Section in **Trentham** under Lieutenants **Woods**⁵ and **Broberg**⁶; C Section in **Burnham** with Captain **McAlpine**⁷ and Lieutenant **Good**.⁸ RMT's job was to carry riflemen about and to lend a hand with the multitude of transport tasks required by a modern army. To look after its trucks was a sort of mobile repair shop called Workshops Section. This Workshops Section and Company Headquarters, with its clerk, typist, despatch rider, sergeantmajor, and so on, the small administrative staff of the company, began to take shape in **Trentham**. Later drivers and technicians from **Papakura** and **Burnham** went to **Trentham** to complete Workshops Section and Company Headquarters, CSM **Rhodes**⁹ leading the southerners and Staff-Sergeant **Upton**¹⁰ heading the others.

Once rifles were issued, drivers settled into the routine of rifle drill, copious instructions on the Lewis gun (never used), preliminary infantry training, route marches, map-reading, and lectures about the organisation of the Division and how the Army Service Corps fitted into the picture. Few even saw the inside of a truck. Nobody seemed to know exactly what this RMT outfit was. Besides, no RMT had been with **1 NZEF** in the First World War—and was it really necessary? Trucks were in short supply in those early days, and on the parade ground of **Trentham** RMT men reluctantly stood-in for trucks, glum and apprehensive while 'sump', 'petrol' and 'water' were examined and checked.

From 14 December it was goodbye to it all for a fortnight, with a £3

gratuity, a travelling warrant, and a pass safely pocketed within each new drill uniform. When the men were on leave a good many people wanted to know: 'Why are you in the Army? There are more men in the Maginot Line than they know what to do with.'

In the new year the address for letters became:

Number, rank, initials, name,

Company,

NZASC,

2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force,

C/o GPO, [Wellington](#).

Any day now....

Then it was past the pubs and the eating places where so much of the soldier's pay stayed, past the offices and shops (*keep in step and give 'em a good show*), down those streets walked in happiness or in loneliness on leave, past the crowds and the children held up to see, with a bit of cheering and waving, and a blaze of band music. It was listening to speeches (mostly too long) from about five lots of officials trying to say the same thing. But the small handkerchief glimpsed waving, then abruptly arrested and dabbed to eyes suddenly wet, said it: New Zealand's goodbye to the First Echelon of her Expeditionary Force that morning of Wednesday, 3 January 1940, in [Auckland](#), [Wellington](#), and [Christchurch](#).

And crowds through the camps in the afternoon, and cakes for the trip, and best frocks, photographs, and talking and laughing, just a bit on the artificial side, maybe.

Shouldering black-stencilled kitbags and sea kits, the Trentham RMT men boarded the transport *Orion* at King's Wharf, [Wellington](#), on Friday, 5 January. Soon they were joined by A Section and Captain Whyte from

the **Papakura** troop train. The RMT men in this ship numbered 284. The rest of the company (94) from **Burnham** embarked in the **Sobieski** at **Lyttelton** on the same day. Next morning the convoy joined up and swung westward through Cook Strait.

Over the widening water lay New Zealand in her pakeha centennial year. Visitors to the Exhibition in **Wellington** were nearing the million mark. From the top of a crazy house a model of a man laughed incessantly upon the crowds below. Bing Crosby fans sang 'Pennies from Heaven', and Claudette Colbert was appearing in a film, 'It's a Wonderful World'.

The last to be seen of New Zealand was Mount Egmont, with a bit of cloud, at 6 p.m. The next land was near **Sydney**, but men did not get ashore until **Fremantle** was reached on 18 January. 'We knocked about a bit and the Aussie kids were mad on getting our badges and shoulder titles and buttons. When you walked it still seemed the boat was rocking.' Next day there was an unnecessary route march to **Perth**, about 14 miles in all, with the temperature over 90. 'Three hours 40 minutes it took us. This is not my idea of a joke. We bet the zoo wasn't crowded that day.'

The sea grew bluer and bluer. Sunsets resembled cinema-organ music. A lot now slept on deck, Mae Wests for pillows. All the good Westerns were out of the library and only sea stories were left. The ship's cinema was always crowded. ¹¹

'We crossed the Equator on 28 January and everyone said: did you feel the bump? **Colombo**, 30 January, another hot march, three hours leave, and what a pong! The Romantic East! Niggers came out in boats to sell fruit and stuff. What they do for a pair of bust tennis shoes would set your hair on end.'

Aden, 8 February: 'Pete met an old beggar saying "No mother, no father." He must have been 90.' The Red Sea: lectures.... 'The wind came hot and dry, and you could see the land far off looking white, like snow.'

Port Tewfik on 12 February, and so, wide-eyed, wondering, by train through **Cairo** suburbs to **Maadi**. 'P.S. These marks are sweat, not tears.'

The 4th RMT went up into the **Western Desert**, up into 'the blue', into a desert as large as **India**; it left **Maadi** on 18 June, just eight days after **Italy** declared war—with **Holland**, **Belgium**, and **France** now prostrate. If there was any fat in this wasteland by the Libyan border, the RMT, suddenly the most advanced unit of the First Echelon, certainly lived on it now. The company's fortunes had changed with a vengeance. At Maadi the RMT had not exactly cut a dash. For many weeks it had only a handful of trucks. The company was the youngest child in the NZASC brood, and veteran drivers, instancing RMT's lowliness in early 1940, love to say that at a ceremonial parade for the British Ambassador in Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson, and Lady Lampson, when 4 RMT's turn came to march past the saluting base even the band had packed up and gone. The visit was commemorated in an unprintable song to the tune of 'Steamboat Bill'.

All that the RMT did at **Maadi**, apart from route-marching and drill, was to learn how to care for, maintain, and look after trucks. The 380 men shared (like the miracle of loaves and fishes) about a dozen old Morris trucks, one Humber car, and 27 Norton motor-cycles. The most important job was to teach men to drive a lorry properly. Each of the three sections hoped to get 30 lorries to itself one day, and there were supposed to be two first-rate drivers to each lorry. RMT aimed at having at least one reliable driver ready for each truck by the time its permanent vehicles rolled in. Sergeants, corporals, and despatch riders, with much agony, learned to handle the motor-cycles in the sand, but once in the desert the NCOs stuck to the trucks, and only the despatch riders kept motorcycles.

Hardly anybody had handled a heavy lorry in his life. In one section, for example, of 90 men only three (yes, three) had driven heavy transport vehicles in New Zealand, and only 30 had car licences. The remaining 57 had never even driven a car. For an hour or so each week drivers coached non-drivers in starting, changing gears, and steering on

a hard, firm stretch of sand at **Maadi**. The learners then passed on to more advanced instructors, and finally had to pass a gruelling test over really tough going of soft sand, rocks, and hummocks. ¹² When the fleet of trucks did arrive shortly before the move into the blue, the three sections had barely enough No. 1 drivers to take over each truck. As it turned out, after a short time in the **Western Desert**, practically any driver could be sent confidently on any task, a tribute to the corporals for studying, nursing, and developing their men.

But by mid-May (with reports of the Italian Army moving restlessly on and behind the Libyan border), the company had received at long last 98 three-ton Bedford lorries, 16 30-cwt. trucks, three one-ton trucks, and nine cars. Each vehicle bore the divisional sign, a white fernleaf on a square black background, on the front left mudguard, and the company's colours, green and red, and its number, 39 (later changed to 48).

RMT was beginning to perk up.

Then, on 18 June, with the riflemen of 18 and 19 Battalions packed aboard, the three-tonners left for the Desert on the RMT trail which would lead some 500 times round the world before the war ended five years later. Down by the **Nile** they went, passing the sweet white sails of its feluccas, the flame trees, and naked children dabbling in mucky canals; over the Khedive Ismail Bridge to Giza and Cheops' Pyramid, nearly 500 feet high, nearly 5000 years old, where the ragged young descendants of the Pharaoh's people begged for biscuits, cigarettes and baksheesh; past Mena House into the wastes of desert, the hypnotic black thread of the bitumen road stretching ahead; on to the turn-off to **Alexandria**. They dispersed for the night and were away next day, with glimpses of the blue **Mediterranean**, sparkling white sand dunes, and the strange pink of salt marshes. And so they came to **Garawla**, near **Mersa Matruh**, by dusk, a wind blowing the sand and making it hard to see ahead. In the night they were welcomed by bombs falling just beyond the dispersed lorries.

At **Garawla** (nothing more than a couple of huts and an airstrip) RMT's passengers set about hewing and blasting the never-used 'Kiwi Canal', an anti-tank ditch some 6000 yards long, twelve feet wide, and five feet deep. On the last day in June the company, 370 strong, moved to Smugglers' Cove, some five miles east of heavily bombed **Mersa Matruh**. The RMT, now virtually taken away from **2 NZEF** until the campaign in **Greece**, began a long and pleasant period of service for the British under the command of **Western Desert Force**. While to the west small British mobile columns engaged and harassed the cautious enemy along the frontier, Western Desert Force prepared secretly and stealthily for the counterattack. The RMT's part was to help fetch and carry everything from water, food, petrol and oil to ammunition, leave parties, and mines. *And Naafi* (Navy, Army, and Air Force Institute) canteen goods—the fat of the wasteland—spirits, beer, tinned delicacies, cigarettes, tobacco—yes, indeed, and these luxuries drivers considered fair game to be 'acquired' by luck and by subtleties. The Naafi run had to be rotated strictly. The booty was concealed with equal cunning. **Steve Tripp**,¹³ for example, buried a crate of beer in a military cemetery. The company built up dumps and kept them full, carted supplies over open desert (and not-so-open desert pocked with boulders, potholes, shingle, thorn bushes, and treacherous sands), and followed, with the assurance of camels, faint tracks to as far as **Siwa Oasis**, some 160 miles inland. **Siwa** was the forward base for the **Long Range Desert Group**, and the RMT party, usually a corporal and three or four trucks, often came back with a welcome load of dates.

Communications were difficult. The railway stopped short near the indifferent port of **Mersa Matruh** and the only road was the one along the coast. **Western Desert Force**, being far from amply supplied with transport, warmly welcomed the New Zealand drivers and their three-tonners.

The RMT men made themselves at home in remarkably quick time, A Section even adopting a young Arab waif, 'Mahmid', until officialdom frowned. Trucks, frequently called out on jobs for days on end, took on a

homely appearance, with a photograph of the wife (or the girl friend) fixed prominently before the driver or the spare driver (for there were two drivers to a lorry), 'and a photograph of the mother-in-law well behind his head'.

A typical three-tonner, developed by its two drivers over a period in the blue, became something like this. Bits and pieces were hung and fixed here and there with the skill of a high-country sheepfarmer adding 'just a bit more' to an already overburdened packhorse. Between the two drivers in the cab rose something like the little cupboard in the bathroom. It had a shelf or so, and there they kept brush, comb, mirror, toilet gear, and any opened foodstuffs—a half-finished tin of jam and margarine (soldiers from the world's largest butter-exporting country ate margarine throughout the war), the current packet of **Naafi** biscuits, and so on. While the truck bowled along the 'pantry' could be tapped for a snack. Bolted under the tailboard was a large metal box, about four feet long, completely filled with reserve tinned food. Then slung along the sides under the edge of the tray were other lockers with more food. In the gap between the cab and the tray, by the spare wheel, rested a five-gallon water container, complete with tap. That was the water supply, apart from the usual tins of reserve water. Slung under the trapdoor in the middle of the tray (the trapdoor was for inspecting the transmission) lay a shallow locker for hard-tack food.

For light during rest and repose in the back of the lorry, the trouble lamp (the wire-cage protected electric light on a flex connected to the truck battery) was fixed semi-permanently inside the canopy. With all headlights absolutely banned, the only other drain on the battery was for starting. With the canopy well roped down and absolutely lightproof at night, there was always plenty of power for reading, writing home, playing cards, eating, and yarning. The trouble lamp worked from a switch rigged up alongside the resting driver. He didn't even have to get out of bed. Now, drivers were supposed to sleep on the floor of the desert or on the bare floor of the truck, with a humble groundsheet and a couple of blankets. In no time, however, every driver had a comfortable

mattress (from bombed-out houses in [Matruh](#)) or a folding camp bed. And usually some flat spot was left to settle down on, even when the lorry was loaded up.

About the most useful part of a lorry was the exhaust manifold. A tin of M and V (meat and vegetables) was placed on this and, presto! after a couple of miles breakfast was hot and ready. When away from the cooks' truck ¹⁴ men also whipped up hot meals and brewed tea in no time on primuses or petrol fires. Every lorry carried an ample emergency supply of petrol. Drivers washed their shirts in petrol; water was scarce.

What about navigation and desert craft? Why didn't this raw company from [Maadi](#) disappear without trace in the trackless desert, like the Persian host on the way to beat up [Siwa](#) Oasis thousands of years ago?

Two British 7 Armoured Division navigators with sun compasses went out with 4 RMT Company on its first job in the desert, a four-day job building a dump. A khamsin, the most furious and the thickest of all dust-storms, chased the company home. From then on 4 RMT worked on its own.

For a start trucks worked mainly between Smugglers' Cove and [Matruh](#), shifting the supply dumps and dispersing them in the desert. This was virtually all road work, the convoys going only a few hundred yards out from the bitumen road into the desert. This was the first series of jobs.

By now two personalities in particular were widely known. One was [Bill Tanner](#), ¹⁵ the company's sanitary corporal, a small, merry, deep-voiced man whose work (and play) was of the best. He carried a pet tortoise with him and looked, some thought, like a tortoise. That became Bill's nickname, and the stories about Bill would fill a book—but not this one. The other personality was Padre Roy Jamieson ¹⁶ who, through his understanding and simplicity, soon became part of the company's life. He was awarded the MBE 'for great devotion to duty and

outstanding service, not only as a chaplain but as a leader.' Padre Jamieson kept his sermons and services short and apt, 'and when he left us after seeing us right through the desert, 4 RMT was never quite the same again,' writes one driver. 'His commonsense helps many of us still.' One church parade in 1940 Graham [McMillan](#)¹⁷ remembers vividly for different reasons. 'Somebody had found a little sheltered cove where a good many of us could gather without much danger of being bombed,' he said. 'We all piled into this little cove, somebody had a fiddle to provide the music, and away the service went. Well, what with the roar of the waves, we could hardly hear Padre, or the fiddle, and by the time the service ended, half our boots were awash from the incoming tide.'

After road work the desert trips began, carting rations for 7 Armoured Division. This was work for one or two subsections (six or twelve lorries) under corporals, and there were six sub-sections, each of six trucks, to A, B, and C Sections. Only officers had maps and prismatic compasses, and they couldn't be everywhere. One of the senior NCOs would pioneer the route to the dump. Drivers would go there in convoy and come back in convoy. Then it was considered everyone knew the way.

This is how the route was pioneered. First, the NCO (or driver in charge of the convoy) would study the map before leaving, watching for and memorising landmarks, escarpments, and bad bits, and would fix a route in a dead straight line. He didn't take the map with him. His starting point would be on an intentionally simple angle (say 45 degrees) from one of the milestones (or kilometre pegs: white, with the number painted in black) which bordered the coastal road. Reaching the particular peg with his loaded trucks, the NCO in charge of the convoy would get out and stand by the peg. Here he would make his turn (in this case 45 degrees) giving him the angle he had fixed on the map. Parade ground drill (*Right turn! Left turn! Rotten! As you were!*) long ago had taught him to make an exact, right-angle turn. Half of such a turn would be 45 degrees; a third would be 30 degrees. So far, so good.

His turn made, the NCO, fixing his eyes on a bush or a tiny feature,

would walk straight towards it until the following truck was 20 to 30 yards along the line, which was now established for the waiting convoy. All the other drivers had to do was to follow the truck ahead. The NCO knew the distance (say 50 miles) to the destination, probably a couple of camouflaged tents in camel-thorn. The leading truck now had to drive 50 miles dead straight, a most difficult task, for trucks drift to the right or to the left, just as human beings do when walking for any length of time.

The NCO in the leading truck (he wasn't driving, of course; he had quite enough to do already) would pick another bush or rock on the skyline about 300 yards ahead. He glued his eyes to this bush (peering into the future), while the No. 1 driver (in the present) dodged any rough stuff ahead, from boulders to potholes to big bushes. When he had almost reached the bush, the NCO would quickly pick another one dead in line, and so on to the journey's end. The strain on him was not light. Sometimes in his sleep he would dream of dancing bushes.

When swerving to avoid obstacles, it was essential that the driver passed round the first obstacle on the left-hand side and dodged the next one on the right-hand side. This, soon becoming automatic, brought the driver roughly back into line again and helped prevent side-drift.

Another aid to navigation was to use a shadow in the cab as a sun compass. Allowance had to be made for the sun shifting round and taking the shadow with it. ¹⁸

Occasionally, without stopping the convoy, the leader would climb out on to the spare wheel at the back of the cab and look at the convoy behind. If one truck could be seen behind, all was well, but if his dozen trucks were sprawled in an arc round the horizon he was great-circle sailing and had to get back on his rhumb-line smartly. In such small convoys one rule could not be broken: trucks had to follow dead behind one another. After the required distance, the 50 miles, had been checked carefully on the speedometer, the trucks, which would be creaking and groaning at four to five miles an hour if the going was uneven, would

stop. The leader would climb out on the cab roof and look around hopefully. If he could not see the objective, he sent trucks on a limited scour in different directions, and one of them would find the dump.

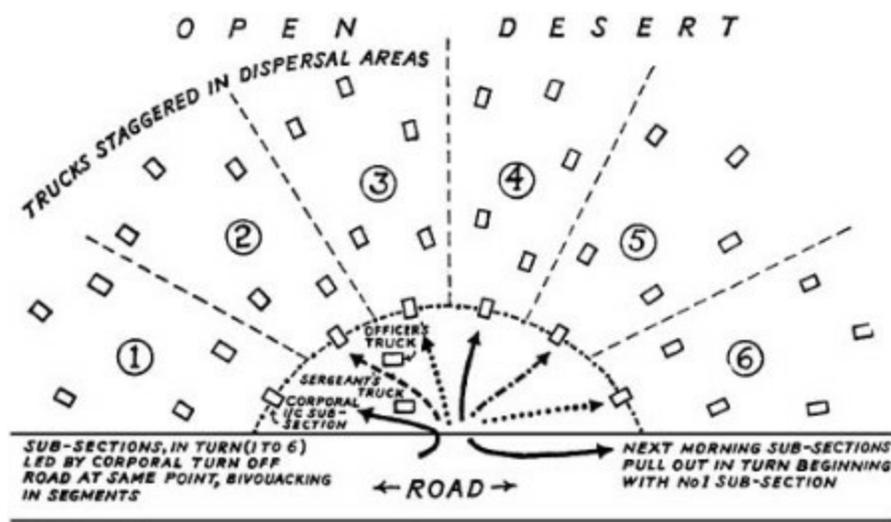
By such methods, rough as they may seem, RMT trucks could travel considerable distances and at the end would be no more than half a mile or so out. The usual journey was 30 to 40 miles.

Just when a well-marked track was fixed in the desert, the dump would be established on another map reference and the whole thing began again. Of course, going back was nothing —all that had to be done was to follow the tracks or, if the ground was stony, to head due north for the coastal road, where the distance from [Mersa Matruh](#) could be fixed by the nearest kilo peg. As for night travelling without map or compass: if no stars shone no truck moved. Every RMT man knew how to find the Pole Star and its pointers, so that if some were obscured he could work from the others. Fixing onto stars (such as Orion) that moved in the night could be most misleading. The stars were very big and close and personal to every man in the desert. Often before falling asleep in his bleak slit trench, a man would gaze at the stars with something close to adoration.

Frequently scattered far and wide on the individual carrying tasks handed out to the small six-lorry sub-sections, the drivers soon became confident and, above all, dependable. One of the highest peaks of efficiency was reached by one man in 1940. The drop arm of his steering gear broke, it was impossible to make temporary repairs, and he was by himself, alone in the bare desert. He put his three-tonner in creeper gear, wedged his accelerator down with a stick, and walked alongside the front wheels, kicking them into line whenever they bumped off course. He did this for one day, stopped during the cloudy night, and continued on next day, going north until he hit the coastal road. He sent a message back with a passing truck to Workshops and stayed guarding his lorry until the breakdown truck arrived. On the other hand, one RMT man became nicknamed 'Dipstick'. He was a newcomer to the company

and evidently to vehicles too. In the periodic oil-change and checkup, he drained the engine all right, but after a couple of hours told his corporal he had not been successful in refilling the motor. On investigation it was found he had been attempting to refill through the tiny dipstick hole.

Spacing the lorries and maintenance could not be neglected in the **Western Desert**. 'There'll come a time....' instructors had said over and over again. Spacing was based on the scatter value of the current enemy bomb, and trucks were spaced at all times so that no bomb could get two of them. Two hundred and fifty yards was considered safe. Night movement was nose-to-tail. Light and horn fuses were drawn from all trucks. On road work in the daytime a section would take up to five miles of road, and when night approached trucks dispersed methodically in sub-sections in open desert on one side of the road, ready to complete the task next day. The day finished with getting the trucks ready for tomorrow. The routine, laid down in the 'Good Book', had been learned thoroughly. Petrol, water and oil were checked and replenished; anything which had worked loose was tightened up, and any small mechanical adjustments were made at the end of the day. In this way the RMT got off each day to a clear start. Repairs beyond the scope of the driver-mechanic in each sub-section were handled by Workshops, where much enthusiasm developed into a great deal of skill. When the time came for Lieutenant **McDonagh**,¹⁹ from Petrol Company, to inspect all New Zealand transport in the desert in November 1940, he considered the RMT fleet the best maintained of the lot.



ROADSIDE DISPERSAL FOR AN RMT SECTION AT NIGHT

ROADSIDE DISPERSAL FOR AN RMT SECTION AT NIGHT

On maintenance, Lieutenant John Fenton,²⁰ 6 RMT (and this, momentarily, is looking forward into 1941) writes:

In the completely motorised New Zealand Division hit and run methods of maintenance could not be tolerated, particularly in an isolated desert war. The Army laid down virtually foolproof Vehicle Inspections (nothing was overlooked) and Maintenance systems and they became second nature to us. The Commanding Officer's technical adviser was the Workshops officer; the Platoon (or Section, as they were first called) Commanders were responsible for the operation, inspection and maintenance being carried out by the drivers. Daily maintenance (and glancing at the instruments on the dash to anticipate trouble) became instinctive. It was often noticed that during halts and night bivvies, as the infantry were cleaning their weapons, the RMT drivers also maintained their vehicles. A good driver, proud of his truck, kept 100% fit; reckoned the cost of his vehicle not in £ s d but in men and women power, materials, rubber, petrol, oil and valuable shipping space; remembered the responsibility of the load he carried. Its monetary value may have run into thousands of pounds, but its monetary value was secondary to the men in the line depending on the drivers getting that load there. If the load was personnel, then it was priceless.²¹

From early insistence on correct spacing (if in doubt in the first few

weeks someone would pace the distance; besides, Colonel Essie, officer commanding all the RASC in the **Western Desert**, could be relied upon to appear in the most fantastic places and shout: 'Disperse those trucks!') drivers naturally adapted themselves at the end of the year to two formations, 'Arrowhead' and 'Air Formation', for troop-carrying by day. At night they closed up nose-to-tail.

The arrowhead, or inverted V formation, with 250 yards between trucks, was used when limited numbers of trucks carrying troops were crossing open desert. This formation was safe against bombing, but was too neat and tidy to give protection against strafing. In air formation the trucks were staggered so that no more than two were in line in any direction, and each about 250 yards away from its neighbour on all sides.

The Italian Air Force, unlike their Army, was active. The bombing of **Mersa Matruh** reached a peak of five raids in one afternoon in July. Three RMT men were out of luck that month. The **2 NZEF**'s first casualty through enemy action came when a formation of Italian Savoias swept in over **Matruh** at 2 p.m. on 12 July. Corporal **Pussell**,²² wounded in an arm and a leg, was evacuated to hospital. Six days later four bombs fell in Company Headquarters. Driver **Graham**²³ suffered from shock and abrasions, and Driver **Andrews**²⁴ was wounded in the right leg. There were no further battle casualties in the First Echelon during the month.

Sudden and violent explosions halted a convoy of six A Section lorries rumbling along the **Sidi Barrani- Matruh** road in the darkness at 4.10 a.m. on Friday, 13 September. The trucks were carrying men on leave from 7 Armoured Division. Thermos bombs, unknown until then, littered the area. This new Italian device looked like a khaki-coloured thermos flask measuring about seven inches by two, with an aluminium spiral spring or cap at one end of the canister, and was exploded by vibration. These bombs had been dropped by aircraft. A blast threw Driver **Osborn**²⁵ on to one, which exploded, fatally wounding him. His was the first death from enemy action in the company and in **2 NZEF**.

Further casualties were prevented by the presence of mind of Corporal Tom Gill,²⁶ who was in charge of the convoy. He forbade any further movement whatsoever. Investigating at dawn, he posted pickets at each end of the convoy, and sent for medical help and for engineers to deal with the bombs. He switched a fully loaded ammunition column close behind from the danger area, and for his work received the BEM. He was helped by Drivers Townsend²⁷ and Walding.²⁸

Arthur Brumby,²⁹ of Workshops Section, exploded a supposedly 'dud' thermos bomb while taking it to bits to see what made it tick. Bill Lupton,³⁰ nearby, was bowled over backwards. White and shaken and with a badly lacerated hand, Brumby swore the last screw had set it off. At the RAP (Regimental Aid Post) all he could think about was how to find another thermos bomb and prove his theory.

That day, 13 September, the Italians advanced into Egypt by the coastal road. They reached Sidi Barrani (a few houses and a landing ground) on 16 September, dug in, and stayed there, establishing a number of strongly defended camps, two of them called Tummar East and Tummar West, a few miles south. Altogether the advance was 65 miles.

Air raids on Western Desert camps and dumps increased. On 22 September the RMT moved back to Fuka, where regular leave parties left for Cairo and Alexandria, and a most successful anniversary dinner (lamb and mint sauce) was held. Although the nearest Naafi had scanty supplies, beer was abundant for once, and this is the reason why. Driver Logie³¹ and one or two comrades seized a truck and hastened a hundred miles back to Alexandria. Mustapha Barracks and even a few cafes had nothing, so they went to the brewery itself, where stocks were exhausted. 'We talked them into filling a truckload of bottles on the spot,' says Logie, 'and got back just in time for the reunion.'

By now, characters and hard cases were part of the company's life. A random run around A Section, for example, reveals these more-printable nicknames: 'Casara', 'Soap Box', 'Horse Thief', 'Zulu', 'Brusher',

'Gharry', 'Grandma', 'Labour Battalion', 'Clark Gable', 'Mother', 'Know-all', 'Bulldust', 'Gramophone', 'Playboy', 'Neck or Nothing', 'Half Pint', 'Sleepy', 'Swamp Rat', 'Tucker Box', 'Moaner', 'Fancy Pants', 'That'll be the Day', and 'Tent Peg'.

About this time a candid routine order concerning dive-bombing attacks warned: 'On no account will troops look up from slit trenches except when firing as the white of their faces is immediately conspicuous.' With the RMT based at **Fuka, most of the First Echelon worked away at defensive positions some 18 miles west at **Baggush**. The majority of the Second Echelon was in England, and the Third Echelon, still at sea, did not begin to arrive in **Maadi** until 30 September.**

The RMT's first tasks, often under arduous conditions, had been carried out excellently and with devotion to duty and determination, maintaining the fine traditions of the NZEF in the 1914–18 War, said **Major-General Freyberg in a message. Typical of further messages of thanks and congratulation was the note from Major-General M. O'M. Creagh, commander of 7 Armoured Division, to Lieutenant-General R. N. O'Connor, commander of **Western Desert Force**: 'May I bring to your notice the excellent work done by the New Zealand R.A.S.C. Coy., which has been working as third-line in this Division. Their work with the Division has been first class in every way and I can say no more than we much regret their departure.'**

¹ Some RMT men speak of the Reserve Motor Transport Company. So, to keep the record straight:

The *Army Act*, Pt V, Sec 190 (40) says: 'The expression "horse" includes a "mule" and the provisions of this Act apply to any beasts of whatever description, used for burden or draught or for carrying persons in the like manner as if such were included in the expression "horse".'

Ibid. (40 A): 'The expression "carriage" means a vehicle for carriage or haulage other than one specially constructed for use on rails.'

Amendment 110/General/4762 adds: ‘and the expression “trailer” means carriage constructed or adapted for being drawn by a mechanically propelled carriage.’

Thus, in the *Army Act*, the term ‘mechanically propelled carriage’ is used to embrace all such vehicles and the term ‘motor’ or ‘mechanical’ transport is not used at all. The RMT's name probably derives from the Reserve Mechanically Propelled Carriage Transport Company (or Column).

In the index to the *Manual of Military Law* one reads: ‘Motors. (See Carriages.)’

² Soldiers made up words for all bugle calls except the last call at night, Last Post. C. E. Montague, in *Disenchantment*, calls it ‘that most lovely and melancholy of calls, the noble death of each day's life, a sound moving about hither and thither, like a veiled figure making gestures both stately and tender, among the dim thoughts that we have about death the approaching extinguisher—resignation and sadness and unfulfilment and triumph all coming back to the overbearing sense of extinction in those two recurrent notes of “Lights Out”. One listens as if with bowed mind...’

³ Lt-Col G. H. Whyte, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Te Puke; born Pahiatua, 23 Aug 1895; company representative; 3 Auck 4 Bde and ASC 1 Bde 1917–19; OC 4 RMT Coy Nov 1939–19 Jan 1941; CRASC 5 Div (in NZ) Dec 1942–May 1943; CO Trg Bn, Trentham, Nov 1943–Oct 1944.

⁴ Capt F. H. Muller, MC; Hamilton; born NZ 18 Mar 1905; engine driver; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.

⁵ Maj B. A. N. Woods; Wellington; born NZ 2 Jul 1892; traveller; 1 NZEF (Auck Mtd Rifles and Anglo-Russian Armd Car Bde); OC ASC Comp Coy 7 Nov–1 Dec 1940, Base Sup Coy 10 Dec 1940–10 Feb 1941, 4 RMT Coy 10 Feb–26 Jun 1941.

⁶ Maj R. E. Broberg, ED; Wellington; born Wellington, 5 Mar 1909; mechanical engineer; wounded 24 Apr 1941; senior

inspector of munitions, Army HQ, (NZ), 1943–45.

⁷ **Capt J. A. McAlpine**, MBE, MC; born **Ashburton**, 26 May 1910; farmer; OC 4 RMT Coy 19 Jan–10 Feb 1941; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

⁸ **Maj G. G. Good**, OBE, m.i.d.; Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia; born **New South Wales**, 14 Nov 1913; dental mechanic; OC 6 RMT Coy 2 Feb 1942–11 Sep 1943, NZASC Base Trg Depot 11 Sep 1943–22 Apr 1944, Pet Coy 7 May–20 Jul 1944.

⁹ **Capt C. W. Rhodes**; Hastings; born Dunedin, 20 Jul 1904; engineer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁰ **WO II H. T. Upton**; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 27 Aug 1910; warehouseman; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

¹¹ Films shown on the voyage: 'Air Hostess', 'Two in a Crowd', 'After the Thin Man', 'Anything Goes', 'Roman Scandals', 'Kid Millions', 'The Street Singer's Serenade', 'Man in Possession', and 'Breezing Home'.

¹² Here, and in the desert, men had sand trays (long metal troughs) and the far more useful sand mats (canvas strips with wooden battens) for getting stuck trucks out of loose sand, and one tow rope among six trucks. While in the desert the RMT had mud tires (with deep herringbone grooves); re-equipping for **Greece**, the company was given sand tires (wide, flat-surfaced tires with a very shallow tread) for the **Balkan** mud. Similarly, drivers spent the first cold winter in shorts and shirts and, with the return of good weather in **Greece**, received battle dress.

¹³ **Cpl R. S. Tripp**; Paraparaumu; born NZ 1 Sep 1907; railway porter; twice wounded.

¹⁴ Fresh vegetables issued were C3 in quality and quantity, so for some weeks a Company Headquarters truck was sent

weekly to **Alexandria**, where vegetables were bought with canteen funds.

¹⁵ **Cpl W. F. Tanner**; **Marion**; born **Auckland**, 16 Aug 1898; works foreman; wounded 26 May 1941.

¹⁶ **Rev. V. R. Jamieson**, MBE, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Lower Hutt**, 22 Mar 1904; Methodist minister.

¹⁷ **Dvr G. McMillan**; **Christchurch**; born **Waddington**, 22 Apr 1908; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁸ In sandstorms such convoys of 6 to 12 trucks froze in their tracks until the sky began to clear. Watching the way the wind blew helped keep a sense of direction.

¹⁹ **Capt W. G. McDonagh**, m.i.d.; born **Ireland**, 13 Oct 1897; motor engineer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

²⁰ **Maj J. D. Fenton**, MBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Waitara**, 24 Jul 1912; foreman motor mechanic; wounded 2 Jun 1944; Deputy Assistant Director Mechanical Engineering, CMD, Apr 1947-.

²¹ A three-tonner's average load was about three tons of freight, or about 620 gallons of petrol, or 25 men without kit or equipment, or 20 with equipment, or 18 fully equipped with kitbags, or 30 prisoners of war or native labourers.

²² **Cpl O. T. Pussell**, m.i.d.; born **Feilding**, 12 Feb 1917; battery assembler; twice wounded; died of wounds 25 Dec 1940.

²³ **Dvr J. A. Graham**; **Hamilton**; born **NZ** 25 Jul 1915; insurance clerk; wounded 18 Jul 1940.

²⁴ **Dvr C. L. Andrews**; **Auckland**; born **New Plymouth**, 27 Apr

1907; commission agent; wounded 18 Jul 1940.

²⁵ Dvr G. R. Osborn; born London, 27 Jan 1907; truck driver; killed in action 13 Sep 1940.

²⁶ S-Sgt T. W. Gill, BEM; Wellington; born Shannon, 9 Nov 1907; bus driver.

²⁷ Dvr N. W. Townsend, m.i.d.; Te Kuiti; born Ireland, 11 Feb 1906; motor mechanic; wounded May 1941.

²⁸ Cpl J. A. Walding, m.i.d.; Mamaku; born NZ 8 Apr 1907; butcher.

²⁹ Cpl A. W. J. Brumby; Auckland; born Wellington, 1 Nov 1917; fitter and turner.

³⁰ Dvr W. H. T. Lupton; Te Awamutu; born Auckland, 7 Jun 1905; blacksmith; twice wounded; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped 7 May 1944.

³¹ Dvr J. C. S. Logie; Dunedin; born Gore, 30 Oct 1905; PWD ganger; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 2 – FIRST DESERT CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 2

First Desert Campaign

DURING late November 1940 4 RMT, right away from New Zealand command and attached to **Western Desert Force** headquarters, was working for the genuine old British sweats, the original Desert Rats, who had their modest insignia, a red rat sitting up on its haunches, painted on their vehicles. RMT's Company Headquarters and Workshops were stationed at **Fuka**. A Section was working on supplies from **Fuka** forward. B Section was in the desert building up and maintaining a petrol sub-park below **Garawla**, and was also establishing a reserve dump of over a million gallons further south, with eight-gallon cases mostly buried to ground level and camouflaged with camel-thorn. ¹ C Section was at **Bir Abu Batta**, working with RASC7 Armoured Division, transporting rations, petrol, ammunition, and ordnance stores. At the end of the month C Section rejoined the company at **Fuka**. ² Then Headquarters, A, C, and Workshops Sections moved to Smugglers' Cove, near **Mersa Matruh**, and checked vehicles.

Something was in the air all right.

B Section, still busy around its petrol park, noticed three big straws in the wind. First of all stocks of diesel fuel arrived at the railhead at **Qasaba** for storage in dumps. Diesel oil could only mean one thing: tanks. Next the RQMS turned up from **7 Royal Tank Regiment** to arrange for delivery of diesel fuel for I tanks— *tremendous 25-ton marvels—15 miles an hour or so flat out—25-pounder shells just bounced off'em—invincible*. They were moving up quietly each night and passed almost through B Section's lines. Drivers supplied them with fuel and oil daily.

Finally, on 27 and 28 November, trucks carrying petrol up to forward positions were switched from the usual route because of manoeuvres with live ammunition. The men on these manoeuvres were Indian troops in Cypriot trucks with 7 Royal Tanks. They were rehearsing a battle

sequence. Rumour had it that the live ammunition disconcerted the Cypriot drivers, who beetled off, and the battle was lost without opposition. Anyway B Section was immediately afterwards sent to rejoin the unit at Smugglers' Cove, arriving there about 1 December. This was the first time the whole 4 RMT Company had been together for many weeks. One truck in each sub-section (one in every six) was fitted with brackets to hold four stretchers. Everyone knew what that meant.

Quietly and without fuss in the afternoon of 5 December A, B, and C Sections moved from Smugglers' Cove along the road towards **Alexandria**. The 100-odd trucks left the road near **Garawla** and turned south into the desert to an area known as **Naghamish**. Here guides met sections and led them in groups through the dusk to battalion areas. Now, and for some memorable days to come, 4 RMT was dispersed among and entirely at the disposal of units of 5 Brigade of 4 Indian Division. A Section went to **1 Royal Fusiliers** who, with years of service in **India**, had a wonderful store of yarns and experiences. B Section went to **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, C Section to **3/1 Punjab Regiment**.

'The place at first sight seemed to be deserted, and it was hard to find even traces of the existence of a camp,' says George **Sheddan**.³ 'Those boys knew their stuff with camouflage. The ground just opened up and disgorged Indian soldiers in their hundreds. They could hide themselves behind two grains of sand.' When he and Cyril **Spiers**⁴ opened a bright conversation with a bunch of Punjabis by saying 'Boukra Mussolini kullos', one answered by drawing a bayonet and pulling it across his throat. The two gathered that the Punjabis' one ambition was 'to get into action and take somebody to bits to see how he worked'.

In the dark and in the weird creeping grey of approaching dawn the fighting men embussed and the RMT moved off towards the world's first desert war between two fully mechanised armies.

The day came wrapped in cold and cloud. A raw wind drove stinging bits of sand into the faces of the troops. Once out of camp the vehicles travelled south and, later in the day, west, heading over open desert well

inland from the comfortable coastal road. They covered some 50 miles before stopping for the night a few miles west of **Siwa** Track, and 30 or so miles south of the coastal road. All trucks moved in air formation, no truck nearer than 250 yards to any other. The RMT had often moved like this lately. As usual, while the front of the convoy quite probably was moving at a steady and sedate eight miles in the hour, the rear was alternately halted or belting along about 40 miles an hour, each driver mortally afraid of losing sight of the vehicle in front. This concertina action of convoys, never really mastered, seemed to be unaccountable. At times, one man remembers, it looked like a gold rush on the Klondyke. Drivers, flat out, avoiding bumps by quick twists of the steering wheel, feared springs would snap like carrots.

The host drove west. The Petrol Age was going to war. Describing a typical section move on this day, an RMT sergeant said:

During one stop I climbed up on the cab roof and looked around. The wind and sand had subsided and as far as I could see on all sides were vehicles moving—one can see a long way across a flat clear desert from a truck roof. Two other brigades were moving at the same time along parallel routes. I shall never forget that view. Some trucks were so far off they appeared stationary except that there was a tiny puff of dust behind them. All were moving westwards—Italianwards. There weren't sufficient supplies in the **Western Desert** to warrant a manoeuvre of this scope: we were obviously up to something shrewd.

After about 50 miles we just stopped. No one came near us or told us anything so my cobbler and I investigated and found that the troops were here for the night. Further search revealed the Section cook's 30-cwt. truck. **George Cashmere**⁵ was No. 1 cook at this time and he heated up stew and tea. We set out to find the Section trucks—all 40-odd.⁶

We travelled miles feeding the brutes. Darkness fell with *no* stars. We received directions at each truck where the next one was. We wandered from one truck to another, 300 yds between, until we reached the last at about 10 pm. Then where were we? Where was George's cook

truck? We lay on the ground trying to see the silhouette of something, but not even a snake stuck up its head. There was of course an issue of prismatic compasses to our Company but the officers had those—all *three* of them. So we drove off in the direction dictated by the average of our three instincts. The desert was cluttered for miles with transport but we saw none of it until much later we met of all people Captain Good, our own Section commander, within 100 yards of George's cook truck—amazing navigation!—but not ours.

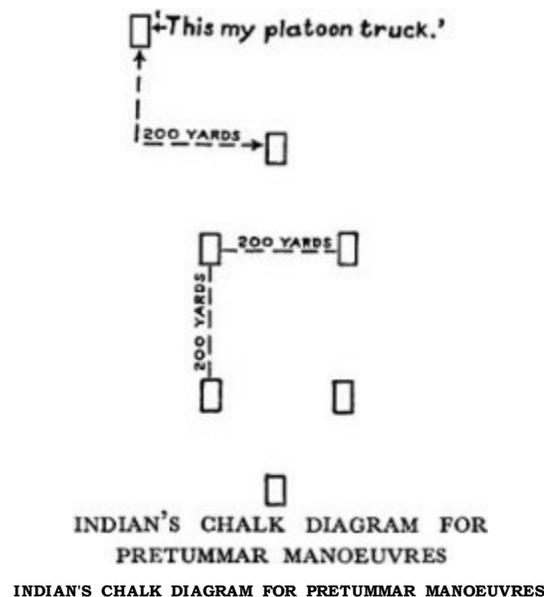
Next day, 7 December, the news was out officially: a fullscale attack was to be made any time now on the Italian camps around **Sidi Barrani**. No advance took place this day. Sub-sections, with their companies of troops, practised movements required for the battle: 'trucks to advance to within 500 yards of the perimeter of Italian Camps and infantry to debus and advance to positions on foot.'

The average RMT truck now looked something like this. The 20 Indian passengers (1 corporal, 19 privates) had puckered up the canvas and lashed it round the centre support. This left the framework bare. A Bren gun was slung above the cab roof, while rifles and assorted kit hung from all along the exposed canopy framework. This left room for anti-aircraft work by all hands.

The words two paragraphs back, 'sub-sections, with their companies of troops, practised movements required for the battle', cover a multitude of activities and explain something of the cocky 'Up Guards and at 'em' air about Wavell's 1940 campaign. As the war developed, to co-ordinate manoeuvring infantry, RMT trucks, and so on, sheaves of plans and reports and diagrams and lectures would pile up. Days would pass on patient and not-so-patient manoeuvres. Excruciatingly detailed arrangements would be made about lights, rendezvous, signposts, guides, engineers, military police, movement tables (or charts), bulldozers, flags, radio, precise times, and so on. For our first desert attack the RMT was given exactly one day with its infantry to practise 'movements required for the battle'.

The manoeuvres, a bare 48 hours before the battle, and now described by Sergeant **Thomson**, ⁷ would have sent General Montgomery reeling in his caravan. There would never again be anything like this in the Desert. The untried RMT was about to establish in battle the first foundations of the **2 NZEF**'s reputation for initiative, dependability, and honest-to-God common sense.

None of the Indians with us could talk a word of English and none of us knew any Hindustani (or whatever it was). ⁸ There were six 4 RMT trucks carrying B Company. The only other vehicle was an Austin company truck with a driver and two Indian officers. *They* knew no English. B Company had no white officers at all. When it came to practising our manoeuvres the Subedar (Indian officer) explained it to the Rajput corporal riding on our truck and then, for our benefit, drew a diagram with chalk (which we supplied) on our front mudguard. He could write numbers our way and he used up his complete English vocabulary: '*This my platoon truck,*' pointing at his sketch of it. We then passed on what we reckoned he had said to the other drivers in our subsection. When he used up our supply of chalk we managed the diagram in the sand with our fingers. The whole thing looked something like this:



Incidentally for the next few days we received no orders at all in English. Various patterns of the above cropped up almost hourly;

distances and formations were constantly changed for no reason apparent to us.

For the manoeuvres we in the leading RMT trucks had a hazy idea of what was wanted. We were to follow behind the Subedar in his ' *This my platoon truck*' according to the chalk plan on the mudguard. The desert here, not far west of the **Siwa** Track, was flat and hard and pebbly. So we set off at a very sedate speed. There was no flying sand, the sun was shining cheerfully; we were feeling pleasantly warm for once; we were relaxed and cosy—until ' *This my platoon truck*' stopped suddenly! The Subedar sprang to earth facing us and flapping his wings like a demented duck. The passengers began attacking the cab roof with fists and rifle butts so we stopped. I got out to see what the hell was up. I stepped back alongside the truck and was nearly brained. Rifles, picks and shovels, boots and tin hats with Rajputs sandwiched between, all hurtled over the side and the tailboard. They ran violently in all directions for some yards, dug ferociously, and in no time at all were all down off the horizon, peering along rifle sights. These Indian troops certainly trained well, seriously and thoroughly—everything done strictly according to the book.

Eventually we got going and did it again. This time we were ready. As soon as the Subedar sprang ashore flapping, I put on my tin hat for protection, dashed round the back and let down the tailboard, only to find they had pulled the pins and let it go with a rush. So I stood there and handed some out. One wee man reached down both hands to me and I lifted him down. Another tall stiff specimen gravely handed me his shovel and insisted that I steady him in his descent. We did this pantomime several times and then, quite unexpectedly, the demented duck was replaced by a penguin impersonation.

This time the troops bailed out as before but without shovels. They set off ahead over the sands with fixed bayonets at a steady, determined pace for a few hundred yards. This was the final assault apparently. They looked good and reliable to me. As before everything was correctly and

conscientiously done. After capturing the enemy's camp a couple of times we drove back to our bivouac area for the night. One disconcerting factor was that we drivers of B Company never knew what was likely to happen next. There were no English officers to tell us if, for example, we would be halted long enough to do some minor adjustment to the truck, or at what time we would need to be ready tomorrow. The Indians would all leave without a comprehensible word, and would as suddenly return and want to be carried on. This isn't the best way to treat New Zealand drivers, who give of their best when they know all that is required of them and, if possible, *why*.

So 7 December got us nowhere positionally, but we certainly had moved along technically to establish teamwork.

Two instances illustrate the rapid New Zealand-Indian settling-down process. One was a fluke. An RMT NCO saw a horned viper, a sandy-coloured snake about a foot long with a large triangular head. This snake, usually seen curled up and poised threateningly, leaps diagonally, jumping just a little higher than the top of a man's half-puttees. On a sudden whim the RMT man took a flying kick at the snake, luckily half-stunned it, nipped it behind the neck and, with its tongue still flickering, showed it to his truckload of Indians who, far from being interested, all cringed away. Surprised, he told an Anglo-Indian warrant officer and received the reply: 'So'd you cringe if you came from a country where thousands die from snakebites every year.' After this the Indians would do anything for the RMT man. The RMT man would do anything to avoid more vipers.

The other instance concerns Driver 'Nugget' [Parnell](#)⁹ who, after driving many weary miles, became increasingly vexed because the Indian corporal would pound on the roof of the cab and shout angrily and unintelligibly when he swerved a mite off course to miss a great bush, rock, or hole. It eventually became too much. Nugget at length stopped his truck (and the following convoy), clambered out and addressed the passengers passionately. If they left him alone, he said in effect, he would get them to their battle in good order. He had been

driving trucks for a very long time. He was only considering their comfort and the well-being of his vehicle in not charging great mountains of rock. *And* if they didn't shut up their bloody caterwauling and their crashing in of the roof, he'd drive the blasted truck into the next damn hole he could find and leave them there to rot! The Indians recognised not a word but they grasped the idea, and Nugget was left for the remainder of the campaign to navigate in peace. ¹⁰

On 8 December, the day before battle, the whole division moved undetected about another 50 miles, heading for the gap between Alam Nibeiva Camp and Bir el Rabia Camp.

No supplies—not a crumb of food, not a drop of petrol, not a mouthful of water—had reached several of the RMT lorries since they left Smugglers' Cove. This was a brigade fault; once attached to the infantry, each RMT section became part of the battalion for all purposes. Fortunately RMT's early training in desert-craft (or 'desert-graft') paid off handsomely now for these forgotten men. Each truck had its extra built-in lockers groaning with tins. In the past no truck had ever gone out on a job without two spare cases of petrol (16 gallons), but on this advance all drivers had tucked away four extra cases. Each truck had an official emergency ration (almost a petrol tin full of tinned stuff and biscuits), and every man had his store of illicit grub. For months the RMT policy had been: any emergency rations used up on a job had to be replaced at the first chance, and no silly questions asked. RMT men seldom missed a chance to relieve bulk ration dumps of a case here and there. This mostly went into cooks' stores to supplement the meals, or was spread among reserve food in the trucks. Explaining the RMT attitude a driver says: 'For months we had been handling rations but the only stuff ratted was bulk. No man tampered with food broken down for a specific number of men in a unit up front. That got to its destination complete to the last dried pea, and it stayed that way. So although on our first advance our own HQ vehicles were unable to find all of us, scattered for miles as we were, we existed OK due to our earlier training.'

The day was dull and cold and sandy. The RMT moved in fits and starts. Trucks tore madly across rough ground for a few miles, drivers worrying over front springs, only to halt for varying and unspecified periods nowhere in particular. The expected enemy attack from the air did not come, except for one or two negligible sallies around the Tummar camps. The most cautious air formation in the history of desert movement was not tested. Drivers were full of admiration for their passengers, huddled together for warmth, thrown and bashed about as the trucks bounded from hummock to boulder, and exposed to flying sand whipped up by the icy wind. By the end of the day, when they were about 15 to 20 miles southward of **Nibeiwa**, Fusiliers and Indians were so stiff they could scarcely walk.

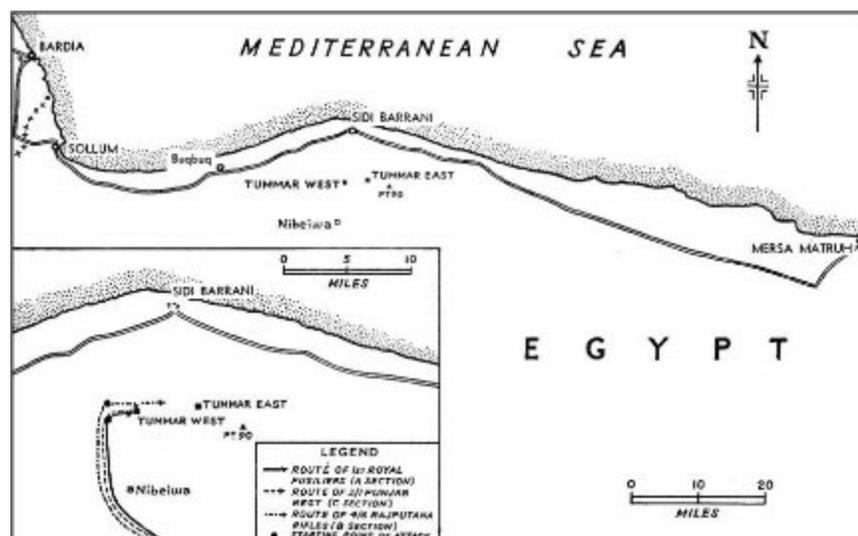
Before bedding down for the night regimental officers addressed the New Zealand drivers, showed maps of the proposed battle areas, outlined the complete operation, gave detailed requirements, and made plain that everything depended on trucks being able to get troops up to battle. Major Whyte, with three battalion commanders, attended the Brigadier's conference. The operation was discussed in full. The leading battalion (in A Section's trucks) had to debus 500 yards from the perimeter. Trucks would have no trace of cover coming or going. When the troops left, trucks would turn about in groups of two, one ahead of the other, to reduce the target. The front truck would get some protection from the one behind from small-arms fire.

B Section drivers were rounded up and paraded before the Rajput's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel L. B. Jones. A man present wrote:

We looked a motley crew. Every driver had four days' growth of beard. Our uniforms were anything but uniform. This was a sore point at the time. We'd been attached to the British for months. When we sent to **Maadi** for clothing replacements they said: 'Get your gear from the British' and the British said, 'Oh, but we can't supply New Zealanders.' So we scrounged what clobber we could, and air raids while carting to

Field Ordnance Depots were always helpful. Colonel Jones, not seeming to notice anything peculiar, made us sit down, put us all at our ease immediately, and explained his problems very patiently.

He told us A and C Sections were concerned with the Italian camp, **Tummar West**. He told us that we were to take the Rajputs in to the attack on a neighbouring Italian camp, **Tummar East**. He outlined the general plan of the whole attack on **Sidi Barrani** and surrounding outposts—he showed us everything on an outline map on a blackboard. He gave us an estimated timetable of the operation, and told us what ‘Intelligence’ knew of the enemy strengths and placements. He explained our own special task in the assault and mentioned he was greatly understaffed with ‘white’ officers. He was relying on us drivers to give the required example to the Indians when things warmed up. He said: ‘Would you give them a cheer when they go into the attack? You will find them very steady and good soldiers once they get going. So would you give them some vocal encouragement as they leave the trucks?’



ATTACK ON THE TUMMAR FORTS, DECEMBER 1940
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We all felt very bucked, very honoured, and rather important. We all thought very highly of Colonel Jones and his understanding of New Zealanders. We couldn't possibly fall down on the job now we had been entrusted with virtually the success of the whole operation. 11

That night was particularly dark, cold, and at times noisy. An uproar flared ahead. This was merely a diversion. Some Indians had sneaked up on the eastern side (or front) of **Nibeiva** Camp to fire a few shots, and the Italians had supplied enough panic and tumult to cover the noise of our tanks and truckloads of other troops passing round the south and up to the western side (or rear) of this perimeter camp ready for the early morning attack.

The last flares died in the distance. Total blackness pressed down over all the machines of war and over all the sleeping soldiers. All became calm and still.

But Corporal **Tinker**,¹² who on the way up had eaten a tin of spaghetti, a tin of beans, oranges, a tin of sardines, a tin of M and V, a tin of herrings, a tin of milk, and one and a half tins of pineapple chunks, wrote in his diary next morning: 'Up several times during night—crook guts.'

Expectant, tense, each driver hugging his own secret thoughts (wondering *Will I be any good, will I do my block, will I get killed, will I get hit here, here, or—worst of all—here?*), A, B and C Sections sneaked with the dawn south, west, then north out of range past **Nibeiva**, the Italians' southernmost camp, 18 miles from their stronghold of **Sidi Barrani**. Drivers and passengers waited, but not for long. From the east they heard a sudden roar of attack—the Empire's first offensive—as tanks and 7 Armoured Division troops fell upon the unsuspecting Italians at **Nibeiva** and seized, after a short clash, the surprised camp with over 2000 prisoners. Drivers stood around watching the artillery bombardment raising the dust and smoke on a distant mound. Then they saw an astonishing sight. Down one end of the low skyline moved a dark green wall—a solid unbroken endless mass of Italian prisoners, hundreds upon hundreds of them, marching out. A great caterpillar of humanity.

Hell, eh! Here's something to write home about!

On now to the same treatment at **Tummar West**. Every time the trucks stopped the Indians leapt out and dug themselves in madly all round each truck. The area, pocked with a mass of slit trenches, added to the natural hazards of desert driving. Sand began to move early in the day, the wind whipping the churned-up surface. From time to time squadrons of tanks passed through the RMT, or waited with the trucks in a shallow wadi before their next venture. An I tank cruising along through the sand threw up a bow wave like a battleship; all you could see was the heavily armoured turret and upperworks, with the squat, menacing gun. One tank had the barrel of its gun peeled back in four strips like a banana—probably a premature explosion.

And so to the assembly point, and the first New Zealand charge of the Second World War. A Section would lead the attack with the Fusiliers; C Section would follow with the Punjabis; B Section was reserved for another task.

A Section's lorries formed up facing the **Tummar West** camp, about three miles away. Some NCOs went from truck to truck, chatting with their drivers, ready to change any man who might be jittery. 'Unnecessary precaution,' reported one NCO. 'All were as steady as though on parade, and only showed their excitement by their eyes and a desire to be on the move.'

Every man knew the story. Our artillery would lay down a barrage at 12.30 p.m., as the new I tanks, interspersed with lorry-loads of infantry, moved off to attack **Tummar West**. Captain Fisher, of the Fusiliers, would lead, with A Section loaded with Fusiliers following immediately behind him, the lorries staggered and slightly dispersed. Platoon commanders would ride in the cabs with the No. 1 driver, and the No. 2 driver would sit on the edge of the body of the vehicle next to the driver's door. If the driver stopped one the emergency driver (No. 2) would open the door, tumble out the stricken man, and take his place.

The infantry tanks formed up and the anti-aircraft gunners watched for a possible air attack. The wind was bitterly cold. The rum issue was

doubly acceptable. Corporal Jones ¹³ wrote:

At last the tanks were in position and I made a last check of the vehicles, wishing all the drivers 'Good luck!' The tank crews stood up and gave the 'thumbs up' sign which was returned by our troops. Then the lids of the tanks closed and we began to move forward in huge extended line. As this massive mechanised fleet moved into attack huge dust clouds rose and almost immediately the Italian artillery let go with everything it had. As we got closer the fear of minefields became uppermost in our minds but not one vehicle was blown up.

The air was now filled with howling, screaming shells and bursting shrapnel. Fountains of sand rose up. I looked at the Tommies who were yelling something about 'Look at the bloody fireworks!' I looked at my driver, a veteran driver from **Gisborne**, and thought to myself: 'All hell won't stop Nick.'

We were now in sight of the Italian camp. The enemy could see us clearly and fired madly with everything he could bring to bear, including anti-aircraft guns and small arms. Our tanks were returning the fire now. They would lurch to a standstill and after a second's pause the whole forepart of the tank would appear to belch orange flame. No individual shot could be heard because the thunder of guns and exploding shells and the roaring, clanking tanks merged into just one terrific inferno of sound.

An Indian lorry [near us] was hit but still kept moving although casualties on board were obviously heavy. Suddenly one of our own lorries, to my immediate left, was enveloped in a cloud of smoke and dust. 'God!' I thought, 'they've got poor Clarky.' He was only a boy, not yet 21 and a favourite in the sub-section. Then almost immediately I saw his lorry lurch out of the dustcloud, and on.

The leading vehicle, increasing speed, looked as if it was almost going to charge into the enemy rock fortifications. Suddenly this lorry stopped and out sprang Captain Fisher armed with rifle and bayonet. Our

vehicle slithered to a standstill. Troops poured out and charged while the lorries sat like sitting birds.... After a while, the second phase of the attack came, and the second wave of attackers, Indians from C Section's trucks came through, to be joined by armed drivers who were keen 'to go in and get an Eyetie, too'.... When the firing died down and before we moved our lorries we paced the distance from the nearest Italian guns to our position: exactly 120 paces. God must have been with us that day. It's almost unbelievable gunners could have missed our vehicles at such a short range.

Probably the Italians, totally unprepared for attack in the rear, in their panic completely forgot to lower their sights.

Major Whyte, moving up in the attack, noticed about 2000 yards were passed before the enemy woke up. Enemy artillery landed a salvo wide on the right, then another wide on the left, and then came uncomfortably close to the target. At about 1000 yards rifles and machine guns lining the perimeter opened fire. The major, now most anxious—and later, most proud—reached a point he thought was the line to debus, 500 yards from the perimeter. In his own words, 'Instead of stopping, every lorry speeded up to its maximum and kept on for at least another 400 yards. This was an anxious moment but nothing could be done. At last the halt came, and on the perimeter guns of all calibre were still in action ... then I saw, dammit, RMT drivers grab their own rifles and go in too over the low stone breastwork.... During this operation the RMT did not suffer a single casualty. Some tyres were burst, many of the lorries were scarred and one had 68 holes in it.'

C Section, also driving through heavy fire without casualties, quickly brought up the second wave of attackers. The Punjabis climbed out, chanting weirdly. This eerie chant or wail made Driver Beaton's ¹⁴ hair stand on end. Then he heard sobbing from the back of his lorry and found a sick Indian, broken- hearted because his comrades had left him behind. 'He almost cried his heart out and I could not pacify him,' said Beaton.

Meanwhile 'Lead was flying thick and fast,' said Sheddan, 'and we no sooner got our heads up to see what was going on than we had to flatten out again. Until the Punjabis reached the Eyetie lines the enemy kept up a fairly steady fire, but then the tune changed, and through a pair of field glasses belonging to Sergeant **Gay**¹⁵ I plainly saw Eyeties dropping their rifles, deserting machine-gun nests, and running down the slope in hundreds with their hands up.'

Among some of the RMT men who disobeyed orders, left their trucks, and followed in behind the Indians, was one of the youngest members of the company, 'Ginger' **Wingham**,¹⁶ of **Christchurch**. Ginger had collected an automatic pistol in his travels, and with this firmly in hand he entered a dugout occupied by five Italian officers. Flourishing his revolver superbly, Ginger ordered them out. One officer eyed him up and down, cleared his throat, and said in Oxford English: 'Don't worry, sonny, we won't hurt you.' Ginger, piqued, got them out—at the double.

The attack had begun at 12.30 p.m., to synchronise with the Italians' lunch period when, it was hoped, the defences would be lightly manned. Intelligence assumed the camp would be taken completely by surprise. They were right. The Fusiliers had pressed hotly into an alarmed and confused enemy expecting and prepared for an assault from the east. The Fusiliers did not take long to clear the first half of the camp. The Punjabis, following up, found resistance in the remaining half of the camp much stronger, for the Italians had rallied to some extent. The Punjabis (an RMT man with them here and there) pushed on doggedly, rooting Italians from dugouts, rounding up prisoners and surrendering parties, and silencing one by one various strongpoints. By about four o'clock **Tummar West** was ours, except for some isolated strongpoints and a few machine-gun posts on the eastern perimeter.

As resistance faltered and faded, B Section's turn approached.

This section was not concerned with **Tummar West** and had kept on to the north, to halt west of and just above the besieged camp. These drivers were to take the Rajputanas past the north flank of **Tummar**

West, once the camp had fallen, and carry on to seize **Tummar East**. Little did they know that the enemy, equally startled, would meet them half-way. The start line was within sight of **Tummar West**, but some distance from and out of sight of **Tummar East**. Some shells from **Tummar West** fell disconcertingly, but harmlessly, among the convoy during the move up to the start at 2 p.m. Don ('Shortie') Sutherland's ¹⁷ truck vanished clean out of sight in sand and smoke, apparently having received a direct hit, until, unharmed, it bounded out of the dust cloud, still holding formation. The trucks moved off to the attack at 4.20 p.m., covered one and a half to two miles, and then ran slap-bang into Italian infantry on foot. The RMT had hit a counter-attack coming out from **Tummar East** to the relief of its sister camp. While three companies of Rajputanas and their RMT drivers smartly debussed to engage the force from **Tummar East**, the fourth company entered **Tummar West** from the north-east to help quell resistance centred round some Italian light tanks. By 5.30 p.m. all resistance was quietened. It was then too dark to continue to advance, so trucks and drivers laagered with their companies.

While B Section had been passing **Tummar West**, the subsection on the southern flank, in danger of running into an anti-tank ditch, was forced to break formation and drive in line, almost nose-to-tail. Directly on the other side of the ditch three or four light Italian tanks suddenly appeared, fired at point-blank range, and merely nicked a Punjabi in the heel. These trucks ran into a curtain of fire from the last strongpoints by the camp's eastern perimeter. The Subedar stopped his truck, 'This time imitated a pelican,' and vanished completely. On his own initiative, Sergeant Thomson organised an attack and led his Rajputs until they linked with the Punjabis. For this brave act Thomson (backed up by most of his drivers) received the DCM.



Thomson, later finding one of his drivers missing, searched anxiously, and finally discovered him in a bottle-strewn dugout arm-in-arm with an Italian. The two were singing unsteadily ‘Stormy Weather’.

From late afternoon until well into the night various parties of RMT men picked their way through the conquered camp while ponderous Ionton lorries filled with ammunition blazed and exploded. A huge dump of fireworks made ironic carnival. Dense clouds of smoke hung over the camp and dead men, documents, abandoned weapons, and equipment lay everywhere. Pitiful cries came from the wounded and the dying. Among the shambles delighted mules gorged away at stores of forage. One greedy beast, partly treading on the remains of his ex-master, wrenched eagerly at a bale of straw.

A party from A Section, finding its weary Fusiliers and learning that the cooks' truck was lost as usual, brewed up and gave them tea and food. An A Section corporal joined them, deeply distressed at what he had just seen. There was one bunch of Italian officers under guard, he said, and another bunch was marched over to them. They recognised cobbles and wept and embraced and started kissing each other! Tinker, in B Section, treated his suffering stomach to a tin of Italian fruit salad, while others, pocketing Italian cigarettes and putting aside bottles of mineral waters, sampled tinned Italian tunny fish, sardines, a jellied meat which was probably horse, and a pleasing mess of macaroni with tomato sauce and cheese. And, of course, wine and more wine. More

ambitious loot included neat-looking pistols and watches, but the fountain pens were deplorable affairs. Set aside as curiosities for air-mailing home in the non-censored green envelopes were 50 and 100 lire notes, bearing the picture of a rather apologetic Italian king, and only later did many a driver realise with a curse that these notes were worth real money in **Cairo**. Sheddan, with another C Section man, flashed a torch into a dugout and flushed two prisoners. Offered a smoke, one prisoner gave in return a fine photograph of himself.

But souvenir collecting was only part of the story. Drivers also turned their hand to first aid and helped gather wounded.

Lieutenant Allan **Lomas**, ¹⁸ a New Zealand medical officer attached to 4 RMT Company, assisted by his medical orderly, Driver Jack **Prichard**, ¹⁹ worked for twelve hours without food or rest. Part of the time they were under fire. They attended to the wounded of both sides, and for their work Lomas received the MC and Prichard the MM.

Shocked at the sight of some of the wounds and realising for the first time what a mess shell fragments and grenades can make of a human body, a New Zealander later wondered about the people in war factories who made these things. Perhaps they made them with the radio playing dance tunes, music-while-you-work stuff, 'Run Rabbit Run' and 'Roll Out the Barrel'.

For a while drivers helped the Indians guard great mobs of Italian and Libyan prisoners. ²⁰ It was impossible not to feel pity for these wretched, swarthy little men with their battered cardboard suitcases and their thin, inferior uniforms. The dull rumble and murmur of their talk got monotonous in time. Against this background nearby prisoners could be heard calling out, and into the night cries continued, strangely similar to sheep bleating in a shed: *Santa Maria ... Bruno! ... Antonio ... Acqua, Acqua! ... Presto ... Antonio, Antonio, ... Mamma mia....*

Bigger actions by far were to follow. 'But this was our first action and we are proud of it,' writes a driver. 'There never is another battle

like your first.'

Next morning B Section grouped together and with the Rajputs resumed the interrupted advance on **Tummar East**, entering the almost deserted camp unopposed. The Indians rounded up the stray Italians and the trucks were dispersed inside the perimeter. But all was not over yet. The enemy still held out at **Point 90 Camp**, about three miles south-east. From there he ranged his artillery on **Tummar East**. After undergoing nearly three hours of almost continuous shelling, the RMT section was ordered back a mile, to be joined by the infantry. Only one Indian had been wounded and not a truck was hit. In the late afternoon the Rajputs moved towards **Sidi Barrani**. Next day, 11 December, in a fast move, the section took off with the Rajputs to assist the attack on **Point 90 Camp**, which fell with almost no opposition. This was the last spot of trouble.

In the meantime trucks were taken from A, B, and C Sections for a further move after dark. The idea was to take Sofafi Camp, to the south. The way led through enemy minefields in pitch darkness. After about a couple of hours' travelling news came through that the Italians had abandoned **Sofafi**. Drivers pulled up and parked for the night, revelling in the first decent sleep for nearly a week.

While this was going on a second RMT group, together with vehicles from other companies and several captured lorries, had loaded prisoners (including several hundred officers and one general) and set off for the cage at **Mersa Matruh**, with Captain Broberg navigating. The route lay south of **Nibeiba**. The convoy, heading cautiously along a much-used track, spotted a recently mined lorry. Major Whyte, suspicious, investigated the track and found three mines. While these were being removed, two Italian officers under guard came up from an RMT truck in a big hurry. One said breathlessly in English: 'This area is mined. In our interests as well as yours, it is right that we should tell you.'

'You put' em in, you take 'em out,' answered Major Whyte. The Italians did, and then led the whole convoy safely through the minefield.

‘I later yarned with the English-speaking officer and questioned him about **Tummar West,’ said the Major. ‘He told me they were completely taken by surprise, and the boldness of our attack in transport caused a panic effect which accounted for us getting off so lightly.’**

‘The trip was tough and we were all dead tired,’ said a driver. ‘Half the time I was nearly asleep and at each goodsized bump—and there were plenty—my head hit the roof of the cab with a wallop. That’s where the tin hat came in handy. We reached the prison camp about three in the morning darned near done, eyes full of sand, a week’s beard on, and a good crust of dirt all over.’

The Sofafi column returned to **Tummar West next day, 12 December. The Indians set about cleaning up the mess while the RMT waited in an intense sandstorm, a gritty curtain coming down over **Tummar West**’s last act in the war. Later the Indians moved out on foot, their destination **Sudan** and **Abyssinia**. Drivers hoped transport would turn up for their gallant ex-passengers for at least part of the journey. ‘I was very sorry to say goodbye to my lot of Indian troops,’ wrote one driver. ‘I will always remember their kindness and good-fellowship.’ The Fusiliers were on the way too. The riflemen, the excitement, had gone. The New Zealanders’ job was now carrying more Italians back to **Matruh**—a rough ride by way of the desert, for the **Sidi Barrani- Matruh** road was still damaged and mined.**

The 4th RMT was well represented in the battle honours. Major Whyte received the OBE ‘for most valuable service’, the citation also paying high tribute to his company’s efficiency. Captain McAlpine, who already had been awarded the MBE for consistent good work and devotion to duty, received the MC for controlling and supervising debussing at **Tummar West ‘with great coolness and courage’. Lieutenant Muller won the MC for displaying courage and leadership during the engagement; Sergeant **Wilson** ²¹ received the MM for bravery and ‘complete disregard for danger’ during the prolonged shelling of **Tummar East**, and Driver **Corp** ²² was awarded the MM for driving his**

lorry to within 30 yards of the enemy parapet, entering an exposed position under heavy fire, and carrying out a wounded soldier.

On 16 December **Italy's** three-month occupation of the fringe of Egypt ended. Nearly 40,000 prisoners were in the bag for fewer than 1000 British casualties. **Bardia**, the first important post inside Italian territory, was the next objective. It was less than ten miles past the Egyptian frontier. The next day orders arrived for the RMT to pick up Australian troops and take them ten miles west of **Sidi Barrani** in preparation for the New Year attack on strongly fortified **Bardia**, 'the bastion of Fascism', according to **Bari** radio. Lean, laconic, superbly confident, the Australians sauntered aboard. Insisting on navigating the convoy themselves, they got off to a bad start by circling **Matruh**, and promptly got lost in desert the RMT knew like the back of its hand.

During the third week of December 4 RMT moved to **Sollum**. Any trucks in particularly bad shape were exchanged for Bedfords from a newly arrived British reserve mechanical transport company, X RMT Company. This unit had removed the glass from the windscreens of its trucks to prevent reflected sunlight from flashing away their positions to enemy aircraft or patrols. The New Zealand drivers took a decidedly sour view of this uncomfortable precaution. With the glass gone, sand drove into faces and cabs, and the cold, biting wind of the desert winter cut with increasing force into faces and hands. The Kiwi system was to smear the windscreens with oil and throw on sand, leaving a small strip clear to look through.

Snub-nosed barges from ships out in the bay were now bringing war materials into **Sollum's** little port, and 4 RMT's job was to help carry this material from the stone pier up hairpin bends to dumps scattered along the dreary escarpment. The company worked the clock round, sections taking turns with the night shifts, for with the advance in the desert supply problems had increased, especially with food, water, and petrol. Tanks alone in one action needed between 20,000 and 25,000 gallons of petrol a day. ASC drivers 'worked against great difficulties of time and space,' says a War Office publication, *Destruction of an Army*, 'and

these men, hardy, tough and enterprising, deserve to share in the triumphs of the campaign as much as the men who drove more spectacular vehicles.'

Sollum, bombed regularly by enemy aircraft, was also troubled by a big gun in **Bardia**—' **Bardia Bill**'. It paid not to waste time around that narrow wharf. Warnings came from an old mariner who would emerge from a hut and shout 'Air raid!'; from small naval gunboats opening fire out in the bay; and from the stampede of wharf workers, Cypriots and Palestinians, heading for the caves. On the day before Christmas 4 RMT met with its heaviest air-raid casualties in **Africa**. The men, all from B Section, were anxious to speed up the work and had four trucks loading at the same time. At 12.40 p.m. a flight of 17 Italian aircraft caught everyone by surprise. Bombs straddled wharf and barges. In the ruins (and among the red oranges intended for the troops on Christmas Day), lay Second-Lieutenant Wallace,²³ Lance-Corporal **Norrish**²⁴ and Driver **Ted Reynolds**.²⁵ Corporal Pussell and 'Scotty' **Hurst**²⁶ died of wounds. The wounded included Sergeant **Mulligan**,²⁷ Drivers **Davis**,²⁸ 'Bounty' **Quintal**²⁹ (a descendant of a *Bounty* mutineer), Ian **Appleton**,³⁰ and **Ted Boosey**.³¹ The five deaths sent a shadow of sorrow over the first Christmas away from home, and the day passed without any celebrating by the hardworking drivers. They made up for it though when a Naafship came in for unloading before the New Year. Thanks to the ship's crew, the barge men, the Cypriots and Palestinians, the wharf MPs and the RMT, much of the original cargo failed to reach the **Naafi** tent.

Bardia, yielding no fewer than 40,000 prisoners, was ours on 5 January. Even before the bypassed fortress fell, the RMT sowed dumps of petrol, food, water, and ammunition—all for the well-advanced 7 Armoured Division—in open desert beyond the frontier and on the way towards **Tobruk**. Promptly on 6 January that sober old aircraft, the Lysander, perhaps best described as a threshing machine gone air-minded, circled an ammunition-carrying RMT convoy and dropped a message. The company was to leave everything and report to Headquarters 6 Australian Division immediately. Loads were flung out on

the spot. By nightfall 4 RMT was rolling into **Bardia**.

Near **Bardia** Major Whyte overtook some thousands of prisoners, a Bren carrier idling behind them. 'An Aussie was strolling slowly backwards and forwards behind the prisoners,' writes the Major. 'He wasn't carrying a rifle, but had in his hand an unsheathed bayonet, with which he occasionally flicked the tops of camelthorn bushes. "Everything OK, Aussie?" The Australian spat. "I joined the army," he drawled, "because I was tired of my old job and wanted a change, but here I am bloody well droving again." '

The victorious Australian riflemen climbed into the Bedfords and the company was off again, heading west into the night along the tarsealed road to the garrison port of **Tobruk**.³² There was practically no moon (and of course no headlights) and, in places where the road narrowed or was still being repaired, a number of trucks went over the side. Tidying itself up, the convoy halted at 3.30 a.m. Drivers quickly dozed off within their cabs. Trucks got under way again at dawn, and the Australians debussed a few miles east of the now encircled town. Two lines defended the township and the harbour; the inner line stretched about 19 miles, and the outer 30 miles. Drivers had just enough time to brew up and bolt a breakfast (or dinner) of stew before about-turning for **Bardia** again. The following night, 8 January, the RMT drove a second lot of Australians to **Tobruk** at 3 a.m., and at once set off for the final load of riflemen. The third party of troops was driven to its destination next night. Within four nights, with practically no sleep or regular meals, 4 RMT had carried some 5000 Australians over the 70 miles between **Bardia** and the outskirts of **Tobruk**. Once again the company had taken a vital part in the campaign. Tired out, drivers returned to wharf work at **Sollum**, where a number of new engines were fitted into lorries, and Archie Jeff³³ presented an astounded Corporal Tinker with a pair of Italian boots, size 28.

With the fall of **Tobruk**, 4 RMT at once moved up to the garrison port. 'Our first sight of **Tobruk** was a harbour filled with sunken ships and seaplanes, two liners ashore, petrol tanks blazing, and a cruiser, the

***San Giorgio*, on fire,' noted one RMT man. Drivers heard firsthand accounts of the spectacular victory. Attacking at dawn on 21 January, British and Australian troops, with fewer than 500 casualties, had seized all of **Tobruk's** defences by the evening of the 22nd. Over 15,000 prisoners were taken, including an admiral, together with 200 guns and much booty. **Tobruk's** water supply had broken down, and the infantrymen had seen many pitiful figures lying on the ground gnawing the edges of their coats, while others staggered about like sleepwalkers mumbling ' *Acqua, acqua*'.**

From **Tobruk** RMT lorries at once pushed on, carrying Australian troops a hundred miles up the coast, to leave them under shellfire preparing for the attack on **Derna**, which fell on 30 January. In the interval RMT went back to wharf work at **Tobruk**. This included a nasty fright at dusk when three bombers, thought to be ours, coming in low over the sea with their lights on, bombed and strafed angrily. Sergeant Maurice **Browne**,³⁴ All Black hockey player, 'and he could really run,' had 15 yards start in a 100-yard charge for the caves, but the **Mediterranean** wharfies trampled him down.

Three days after **Derna** fell the RMT had set up its headquarters in the little seaside resort. Men gave the Italians full credit for road-building, and only a couple or so bends of the zigzag road above the town had been blown. A driver wrote: 'We came upon **Derna**, a little white town nestling under the escarpment and extending to the seashore. It was great to see green trees, grass, and gardens of vegetables and flowers.... Given three hours' leave. Had a scrounge around some of the buildings. Some lovely buildings, but not much left as Wogs had been ratting through the place. Had a bath in a flat.³⁵ A beautiful bathroom, blue tiles and chromium fittings. Broke up coathangers and furniture to put under geyser. Had a shave too. It was great; I am white now and really feel clean again.' Feeling pleased too was Company Headquarters, set up in modern, furnished flats in the hastily evacuated town. Such luxuries as radios, crockery, table linen, spring beds, mattresses and bed linen helped the quick recovery of physically and

mentally tired men. ³⁶

‘The Aussies had been through so fast that even they hadn't had time to do-over much—but they certainly made a job of the Governor's residence,’ said one driver. ‘You'd find houses with whole libraries available to the more cultured looters: Italian-English dictionaries for example, and oh yes, a man could be seen listening to his engine with a stethoscope. Some men were up to their gills in grog. A certain Italian brandy was vicious stuff. It was probably this brandy that sent two drivers, with .303 rifles, stalking one another at night in grim earnest by **Derna** airdrome.’

Eric Broberg, now in charge of Workshops, ³⁷ got an Italian garage working. His men detected a false wall and uncovered a magnificent lathe. A hefty sewing machine which sewed leather was also found. This was ideal for repairing truck canopies and leather buckles and straps.

While drivers loaded petrol at the **Derna** wharf and carted it to a dump on top of the escarpment, a British flying column in a famous ‘left hook’ cut deep inland over punishing country, passed Fort Msus and completely trapped near the coast on 5 February Italian forces withdrawing south from **Benghazi**. This Italian host, ten miles long, was avoiding the Australians who, not far from the coast, were thrusting west towards **Benghazi**. After a 36-hour battle the flying column captured at Beda Fomm over 20,000 prisoners and 1500 lorries.

With the Italians now thoroughly routed in **Libya** and the threat to Egypt (and the vital **Suez Canal**) removed, our advance halted. Between 9 December 1940 and 8 February 1941, in 62 days, 133,295 Italian prisoners had been taken, together with enormous stocks of equipment, armour, and some 1300 guns. The 4th RMT, which had been in at the opening of the campaign, was represented (but in a different role) in this final blow. Following up this inland striking force on 6 February came RMT lorries laden with precious petrol. These lorries moved back from **Derna** to **Bomba**, to cut inland and join up with a vast convoy of supply vehicles. The going over the desert was extremely rough, and choking

clouds of dust checked progress. Trucks closed up, yet still the one ahead was difficult to see. 'For mile after mile the vehicles had to plunge over and plough through a desert surface covered with rough boulders and slabs of rock, lurching and bumping over the billowy ground at about 4 mph,' says *Destruction of an Army*. 'An added difficulty was the lack of accurate maps of the country from Mekili onwards. Parties of supply lorries disappeared into the curtain of dust and lost contact with the main column; hours later they would be seen looming out of the gloom again.' The dust continued next day, and again rough country lay across their path, but at times the surface had packed hard and travelling was better than on bitumen. In the evening and early next morning the RMT safely delivered the petrol to an enormous dump rising near (it is thought) Fort Msus. This was the company's last hectic dash of the campaign.

On the way back it wasn't dust—it was mud, red mud. The trucks, pushed and towed laboriously over the worst parts, finally made **Derna**, where the storm had left giant hailstones which lay about for four days. The bitter cold at this time, when RMT drivers were still in summer dress, partly accounts for the company's motley dress on its return to Egypt. Drivers had seized any warm clothing they could find (B Section particularly) and returned to the New Zealand fold dressed in all sorts of Italian finery—high-ranking naval uniform (and swords), peaked hats, generals' tunics and privates' jackboots—a fantastic sight.

Derna soon became a terminus for supply columns operating from **Tobruk** and further east. 'It was amazing the amount of transport that poured into **Derna**,' said one NCO. 'British 10-ton diesels, commandeered Italian lorries, and other NZASC units would turn up in convoys with supplies.' From **Derna** onwards the RMT worked, operating along supply routes to fertile **Barce** (about 110 miles west of **Derna** on the road to **Benghazi**) and to Magrun, 50 miles south of **Benghazi**. There were roads here and they were good. Three trucks from A Section were attached for a time to supply an anti-aircraft unit near **El Agheila**, the farthest west **Wavell's Army** advanced.

But this work was soon interrupted. Early on 25 February 4 RMT, tried and tested veterans now, the most experienced unit in **2 NZEF**, moved off laden with souvenirs on its long journey of over 500 miles eastwards to **Helwan** where, during a complete refit, a new section, D Section under Captain 'Scotty' **Veitch**,³⁸ would be added, bringing the company to full strength at last.

One by one the big three-tonners got under way. The strings of war next month would jerk these men and trucks across the **Mediterranean** to **Greece**. Most of them would never see the little white villas of **Derna** again. Out and away they went on the road to Egypt, **Derna** disappearing behind the tailboards in the west.

But they were leaving a desert where there was now one difference. Out of the morning haze, at ten o'clock on Saturday, 22 February, 15 planes swept low in three waves, machinegunning an RMT convoy returning from dumping petrol at Magrun. Three trucks were hit and one driver, Steve Tripp, was slightly wounded. These planes, tenacious, daring, meant business. The bold, black swastika was making its first appearance over **Africa**.

¹ CSM Rhodes helped B Sec start this dump, which **L-Cpl V. L. Norrish** completed, together with map and key plan showing the exact location of every case. This brilliant young NCO was killed a month later.

² Sgt R. A. Walker, of C Sec, estimated each vehicle now had travelled about 8000 miles. The average truck mileage at the end of the campaign was about 16,000.

³ **Dvr G. W. Sheddan; Christchurch**; born Dunedin, 17 Aug 1918; stationer.

⁴ **Dvr C. W. B. McK. K. Spiers**; Dunedin; born NZ 27 Apr 1918; farmhand; p.w. Apr 1941.

⁵ **Dvr L. G. F. Cashmere; Outram; born NZ 26 Jul 1907; motor driver.**

⁶ **'The Indians,' writes Dvr T. M. Cumming, 'carried most of their own rations consisting of dried fruits (apricots, prunes, etc.) and chapattis or, as we knew them, the Egyptian pancakes. "Bully" disgusted them; they thought it pure "dog". They were great tea drinkers, and at every stop thick sweet tea was brewed, and my mug was always filled first. They loved strawberry jam—and got it.'**

⁷ **WO I R. H. Thomson, DCM, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Port Chalmers, 19 Feb 1912; school-teacher; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁸ **Thomson's difficulties were those experienced by B and C Secs; A Sec had no trouble with the Fusiliers' English.**

⁹ **Dvr E. R. Parnell; Johnsonville; born England, 29 Apr 1914; truck driver.**

¹⁰ **For the average driver the normal driving routine was tiring enough, with difficult going, flying sand, and biting cold. No winter dress had been issued officially, and a great many drivers still wore skimpy shirts, shorts and, mercifully, the good thick New Zealand greatcoat. One man lived in his greatcoat for 10 days. Maintenance had to be fitted in during any spare time; to the nagging of back-seat drivers had to be added (in the case of B and C Sections) language difficulties. Some drivers also drove late into the night on odd local errands, and sleep for everyone was very precious. One driver, who had endured all this and a boil on the cheek without complaint, was roused by an Indian at 3.30 a.m. for a 6 a.m. move. At sun-up the Indian was still looking pale.**

¹¹ **Brig. W. L. Lloyd, commanding 5 Ind Inf Bde, told Maj Whyte afterwards: 'I am certain the whole operation would not have succeeded as it did had it not been for the co-operation and efficiency of your unit.'**

¹² Lt E. L. Tinker; Christchurch; born Otautau, 20 Oct 1917; garage attendant and lorry driver.

¹³ Capt W. K. Jones; Te Puke; born England, 24 Apr 1911; transport contractor.

¹⁴ Dvr M. J. Beaton; Gore; born Gore, 2 Jun 1911; concrete worker; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 17 Mar 1945.

¹⁵ WO I R. Gay; Dunedin; born Hokitika, 9 Nov 1904; transport driver.

¹⁶ Dvr W. H. Wingham; Ikamatua, Westland; born Christchurch, 9 Nov 1919; motor trimmer; wounded 18 Apr 1941; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

¹⁷ L-Cpl D. M. Sutherland; Wellington; born Scotland, 24 Aug 1909; process engraver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁸ Maj A. L. Lomas, MC, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 30 Jun 1916; medical practitioner; RMO NZASC Jan 1940-Jun 1941; 4 Fd Amb Jun 1941-Jun 1942; OC Maadi Camp Hosp Jun 1942-Apr 1943; 3 Gen Hosp Apr-Aug 1943; DADMS 2 NZ Div Aug 1943-Apr 1944.

¹⁹ Sgt N. J. Prichard, MM; Dunedin; born NZ 10 Nov 1916; law clerk.

²⁰ Tummar West yielded 3000 to 4000 PWs and a large number of vehicles and stores. The three captured camps yielded some 7000 PWs, about 100 guns, several hundred motor vehicles, and vast quantities of stores and ammunition. Over 40 enemy tanks had been destroyed.

²¹ WO II P. G. Wilson, MM, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born Wairoa, 21

Sep 1905; foreman mechanic; p.w. 27 May 1941.

²² Dvr G. W. Corp, MM; born England, 3 Sep 1911; taxi driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; killed (in air raid) while p.w. 12 May 1944.

²³ 2 Lt J. T. Wallace, m.i.d.; born USA, 5 Mar 1910; machinery salesman; killed in action 24 Dec 1940.

²⁴ L-Cpl V. L. Norrish; born NZ 11 Dec 1918; clerk; died of wounds 24 Dec 1940.

²⁵ Dvr E. W. Reynolds; born NZ 2 May 1906; truck and service-car driver; killed in action 24 Dec 1940.

²⁶ Dvr A. B. Hurst; born Ireland, 1 Oct 1904; labourer; died of wounds 25 Dec 1940.

²⁷ Sgt C. J. Mulligan; Invercargill; born NZ 18 Apr 1914; traction-engine driver; wounded 24 Dec 1940.

²⁸ Maj R. K. Davis, m.i.d.; Eureka, Waikato; born Auckland, 2 Mar 1917; clerk; OC 4 RMT Coy 30 May-30 Nov 1945; wounded 24 Dec 1940.

²⁹ Dvr N. A. S. Quintal; Auckland; born Waihi, 27 Aug 1914; labourer; wounded 24 Dec 1940; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³⁰ Dvr I. E. Appleton; Wellington; born Wellington, 12 Sep 1915; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1940; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³¹ Dvr E. W. Boosey; Masterton; born Wellington, 25 Mar 1918; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1940.

³² Drivers who took part in the first Libyan campaign

invariably call **Tobruk** ' *Toe-brook*'; those arriving later say 'T' *brook*'.

³³ **Dvr A. R. Jeff; Nelson**; born Ohakune, 27 Oct 1916; chainman; wounded 23 May 1941.

³⁴ **Capt M. G. Browne**, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born South Africa, 28 Sep 1913; clerk.

³⁵ 'Nugget' Parnell and some comrades found a bath in a deserted hotel, but water was not running in the taps. They broke into the packed cellar, carried crates to the bathroom, and bathed contentedly enough in champagne. Even Cleopatra managed only asses' milk.

³⁶ In **Derna** Alf Beaton would park himself down on a doorstep with a pound or so of tea and a small 'spot'-sized glass. The gathering natives learned they could have a spot glass full of tea-leaves for a couple of eggs. While bartering **Alf** always slyly managed to fill the glass with his thumb stuck inside it. A thumb inside a little glass takes up a lot of space. Then when the native handed over two eggs and demanded baksheesh, **Alf**, all in one cunning and concealing flourish, added an extra pinch, tipped out the measure of tea-leaves, and removed his thumb. That extra pinch put the Arabs in high good humour, and **Alf's** reputation soon became unexcelled for generous trading.

³⁷ Maj Whyte, ill, left the company before **Tobruk**; Maj Woods, returning to the company at **Derna**, took his place, Capt McAlpine acting as OC in the meantime. CSM Rhodes had left the company before the attacks on the Tummar camps, and Thomson became CSM at **Derna**.

³⁸ **Capt J. Veitch**; born **Scotland**, 2 Feb 1901; omnibus driver; died while p.w. 3 Jun 1941.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 3 – GREECE

CHAPTER 3

Greece

IT seemed the desert was saying goodbye to the men who knew it so well, a goodbye harsh with the violence of element-torn wadis and escarpments. The dust-storm swirled over **Alexandria**, blotting out the sun and bringing shipping to a standstill. Rough hands shielded tanned faces from wind-whipped particles of sand; the outlines of transports and ships of war faded and were lost. The storm, its strength displayed, slackened; the convoy crept to sea.

And now to the eyes once more the caress of green hills and far mountains, the gentle shades of green and blue beneath a kindly sun. 'It could be home. It could be home.'

From the decks and holds of the *Port Halifax* truck after truck swung up and away and on to the dock at **Piraeus**. Vehicles and drivers of 4 RMT Company were landing to join the 2 NZEF's first stand against the enemy, the old foe, the German, now massing within **Bulgaria** for assault upon a sorely pressed **Greece**. The dock had to be cleared quickly, for further convoys were steaming towards the coast, bringing British aid under the Lustre Force plan.

Without delay, engines started up, vehicles moved into line, and the convoy, echoing and re-echoing through the cobbled streets of the grimy port, passed over a gentle hill to a joyful welcome in the great white city of **Athens** spread beneath the Parthenon. Crying and waving, the citizens pelted the moving vehicles with flowers, cigarettes, and sweets: a hero's welcome. Drivers, at first a bit puzzled at gestures, soon realised that the Greek way of waving goodbye is the opposite to ours, as though they were beckoning the men to come back again. Six miles from **Athens**, beneath the scented pines of **Kifisia**, the convoy dispersed and drivers prepared for the first evening in **Greece**. Grateful women begged to help by washing, ironing, and mending clothes. Children came forward to make friends and to share many a meal. Greeks, perturbed at

New Zealanders sampling wine without food, insisted on bringing bread and a little meat, although the war against the Italian invaders had clipped their rations cruelly. More aloof, a dapper civilian strolled through the lines, two dachshunds frisking behind him — a fantastic, almost contemptuous touch. No restrictions curbed the curiosity of the German ambassador — or his military attaché and staff.

Sleep was sound that night, the scent of the trees and the wild thyme seeping deep into many a memory.

Within four or five days the advance party left to collect the rest of the company, arriving on 21 March in HMS *Fiona*, a small merchantman from the Indian coast. One gun mounted at the stern had been fired twice, and each time the pumps had had to be manned until a rivetting job was done. Each time all the crockery had to be replaced.

‘Soldiers crowded everywhere, not much room to sleep, about two feet by four feet of space,’ wrote Driver Neale [Weastell](#)¹ in his diary on the trip. ‘Had a few games of cards. Weather cold, feed not very plentiful.’

To keep the landing army properly fed, supplied, and armed, two enormous dumps had been made, one at the [Athens](#) racecourse, the other at [Larisa](#), about 150 miles north by road and rail. To bring the supplies closer to the fighting positions, field supply depots had to be made. These depots, containing stores of food, oil, petrol, disinfectants, and medical comforts, plus ammunition nearby, were set at [Livadhion](#), [Servia](#), and [Kozani](#)—all beyond [Larisa](#). From these depots branched handy field dumps at [Katerini](#), [Veroia](#), [Edhessa](#) and [Amindaion](#). The first three field dumps were to hold 12,000, 36,000 and 24,000 rations each. [Amindaion](#) would be stocked when the others were filled.

RMT's job, apart from carrying troops when needed, was to help the ASC fill and keep full these dumps and depots. And [Greece](#)'s roads were certainly poor, and the over-burdened railways not much better.

For a week the company worked around [Athens](#), moving troops and

supplies as they arrived. Arthur **Pope**² found a full and promising looking barrel, whipped it back to camp, broached the keg before expectant comrades, and found it contained olive oil. Leave parties explored the blacked-out city, wandered awed or bored through the classical ruins, and brightened up in the thriving wineshops and cafés, echoing to the song hits of the day, ‘Oh what a Surprise for the Duce’ and ‘Woodpecker Song’. One punishing drink was ouzo. After a night on this, horrible indeed were **Kifisia**'s green and woolly caterpillars hooking on to one another and forming long, mysterious ‘snakes’. That—and the mating of tortoises—caused much anxiety.

From the fields peasants looked up, smiling and waving, when the company, loaded with rations and petrol, left in convoy for **Larisa** on 28 March. At even the smallest village happy Greeks, giving the ‘thumbs up’ sign, pressed rosebuds and orange blossoms on the grinning drivers, and handed out wine and cheese and yet more garlands and olive twigs. Stan Shaw,³ given a little Greek cross, tied it on to his braces, where it stayed until the day of invasion in **Crete**. During halts—and there were many, for ‘the convoy discipline was frankly terrible’—tinned food was bartered for eggs, bread, wine, and money. Steve Tripp traded away a tin of axle grease. Just as the Greek reappeared, breathless and furious, the convoy moved off again in the nick of time.

‘We were put behind the artillery, and this was the worst convoy we were ever in,’ noted Driver **Wan**.⁴ ‘Sometimes we only did a chain without stopping; if we were lucky we might make 100 yards! Occasionally we belted along flat out. Some time in the early part of the night we stopped on a road going through a swamp, and we couldn't talk for the deafening noise made by thousands of frogs.’

‘The most striking things in the country were the amount of women toiling in the fields, and the primitive way they worked,’ wrote Driver **Cumming**.⁵ ‘In most places there was no ploughing. Instead a line of women would be swinging large three-cornered hoes, about the size of a spade, breaking up the ground to a depth of six to eight inches. In the

“wealthier” farms a wooden plough was used, pulled by a mule or—more often—a donkey. Mules had long since been commandeered by the Army. We saw sheep and goats being milked within a circle of reeds and brushwood. Head and body are passed through the milker's legs, and the animals are milked through their own hind-legs. The milk is poured into a skin, and taken away to become either curd or cheese.’

After an overnight break near **Lamia** the convoy moved north in fits and starts to **Nikaia**, a small village just outside **Larisa**, where storks, birds of good luck, made welcome nests on the roofs. Greetings on the way were as friendly as ever, and the tossing of flowers and greenery continued. But by now some began to regret the enthusiasm; being clocked on the head by a substantial bunch of flowers or a chestnut bough when travelling at 30 miles an hour was no joke. At **Nikaia** Major Woods set up Company Headquarters and Workshops. A typical Greek peasant village, **Nikaia** was not much more than an inn, a few shops selling wine and groceries, and some white and grey stone houses of farmers who worked the surrounding country. A peaceful spot where a few geese or turkeys wandered about, always watched carefully by farmers or their children. When a turkey ended up in a foreign pot, most times it had been haggled over and paid for. War against the Italians had left the humble Greeks with little to offer, yet they made friends, gladly sharing cups of strong coffee with visiting drivers. Apart from this, entertainment was nil, except when a gipsy band appeared with a dancing bear, a sorrowful, shaggy beast blinking behind a stout muzzle.

With the company ready for field service, on the morning of 30 March a convoy of 100 trucks set out with full loads for the field supply depots sprouting near **Servia** and **Kozani**, about 65 miles away. Towards the cold and rugged north beyond the Thessaly Plain they drove, passing through **Tirnavos** and over the rolling hill country to **Elasson**, where **Mount Olympus**, rising beyond 9500 feet, stood sharply outlined in a covering of snow. Here was an even more abrupt change from driving over the trackless desert. Past **Elasson**, along rocky hills and valleys spattered with scrub, slippery roads twisted and looped for ten miles up

the precipitous **Servia Pass** and down to the township of **Servia**.

By the roadside gangs of women and children attempted to keep the surface repaired and in good condition. The roads, metalled and narrow, bustling with army transport, were little better than New Zealand back-country roads, and the three-tonners needed steady hands and sharp eyes to guide them around hairpin bends and through the heavy traffic. **Servia** reached, the run through to **Kozani** was comfortable enough, and sections returned to **Nikaia** to move further supplies piling up from trains and trucks at **Larisa**. While the operating sections worked forward from **Nikaia**, Headquarters and Workshops stayed put. Repairs were mostly the result of accidents or war damage rather than general wear and tear, for more than half of the trucks were brand new. There was the inevitable stream of broken springs—not as bad as in the Desert—and these were handled by the section's three blacksmiths under Lance-Corporal Ruffel, ⁶ a shrewd springsmith who, without any of the special tempering oils, made do with only old engine oil.

On the last day of March a casually handled pistol killed Driver 'Aussie' **Osborne**, ⁷ the first divisional casualty in **Greece**. It was a tragic coincidence, for his namesake Driver G. R. Osborn was the first **2 NZEF** soldier to die from thermosbomb wounds near **Matruh** the previous September. Furthermore, Aussie (i.e., not G. R. Osborn) had been officially reported dead after the thermos-bomb raid, and even his base kit had been sent home. He was buried with full military honours in the Greek cemetery at **Larisa**, Padre Jamieson holding a simple service. Following the tragedy, Captain Broberg and Staff-Sergeant **Hoare** ⁸ swooped on Workshops men when they were busily digging slit trenches and announced a thorough search of trucks and kits while the section remained on parade. A startling amount of prohibited stuff was found, including Italian hand grenades, some fully charged, automatic pistols, and cameras. Ces Weston's ⁹ private arsenal of 17 grenades was brought to light, not all of them entirely harmless. Asked why he had collected them, Ces replied that his many nephews and nieces in New Zealand might have liked them for souvenirs.

For a week the three-tonners were on the move day and night, shifting hundreds of tons of rations, ammunition, barbed wire, explosives, and petrol from **Larisa** to the field depots and dumps growing up behind the infantry and the gunners, who were wasting no time in digging in and making ready for the assault. The roads up through the mountains about **Servia** and **Kozani** were bad enough by day; by night they demanded a driver's utmost skill. No lights at all, not even tail lights, were allowed, no matter how rough, narrow or steep the road, yet not one truck came to grief or crashed over the edge into the black valleys below. ¹⁰ The side roads were worse, and day by day over the northern front the patches of mud and potholes spread steadily.

Leaving the supply service for moving troops, 50 three-ton trucks under Captain McAlpine and Captain Good were ordered off on 4 April to the **Veroia** pass, east of **Kozani**. Here Greek troops were picked up from their hill positions and taken over some 70 miles to near **Edhessa**. This move transferred units of 12 Greek Division from its right flank to its left, strengthening the defence line in the **Edhessa** area. Australians took the place of the transferred Greeks. The trucks returned to Company Headquarters at **Nikaia** on 7 April. On this move Max Beaton shared a bagful of bread among Greek infantry and offered some M and V to a Greek officer. 'He gesticulates with his hands,' recalls Max, 'and offers his most hearty thanks by saying "Merci, merci". Being dumblike I think he means "No, no", and calmly munch away at hot M & V and tomatoes.

Next stop I got a sudden jolt as one of the boys explains. The Greek, a fine fellow, understands, and I fix him up. Later he gets out at a village and returns with a gift of a dozen eggs.'

By 5 April the New Zealand Division, apart from 5 Brigade preparing defensive positions back in the **Olympus Pass**, held forward positions on the Aliakmon line just north of **Katerini** and about 80 miles from **Larisa**. This line, running from the sea to the Yugoslav border, could be turned from the flank if the Germans attacked through **Yugoslavia** and

advanced down a broad valley into **Greece** through the **Monastir** (or **Florina**) Gap. This weakness was not strongly defended. It was hoped **Yugoslavia** would join the Allies.

On the dismal wet morning of 6 April, while RMT men in their overcoats huddled round the cooks' trucks for breakfast, **Germany** attacked **Yugoslavia** and **Greece**. Next day the threat to the Aliakmon line from the rear became reality. **Yugoslavia** collapsed completely and the Germans advanced to the **Monastir Gap**. It was decided to pull back the New Zealand Division from the Aliakmon line to the **Olympus Pass** positions, part of a general move to draw in and tighten the defence of **Greece**. The Allied line would now run from the coast, across the **Olympus** passes to the **Servia** area, and would then swing north-west through **Veve**, south of the **Monastir Gap**.

This meant pulling back not only the troops but also the advanced food, supply and ammunition dumps which were still being built up. With a grinding of gears, the army machine went into reverse. So back over the congested roads now rapidly churning into mud went the RMT lorries, helping the New Zealand Supply Column return the dumps to safer areas. It was a tedious and tiring task, to say the least, but in the end some 86,000 gallons of petrol and 300,000 rations around **Katerini** were evacuated by rail and road. Later, the Germans collected most of this.

A slender bridge sent twelve RMT trucks hurrying north from **Larisa**. British armour, facing a sudden threat of being overwhelmed by the invaders from **Yugoslavia**, would have to retreat west down the road to **Grevena**, crossing a bridge over the **Aliakmon River** gorge ten miles above the town. The bridge had to be reinforced to bear the tanks. Told of the predicament, engineers in **Larisa** handed a heap of long metal girders over to the RMT and told the drivers to get going. The safety of the tanks was in their hands.

Up over the **Servia Pass** and through the town the RMT drove to **Kozani**, where only a few days before the three-tonners had carted

supplies for a dump. Now retreat was in the air, and beyond the dark hills ahead the German was moving down, how fast nobody knew. The girders, unwieldy loads, stuck out over the tailboards, making the going awkward, especially at corners. Plenty of trouble arrived with the dawn, when the convoy had passed **Kozani**. The roads now were choked with Greek soldiers moving from the high ground east of the **Servia-Ptolemais** road to the high ground west of the same road. It was unfortunate that the Greeks had to clutter up the lines of communication in this way, but it was all part of the withdrawal plan from the Aliakmon line. Some soldiers incorrectly thought the Greeks were bolting already, and condemned them unjustly. With little modern transport of their own, the Greeks toiled on laboriously, donkeys and even oxen hauling carts, ammunition limbers, and guns. Another army, led only by fear, began to take to the roads too at this time—the refugees.

The RMT lorries inched along in this crawling mass from the **Monastir Gap**. It took hours to cover the 15 miles to Siatista. The next problem was to get the girders down the choked, cork-screwing road to the bridge below. One by one the trucks were brought up to a curve overlooking the bridge 200 feet below, and from there the girders were tipped over the edge and manhandled down to the riverbed.

Meanwhile at **Larisa** the engineers determined to make doubly sure that the strategic bridge was reinforced. Within twenty-four hours a second girder-toting convoy, led by Captain Good, swung north over the same route, edged through the crowded traffic, and finally made **Servia** bridge. But here Australians, busy with demolition charges, refused to let the RMT go on.

‘Jerry's on the way, and our job's to blow the — bridges,’ they said. They told the New Zealanders what they could do with their girders. Wearily, the second convoy returned the girders to their store in **Larisa**.

And the strategic bridge? It was never used. The British tanks quietly found another crossing.

Ten miles north from **Servia** bridge, in the rough country near **Kozani**, Captain McAlpine with 33 trucks on 12 April searched in vain for Greek infantry to be moved to a new line south of the town. Making the best of a bad job, the lorries shifted ammunition left behind by the Greeks towards the new line of defence and returned through **Kozani**, packed with refugees, to evacuate the last of **19 Australian Brigade**, withdrawing to the shorter line from the rearguard action at **Vevi**. Heavy fighting was going on in the hills, the valleys echoing and re-echoing with gunfire, as the drivers moved through mud and slush towards the rendezvous, a long dark ridge, where the infantry was expected to embus at midnight. Here it was found that only about half a dozen vehicles would be wanted after all, so the rest of the convoy turned back and made for Company Headquarters near **Larisa**. The remaining six, on making for Company Headquarters next day, would be among the last New Zealand vehicles to use **Servia** bridge, which was blown at 3.20 p.m. on 13 April.

Through the long night (12–13 April) of bitter cold and further snow, the small cluster of drivers waited within their lorries for the infantry to turn up. Every hour engines were started up and run for a few minutes to ensure easy starting in an emergency. Sometimes a lonely shell whined high over the area. Sometimes small-arms fire ricocheted nearby. Someone lit a fire in a small drum, and drivers huddled round until the captain sharply ordered them to put the fire out. The miserable night ended at last for Corporal **Walker**,¹¹ Drivers Ray **Richards**,¹² George **Cowlin**,¹³ Bill **Walker**,¹⁴ ‘Rusty’ **Hammond**,¹⁵ the Beaton brothers,¹⁶ **Willis**,¹⁷ **Thornley**,¹⁸ **Spiers**, **Cherry**,¹⁹ **Keys**,²⁰ **Bennett**,²¹ and **Christoffersen**.²² Down from the hills straggled small parties of weary Australians, some without rifles and one or two even without boots, and one by one the vehicles filled and smartly moved off to Kteni, south of **Kozani**. At the last moment a stranded British tank crew was spotted in the distance and out to its rescue drove the Beaton brothers. As the last of the Tommies climbed in, German rifles opened up. Alf Beaton clung for dear life to the tailboard while his brother raced the truck out of immediate danger. The convoy pulled out under fire, Captain McAlpine's

staff car at the rear receiving close attention from a machine gun. As the convoy passed through **Kozani** German bombers began attacking the town.

Another swarm of fighters and bombers droned high over the snowy **Olympus** range and made for **Larisa**, the sun glinting on their wings and bodies and sending shadows skimming like nightmarish fish along the fields below. A few Hurricanes rose in brief defiance before the aerodrome and its anti-aircraft defences rocked under the impact of high explosives. Soon black and yellow plumes of smoke mingled above unfortunate **Larisa**, doubly devastated by a recent earthquake and a subsequent raid by the Italian Air Force. Then from the armada came fighters to strafe streets, roads, and countryside and any signs of movement. The RMT area at **Nikaia** did not escape. Drivers **Snell**,²³ **Frayling**,²⁴ and **Bruning**²⁵ turned their Bren guns on a low-flying fighter, and as if angered, it turned, attacking again at tree-top level. Enraged, 'Battler' Charlie Snell, a boxer in civilian life, kept blazing away, thumping his chest between bursts and shouting, 'I'm Battler Snell, you bastard!' The fire may have brought down the plane, which was found later in the vicinity.

By the night of 13 April all sections were drawing together again at **Nikaia**, A and D Sections helping to move two field dumps over **Servia Pass** to temporary safety. With 18 vehicles, Second-Lieutenant **Pool**²⁶ joined about sixty British trucks bound for Ioannina, where Greek troops from the Albanian front were to join troops at **Grevena**. They travelled west through **Trikkala** and **Kalabaka**, climbing among ice and snow at night with lights on, to about 5000 feet over the Metso-von Pass in the **Pindus Mountains**. The Greeks, who were found before dawn trying to sleep on the frozen roadside, were picked up and taken to **Kalabaka**, where they were left to find their own way to **Grevena**. The RMT trucks returned for more Greeks, only to find that the troops wouldn't budge, preferring now to stay and fight in the mountains rather than to retreat, as they thought, to another front at **Grevena**. The detachment at **Kalabaka**, instead of heading north to **Grevena**, began marching back to

rejoin its comrades, and to make matters worse an Australian brigadier ordered Lieutenant Pool to stand by ready to move *his* men. Pool says he ignored this order and told his drivers to escape from this mess by returning at once to **Nikaia**.

‘Around **Trikkala**,’ wrote Driver Wan, describing his trip up to the Greeks, ‘there are herds of cows the same as we see around New Zealand. The township seemed very pretty and quaint. On our way through it was beautiful and peaceful and the people waved and cheered us on our way.... Coming back **Trikkala** was a pitiful sight. The place had been twice bombed. With the first bombing, all the casualties were put in the church. The second bombing got the church. We never got any waves or cheers and I was filled with an infinite sadness. I still think of that beautiful spot and would like to visit it once more.’

Despite air raid after air raid, trains kept a stream of ammunition, supplies and petrol flowing into **Larisa**, and company transport, principally D Section, commanded by Captain Veitch, helped RASC convoys spread these loads in dumps over the Thessaly Plain and as far west as **Trikkala**.

When a battalion of 17 Australian Brigade reached **Larisa** by train on 14 April, RMT trucks were called in to drive the troops to near **Kalabaka**, where the brigade was forming a rearguard. The drivers took them through **Trikkala** to their destination, a journey of about 70 miles, arriving at 3 a.m. on 15 April. ‘Big air battle over us about 8 a.m.,’ wrote Neale Weastell. ‘Three planes came down and burst into flames. Left there are 9.15, driving into bombing all the way down on different villages and on the road.’ The convoy reached **Larisa** at the height of a heavy air raid, Driver Weastell estimating that 64 planes were taking part in the attack. From the smashed town panic-stricken civilians were fleeing in all directions. The drivers stopped. They took on loads of terrified women and crying children. With bitter feelings they drove their pathetic passengers to safety in the countryside near **Nikaia**. ‘Being New Zealanders,’ Allan Christoffersen remembers, ‘we were only picking up women and children. As the Greek men were pushing them aside we

were throwing them off again as fast as they got aboard. The men just couldn't make it out. They thought they came first. We thought different.'

Corporal Lloyd **Hinchey**²⁷ and Cam **Sawers**²⁸ were involved in a dead-end convoy when trucks with 25-pounder ammunition were switched from **Trikkala** to near **Grevena**, where Australian gunners were fighting a rearguard action. Sometimes the drivers had to clear donkey carts and refugees' belongings from the road ahead, and one bad stretch of ten miles took eight hours to cover. But the ammunition got through—just as the gunners were packing up, their last round fired. Still loaded, the convoy joined in the retreat.

About the only clear fact now was that a general retreat south was imminent. One indication came when A Section men with Captain Muller shifted an ammunition dump at **Trikkala** down to **Lamia**, 55 weary miles of more crowded roads. A second pointer was the evacuation by 4 RMT trucks of the staff of 1 New Zealand General Hospital at Farsala to the railway line nearby. The patients, about four hundred, had gone on by train to **Athens** the day before, 13 April. A third sign was the abrupt evacuation of Workshops Section to **Athens**, Staff-Sergeant **Cooney**²⁹ rousing men from their sleep in the early hours of 15 April with Captain Broberg's orders to pack without delay. Headquarters Section soon followed them south. One night, after a paratroop scare (false), men from Headquarters had manned a highly unpopular road block on the **Larisa- Athens** road. Sergeant-Major Thomson had an English phrase ready for suspects to repeat: 'Just what do you think this is?' ('Yust vat do you tink diss iss?'). He never tried it out, convinced by the first cries of 'What the blasted hell do you stupid bastards think you're doing?'

No one at the time quite knew what was going on, but it added up to this: the British forces were too slender to hold the enemy advance. We were withdrawing to **Thermopylae**. Up to 13 April it had been hoped that the line from the **Olympus** passes to the south of **Vevi** could be held. All

troop-moving was done with this in view. After 13 April the problem was to establish rearguards and extricate troops from the line in such a way that **Larisa**, the junction of all routes north, could be held until evacuation to **Thermopylae** was complete.

The operating sections took a last look at **Nikaia**, then on 16 April wound north about 30 miles to near **Elasson**, ready to help move part of the New Zealand Division back to the **Thermopylae** defences. Just outside **Larisa** a **Naafi** had been abandoned. The bottlenecks of nearby bridges were halting traffic for long periods. Bob **Mitchell** ³⁰ and a comrade during one long halt left their truck, seized a four-dozen crate of beer, and just failed to manhandle it up a bank between the **Naafi** and their truck. Mad with frustration, they saw the convoy begin to move again. Mitchell's truck was about to hold up those behind. Major Woods from the bank curtly ordered the struggling couple back to their truck. 'When the truck drew up level with the abandoned crate the tailboard was conveniently down, the lorry crept very slowly, this time *four* of the boys swept out to tackle the crate, and Major Woods, acting the gentleman, looked the other way.'

Bright and clear dawned 18 April; birds preened and sang from trees and hedgerows where flowers of spring looked out to frail mists, rising to unveil the massive **Olympus** ranges. It seemed strange that this day, beginning with such beauty, should end with widespread violence and death.

First away from the company was A Section, just back from taking ammunition to **Lamia** and safely returning through a brisk air raid. The 20 trucks were to pick up **21 Battalion** and some Australians, who were bitterly disputing the **Pinios Gorge** near **Tempe** village, about 20 miles towards the coast northeast of **Larisa**.

Led by Sergeant Bruce **Crowley**, ³¹ the 20 trucks reached the rendezvous near the Vale of **Tempe**. Captain Muller and his driver, **Tidman**, ³² bringing up the rear, ran into an air raid in **Larisa** and dived for cover in the town square. The trucks then went on about two miles

to the embussing point near a bluff, where they dispersed just before a Stuka raid, and settled down to await men of **21 Battalion**.

At the mouth of the gorge Muller was joined by Lieutenant Pool ³³ with two trucks. Here Major **Harding**, ³⁴ second-in-command of **21 Battalion**, told the two RMT officers he did not favour returning his men through the bottleneck of **Larisa**, which was being bombed regularly. He himself had used an overland route, little more than a track, which dodged **Larisa** and led on to the **Volos** road. Along this road the trucks could go to their destination at **Molos**. Pool, taking a wrong turning at **Larisa**, had travelled over part of this short cut. Major Harding had ordered his transport officer to reconnoitre an overland route dodging congested **Larisa**, but the officer did not return. He was captured by an advance party of German soldiers. This independent enemy striking force, circling through the hills, had crossed the river behind the Vale of **Tempe** men, set up a stoutly manned road block, defied all comers, and had completely severed the **Tempe- Larisa** road by 7 p.m. Except for the overland track, **Tempe** was now bottled up, but no RMT drivers up with their lorries knew about this.



Most of these drivers spent four drab years as prisoners of war, and although each has his own version of the Vale of **Tempe** affair (and few accounts agree in detail), they are unanimous that 'it was a damn bad

show from start to finish’.

Now troops outside the Vale of **Tempe** who were retreating fast past **Larisa** in the night saw fiery indications of the road block in the distance and started the false rumour that parachutists were advancing on (or were seizing) **Larisa**. The only attack by German parachutists in **Greece** was at **Corinth** Canal, and **Larisa** was not entered by German soldiers until 7.30 a.m. on 19 April.

Fighting raged in **Tempe**'s hills until dusk. By then between 100 and 200 men, some from **21 Battalion**, but mostly Australians, were gathered in waiting transport. Then the first party (a mixed lot with perhaps up to seven RMT lorries) left for the mouth of the gorge. Lieutenant Pool took over this convoy and with much difficulty (for the night was pitch black) crossed overland to the **Volos** road, eventually reaching **Molos** safely. ‘Infantry guides were posted at the turnoff, but apparently they did not remain,’ said the lieutenant. ‘Had the guides remained at their posts I’m sure the rest of A Section and many members of **21 Battalion** would have escaped capture.’³⁵

Soon after this first party left, the bulk of the RMT transport began to move. Drivers had sat watching others pulling out, and Driver **Herbert Elliott**³⁶ writes: ‘It was a fair dinkum rout. There were guns and trucks and what-have-you going for their lives, and us still sitting there. When we started to move down the valley towards **Larissa** it was fairly dark and things were sticky. There were guns and trucks in the ditch. One gun was right across the road and we had to heave it off before we could get past. We finally got going up the road when everything in front stopped, and all the troops came running down the road.’ Drivers learned of the road block. ‘It was a case of ditch our trucks and take to the hills, and believe me we got out of that area smartly.’

Distinguishing himself in the mêlée was Driver **John Snell**,³⁷ who won the DCM by crawling forward under fire to some apparently reluctant Bren carriers, gathering grenades and joining a charge on the road block. Snell, hurling grenades from the running-board of his lorry,

silenced at least two enemy machine-gun or tommy-gun positions. His driver killed, he jumped into another truck and carried on with the attacking party until the road was hopelessly blocked.

No man could keep his trucks together under such conditions. Sergeant Crowley and some of his men grouped together in the hills. The party included Corporal **Johnston**,³⁸ Frank **Mead**,³⁹ Noel **Callagher**,⁴⁰ **Jim Ward**,⁴¹ Jack Logie, Herb Elliott, and a B Section man, Cliff **Bezar**.⁴² In vain, twice using Greek schooners to evade the enemy, they made their way down the coast to **Tolos**, just south of **Argos**. The last landing craft was filled and the A Section drivers were left behind.

Referring to the RMT convoy later, Major Harding said: 'They did a good job of work. They were up to time at the rendezvous I had arranged with Divisional Headquarters. The dispersion was quick and orderly and the convoy that pushed off at about 9 p.m. looked all set for **Molos**.'

Back near **Elasson** the remaining A Section trucks, together with B and C Sections, waited to join in 6 Brigade's move to the **Thermopylae** line. Noon came and went, then at 2 p.m. Captain McAlpine left to check details of the move with 6 Brigade Headquarters, a few miles south near **Tirnavos**.

Beside McAlpine in the battered staff car sat his batman, 'Ginger' Wingham. Suddenly a flight of three Me 109s, hedgehopping across the fields, slashed at the car, severely wounding the officer in the chest and wounding Ginger in a leg. Nearby gunners came over to help. McAlpine insisted that 6 Brigade and 4 RMT Company should be told instantly they had failed to get through. This remained uppermost in his mind. An ambulance took the two to an RAP in an old orchard outside **Tirnavos**. The medical unit, ready to move, unpacked, put up a tent and began giving McAlpine a blood transfusion. It was too late. They buried him under the peaceful boughs of the fruit trees.⁴³ Wingham could not believe their days together had ended. He thought of 'Captain Mac' over the last week, always on the move, never resting, a tin of beans or stew always heating on the car's manifold, ready for the two to share on the

way. Then his mind went back to the Desert, and to **Tummar West** where they were taking the Indian Division. He remembered a British officer, red tape to the hilt, giving McAlpine strict orders to stay behind until sent for. He remembered 'Captain Mac' wandering round the car several times, kicking the sand, until he said: 'Hop in. I feel sure he'll be lost and needing us by now.' Wingham's sorrow grew.

When McAlpine did not return, Captain Good, with despatch rider Bert **Barrington**,⁴⁴ left for Brigade Headquarters. Barrington returned with details of the move and broke the news of McAlpine's end to a shocked company. The sudden death of such a vigorous and adventurous personality seemed incredible. The commanding officer, Major Woods, realised he had lost his right-hand man.

Immediately, Lieutenant **Coleman**⁴⁵ led a mixture of B and C Sections' trucks off to **24 Battalion** to pick up the riflemen at 9.30 p.m. (Every RMT lorry carried cases of fruits, food and chocolate, and some carried beer, all seized from abandoned dumps. This would be a most welcome surprise for the weary battalions when they boarded the trucks. 'I can still hear the rattle of those empties going over the side of the old bus as those boys got stuck into our little treat for them.') The black-crossed planes were coming over in droves. *Drive a few hundred yards ... halt ... take cover ... back ... on.* At Tirnavos a red-cap in British uniform misdirected some of the trucks onto the **Larisa** road, but the drivers soon realised the error and returned to the convoy. A strong rumour later said the MP was shot as a fifth columnist, but like most stories of the fifth column in **Greece**, no record can be found of it. The battalion aboard, the trucks, now led by Captain Good, drove south all night, passing a blazing **Larisa** and seeing firing going on past the airfield. 'Parachutists,' said rumours. It was the road block, spreading confusion among the hapless men escaping from the Vale of **Tempe**. Between **Larisa** and **Volos** **General Freyberg** loomed out of the darkness, shouting 'Put on your lights and go like hell!' They did, the lights disconcertingly revealing the perils of craters, rough detours and smashed vehicles. About 7 a.m. a weary convoy debussed **24 Battalion**

near **Volos**, the empty trucks going on south past **Thermopylae** and on about 35 miles further to the assembly point at **Atalandi**.

When the move to lift **24 Battalion** began, the remaining 25 trucks (ten of them left-overs from A Section), with Major Woods, Second-Lieutenant **Gilmore** ⁴⁶ and Padre Jamieson, went west through **Tirnavos**, picking up **25 Battalion** near **Elasson** just after dusk. Already stray German tanks were nosing into the neighbourhood, to be met with shells from **6 Field Regiment**. Most of the trucks had moved off quietly and calmly by 9 p.m., passing safely down the thronged and torn roads to drop **25 Battalion** at **Molos**. The six RMT trucks which had remained behind under Sergeant-Major Thomson to gather the last of **25 Battalion** left as midnight approached. Behind them they heard the roar of bridges going up, first at **Tirnavos**, then at **Larisa**.

Jim Ward, running late in the night, took cover in a cemetery in **Larisa**. 'I was crawling round miserably in the dark.

A few were landing here and there. I had my head well down when I heard a voice. I couldn't see anything. I thought "What the hell?" and began to crawl on—faster. The same voice said: "Come here you silly b —." I looked up and saw an Aussie's head poking out of a crypt. "Safer in here Dig," he said. In I went beside two Aussies and a Tommy who had scraped a skeleton into a corner. We pulled the concrete slab back in place. We were set.'

Describing the trip down that night, Driver **Simpson** ⁴⁷ says: 'In the finish I was so tired of straining through the windscreen that I kicked the glass out of it. That helped no end, and the cold air kept me awake, and made **Bill Peach** ⁴⁸ beside me sleep sounder.' A little later, misled by a heap of shingle on the side of the road, Simpson went over the bank and ended up wheels on top. 'In the back I had about 15 or more men with unsheathed bayonets, and these had stuck in the ground when the canopy flattened out. Well, what a roar! They were kicking and swearing and all they had to do was crawl out, but the beggars wouldn't come out without their rifles.'

On the morning of 19 April, with **24 Battalion** safely—and correctly, so it was thought—debussed near **Volos**, and the RMT trucks well on the way to **Atalandi**, Captain Good and Lieutenant Coleman, enjoying a bathe in a hot pool near **Thermopylae**, were abruptly interrupted by a terse despatch rider telling them **24 Battalion** should have been left at **Molos**, not **Volos**—a difference of at least 80 miles. More angry than anxious, the battalion, stranded far above the **Thermopylae** line, was now marching south; would it have to march the whole way? Fortunately Captain Veitch, with D Section, was close to nearby **Lamia**. This section had been busy shifting ammunition south. Told at once, Veitch led D Section north, to meet **24 Battalion** at **Almiros** at 6 p.m., the battle-weary infantry meanwhile having foot-slogged over 15 miles. This seeming confusion had been caused by a change in plan. Both **24** and **25 Battalions** were to have stayed in the **Volos** area during daylight of 19 April. However, **General Freyberg** directed the brigade to move straight through to **Molos**, as the enemy made no air reconnaissance early on 19 April. While **25 Battalion's** transport, under Major Woods, was still with the battalion, the transport with Good and Coleman, arriving at **Volos** earlier, had left **24 Battalion** at the rearguard position before the change in plan.

The remaining trucks of 4 RMT Company began reassembling in olive groves near **Atalandi** all through the afternoon and night of 19 April and on through the next day, **Hitler's** birthday, when two Messerschmitts, striking at daylight, fatally wounded Driver **Forbes** ⁴⁹ and slightly wounded Driver O'Callaghan ⁵⁰ in the truck ahead.

Many familiar faces were missing; many a bullet-scarred truck told of the hairbreadth escapes. But Driver 'Hori' **Martin**, ⁵¹ one of the three Maoris in the company, kept grinning away as cheerfully as ever. When his truck was hit, setting the load of ammunition on fire, Hori instantly jumped in and flung out ammunition until his truck was clear. Told that was a risky thing to do and that he could quite easily have been blown to bits, Hori replied: 'I was too frightened to run away, eh?'

Orders began to come in again. Ten trucks reported to **Athens** for ordnance stores. On the way back they were bombed and three trucks were lost. Nobody wanted the stores on the seven remaining trucks, which were filled with boots, tires, and odds and ends the company had been wanting for weeks. Nothing could be done with them now. Fires would have attracted planes, so holes were ripped in bales and cases, and acid from truck batteries was dripped in.

A delayed signal summoning 30 trucks to report to 6 Brigade at **Molos** by 1 a.m. reached the company 40 minutes after midnight on 21 April. A convoy headed by Captain Veitch got away, struggling through traffic streaming south, to arrive before daylight, only to find trucks from the Divisional Ammunition Company had done the job. Back came the RMT trucks—empty—and they dispersed as yet another air raid broke overhead.

No driver will forget his cat-and-mouse life in the last two weeks in **Greece**. 'A living nightmare,' sums up Driver Spiers, who writes:

It was impossible to drive safely during the day because of the strong German air force. Sleep during the day was impossible because of planes hovering above bombing and machine-gunning the slightest movement. At night we drove endless miles. The men were more like ghosts than men towards the end.

Some indication of the mental torture can be gained from this.

Towards the end when daylight driving was a necessity it was one continuous stop and start, in and out of the truck all the time. Stop and dive under the truck or into the ditch or trees if lucky enough to be near any. On one occasion I was carrying infantry. We were attacked by a very lowflying bomber and the men, so fed up not being able to fight back, debussed and kneeling on the road or sighting over the bonnet and mudguards blind to personal danger gave that Jerrie hell. He soon left but what was the use as there was always another to take his place.

On another occasion when my second driver in the crow's nest above gave the signal to bail out I kept going, scared and fed up, hoping against hope that I'd be hit and finish it all but no such luck—on to the bitter end.

Lieutenant Coleman left the company dispersal area at **Atalandi** on 22 April to help move 4 Infantry Brigade ⁵² back towards the evacuation beaches. Over the next few confused days drivers became split up among the battalions and embarked at **Porto Rafti** with the units they had been carrying. Coleman, moving with **20 Battalion**, gathered together thirty RMT men and embarked in the destroyer **Kingston** for **Crete**. ⁵³ Corporal **Gray**, ⁵⁴ setting out originally with this convoy, took six trucks to the **Corinth** area with reserve supplies for infantry detachments. At **Corinth** enemy planes systematically swept the countryside in preparation for a parachute landing. Caught broadside on, one truck containing Drivers **Turnbull** ⁵⁵ and **Pool** ⁵⁶ was set blazing, and it is believed that here **Turnbull** lost his life.

Four RMT drivers (Lance-Corporal **Thompson**, ⁵⁷ Drivers 'Bunny' **Penny**, ⁵⁸ **Spiers**, and **Cherry**) were with a detachment with **19 Battalion** which was guarding areas about **Corinth Canal**. On 25 April the area was bombed and strafed continuously. Everyone lay doggo. **Spiers** writes:

At dawn on 26 April we were awakened by a terrific drone which filled the whole air, and on going to the edge of the woods and looking over the harbour the prettiest and most frightening sight I'd seen throughout my active days appeared before me. Our hilltop was about 500 ft above sea level, overlooking the harbour on one side and higher mountains on the other. Roaring majestically up the harbour not more than 50 ft above sea level and towing gliders were about 70 three-engined German transports. All were not towing gliders. We looked right down upon them although they were about half a mile distant. Just before reaching the open ground west of the town the planes rose sharply and began spewing out paratroops. Red, green and white 'chutes were prominent. Fierce fighting immediately started. It was during this

operation that the bridge was blown, but whether the English blew it to save having it taken intact or not I can't say.

Penny and Spiers captured a German on a BSA motorcycle. They sheltered with others in a cave. Two Greek policemen appeared with white flags on poles and told the party that if it did not surrender it would be blasted out. Ill equipped and with practically no ammunition left, the party surrendered. 'Our prisoner of one day was now our captor.'



Back at the company dispersal area near **Atalandi** (where some firmly believed sheep bells were being used for signalling by enemy agents), in the evening of 22 April all trucks except five were ordered to be destroyed. Many a driver felt a lump in his throat as he set about his work, perhaps consoling himself by saying, 'Anyhow, Jerry won't get the old bus.' Most remarks were unprintable. Drivers got the business over as quickly as possible. They tried to turn aside thoughts of victorious motors pressing west into the far desert. They tried to close their ears to the smash-up going on under the olive trees of **Atalandi**. Picks and crowbars crashed down into faithful engines. Holes gaped in radiators and petrol tanks. Tires were slashed. Some men drained away the oil and left the motor running, the accelerator weighed down with a stone. These engines died painfully, reproachfully. Then through the night wound this five-truck ghost of a company, some 120 silent RMT men aboard, to reach the outskirts of **Athens**, where Headquarters Section was camped with a few worn trucks. There they waited until 24 April,

when the men left for the lying-up area near D Beach, at **Porto Rafti**.

Above **Athens** the Parthenon looked down on just another beaten army passing by.

On the night of 26-27 April the company came out from its hiding places beneath the trees, marched to the beach, and divided into different parties. About 120 men were taken to a **Crete**-bound destroyer, the ***Kandahar***, 66 of them later moving to the troopship ***Salween*** for Egypt. This party included Major Woods, Captain Good, Second-Lieutenant **Surgenor**,⁵⁹ Sergeant-Major **Beer**,⁶⁰ and Staff-Sergeant Upton. A few other RMT men were evacuated in the ***Carlisle***, an anti-aircraft cruiser. In the ***Glengyle***,⁶¹ destined for **Crete**, on the previous night were four RMT men: Corporal Stan Shaw, Drivers **Liddle**⁶² and Arthur Pope, and another. Attached to 6 Field Ambulance at **Tirnavos**, they had carried wounded until the evacuation. Pope and a padre, just before leaving, found a Humber-Snipe staff car undamaged among wrecked vehicles. Remarking sarcastically about brass hats going off first and leaving good cars for Jerry, the two wrecked it thoroughly, to the speechless fury of a brigadier, returning to his car after a brief but fatal absence of five minutes.⁶³

Far to the south, at **Kalamata**, Driver Sutherland saw the last rescue ship disappear in the darkness. He joined a party of Australians, and hope rose again when they found a small fishing smack abandoned off the coast. Swimming out and climbing aboard, they tried to start the engine, for two days hauling uselessly at a rope around the flywheel. Finally they hoisted the sails, pointed the boat in the general direction of **Crete**, and set off. Although they carefully rationed a tiny store of water, white bread, and goats' cheese, they were starving when they landed at **Canea** six days later. Sutherland refused hospital treatment and joined Second-Lieutenant Hope Gibbons'⁶⁴ platoon.

Near **Corinth** Captain Muller and Driver Tidman waited and hoped. From their dressing station at **Volos** after the Vale of **Tempe** escape the two had been taken to hospital in **Athens**, and from there by train to just

north of the canal. Tidman's luck held good, but Muller, left behind, was picked up by a German patrol. The two, now separated, had been together continuously since they entered **Ngaruawahia Camp**.

Workshops Section had reached **Athens** from **Nikaia** on 19 April to become the Heavy Repairs Section of 4 Advanced Maintenance Depot, a British Army unit. The RMT men started work again at full pressure in a large motor works in **Athens**. Before them lay a shop piled with vehicles of all kinds and sizes with one common complaint: they wouldn't go. From senior NCOs to cooks, the men went to work with a will. Under three key men, Staff-Sergeants Wilson, Hoare and Cooney, they worked round the clock. Fitters, electricians, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, other tradesmen and storemen, all helped one another out. A storeman-clerk, who previously had handled only a carpenter's hammer, could be seen striking for the blacksmiths to get a set of springs out in a hurry. Within three days, by stripping a few vehicles, exchanging or making parts, the men had 80 per cent of the vehicles running and back in service again. One persistent task was repairing a British blood-wagon, which three times set out with blood for the front and three times was towed back, riddled by aircraft fire despite its red crosses.

As the motors returned to life the latrines failed, and a Greek contractor agreed to end the trouble in the septic tank for 200 drachmae. Next day, when the price had risen to 1400 drachmae, Captain Broberg persuaded the Greek to return for payment on a date when the New Zealanders would be far from **Athens**.

Before moving, everything of possible use to the enemy had to be smashed and ruined, a bitter order for the workshops men who took such pride in their equipment. Engines were ruined methodically; 100 spare truck tires were put through a bandsaw and neatly stacked together again. Into the wreckage went superbly stocked Thornycroft technical vehicles, their contents sufficient to start a medium-sized garage. Jimmie **Sellars** ⁶⁵ painted and left a big sign among the destruction: 'Fix this, Adolf!' Just as Workshops began moving off to **Piraeus** in the early afternoon of 24 April, Captain Broberg remembered that Staff-Sergeant

Wilson had been given a mass of small parts and dozens of different tools to hide or destroy. Had this been done? With the characteristic Wilson grin came the reply, 'Sure. They're in the — septic tank.' Workshops men gave away all personal gear before leaving. Johnny Boag⁶⁶ handed his blankets to an elderly couple; with tears of gratitude running down her face the old lady smothered Johnny with kisses.

Workshops joined the hundreds crowded into the *Hellas*, a royal yacht at Piraeus. All sorts were packed aboard: British, dumpy and philosophical, weary Australians, despondent civilians, merchant seamen, and patient-eyed wounded. The Greek skipper and a large part of his crew slipped away in the crowds, but the merchant seamen took their places.

Then, just before sunset, just before sailing time for Egypt, there was a drone in the distance and half a dozen Stukas came in, flying low and fast. The ship carried guns fore and aft and was a legitimate target.

Five bombs struck the crowded *Hellas*; three burst alongside on the wharf. In a few minutes flames seemed to be everywhere. Surrounded by the wounded, the dead, and the panicstricken, Staff-Sergeants Wilson and Cooney worked valiantly in a race against the fires, quietly organising rescue parties to sort the wounded from the dead.

Diving overboard, Drivers Cliff Lockyer,⁶⁷ Thornton,⁶⁸ and 'Scotty' McIntyre⁶⁹ set off to swim across the harbour away from the burning ship. Lockyer, struggling across the quarter mile of sea, reached the shore to find McIntyre, black with oil. 'It was serious, but we couldn't help laughing at ourselves, all dirty, all nude.' Driver Ramsay,⁷⁰ among those who made for the shattered docks, badly burned his hands and legs on the scorching bolts and staples in the smouldering piles.

Driver 'Ginger' Wingham, helpless from the strafing which had killed Captain McAlpine six days ago, was helped by Ian Cooney and another driver to mooring ropes still intact, down which he slid to safety. Staff-Sergeant Hoare, suffering from concussion and a broken arm and jaw,

was a pitiful sight with face and legs blackened and clothing ripped and torn. Sergeants **Mellso**⁷¹ and **Delaney**⁷² were found among the dead, together with five others, Drivers **Thurlow**,⁷³ **Hook**,⁷⁴ **Austin**,⁷⁵ **Allanson**,⁷⁶ and **Patrick**.⁷⁷ Few, if any, escaped from the shambles of the once luxurious smoke-room.⁷⁸

Not until paint began peeling from the Grecian figurehead did the rescue parties stumble ashore. The wounded rescued — they included Corporal **Sinclair**,⁷⁹ Lance-Corporal Ruffell, Drivers **Pistor**,⁸⁰ **Saunders**,⁸¹ **Housham**,⁸² **Stringer**⁸³ and **Potter**⁸⁴—were sent in commandeered trucks to hospital in **Athens**. Most of them were taken prisoner later, including Driver **Stevens**,⁸⁵ who was on the gangplank of the ship when the first bomb fell. He was pleased to find his tremendous moustache undamaged. Although wounded, Tim **Armstrong**,⁸⁶ one of the drivers who refused hospital treatment, drove survivors to Daphni Camp, the stragglers' collecting point. There Captain Broberg, wounded in the back during the attack, found that his uninjured men totalled only about twenty. Next day they crossed the **Corinth** Canal and sheltered from hostile skies in the **Argos** area, stragglers bringing the Workshops total up to about twenty-five. A landing craft took them to a destroyer, HMAS **Stuart**, from which they were bundled on to HMS **Orion**, which landed them next day (27 April) in **Suda Bay, Crete**. Of Workshops' 75 men, 31 remained; only seven of them rejoined the section in Egypt after the campaign in **Crete**. Virtually wiped out, the section had suffered over 90 per cent permanent casualties.

The 4th RMT Company, which had gone to **Greece** 419 strong, sailed away totalling 356. The company's casualties in **Greece** were: one officer and ten other ranks killed or died of wounds; one officer and four other ranks wounded; one officer and 51 other ranks captured (of whom the officer and ten other ranks were wounded).

Captured in **Greece**, one RMT man, Sergeant Charlie **Mutch**,⁸⁷ escaped and eventually joined the guerrillas. He made contact with British and New Zealand specialists and for eight months was kept busy running a mule train. 'If I wasn't carting explosives I had gold

sovereigns or else wireless sets.’ He saw many sad and strange things. ‘On one trip I looked over the escarpment above Delphi and saw a company of Ites pull in. After they had gone I went down. The town was in tears. The Ites had taken the statue—and how would they get the tourists after the war?’

He took part in many activities, one of them the blowing up of the **Asopos viaduct**, protected by pillboxes and a guard of 240 men. Local Greeks said it was impossible to get down the gorge to the viaduct, which was three miles north-west of **Brallos** and some ten miles south of **Lamia**.

Two New Zealanders, **Don Stott**⁸⁸ and **Bob Morton**⁸⁹ (both formerly of **5 Field Regiment**), and six others spent five days getting about two-thirds of the way down with the explosives—crawling along the sides of the cliffs, over waterfalls, and swimming below the falls until they came to the main waterfall: a sheer drop of 40 feet and about 15 feet wide, the side walls perpendicular and like glass. There the party ran out of rope, had to give up, and returned to camp. A few days later Don Stott begged permission for another go at the viaduct. He got Charlie Mutch and a Palestinian sergeant, a tough chap as hard as nails, to go with him. Stott's biggest disappointment was not having Bob Morton, who had been sent to **Athens** the day before to organise a sabotage group. **Bulldog Drummond and Company**, said Charlie, had nothing on these two.

Charlie describes what happened:

Our first day was spent in felling a tree about half a mile back and floating and pushing it down the river. The roar of a fall stopped the sound of the axe. With branches about every three or four feet, this tree was about 70 feet long. After having it well tied back it was let over. To our joy it reached the bottom with about three feet to spare at the top. The next day we swam the pool below the fall and got another 400 yards on. The next day Don Stott, about a chain in front, came back and said we had made it. The bridge was only another 100 yards in front. He sent me off straight away to get two sappers and an officer who came

originally from Kenya.

We arrived back three days later. We had three hours to wait for darkness. The cold was terrible. All we had on was a pair of shorts and sandshoes. There was a track made down under the bridge from the guardhouse to the water. We could hear the mumble of talk from the guardroom about 30 yards away. Then one man came down the track smoking a cigarette. The Kenya major in front knocked him over the cliff with a lump of wood. We then set to work getting the charges out to the four main girders. Then the Palestinian and I made back to get the two mules ready for a quick getaway while the others fixed the wiring and time fuses. What a mad scramble it was, swimming and climbing ropes. While going up one rope ladder my arms gave out on me and I fell back about 25 feet and knocked myself out and got a bad knock on the shin. I came to about 15 minutes later hearing the other chap calling to me from the top in the darkness. After another couple of attempts I made it. By the time we had got the mules loaded up the others had arrived and we made off. We were so tired it took two days to get back to Headquarters instead of one.

The viaduct? Oh yes. It went up all right. ⁹⁰

¹ **Dvr N. M. Weastell; Christchurch; born Glentunnel, 7 Mar 1913; shop assistant.**

² **Dvr A. Q. Pope; Johnsonville; born Wellington, 16 Nov 1917; horse breaker; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

³ **Sgt S. Shaw; Wellington; born NZ 9 Jun 1899; motor driving instructor; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁴ **Dvr C. T. Wan; Lower Hutt; born New Plymouth, 19 Mar 1914; labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁵ **Cpl T. M. Cumming; Christchurch; born Galashiels,**

Scotland, 14 Jun 1910; baker; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped to Crete; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 19 Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 24 Aug 1941.

⁶ **L-Cpl R. L. Ruffell; born NZ 31 Oct 1916; blacksmith; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁷ **Dvr I. C. Osborne; born Whakapara, 21 May 1903; motor mechanic; accidentally killed 31 Mar 1941.**

⁸ **WO I E. A. Hoare; Wellington; born Wellington, 19 Mar 1906; mechanic; wounded 24 Apr 1941; p.w. 7 May 1941.**

⁹ **Dvr C. B. Weston, EM; Auckland; born NZ 13 Nov 1910; plumber; wounded 24 Apr 1941.**

¹⁰ **British officers, congratulating Maj Woods on his company's performance, said they fully expected 4 RMT to make good after the reports they had had from 7 Armd Div in the Desert.**

¹¹ **Lt R. A. Walker; Dunedin; born Otautau, 9 Feb 1910; storeman.**

¹² **Sgt R. W. Richards; Hororata; born Christchurch, 10 Jul 1912; truck driver.**

¹³ **Cpl G. W. Cowlin; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 Oct 1918; carpenter.**

¹⁴ **Dvr W. H. Walker; Greendale, Canterbury; born Christchurch, 10 Jul 1917; labourer; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941.**

¹⁵ **Dvr W. H. Hammond; Belfast; born NZ 5 Jun 1916; chaff-cutter worker; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

¹⁶ Dvr M. J. Beaton (see p. 32) and **Cpl A. Beaton**; born Gore, 28 Jun 1913; labourer; died at sea 30 Jul 1943.

¹⁷ Dvr A. Willis; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 12 Jun 1912; bus driver; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; wounded while p.w. 18 Oct 1942.

¹⁸ L-Cpl H. T. Thornley; Hawarden; born NZ 28 Aug 1917; lorry driver.

¹⁹ Dvr R. E. Cherry; Featherston; born Featherston, 28 Sep 1918; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.

²⁰ Dvr W. J. Keys; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 1 May 1918; painter and decorator; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²¹ L-Sgt H. Bennett; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 22 Jun 1913; truck driver; wounded 30 Dec 1942.

²² Dvr A. S. Christoffersen; Makotuku, Hawke's Bay; born Norsewood, 5 May 1911; motor mechanic; p.w. 3 Jun 1941.

²³ Dvr C. F. H. Snell; Hamilton; born NZ 3 Sep 1911; mechanic.

²⁴ Dvr E. C. Frayling; Auckland; born England, 10 Apr 1905; housemaster, Institute of the Blind; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁵ Sgt J. P. Bruning, MM; Westport; born Westport, 17 Jan 1913; factory hand; p.w. 1 Jun 1941. When a call was made for drivers at Moosburg prisoner-of-war camp in February 1945, Bruning drove under the International Red Cross. In one load he took 26 Russian generals and one field marshal from the prisoner-of-war camp to an airfield, a distance of 50 miles.

²⁶ Lt-Col J. Pool, m.i.d.; Te Kopuru, North Auckland; born

England, 12 Jun 1904; credit manager; LO with SHAEF in Europe 1944–45; LO with British Army Staff in Paris 1945–46.

²⁷ Cpl L. W. Hinchey; Invercargill; born NZ 19 Jan 1914; diesel tractor expert; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁸ Sgt A. C. Sawers; Taumarunui; born Hinuera, Waikato, 2 Feb 1910; shepherd; twice wounded.

²⁹ WO II D. L. Cooney, m.i.d.; Alexandra; born Dunedin, 30 Jan 1912; motor mechanic; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³⁰ Dvr R. H. Mitchell; Wellington; born Wellington, 4 May 1918; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³¹ Sgt B. J. Crowley, DCM, EM; Auckland; born Dunedin, 24 Jun 1914; salesman; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped 23 Sep 1943. (See Appendix.)

³² L-Cpl C. W. Tidman; Auckland; born Dunedin, 23 Jul 1911; suit cutter; wounded Apr 1941.

³³ After the abortive attempt to lift Greeks near the Albanian border, Pool had returned to Nikaia. Most of his trucks had gone on to the new company area at Elasson. From Nikaia Pool had followed on towards Tempe 'with four trucks, losing one before reaching Larisa and, shortly afterwards, having my own vehicle shot up and burnt'.

³⁴ Lt-Col E. A. Harding, MC; Dargaville; born Dargaville, 4 Dec 1893; farmer; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (OC 5 (Res) Bn); actg CO 21 Bn 20 Apr–17 May 1941; CO 1 North Auckland Bn.

³⁵ 'There was no need to post guides: the traffic lane was firmly established by this time—about 9 pm,' comments Capt Muller. At the mouth of the gorge the Captain, concerned about

the remaining RMT trucks, vainly attempted to move forward against the roaring tide of scurrying (not to say panic-stricken) vehicles and guns. Then a report arrived that the Germans had established a road block between **Tempe** and **Larisa**. (This was the road block established by the overland enemy party four miles from **Larisa** at 7 p.m. that day, 18 April.) The only news Muller could gather was, 'The line's broken; everything's clearing out.' Three RMT trucks with Australians arrived at 9 p.m.; with them Capt Muller and Dvr Tidman took the dirt road, now axle-deep to wheel-deep in mud. One truck bogged down. The rest went back to test the rumoured road block, finding it very much alive when mortars burst among them. Returning on foot to the dirt road, the RMT men became separated. Muller and Tidman got a lift and were both injured when the truck overturned. They landed up in a dressing-station at **Volos**.

³⁶ **L-Cpl H. H. Elliott; Auckland; born Auckland, 21 Jul 1912; lorry driver; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.**

³⁷ **Dvr J. A. Snell, DCM; Auckland; born Opotiki, 8 Sep 1915; painter.**

³⁸ **Cpl W. F. Johnston; Morrinsville; born Matamata, 15 Mar 1916; accountant; p.w. Apr 1941.**

³⁹ **L-Cpl F. D. Mead; Taneatua; born Auckland, 21 Jul 1918; lorry driver; wounded 28 Apr 1941; p.w. 30 Apr 1941; escaped 7 Jun 1941; recaptured 28 Jan 1942; escaped Feb 1945; with 30 (US) Div until Apr 1945.**

⁴⁰ **Dvr N. H. Callagher; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Apr 1905; blacksmith; p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁴¹ **Dvr J. J. Ward; Auckland; born NZ 10 Jul 1912; bartender; p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁴² **Dvr C. C. Bezar; Christchurch; born NZ 23 Sep 1917; clerk; p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁴³ 'The skipper,' wrote one of his drivers, 'was the gamest, fairest and toughest man in the **2 NZEF** in my opinion—bar none.'

⁴⁴ **Dvr H. C. Barrington; Masterton; born Christchurch, 25 Aug 1908; labourer; wounded May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 20 Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 8 Jun 1942.**

⁴⁵ **Maj D. F. Coleman, OBE, m.i.d.; Upper Moutere, Nelson; born Christchurch, 5 Mar 1913; farm manager; OC Mule Pack Coy May 1943; 4 RMT Coy 12 Sep 1943–20 Jul 1944.**

⁴⁶ **2 Lt A. A. Gilmore, BEM; born Glenbrook; farmer; killed in action May 1941.**

⁴⁷ **Dvr J. L. Simpson; Nelson; born Fremantle, Australia, 20 Sep 1917; motor driver and welder.**

⁴⁸ **L-Cpl W. E. Peach; Leeston; born Rangiora, 27 Dec 1916; labourer.**

⁴⁹ **Dvr E. J. W. Forbes; born Auckland, 14 Oct 1914; transport driver; died of wounds 22 Apr 1941.**

⁵⁰ **Cpl D. W. O'Callaghan; Culverden; born Southbridge, 6 Apr 1914; lorry driver; wounded 20 Apr 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁵¹ **Dvr O. Martin, MM; Wellington; born NZ 11 Dec 1918; labourer.**

⁵² '4 I.B. was near Thebes Pass (60 miles north of **Athens**). We were there a total of five days,' writes Dvr Wan. 'Every day the reccie. plane would be over two or three times and he would circle round and round until we began to think he would never go away. The tension was really nervewracking. We were among

trees on a small ridge and the Jerry would fly so low we could look down into his cockpit. His goggles didn't fit too well. He was all the time adjusting them. Now and then he'd give a burst with his cannon, hoping for movement. But the order of the day was camouflage and no movement, and we got away with it.'

⁵³ 'I remember saying "Thank God for the British Navy",' writes Dvr Christoffersen. 'They gave us each a cup of cocoa or tea, one of the best I had ever tasted—and then we just fell asleep sitting down.' Lt Coleman, before embarking, remembers someone setting up a gramophone and smashing all records except one, which was left on the turntable ready for the first German to play. The record was 'There'll Always be an England'.

⁵⁴ **Capt A. T. Gray; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 4 Jul 1913; truck driver; wounded 4 Jul 1942.**

⁵⁵ **Dvr S. H. J. Turnbull; born Oamaru, 21 Dec 1913; farmer; killed in action Apr 1941.**

⁵⁶ **L-Cpl J. Pool; Eiffelton, Canterbury; born Scotland, 16 May 1905; farm worker.**

⁵⁷ **L-Cpl R. J. F. Thompson; Culverden; born Southbridge, 7 Apr 1914; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁵⁸ **L-Cpl O. J. Penny; Christchurch; born Gisborne, 20 Oct 1906; miner; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.**

⁵⁹ **Capt G. R. Surgenor, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 4 Mar 1913; storeman.**

⁶⁰ **WO II T. A. Beer; Christchurch; born England, 22 Sep 1902; driver.**

⁶¹ **Lying asleep alongside a Maori, these RMT men awoke on**

the mess-deck floor of the *Glengyle* to find a heavy sleeper (about 15 stone) lying across their feet. Unable to shift the heavy form, the Maori drew his bayonet and jabbed where the figure was plumpest. 'There was a feminine shriek, and up flew a bonny piece of Greek womanhood, hands clutching behind her. Then came bellows from an irate Tommy. Explanations that our intentions were honourable to his bride (whom he had smuggled off in battle dress one night) were accepted with bad grace.'

⁶² **L-Cpl J. P. Liddle; London; born Napier, 16 Jul 1917; tobacconist; wounded 26 May 1941.**

⁶³ **The 12th (German) Army Quartermaster-General, reporting on 11 May 1941 the British destruction of abandoned trucks and guns, wrote: 'The most that can possibly be repaired is 5%.'**

⁶⁴ **2 Lt H. Hope Gibbons; born Wellington, 18 Apr 1918; mechanical engineer; killed in action May 1941.**

⁶⁵ **Dvr J. H. Sellars; Christchurch; born NZ 17 May 1908; blacksmith; p.w. May 1941.**

⁶⁶ **Dvr J. A. Boag; born NZ 19 Dec 1913; car painter; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.**

⁶⁷ **Dvr C. R. Lockyer; Whakatane; born Petone, 19 Mar 1910; truck driver.**

⁶⁸ **L-Cpl L. R. Thornton; Lower Hutt; born NZ 25 Jun 1917; lorry driver.**

⁶⁹ **Dvr T. M. McIntyre; born Scotland, 3 Apr 1904; died while p.w. 17 Aug 1942.**

⁷⁰ **S-Sgt W. S. Ramsay; Invercargill; born Mataura, 20 Jul 1915; manager.**

⁷¹ **Sgt G. J. D. Mellsop**; born NZ 16 Feb 1916; insurance clerk; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷² **Sgt R. H. Delaney**; born NZ 30 Jun 1904; mechanic; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷³ **Dvr J. S. W. Thurlow**; born Oamaru, 23 Aug 1906; service-car driver; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷⁴ **Dvr F. N. L. Hook**; born NZ 18 Jun 1915; transport driver; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷⁵ **Dvr J. S. Austin**; born NZ 3 Jan 1905; tramways employee; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷⁶ **Dvr E. M. Allanson**; born England, 14 Apr 1906; butcher; died of wounds 24 Apr 1941.

⁷⁷ **Dvr G. W. Patrick**; born Wellington, 9 Jun 1914; carpenter; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.

⁷⁸ Detailed to pick up rations at **Athens** racecourse for the ship, Dvrs Doug Shaw, **Alf** ('Snowy') Creed, and Jack Boag missed the bombing, drove in convoy to **Corinth**, Boag disappearing without a trace on the way. At **Athens** racecourse Shaw and Creed had taken good care to load **Naafi** goods too, and the couple threw a party before embarking in HMS *Havock* for **Crete**. **Alf** still remembers the parting words of a rejoicing British major: 'You Kiwis would find rations and drink in hell.'

⁷⁹ **Sgt A. Sinclair**; born Scotland, 2 Apr 1908; tractor driver; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; died 9 Dec 1951.

⁸⁰ **Dvr C. A. Pistor**; **Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 1 Apr 1910; blacksmith; wounded 24 Apr 1941.

⁸¹ **Dvr J. R. Saunders; Auckland; born Russell, 16 Mar 1920; garage attendant; wounded 24 Apr 1941.**

⁸² **Dvr D. O. Housham; Wellington; born Houhora, 19 Sep 1907; carpenter; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁸³ **Dvr L. F. Stringer; Wellington; born Wellington, 18 Feb 1912; motor mechanic; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁸⁴ **Dvr J. S. Potter; Wellington; born Wellington, 5 Mar 1909; bus driver; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁸⁵ **Dvr F. J. Stevens; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 17 Mar 1913; painter; wounded 24 Apr 1941; p.w. 12 May 1941.**

⁸⁶ **Dvr K. M. Armstrong; Christchurch; born Runanga, 6 Jan 1911; carpenter; wounded 24 Apr 1941.**

⁸⁷ **Sgt C. Mutch, MM; Auckland; born Scotland, 8 Feb 1909; slaughterman; p.w. Apr 1941; escaped May 1941; recaptured Nov 1943.**

⁸⁸ **Maj D. J. Stott, DSO and bar; born NZ 23 Oct 1915; rotary machinist; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped Aug 1941; drowned, Borneo, 20 Mar 1945.**

⁸⁹ **Capt R. M. Morton, MC, DCM; Nyasaland, South Africa; born NZ 3 Mar 1919; clerk; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped Nov 1941; wounded 23 Oct 1942.**

⁹⁰ **For a full account of this operation see *Special Service in Greece* (Episodes and Studies series), published by the War History Branch, 1953.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 4 – CRETE

CHAPTER 4

Crete

Here we sit on the Isle of **Crete**
Spelling up our blistered feet.
Little wonder we've the blues
With feet encased in great canoes.
Khaki shorts instead of slacks,
Living like a tribe of blacks
Except that blacks don't sit and brood
They get about and search for food.

'Twas just a month ago, no more
We sailed to **Greece** to win the war.
We marched about beneath a load
While bombers chased us off the road.
They bombed us here, they strafed us there,
The bastards they were everywhere.
And as they dropped their loads of death
We cursed the absent **RAF**.

One day we heard the radio news
And Winston Churchill gave his views.
'The **RAF**,' he said, 'in **Greece**
Are fighting hard to bring us peace.'
I scratched my head at that and said,
' *That* smells a lot like something dead,
For if in **Greece** the Air Force be
Then where the flamin' hell are we?'

At last we met up with the Hun
At odds of just on five to one.
And when the going got rather hot
We ran, then had another shot.
The bullets flew, the big guns roared,

We yelled for ships to get aboard.
At length they came, aboard we got
And hurried from that cursed spot.
And then they landed us on **Crete**
And marched us off our weary feet.
The food was scarce, the water crook:
I got fed up and slung my hook.
Returned that night filled up with wine
And next day stopped a ten bob fine.

My pay book was behind to hell.
When pay day came I said 'Oh well
'They'll not pay me, I'm sure of that.'
But when they did I smelt a rat.
But next day when the rations came
I woke up to their wily game.
For sooner than lie down and die
I spent my pay on food supply.

So now it looks like even bettin'
A man will soon become a Cretan
And spend his days in deepest gloom
On **Adolf Hitler's** Isle of Doom.

— *Author unknown*

LANDING at **Suda Bay**, towards the western end of **Crete's** northern coastline, men from **Greece** were directed to a large transit camp near the town of **Canea**. A warm welcome from the friendly Cretans helped them on their way. In the transit camp they were sorted out into their units. 'There were many surprises,' wrote one driver. 'Lots of us were enthusiastically welcomed back, because many stories had been going round about us being seen dead or wounded.' Drivers Sellars and **Shaw**,¹ from the *Hellas*, turned up wearing boiler suits and sandshoes and, unable to get a change of clothing, remained dressed that way. George² and Arthur Lambert³ reached **Crete** in an old caique. The trip from

Greece had taken a week. The two landed in poor shape. Prudent Arthur ate sparingly, and urged his brother to do the same, but George, enjoying his food so much, suffered the upsets of the starved man and, taken to hospital, was evacuated to Egypt. Diet-conscious Arthur stayed in **Crete**, and continued to eat sparingly for four years in German prisoner-of-war camps.

Sorted roughly into shape, rested a little, marched to and fro without apparent purpose, and armed with what scanty equipment was available, NZASC and artillery men, loosely organised into a unit known as **Oakes Force**, moved up towards **Galatas** to take up positions as reserve infantrymen. **Oakes Force** was eventually called the Composite Battalion. The battalion, commanded by Major **Lewis**,⁴ was made up of gunners and RMT men, the latter 274 strong on invasion day. The RMT group within the Composite Battalion was commanded by Captain **Veale**,⁵ a gunner. The second-in-command was Captain Veitch, and among the other officers were these from the RMT: Lieutenant Coleman and Second-Lieutenants Hope Gibbons, **Gilmore**, and Pool. The sergeant-major was 'Tommy' Thomson. The Composite Battalion was given a ridge by the coast. The RMT riflemen, without bayonets, were lent 'for a day or two' seven picks and five shovels, already well worn. Overnight (to their surprise, for this was their first attempt) they managed to erect a formidable-looking double barbed-wire fence. 'Changing our positions every day or two we saw quite a lot of the future battleground,' said Driver Cumming. 'Whether this was done to impress the people, or to outwit fifth columnists we never knew, though we were pardonably annoyed to think we'd settle down, only to be moved to the hills on parachute picket, or down to the beach on guard. But anyhow, after **Greece** the air raids at first seemed puny.'

Down the east coast of **Greece**, in the **Dodecanese**, and on several of the larger islands in the Aegean, the winged shapes of the German armada crouched ready, waiting, in the darkness. Under the olive trees and in the vineyards of **Crete** sleeping figures sprawled in peace. The dawn came quietly into **Suda Bay**, the sun rose in a calm and cloudless

sky, and while men, yawning and stretching, reached for that first cigarette of the day, cooks busied themselves about breakfast warming up in well-blackened petrol tins.

Then came the sharp-nosed fighters, scouring the shelter of tree and hollow, swooping as hawks do upon signs of movement. Bombers appeared, to blast the earth, and next, in awful dry-lipped silence, came the gliders. Louder and louder beat a roar from the north as troop-carriers in scores—it seemed without end—brought the invaders to **Crete**. Out spilled parachutists by the hundred to a sweeping crackle of rifle fire below, and breakfast was off—well and truly—for many a soldier on 20 May.

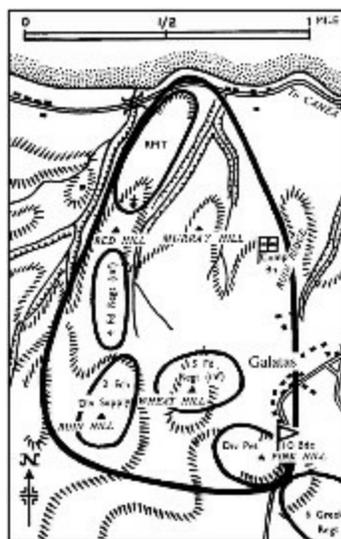
Down to the hostile **Galatas** and the **Prison Valley**, firing as they came, drifted the German *3 Parachute Regiment* and attached units, 3300 men, ⁶ some meeting death in the air, more killed on landing, a few entangled and slain in the trees. Most of them fell inland, thickly about the prison, scattering widely over a rough line south-west from **Karatsos** to **Alikianou** —about four miles.

‘Figures could be seen dropping out of the side door and then a flutter of white as the parachute opened out just behind the tail of the plane,’ wrote Driver Farley. ⁷ ‘To watch them was like watching white handkerchiefs being let go out of a carriage window.’

‘Just like the darned duckshooting season,’ some men remarked, and an RMT man says: ‘I don't think we were scared stiff. Rather, we were interested and awed at that mass of stuff up in the sky. It seemed there wasn't room for one more plane. And for once we could look up into the sky. The strafing and bombing laid off for a bit while the big fat troop-carriers were coming in. In a way it was peaceful. For a while there was an end to the harsh, discordant screaming of dive-peckers' [dive-bombers'] syrens and bombs.’

The Composite Battalion by the sea had an easy introduction to a terrible battle, seen, heard, felt, and stamped on the mind in all its

majesty and terror. Stray parachutists landed in Coleman's 'company', holding ground by the coast. B Section opened up with a will-action came as a relief after cowering into the earth—shooting seven in the air and sending the rest bolting in the direction of Galatas. Tom Alvis,⁸ among dismayed and hungry bystanders, saw a dead parachutist fall gracefully on to the breakfast tin and send the only hot meal of the day flying. 'Who says now the only good German is a dead German?' demanded Tom. Crying 'Don't shoot! I'm wounded!', an injured prisoner fell into the hands of Ian Appleton and Arthur Pope and was taken to Canea. Among equipment captured were tommy guns and a machine gun. Over in A Section Driver Frayling, in fine form, trained his Bren gun on a lumbering Junkers three-motor troop-carrier. Flaming spectacularly, it smashed into the sea. Frayling shared a speedier target, an Me 109 which crashed on the beach, with Driver Bruning, of B Section. Most of the trouble came from fighter planes skimming and snarling over the trees and forcing the battalion to keep down in its holes, but after a time things quietened down over the RMT area.



COMPOSITE BATTALION, GALATAS, 20 MAY 1941

Behind the lines to the east parachutists occupied the clearly marked tents of 7 British General Hospital. One German, landing on the cookhouse, was shot by the cook. An artillery officer from 4 Field Regiment, Second-Lieutenant Carson,⁹ in quieter days a double All

Black (Rugby and cricket), with about twenty men from B Section, went across to lend a hand, arriving as the place was being cleared. They found plenty to do, cleaning up pockets of resistance round about so effectively that **Colonel Kippenberger**,¹⁰ impressed, kept this patrol as a special reserve,¹¹ together with a similar party of gunners under Lieutenant **MacLean**.¹² By dusk the patrol could claim a good share of the 55 prisoners bagged by the Composite Battalion, a fair enough finish to the first round. The invaders were not so happy. Most of the day's fighting had been outside the Composite Battalion. The 19th Battalion, for example, had killed more than a hundred Germans within a few hours of the landing, and assaults on **Galatas** had been beaten back towards the prison area, out of the RMT men's sight and reach.

One RMT man had been in the hospital when it was captured. He was **Alf Creed**,¹³ who had scabies. The hospital had been 'strafed and bombed as if it was all the heads of the Allies,' says Creed. 'We were all herded out of the trenches by paratroopers and were marched to the roadway where we were made to sit down with our hands on our heads. When the Jerry had rounded us up he tried to ask questions, first in French, then in every language but English. One dog called out: "Ask in good down-under language Heine", and was promptly knocked about by another German. I don't think he knew what was said but reacted to our laughter.'

After sitting down for about two hours in this uncomfortable position the captives were lined up in fours and marched off about half a mile to the 6 Field Ambulance lines. As they arrived Germans opened fire into surrounding trees, where someone had picked off one of their men. At this minute a doctor rose out of a slit trench. Whether the German was nervous or not Creed does not know, but he opened up with his tommy gun and killed the doctor.¹⁴ After a three-hour halt the march began again. Creed continues:

Just then a Bren carrier came down the road from Galatos and opened up on us. We scattered smartly, and with much abuse informed the driver and crew that we were New Zealanders, and prisoners. 'Not for

'bloody long,' came the reply, and off they went up to Galatos. After another hour we were marched off again up the hill towards Galatos. We had not gone far when firing broke out from our right and Jerry replied from behind us. We were between fire, so smartly dropped down on our stomachs. Jerry still tried to move us, and we must have looked a sight crawling on hands and knees. I do not know his name but a padre with us rose to his feet and said: 'Boys, if we have to go out let these Jerries see we can go out as men. Let's walk.' He was a leader, a man that gave confidence. We rose in a body and although we were still between fire we walked halfway up to Galatos and only one man was hurt. He had a bullet through a cheek of his behind.

Luckily a patrol from [19 Battalion](#) (among others) despatched the German guards and released the party before dusk. Meanwhile the defenders had received some unexpected benefit from the air. Parachutes also had delivered hexagonal, coloured canisters (about six feet by two feet by two feet) containing mortars, automatic rifles, grenades, ammunition, radio sets, food, medical kit, and also wheels which were clipped together to aid dragging the heavy canisters into cover. Tom [Speed](#) ¹⁵ and Arch Jeff, after raiding German canisters in no-man's-land, returned and distributed hundreds of English cigarettes and chocolate, probably some of the pickings from [Greece](#). Tobacco had been particularly short in [Crete](#), and a heavy smoker, tormented by shortages, swears he was by no means the only one with this very first thought as the parachutists descended: 'Thank God! Tobacco!'

The German paratroop uniform was of greyish blue material. Trousers fitted into the tops of high boots, and in the bottoms of the trousers spare clothing was carried. 'They drop out of the plane from about 100 feet,' noted Bill Carson, 'with the parachute open. Our first prisoner had a pistol and three grenades in his hands when he landed. They climb out of these chutes like lightning. In their water bottles they carry very strong cold black coffee. They each had with them two days' rations, which consisted of a poloney, wrapped bread which was remarkably fresh, dried fruit, and two cakes of milk-chocolate. They also

had two cubes of “dope”, probably some sort of condensed vitamins, which bucked our chaps up no end when they tried it. Each German carried in his wallet two photographs of **Hitler**—one in Air Force uniform, coloured, and the other in Army uniform.'

German pilots returned to the attack next day, 21 May, bombing, machine-gunning and dropping supplies, and many a man, crouched, huddled or prostrate, perfectly still with face and hands pressed to the ground, swore to quit rabbit shooting in civilian life. Machine-gunning aside, the Composite Battalion had a fairly quiet morning. Carson's patrol spent a profitable time mopping up stray parachutists and returning with arms and ammunition. One prize was a mortar, but as bad luck would have it no ammunition to fit could be found. The patrol stalked and killed two snipers—one of them a troublesome fellow who, despite a broken leg, accurately covered a well from a tree—and during the night moved out to set up and run a listening post overlooking the prison, but without incident. As the day grew older further supplies from the air increased the enemy's fire power; mortars were especially active, and the Composite Battalion sorely missed good cover in its poorly prepared defences. These had been made by British troops previously in the area. The slit trench was not in universal use at that time; these British trenches, deep, long, and straight, had more in common with those of 1914–18, and the soil thrown up in front made them most conspicuous from the air and from the ground. Lack of shovels and inexperience further handicapped the men. This, and waiting for attack, gave gunners and drivers in the role of infantrymen an anxious time; yet spirits in general were not depressed, and Captain Veale remained optimistic and active. The main action of the day, again away from the coastal area, cleared Germans from **Cemetery Hill**, just south-east of **Galatas**. Two RMT men met their death this day. A group of drivers under the command of a gunner officer, Lieutenant **Nathan**,¹⁶ was stationed by a little white stone church on the inland flank. Here Sergeant **Nicholls**,¹⁷ using his Bren gun up in a tree, escaped close attention, but Driver **Milne**,¹⁸ operating a Bren gun nearby in a circular pit, opened up at one plane, which returned in a flash and shot up the

gunpit, killing the driver. Driver **Robinson**¹⁹ is believed to have been shot by a patrol of three in Greek uniform. They passed the time of day with him and then turned and fired at him from behind.

In the night the fleet broke up an invasion by sea. Flashes of gunfire and searchlights lit up the sea for miles. The RMT had a grandstand view of the Royal Navy at work in the distance. Destroyers, picking targets by the British-invented radar, rammed troop-carrying caiques and schooners; concentrated gunfire sent larger ships to the bottom. Experts, including Viscount Cunningham in his book *A Sailor's Odyssey*, estimated that the flotilla was carrying about 4000 troops. The actual number of dead, the German official records reveal, was 324.

Returning from a conference at 10 Brigade Headquarters early on the morning of 22 May, Captain Veale passed on the news that the Germans were thought to be evacuating **Crete**,²⁰ and that the Composite Brigade²¹ was to attack in the **Galatas** area. The Composite Battalion's job was to clear the heights in front and also the village of **Stalos**. Patrols of RMT men (including a party of 30 led by Nathan) joined in the push westward towards **Ay Marina** on the coast and south-west towards the hamlet of **Stalos**.²² Three patrols sent by Veale moved in an arc as far as **Stalos**; one under Captain Veitch broke up a pocket of Germans in a clump of farm buildings known as **Ay Ioannis**, capturing half a dozen Germans, including an officer.

Carson's patrol had a characteristically livelier time. Starting from 10 Brigade Headquarters, which had established itself on the morning of the attack beside Composite Battalion's headquarters, the party moved south towards **Aghya** reservoir, but strong opposition stopped it from reaching the reservoir, where the enemy, wasting no time, had seized donkeys and mules to cart ammunition. On the way back (a bullet furrowing remarkably Driver Brown's²³ helmet) the patrol met up with the Divisional Petrol Company and joined in resistance against another and more successful attack from the prison area. Driver Pope recalls a German officer shouting 'Here comes the 22nd!' and other misleading

cries.

Then, according to Pope, 'with a terrific clamour' came one of the most remarkable charges in the campaign. 'Out of the trees came Capt (Michael) Forrester of the Buffs, clad in shorts, a long yellow army jersey reaching down almost to the bottom of the shorts, brass polished and gleaming, web belt in place and waving his revolver in his right hand. He was tall, thin-faced, fair-haired, with no tin hat—the very opposite of a soldier hero; as if he had just stepped on to the parade ground. He looked like ... a Wodehouse character. It was a most inspiring sight. Forrester was at the head of a crowd of disorderly Greeks, including women; one Greek had a shot gun with a serrated-edge bread knife tied on like a bayonet, others had ancient weapons—all sorts. Without hesitation this uncouth group, with Forrester right out in front, went over the top of a parapet and headlong at the crest of the hill. The enemy fled.'

Quite a number of armed Cretan civilians were operating in this area. A party of three armed civilians was brought before platoon commander Corporal Stan Shaw for interrogation. The different languages made questioning a difficult business, almost a farce. The civilians and the RMT men seemed to be getting nowhere. Suddenly a great grin spread over the face of the leader, and to 'prove' his absolute loyalty, the Cretan plunged a hand into a pocket and proudly produced a couple of ears with the statement 'Germanos'.

At dawn on 23 May the hills before the Composite Battalion showed signs of enemy infiltration. About sixty Germans [150, from German documents] were reported at 7.30 a.m. to be moving from the hills towards [Ay Marina](#). Coleman had moved his 'company' forward about 600 yards the day before and had stayed there during a quiet night. Two groups, one under Captain [Nolan](#),²⁴ went forward from [Red Hill](#) to snipe and to observe. Coleman led forward a patrol of 15 men, soon meeting heavy fire from an obviously formidable enemy group. The patrol was heavily engaged for the next hour, during which time it inflicted casualties and knocked out two machine guns with only one casualty, Driver [Glanville](#),²⁵ who was fatally wounded. Supporting Coleman's

right flank was a platoon led by Corporal Shaw. This platoon had one man wounded, Driver Jeff. About this time, it is thought, Driver **Maudsley** ²⁶ lost his life. These units kept the enemy under fire until B Company of 18 Battalion arrived on the scene. No. II Platoon of that company, moving up with fixed bayonets through the RMT and asking, 'Where are these bastards?', staged a brilliant attack, clearing practically all of the village of **Stalos** and pushing the enemy back. As the result of an apparent misunderstanding, the company commander then ordered the platoon back, and B Company withdrew to the RMT group's right flank, leaving it to hold the position. By noon a line of sorts facing south and covering **Stalos** had been made to check enemy units trying to reach the road behind 5 Brigade.

For the time being the position at **Galatas** was under firm control. At Maleme, however, the enemy had been building up his strength rapidly since 21 May when he won the airfield. By 23 May it was decided to withdraw 5 Brigade behind the **Galatas** front, thereby leaving the way open for powerful enemy reinforcements to link up with the battered remnants of *3 Parachute Regiment* in the prison area. Heavy pressure would soon develop on the **Galatas** line, and the commander of the forward troops, **Colonel Kippenberger**, decided to replace the Composite Battalion, whose makeshift organisation might not stand the strain of heavy battle, by 18 Battalion, which had been in reserve. The Composite Battalion had already undergone changes in the course of the battle, and the Divisional Petrol Company and some of the gunners had been placed under Divisional Cavalry command in what was known as **Russell Force**.

The Composite Battalion did not move back far, however, for its next positions on **Ruin Ridge** were only just behind the front line. The change took place on the night of 23–24 May, at the same time as the weary battalions of 5 Brigade moved back along the coastal road and settled between **Galatas** and **Canea**. Some of the RMT found the move from **Stalos** to **Ruin Ridge** difficult and trying. On the way back, stumbling over rough country in the dark, they received conflicting orders. Some drivers reached **Galatas** and had to trudge back. Dawn

found them dead-tired and hungry, with nothing to dig in with, on comparatively open country exposed to heavy machine-gun and mortar fire probing behind the front line on to **Ruin Ridge**. The assault from the air did not slacken. C Company 18 Battalion, locked in a series of engagements in the evening when **Red Hill** exchanged hands, finished up 300 yards back on Signal (or Murray) Hill, bringing the front that much closer to the RMT men on **Ruin Ridge**. Captain Veale expected a company of Australians to turn up, but none arrived; the relief had been cancelled.

What did appear, no matter how briefly, were six memorable **Blenheim** bombers, passing over **Galatas** area on the way to bomb **Maleme** airfield. 'It was wonderful,' writes Driver Wan. 'Where I was everyone cheered wholeheartedly, and wherever British troops were they must have done the same, because we could hear the cheers of others echoing through the hills and valleys.'

This day Arthur Pope was crouched in a gutter, streams of bullets passing overhead, when **Colonel Kippenberger** came up the road. Pope writes: ' "Pretty unhealthy about here sir," from me, somewhat facetiously. "It is," he responded, indicating some very dead Jerries. "They should have been buried long ago." '

On 25 May the Germans were ready and the assault began. **Ruin Hill** (inland from **Ruin Ridge**), previously occupied by the Divisional Supply Company, had not been taken over by 18 Battalion, and from this dominating position the enemy poured heavy fire into the RMT lines. Mortars, firing steadily, were joined by field pieces, thought (wrongly) to be Bofors guns captured at **Maleme**. Fighters frequently strafed the area. By about two o'clock a mounting attack crunched into the right flank of 18 Battalion, one company reporting Germans advancing in solid masses, heedless of cover, undeterred by concentrated fire. Veale's runner returned from Brigade Headquarters with orders to hold on, and the RMT did, although under fire from three sides, including their rear. Infantrymen brought news of the enemy breakthrough, and many passing through the RMT lines showed the effects of a severe mauling.

Major Veale saw 'a most pitiful chap crawling around on all fours. He wouldn't move unless on hands and knees. He could talk, but his nerve had completely gone.'

With no fresh instructions, Veale sent Driver **Major** ²⁷ to Battalion Headquarters. Major returned saying all that remained was a batman picking up the last pair of socks. The batman said the enemy had broken through the Divisional Supply lines, and headquarters 'went that way; you'd better come too.' Major Veale decided to fall back to the next well-known landmark, **Galatas** turnoff, less than two miles away, where his men could form up again for any future tasks. It was only too clear now that advanced German units had passed RMT's left flank, coming down across Red and Signal hills to cut off the RMT except for a narrow strip by the coast. With the unit facing encirclement and capture, Sergeant-Major Thomson ²⁸ and Driver Johnny Quinlan ²⁹ left Major Veale and hastened off along the fireswept **Ruin Ridge** with orders to fall back via the coast to the turnoff. Stumbling and crawling through the gnarled grape-vines and somehow avoiding being hit, Thomson distinctly remembers hearing derisive cries of 'Not bad for the dirty Hun, is it?' and 'Where's your Siegfried Line now?' Orders to withdraw were passed on to the RMT in their scattered positions along **Ruin Ridge**, and the retreat began, one platoon of **20 Battalion** showing drivers how to fight a rearguard action. As the withdrawal began, Driver **Lundon** ³⁰ was killed instantly. Second-Lieutenant Hope Gibbons sent his men back to the turnoff and went forward to collect some battalion maps which had been left behind. Determined that these maps would not fall into enemy hands, Hope Gibbons and his runner, Driver **Cooke**, ³¹ went off to their deaths. Another RMT officer, Second-Lieutenant **Gilmore**, apparently lost his life between the withdrawal and the arrival at the **Galatas** turnoff. No reliable news was heard of him again.

At Galatas turnoff Veale met the Brigade Major, Brian **Bassett**, ³² who told him to withdraw to the transit camp. The companies of **20 Battalion** had taken over from the retiring 18 Battalion and, with a few sections of the Composite Battalion (now, by good fortune, back from

Ruin Ridge) formed a rough line from **Galatas** to the sea as the first wave of Germans reached the village before dusk. East of **Galatas** 18 Battalion and some others from the Composite Battalion were being directed to an area on **Church Hill**.

The withdrawal to the turnoff was attended by confusion and touches of panic. 'In another five minutes,' wrote an RMT man, 'hundreds of New Zealanders were running hell for leather through the grapevines, so I off too, and never ran so hard in my life before, the bullets were buzzing overhead, but I soon ran out of wind, and being tired out I said "To hell with them".' Another RMT man felt this way: 'The air was alive with bullets. You can hear a bullet whine overhead but these were much closer than that. They sounded for all the world like bees buzzing around your ears. You could actually feel the disturbance of the air on your eardrums. I will never forget that particular time. I had regained my nerve and made up my mind that the Jerries would not make me run. I kept saying to myself: "I wonder if I will get hit. I wonder if I will get out of it alive."' It is very clear in my mind, perhaps I was praying.' Some New Zealanders, tried beyond endurance, had lost their nerve, believing they were pursued by endless, invincible hordes, and made their way back regardless of orders. Many, however, halted when told and later stragglers willingly joined the attackers, about two hundred strong, forming up to clear **Galatas** village.

The gallant **Carson patrol** had been broken up after its last united stand that day among bomb, smoke, and ruin with the Divisional Petrol Company around **Pink Hill**. The popular Tom Speed (who declared he hated **Crete's** fleas more than the German mortars) met his death here, but he was avenged by Arthur Pope, who bayoneted his killer. Now, as if drawn by a magnet, the fighting remnants in two isolated groups, each of about half a dozen men, came in at the death to join in the desperate counter-attack now being launched against **Galatas**. Led by two old tanks commanded by Captain Roy Farran, of **3 Hussars**, two companies of **23 Battalion** swept down from the north-east, and parties from 20 and 18 Battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel **Gray**³³ came in from **Church**

Hill. Bayonets glinting, and with the instinctive cries and yells of the killing man, the attackers lunged into darkened back streets and alleys, their pent-up hatred against the six-day hell from the air bursting in the pandemonium of falling flares, the roar of mortars, and the chattering spandaus. Vengeance thrust hard behind bayonet and grenade— *aha, no diving Stuka screamed that way*—and within twenty minutes the village was cleared.

During the night the New Zealand Division withdrew to a shorter line running south from the hospital. Fighting strength had now seriously dropped and the units of 10 Brigade were absorbed into 4 and 5 Brigades. The scattered detachments of the Composite Battalion made their way back to the transit camp area, and by early next day had formed up there in reasonable shape alongside 18 Battalion.

But what had been intended as an area of rest proved in the course of the morning to be nothing of the sort. It was only just to the rear of the Australian front line and soon came under fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, therefore, on orders from **Divisional Headquarters**, led his unit back to an area south of **Canea** and told Major Lewis to follow.

To the RMT men this was a case of leaving the frying pan for the flames. This was the day in particular when the wrath of the **Luftwaffe** rose to full fury; fighters and bombers struck again and again, circling, swooping, zooming, singling out and hunting remorselessly even solitary men. The march degenerated into a series of quick dashes between raids. In this fashion most of the RMT arrived in the **Suda Bay** area, where strafing brought more casualties. Among remnants making their way over to **Suda Bay** were some **Carson patrol** men. Two Dorniers swooped. Jack **Kenning**,³⁴ mortally wounded, gave Lew **Lynn**³⁵ his Bible and two or three other little treasures to send to his mother.³⁶ Simultaneously, Drivers **Reed**³⁷ and George O'Halloran³⁸ were wounded by explosive bullets. Sergeant **Parker**³⁹ and Corporal Cam Sawers, taking cover in a flax bush, became walking wounded cases when an Me109 fired a burst into the bush. Driver Des **Sawers**,⁴⁰ helping his wounded brother, was himself fatally wounded when the party attempted to shelter from

Stukas in a wood. About this time an aircraft dropped roughly printed pamphlets which warned soldiers and civilians against mutilating the German dead, otherwise nearby villages would be burned to the ground. Such mutilations had taken place, for the collecting of ears and noses seemed to be an old Cretan custom.

The end drew near at Suda Bay. Urgent messages arrived before noon on 27 May saying that the enemy was almost in Suda Bay and men were to move back to the region of Sfakia on the opposite side of the island. Moving in a body in daylight over open country would have been fatal. Parties broke up into small groups. It was virtually each man for himself. A large number of RMT men assembled south of Suda Bay under Sergeant-Major Thomson and during the night moved out in good order towards Sfakia.

To Sfakia was about 40 miles, but it seemed twice as far to the weary, dispirited men trudging along crowded mountainous roads by night and hiding by day, short of water, food and tobacco, and fearful of showing any sort of light in the darkness. 'I know,' said Driver Christoffersen, 'that at times I didn't care whether I went on or not. We even cut our battle-dress trousers off at the knees and made shorts of them, as it was so very hot.' Toiling away with the walking wounded was Bill Tanner, cut and dazed from bomb blast. He'd lost the pet tortoise he'd carried in his overcoat pocket from the Desert and all through Greece. He would just whistle or call softly, and the tortoise would poke its head out of his pocket. In Greece a bullet had chipped the tortoise's shell. Bill kept wondering how his tortoise would get on now, in Crete, and at times he found himself absent-mindedly whistling or calling softly.

Cam Sawers, wounded in the right thigh, went with the walking wounded and carried a crude red cross flag (made from a piece of tent) which German airmen respected. Cam took this flag to Alexandria, and its last use was as a sling for a severely wounded Maori on the Helwan-bound hospital train.

The retreating men passed through **Stilos**, where one of the rearguard actions was fought, struggled up across the **White Mountains**, fought for water at a well in the pleasant plain of **Askifou** (there were no creeks in this part of **Crete**), rallied for the last climb over the remaining heights, and at last, exhausted, stumbled down into a ravine not far from **Sfakia**.

Wait, hope, hide, and wonder.

On the night of 29–30 May SS *Glengyle*, the cruisers *Phoebe*, *Perth*, *Calcutta* and *Coventry*, and the destroyers *Jervis*, *Janus* and *Hasty* took off 6000 men. Food and water were very short.

On the night of 30–31 May the tramp of men going off in the destroyers *Nizam* and *Napier* died in the darkness. Lieutenant Coleman, with a few RMT men, was in HMAS *Nizam*; Lieutenant Nathan and a small RMT party were aboard the far from overcrowded HMS *Napier*. From above the beach they had heard some Navy man calling faintly: ‘Don't you b—s want to come?’ Ironically enough, further back the message was passing from group to group: ‘No more tonight.... No more tonight.’ Well, maybe tomorrow night then. Maybe....

On the night of 31 May-I June the last men left in the cruiser *Phoebe*, the destroyers *Jackal*, *Kimberley* and *Hotspur*, and the minelayer *Abdiel*. The last landing craft left the beach at 2.45 a.m., its wake growing fainter and fainter. Then there was nothing.

What now, some 5000 soldiers wondered?

Priority at the beaches had been given to regular infantry units on the natural assumption that they had done most of the fighting. For those among the gunners and drivers who had taken their share of the **Galatas** battle this was perhaps unfair. On the afternoon of 31 May Veale, an artillery officer in charge of a strange unit, called a conference of his RMT men, about a hundred of them. Two things could be done: either the men could make an illegal trip to the beach that night and try

to gatecrash a boat, or they could wait their turn, staying put until officially told to move. Veale said: 'If you do go down to the beaches tonight, other fighting troops will miss out. Make up your own minds. If you decide to go, I'll help all I can. If you stay, I'll stay.' The RMT decided to wait another night.

In the morning the German came into the valley. There was no choice now. Overhead fighters began circling like blowflies about carrion. Rumours of surrender spread and were confirmed by orders left behind by the senior officer, Major-General E. C. Weston, of the **Royal Marines**, who had been flown out by Sunderland to Egypt. Orders to show anything white were ignored by the RMT party of a hundred which watched in dour silence a blond Bavarian hastily stumbling down the rocks, towing a huge swastika flag to call off the dive-bombers.

The conquerors appeared, mostly Bavarian mountain troops. The war was over; ⁴¹ drab prison camps lay ahead for the Division's crack drivers. ⁴²

Drivers elsewhere saw different scenes. 'Snowy' **Rolfe**, ⁴³ who with some Australians at **Sfakia** had shot an old stallion donkey and carved him up with a penknife, watched Alpine troops descending from the hills. Rolfe saw the enemy suddenly spot a dejected bunch of Chinese coolies (from some torpedoed ship). Astounded, he heard the Germans cry out delightedly 'Ching-Chong-Chinaman!' Driver Cumming, ordered out of his gully by armed Germans, saw this: 'It was funny even then to watch some chaps raise their arms above their heads while others raised them, then lowered them, hesitant about being shot or looking silly. However the Jerries were also glad it was all over, and patting us on the back made signs we could drop our arms. We were a motley looking crew then.'

Somewhere a man began playing 'Hi Yi Yippi Yippi Yi' on his accordion, and one by one voices still uncertain, still dazed, still disbelieving, joined in the chorus:

**She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes,
She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes,
She'll be comin' round the mountain,
She'll be comin' round the mountain,
She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes....**

¹ **Dvr E. Shaw; Blackball; born England, 14 Jan 1911; labourer; p.w. I Jun 1941.**

² **Dvr G. E. C. Lambert; Whangarei; born Wellington, 20 Oct 1913; farmhand.**

³ **Dvr A. H. H. Lambert; Whangarei; born Whangarei, I Jul 1917; motor engineer; p.w. I Jun 1941.**

⁴ **Maj H. M. Lewis; London; born Wanganui, 27 Dec 1908; company secretary.**

⁵ **Maj L. H. Veale, ED; Wellington; born NZ I Nov 1911; insurance clerk; p.w. I Jun 1941.**

⁶ **These 3300 invaders suffered 1400 casualties that day. Of the 10,000 Germans who came by air to Crete on 20 May, 6000 remained active by nightfall.**

⁷ **Cpl C. Farley; Wellington; born Halcombe, 18 Sep 1906; construction worker; p.w. I Jun 1941; J Force Mar 1947-Oct 1948; Regular soldier Jan 1949–Apr 1952.**

⁸ **S-Sgt T. Alvis; Upper Hutt; born Australia, 9 Jun 1904; timber worker; wounded May 1941.**

⁹ **Maj W. N. Carson, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jul 1916; warehouseman; wounded 29 Jul 1944; died of wounds 8 Oct 1944.**

¹⁰ **Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger**, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Ladbrooks**, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; I NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde (**Crete**) May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner of War Reception Group in **UK** 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief **NZ War Histories**.

¹¹ **Carson's patrol** (or **Carson's Rangers**, as others knew them) included **Sgt W. Ritchie**, Cpls **D. R. Geenty**, **G. S. Essen**, Dvrs **T. A. Speed**, **A. D. Ayr**, **C. H. Anslow**, **S. C. Scott**, **A. Pope**, **D. Sutherland**, **C. Flett**, **Bert Barrington**, **Tom Wan**, **Alan Carson**, **Eddie Jaspers**, **E. R. ('Nugget') Parnell**, **H. A. R. ('Farmer') Brown**, **J. W. Kenning**, **F. T. Ramage**, **R. H. Mitchell**, **J. P. Liddle**, and **L. M. Lynn**. Sometimes only a few accompanied Carson; on some jobs the whole lot went out. In a subsequent report Carson highly commended Dvr Speed ('at all times an example to the others ... my highest commendations'), Sgt Ritchie ('outstanding courage and a model for the patrol'), Cpls Geenty and **Essen** ('at all times showed great coolness and courage'), Dvrs Ayr, Anslow and Scott ('outstanding work under all conditions, by their actions an inspiration to the other men').

¹² **Maj G. MacLean**; **Wanganui**; born **Wellington**, 13 Nov 1915; farmer; twice wounded.

¹³ **Dvr A. R. Creed**; **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 18 Apr 1917; mechanic.

¹⁴ This was **Lt-Col J. L. R. Plimmer**, CO 6 Fd Amb; the padre mentioned in Creed's account was the **Rev H. I. Hopkins**.

¹⁵ **Dvr T. A. Speed**; born **Calcutta, India**, 19 May 1905; sand blaster; killed in action 25 May 1941.

¹⁶ **Capt M. J. Nathan**; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 1 Oct 1917; estate agent; wounded 3 Sep 1942.

¹⁷ **WO II D. Nicholls**, m.i.d.; **Sydney**; born 14 Apr 1917; costing clerk; p.w. I Jun 1941.

¹⁸ **Dvr J. K. Milne**; born NZ 30 Apr 1917; farm labourer; killed in action 21 May 1941.

¹⁹ **Dvr H. L. Robinson**; born NZ 19 Apr 1906; forester; killed in action 21 May 1941.

²⁰ Based on a quick impression at **Maleme** when Germans briefly rushed back to their aircraft for cover and for supplies.

²¹ Actually 10 Inf Bde, specially formed for the defence of **Galatas** and including Comp Bn, a Div Cav detachment, and some Greeks who had been dispersed by the landing and were now reassembling.

²² Lt Pool, after falling down a bank and injuring his back, was evacuated.

²³ **Dvr H. A. R. Brown**; Wakefield; born **Gisborne**, 17 Oct 1915; farmer; p.w. I Jun 1941.

²⁴ **Capt S. T. Nolan**, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Onehunga**, 14 Aug 1905; motor trimmer; p.w. I Jun 1941.

²⁵ **Dvr S. Glanville**; born **Auckland**, 25 Jan 1910; motor driver; died of wounds 23 May 1941.

²⁶ **Dvr R. Maudsley**; born England, 12 Nov 1911; electrician's labourer; killed in action May 1941.

²⁷ **Dvr A. W. Major**; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 24 Jan 1916; labourer; p.w. I Jun 1941.

²⁸ 'Tommy Thomson, a **Wellington** school-teacher with glasses, didn't smoke or drink,' writes a driver. 'He used to line us up and talk to us like a bunch of kids. We loved it. We knew he'd never give us anything he wouldn't do himself.'

²⁹ Dvr J. C. Quinlan; **Te Kuiti**; born **Wellington**, 21 Nov 1909; civil servant; p.w. I Jun 1941.

³⁰ Dvr J. B. F. Lundo; born NZ 10 Dec 1913; labourer; killed in action 25 May 1941.

³¹ Dvr A. R. Cooke; born NZ 8 Apr 1917; labourer; killed in action May 1941.

³² Maj B. I. Bassett, m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

³³ Brig J. R. Gray, ED, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO 18 Bn Sep 1939-Nov 1941, Mar-Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun-5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

³⁴ L-Cpl J. W. Kenning; born NZ 23 Mar 1917; clerk; died of wounds 26 May 1941.

³⁵ Dvr L. M. Lynn; Oxford; born **Australia**, 10 Dec 1917; grocer; p.w. I Jun 1941.

³⁶ Lynn, although taken prisoner, safely delivered them to Mrs. Kenning in **Palmerston North** in July 1946.

³⁷ Dvr N. R. Reed; born England, 19 Nov 1916; bricklayer; wounded 26 May 1941; died of accidental injuries 30 Sep 1944.

³⁸ Dvr G. O'Halloran; Upper Hutt; born **Wellington**, 17 Feb

1905; driver; wounded 26 May 1941.

³⁹ Sgt B. E. Parker; Wellington; born England, 24 Apr 1909; manufacturer's representative; wounded 26 May 1941.

⁴⁰ Dvr D. C. Sawers; born Cambridge, 25 Jul 1916; farmhand; died of wounds 27 May 1941.

⁴¹ Of the 274 RMT men in Crete, two officers and eleven other ranks were killed, 21 other ranks were wounded, one officer and 173 other ranks (of whom ten were wounded) were taken prisoner. Of these one officer and ten other ranks died or were killed while prisoners of war.

⁴² Back in Egypt, another verse was added to 4 RMT's old 'Steamboat Bill' song:

**And now we're back in Egypt and we're often inclined
To think of all our mates who we have left behind.
We didn't want to leave them, but we had to you see,
Because the rearguard of the Army was the RMT.**

⁴³ Dvr R. W. Rolfe; Mangakino; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1914; carpenter; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Jun 1941; reached Egypt Apr 1942 after sailing in a 26-foot boat without a compass from Crete to Sidi Barrani in four days. 'Uneventful journey across; all eight of us very sick,' he writes.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 5 – ESCAPE

CHAPTER 5

Escape

SOME men mope in captivity, some die, some settle down, some escape. Of the RMT men captured in **Crete**, Corporal **Shand**,¹ Drivers **Barrington**, **Cumming**, **Foley**,² **Payne**,³ **Rolfe**, **Smith**,⁴ **Tisdall**⁵ and **Toon**⁶ escaped.

Follow Driver Toon to the prisoner-of-war cage at Galatas:

We were told to lay down our arms. The war for us was over. That was our last laugh for some time to come-some for many years. You see what few of us had arms had no ammo. As we trudged our way back up the escarpment there was silence among us. Everybody's thoughts must have been the same: was this really the end for us? From the top of the hill looking down on the beach all one could see were pieces of white cloth. How hellish it looked! Word was soon passed around to every nook and corner and soldiers soon poured out onto the road to start the three-day hunger march.

The first night we were stripped of everything: blade razors and knives and anything that could hurt a Hun. That night we never even got a drink of water. The next day was worse, tired, hungry, we crept along in choking dust. The German guards screaming 'hoost, hoost' and pointing their pistols at us never made us go any faster.⁷ Everyone seemed half dead with thirst and the radi- ators of all the smashed trucks on the road were drained for drinking water. As night was falling we were turned off into a paddock and every fifth man was given two tins of bully beef and a packet of biscuits to share up between. We still starved that night but a creek with clear cold water we had to ourselves. Freshened up from a dip in the creek we marched our third day and finally into the P.O.W. camp. When I met Sam Payne his boots were falling apart and his feet were a mass of blisters. Separated from us he had not eaten for seven days. On the march he found an egg and the remains of a tin of bully which had been run over by quite a few trucks.

'It was as flat as a pancake and the meat was a brilliant yellow but I ate it', he said. We all would have done the same.

The P.O.W. camp at Galatas was the filthiest hole I have yet seen and wish to see: those back streets of Cairo don't stink compared to that camp. Sanitary arrangements were a trench out in the open and the damn wind always blew across that trench and over the camp. Lentils and mouldy bread from Greece were the food they gave us, we were starving all the time. Six men to a bivouac, no blankets, and none of us even had a coat. We slept sitting huddled up to one another. One day an inspection was held by the Camp 'Com.' [Commandant] and cameras, watches, etc., were taken. The lousy cows. I got my watch replaced twelve months later-funny too, in exactly the same way. Soldiers were taken sick but nothing was done for them; food they needed, there was none.

While marching to the cage in the remains of the hospital area near Galatas, other RMT men passed liberated Italian prisoners of war. 'They were very decent to us,' one driver wrote, 'and gave freely of the food, sugar and tobacco they had. This made them unpopular with our guards who pushed them aside, and there were several arguments between them.'

At Galatas gaunt, dysentery-weakened prisoners built rude shelters from bits of canvas, wood, and old iron. Sanitary arrangements and living conditions were very crude. Scrounging parties collected their first so-called square meal of green tomatoes, marrow skins and onion tops, and boiled them into a stew. A nearby field of wheat was stripped in a day, prisoners boiling and devouring the heads. British troops succeeded in killing, cooking and eating a donkey and a dog. They declared the dog all right 'as it was a brown one'.

Hopes for a counter-attack on the island faded. Tom Cum-ming and one or two companions talked seriously about escape. Once free they would trust to luck. Surprisingly few would take the risk, arguing that they would be much better off in Austria. Others tried to talk Tom out of

it. 'But now I had the idea in my mind I just couldn't drop it. I brooded over it for days, the thought of freedom urging me away from all this monotony of prison life with its filth, hopelessness and hunger.'

In the night of 19 June he and Jim Toon crept to the latrine pit and waited for the sentries, who were in pairs, to pass. The two then clambered through the barbed wire. When the sentries had passed again, they dropped into a dry ditch, crawled through a culvert under the road, and emerged in a field thick with vines. It all seemed so simple.

They made for **Galatas** and hid in an old farm building. Dawn showed a house nearby where an old lady, at first much alarmed, prepared a banquet of fried potatoes and fresh bread. The next step was to gather food. They stole from house to house, collecting a little here, a little there. One man boldly led the two into a shop and bought a good supply of potatoes. He handed over a groundsheet and described the best way out of **Galatas** and into the hills. 'Are there—er— many Germans in **Galatas**?' asked Tom. The man smiled. 'This is their headquarters,' he said.

It was still early. A few sleepy-eyed Germans drove motorcycles and trucks down a nearby street, but more disturbing were encouraging cries and waves from well-meaning villagers. They passed over an old battleground and collected dixies, a cooking pan, forks and a German bayonet. 'We chased the only rabbit I ever saw on **Crete**. Maybe it was a tame one. But I guess it saw the hungry glint in our eyes.'

The trail to the mountains led through vineyards where a Cretan ('he reminded us of "a well-informed circle" '), generous with wine and tomatoes, said **Russia**, now at war, was attacking **Turkey** for allowing German troops free passage. [**Germany** invaded the **USSR** at 4 a.m. on 22 June 1941.] Far more important, he rolled cigarettes from a packet of New Zealand makings found on the battlefield.

In the heights above **Galatas** friend and foe lay buried in a common grave beneath a large cross. An attempt had been made to pretty-up the

surroundings. Odd parachutes and empty canisters still lay around. And an odd body or two, overlooked. The drivers felt a cloud come over the sun. They gladly got out of the place. In the late afternoon families in a tiny village crammed their two sandbags with bread, olives, bottles of olive oil, a little flour, sugar, and, best of all, tea, which had been snatched from army dumps and hidden at once. 'The women were very sympathetic and wept for us, patting our hands and heads, and crying down all sorts of curses on the "Germanos". We left with the women praying for our safety.'

Luckily they skipped the next village and were sitting down to rest when vicious machine-gun fire broke out below. The screaming of women and girls went on for quite some time. Later they found out what this meant—reprisals. Weak from so much climbing and from so much food, the two settled down for the night in a strange spot—ancient ruins overgrown with vines and creepers. These rustled faintly now and then. Suddenly a voice began calling. The voice came closer. One New Zealander held the bayonet ready. Then a Greek priest, fully robed, appeared in the dusk. Determined no German in disguise would stop them now, the two called softly. The priest was genuine enough, and distracted too, and kept on his way, his cries growing fainter and fainter until silence returned to the ruins. They slept uneasily through the first free night.

Three young women halted them next afternoon near the village of Therisso. One, a refugee from **Athens**, speaking good English, invited them to her house to rest, eat and meet her brother, an officer from the Greek Navy. Friends gathered. Wine and cigarettes went round. Escaped prisoners? Wonderful ! Wives? Children? Mothers? Photographs of them, perhaps? Excellent! Admiration, especially for children, grew. Tom, a father, patted frequently on the back, felt like a national hero. Happily they sat down to fried eggs, chips, salad, cheese-curd and milk, when through the door burst an old woman crying: '*Germanos etho! Germanos etho!*['Germans here!']

Every man raced for the woods. The two New Zealanders slept on a

bed of pine boughs. In the morning the girls arrived with food, money, the last of their cigarettes, and a map of **Crete**. They farewelled the New Zealanders with tears and begged them 'to tell the British to come back'. Supper that night was eaten with a humble goatherd in his stone cottage. The family sat round a square slab of stone. In the centre lay a dish of boiled milk, a plate of olives, and bread. Everyone ate with spoons from the same dish. With the others beating them to it, the two soon improved their technique. After supper the children went to bed on layers of moss and hay and the men curled up in sheepskins under a tree.

Jim and Tom made off for **Sfakia**, clambering over rock and crag until their boots gave out. They were now about 4500 feet up. They lit fires, for the nights were bitterly cold. Confronted by even steeper ranges, they turned back and went east, running into men and women threshing wheat.

'It was surprisingly primitive. Down in a hole paved with flat stones a donkey walked round and round pulling a small sledge with cutting edges on it. A child stood on the sledge to add weight. Once the straw is cut sufficiently fine someone grabs a large wooden fork and tosses it into the breeze, which blows away the chaff. It's very slow, though very little wheat is lost.'

Here they stayed for a week. Tom, greatly alarmed, ate his first dish of snails, but was reassured by Jim, who had eaten and enjoyed them in New Zealand. They also became fond of garlic, said to be good for the stomach and also for keeping snakes away during afternoon siestas. They met guerrillas. One, Petro, had worked in coal mines in the **United States** and had returned to a small vineyard near Palevora. He had taken part in the fighting, shooting down several parachutists and cutting the throats of others. His farm now looted and destroyed, Petro was a fugitive, well armed with five rifles and plenty of ammunition. Another guerrilla, one of the best killers in that area, travelled with three rifles, an automatic, a wicked looking knife and a haversack of cartridges.

'Petro's sons and nephews visited us, bringing from hiding places their rifles,' said Cumming. 'They played with them like children with toys, saying what they would do to any Germans who came their way. They would load and unload them, clean them, aim at a target, and get all excited over some stories of past fights.'

Jim and Tom moved to the little village of Drakona, closer to the coast but still far enough in the mountains to be safe from enemy patrols, usually restricted to villages linked by roads. Sympathetic villagers provided food. They slept in a cave, exchanging army dress for civilian clothes and keeping only identity discs and paybooks. Long hair and moustaches completed their disguise.

'People kept asking: when would the British return? In their view the war started and finished in **Crete. Sometimes we were told **Britain** seemed to talk too much and not fight enough. We felt their confidence was waning. They got more radio news from **Moscow**. They then pinned their faith in the Russians and assured us that one day hundreds of aeroplanes would appear over **Crete**, dropping hundreds of thousands of parachutists. We were also dismayed by the news from **Libya**, with the enemy back to the border.'**

Earning their keep, the two New Zealanders helped charcoal burners chop young firs, cut up the logs and set them alight to smoulder under coverings of earth. One worker, a strict vegetarian, shunning milk, cheese and meat, had fought in **Albania and returned to **Crete** by boat. In the firelight, silent and rapt, he studied for the priesthood of the Greek Orthodox Church.**

Many ex-prisoners were moving through Drakona to the eastern end of the islands. They brought stories of shootings and burning. One man had jaundice. The Cretans treated him for it by cutting the membrane of his lower lip. Fed up with hanging about, the two New Zealanders decided to move east, Tom going ahead via Caboose, Ramallie and Kares. ⁸ Near Kares he met three ex-prisoners, two New Zealanders and an Australian. 'I felt by my reception I was hardly welcome. Lots of chaps

were jealous of spots they had found where food was obtainable and sometimes plentiful. I didn't blame them. After all we were nothing but a lot of hoboes wandering around the country.'

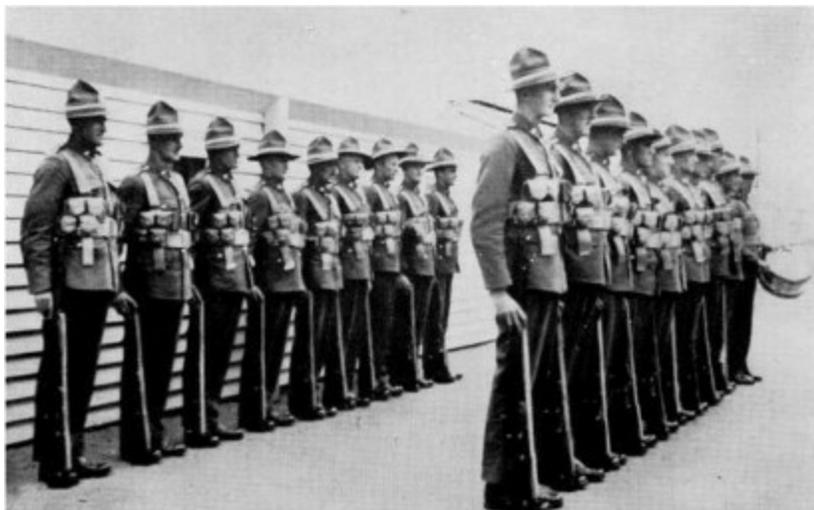
Tom, now separated from Jim, met up with a party of RMT men. Crossing hot, dry, barren hills they made for **Sfakia**, dodging patrols and running mostly into goat and sheep herders. Germans used the roads regularly, the people were less friendly, and food, except for grapes and figs, became harder to get. 'At all times we found that, as everywhere else, the poorer people were always the most insistent that we eat with them.' A turn for the better began in one village on the way to **Sfakia**. With growing excitement the New Zealanders listened to a Cretan of some authority. He said a British officer was getting men off the island in submarines. The Cretan would find a guide to take them towards the rendezvous.

With their water bottles filled to the brim, they waited expectantly outside the village. The bearded guide, Petro, hard as nails, turned up. The party set off at a smart clip along steep tracks winding through thick scrub. Petro had eyes like a hawk. He suddenly lunged into the scrub, startling the men behind until they saw a three-foot snake dangling dead on the handle of his stick. They walked all night, pausing at a village where a priest passed on the latest war news. Next day Petro entertained them royally at his home, which was also the village smithy, and begged them to sign his 'visitors' book'. The RMT men, still a little suspicious, wrote down anything. Some Australians had signed before them, splashing titles, rank and decorations right and left. Through the humble smithy apparently had passed every male descendant of Ned Kelly, Phar Lap, half the Australian stud book, and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Down gullies and around cliff faces they continued to a hideout, where Petro told them to wait a day or two while he spied out the land ahead. Time passed. Petro did not return. The submarine had been expected on 13 August. It was now about 18 August. Someone went back to the smithy and found Petro. He was stretched out dead drunk on a

week's 'bash'.

Alone and disheartened they pushed on, bearded and ragged, their broken boots hanging together with bits of wire and tin tacks. Luck led them to another contact man who promised to have them on the way to **Alexandria** within two days. A youth led them over rocky and dangerous hillsides to the village of Morjou, overlooking the coast sweeping up to bitterly remembered **Sfakia**.



A guard at Papakura Camp, November 1939

A guard at **Papakura Camp**, November 1939



Souvenir postcard

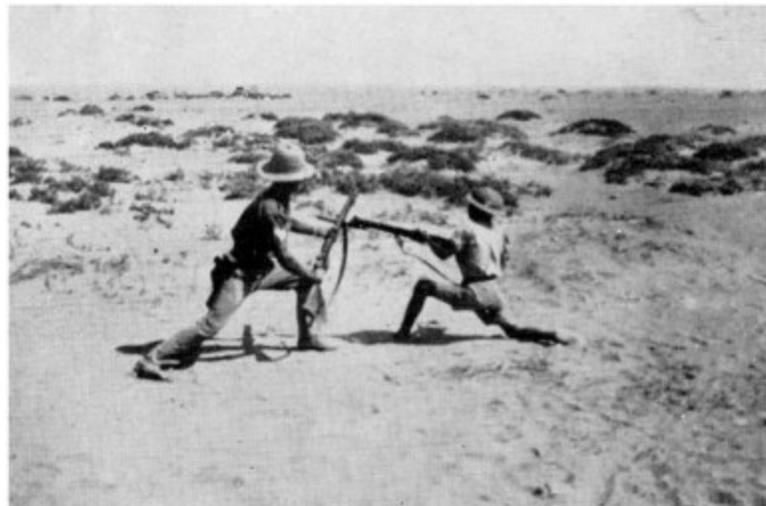
Souvenir postcard



Training in the desert
Training in the desert



Training convoy in Nile Delta
Training convoy in Nile Delta



Bayonet training for 'Mahmid', an adopted Arab waif
Bayonet training for 'Mahmid', an adopted Arab waif



The first anniversary dinner at Fuka, October 1940
The first anniversary dinner at Fuka, October 1940



A sandstorm that lasted three hours, near Bir Thalata
A sandstorm that lasted three hours, near Bir Thalata

A trench and dugout near Mersa Matruh



A trench and dugout near Mersa Matruh

Another guide, a man well over six feet tall and heavily built, took over, making for a distant cave where eight fugitives were waiting. Clambering over cliff and rock, breathless and faint, the men looked down upon Germans bathing and playing about the beaches some two miles below. Far away monasteries sat like toy houses on top of two precipitous hills. Every day the monks came down to attend to their crops, sheep and vineyards.

More guides arrived. The men split into small parties. Time running short forced them to sprint at intervals along goat tracks until the coastal hills and the road from Prevalee were reached.

Tom continues:

Here we saw another group of prisoners coming from the village. We did not join forces until it was quite dark. A crowd of Cretans followed us. We gave away what clothing we carried and also our tobacco leaves. The head monk came down on a mule to give us his blessing. We moved off in silence, warned if any trouble broke out the submarine would not come in.

Reaching the cliffs we fumbled past bay after bay until we came to a very small beach. We had trouble keeping silence here. Everyone was tremendously excited. We had not long to wait. Within half an hour we heard a swishing sound and against the background of the dark sea we saw the conning tower of a submarine. We felt like cheering or crying, so great was our relief. Again we declared that the Navy was certainly *the Service*.

A rubber dinghy approached. We soon had a line from the submarine. Just before entering the water we were eagerly assisted by the Cretans who fought among themselves for our possessions. One helped me out of my jersey and another was undoing my trousers while a third snaffled my boots. The only article I brought off was my paybook and family snapshots, which I held between my teeth. We made our way out, swimmers helping non-swimmers who held onto the line supported by

Eager hands assisted us on board....

¹ **Cpl A. J. Shand**; Bluff; born Winton, 19 Sep 1909; barman; p.w. i Jun 1941; escaped 18 Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 24 Aug 1941.

² **Dvr E. F. Foley**, MM; **Te Awamutu**; born Awanui, 5 Jul 1917; truck driver; p.w. i Jun 1941; escaped 30 Jun 1941; recaptured 27 Mar 1942; escaped 6 Apr 1942; arrived Egypt Jun 1942.

³ **Dvr S. J. Payne**; **Wellington**; born Lancashire, England, 9 May 1918; gardener; p.w. 3 Jun 1941; escaped Jul 1941; arrived Egypt Dec 1941.

⁴ **L-Cpl L. A. Smith**; **Wanaka**; born **Christchurch**, 17 Apr 1918; labourer; p.w. i Jun 1941; escaped 20 Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 28 Nov 1941.

⁵ **Dvr S. D. Tisdall**; **Middlemarch**; born Middlemarch, 13 Jan 1919; labourer; p.w. i Jun 1941; escaped Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 19 Jun 1942.

⁶ **Dvr J. L. P. Toon**; **Helensville**; born **Christchurch**, 9 Mar 1916; labourer; p.w. i Jun 1941; escaped 19 Jun 1941; arrived Egypt 24 Aug 1941.

⁷ On the other hand, an official German account, *From Serbia to Crete*, describing **Suda Bay** prisoners who were exhausted and meticulously sharing their last food and water, says: 'Why should we not admit it frankly? In these moments, when we were ourselves on the point of exhaustion, we were proud of our enemies.'

⁸ The spellings of some of these place-names are phonetic.

Probably small villages, they cannot be found on the maps available.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 6 – TOWARDS THE FRONTIER

CHAPTER 6

Towards the Frontier

PREPARE now, what's left of you, New Zealand Division, for your third campaign—and 4 RMT Company for your fourth. Over in **Greece** lie 291 New Zealanders who will never come back. In **Crete**, where only one-third of the Division fought, are 685 more. Through the raw earth the grass rises again, and back in New Zealand a thousand urgent telegrams beginning 'DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR ...' are folded and put away, and the photograph looks down from piano or mantelpiece or bedside table until time takes it to a drawer, to a box, to a dusty cupboard, to a backyard bonfire, to ashes over the ground where the grass roots and the grass seeds are waiting.

Some of the wounded who get back will fight again: some of the 371 from **Greece**, some of the 967 from **Crete**. It's home for the rest, home or pottering around base camps. That's how it works out, and whichever way you look at it you can't do anything about it. Nothing.

And half-way between, shocked and stunned at their sudden severance from the Division, are the prisoners of war, never to doubt that by next Christmas it'll be over, sure. **Greece** caught 1856 New Zealanders, **Crete** 2180. That Christmas is a long time coming. Besides all this, wipe off all the artillery, the vehicles and heavy equipment that crossed the **Mediterranean** with the Division. That's had it, too. Write it off.

What's ahead for the rest, the old hands and the reinforcements? They're back at it again in **Maadi** and **Helwan**, back at the same old tricks, marching, drilling, practising, manoeuvring, while more reinforcements and new equipment come in to patch up the holes, to fill the gaps, to set this thing of flesh and metal ticking away again. They drink Stella and Pyramide out of cut-down beer bottles, go on leave, go on the shicker, go on the mat. They write letters, maybe saying aloud as they do: 'Dear Mum. I am sending you a quid, but not this week', or

'Dear Mum. This Army life is a bastard.' They sit in the sand in the dark and kick holes with their heels and lean back on elbows and drink again, and the talk goes back to the last few weeks and the old outfit will never be the same again. It never is. It never was.

On 14 June 1941, 4 RMT Company's other ranks numbered 146, 325 men short of full strength. The company needed 216 drivers, 19 driver-mechanics and 23 fitters, among others. A week later the shortage dropped to 174 (111 drivers are still wanted, 13 driver-mechanics, more fitters, more cooks....). By the end of June, at the foot of the company's weekly returns, in the space for signature of commander a new name appears: 'Ian E. Stock, Capt.' ¹ Major Woods had relinquished command of the unit on 26 June and Captain (shortly afterwards Major) Stock had taken over. At the end of July, ² in charge of the company's sections, now only 48 men short, were Captains Good, Broberg, **Julian, ³ and Coleman, Lieutenant **Blanch**, ⁴ and Second-Lieutenants **Burt**, ⁵ **Gray**, ⁶ **Fernandez**, ⁷ and **Smith**. ⁸**

All Workshops tradesmen went to work with new and complete kits of highly prized American tools. They overhauled the officers' new PUs (pick-ups), handy, tough runabouts, 15-cwt. Dodges, rigidly sprung on an all-steel body. They checked over the new four-wheel-drive Fords, which arrived steadily until the company was fully established with 147 three-ton load-carriers. At first, after the trusted old Bedfords destroyed on the beaches and in the olive groves of **Greece, these Fords seemed a tinny job: steel cab, steel tray and sides, and very short in the wheel-base. But time and work proved their usefulness. Spares were easily got. Engines could be changed quickly. The four-wheel drive was popular. Ahead of these vehicles lay tremendous tasks, yet they would serve the Division faithfully until the end of the war.**

Trucks or no trucks, route marches continued until Major Stock was confident his drivers would find 'no hardship now in marching 40 miles in 48 hours'. This, and training in weapons, camouflage, road discipline, and transport manoeuvres at **Fayoum, across the **Nile** south of the Pyramids, welded the unit together again. Jobs ran from picking up new**

arrivals and stores from troopships nosing into **Suez Canal** to carrying infantrymen on brigade exercises and to taking 5000 bivvy tents (about 25 tons) to men preparing defences west of **Alexandria**.

In the Canal Zone each of the Division's three brigades trained for combined operations to get the feel of a division working together again. There had been other changes too. More sturdily equipped, the artillery now should have a better show against tanks and aircraft. A new general hospital had arrived.

Three months after **Crete** the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, in a seven-question cable to **General Freyberg** on 16 September, asked: 'Are you satisfied that the Division is ready for action both in respect of training and equipment?' To that question the General could reply: 'Yes. The Division is trained, and when the deficiencies [some light tanks for the Divisional Cavalry and some light anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank rifles] are made up it will be fit for war in every way.'

But the New Zealand Division was little more than one-sixth of the force gathering for battle. All around, on Egypt's land and in her sky, the strength grew. Every day ships were bringing vehicles of all shapes and sizes, and more and more were coming, streaming out steadily from the assembly lines of **Britain, Canada, Australia** and South Africa. In July tanks and trucks began to turn up in bigger and better numbers from the **United States**. Between July and October almost 34,000 trucks and 2100 armoured vehicles were landed in Egypt. Among new artillery and small-arms supplies were 600 field guns, 200 anti-tank guns, 3700 Bren guns, 80,000 rifles. From Britain came these tanks: Cruiser (19 tons), Matilda (26-odd tons), Valentine (17 tons). The 13-ton Stuart tank appeared from the **United States**.

Deep in conferences, schemes, maps and reports were the men of mystery—the planners, the brass hats. General Auchinleck, taking over command from General Wavell on 5 July, saw the official birth of Eighth Army on 10 September. Details of the plan of attack ran to almost any subject under the sun: ways of deceiving the enemy,

distributing 95,000 mines, recovering damaged tanks and vehicles, Navy and Air Force co-operation, security, checking rumours, dummy tanks, a field propaganda section to find out if loudspeakers could be used effectively against the enemy....

The supply problems were gigantic. Gathering for battle were 118,000 men—almost the entire population of **Wellington** city—and 17,600 vehicles. Soldiers would eat each day 200 tons of food. Every day the vehicles carrying them would use 1500 tons of petrol and oil; guns and rifles would need 480 tons of ammunition a day, and 350 tons (79,400 gallons) of water would be wanted. Altogether the Army would need 2972 tons of supplies every day.

How would men get their day-to-day supplies when Eighth Army left its bases and struck into **Libya** on 18 November? The railway ended at **Misheifa**; the pipeline carrying water from **Alexandria** would go no further than **Sofafi**. So three forward bases were being stocked night and day, and from these bases, with everything needed piling up high as a house over acres of desert, trucks built handier field supply dumps further forward. The New Zealand Division, when the time came for it to be attached to 13 Corps with 4 Indian Division, would draw rations and water from 29 Field Supply Depot, beyond the railhead at **Misheifa**, from 16 to 19 November, and then from 50 Field Supply Depot, to be set up east of the gap in the frontier wire at **El Beida** through which the New Zealand Division would pass. The 29th FSD was preparing to supply in the days just before the attack about 36,000 men and 6000 vehicles daily. To keep clear the supply lines, over which lorries hurried to dump reserves in the forward areas, Eighth Army was staying well back from the frontier and, by avoiding large-scale troop movements, hoped not to forewarn the enemy, stiffened in April by Germans under General Rommel and now besieging **Tobruk**.

The Axis forces had recaptured **Cyrenaica** from the **Western Desert Force**, weakened by the demands of **Greece** and **Crete**. The enemy did not press into Egypt but dug in at **Capuzzo** and **Sollum**, close to the sea

on the Egyptian frontier, to cover the siege and manned a string of forts—the **Omar** forts—stretching south-westwards. This **Capuzzo- Sollum** area is a good prize for any army. Stretching ahead from **Baggush** to **Tobruk** is a low plateau with a flat coastal strip petering out at **Sollum**. A 500-foot escarpment, rising inland to run northwest over 50 miles, meets the coast near **Sollum** and spreads up to **Bardia**. This 500-foot escarpment is a tough barrier for anything on wheels advancing westwards near the coast. The escarpment's two main passes are at **Sollum** and **Halfaya**, seven miles south-east. An army intending to enter **Libya** without using these passes must make a long detour of at least 100 miles to the south. The Germans and Italians held these passes; but they had failed so far to take **Tobruk**.

And while the Army prepared, the Navy and **RAF** continued to engage the enemy.

In mid-September the New Zealand Division's 4 and 6 Brigades settled into the defences of **Baggush** (158 miles west of **Alexandria**, 30 miles east of **Mersa Matruh**), where swallows holidaying from **Europe's** cold swooped and flitted prettily and the dusty date palms grew by the sea. Maybe the date palms were a bit like nikau palms—but not much. Maybe the swallows were *magnoon* (mad). *How d'you make that out? Well, they've wings to go any place they like, and Hell, they come here, to this dump....* But many will remember old **Baggush** fondly, the place where they trained to their prime in the days of their youth. Fifth Brigade felt the same way, arriving at **Baggush** after a month's hard work on defences and roads in a little-known area in the desert south-west of **Alexandria**.⁹ *As if anything would happen there. Just another army stunt to fill in time and keep you away from **Cairo**.*

About 20 miles from **Baggush**, 4 RMT Company was back at **Fuka** again on 17 September, occupying bivvies already dug by the Indians. Work began at once, carrying supplies, petrol, and ammunition up to forward dumps rising to back the November advance into **Libya**. D Section landed up in **Sidi Barrani** one afternoon with Cypriots of a pioneer corps; A and B Sections distributed within a couple of days

42,200 two-gallon tins of water. It was a great day for C Section's mascot, 'Tiny', whenever one of his section's lorries took sheep to the Indian Field Butchery at **Matruh**. Drivers talked about pensioning him off after the war in a comfy kennel on a New Zealand sheep-run. As official news trickled in about the fate of drivers left behind in **Greece** and **Crete**, the Mobile Film Unit turned up to screen 'Nancy Steel is Missing'. Through October the sections worked hard, towards the end running many night details to fox Jerry, besides carrying riflemen on brigade manoeuvres and practising desert movement. This month the company's mileage was up to the 240,000 mark—from the earth to the moon. Each day the company used about 1200 gallons of petrol, enough to send a ten-horse-power car one and a half times round the world. Air raids around **Fuka** did little damage except to blow an ammunition train to bits. Says 4 RMT's war diary:

'Small bomb estimated at 25 lbs found in sea by swimmer and brought into shore and [left near] orderly room.' Right on the nail next day, routine orders reminded all swimmers to remove dentures—army property—before taking a dip.

But now 4 RMT Company is not alone. Another mechanical transport company has been formed within the Division.

The story of 6 RMT Company begins on 14 October 1941, when Colonel **Crump**,¹⁰ head of the NZASC, announced the formation of a new mechanical transport company. In command was Captain **Hood**,¹¹ from the NZASC Section of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Hood, Lieutenant Fenton and Second-Lieutenant **Brown**¹² left the **Western Desert** on 15 October for **Maadi Camp**, where they received instructions about forming the new company, which had to be ready for work in the **Western Desert** within a month. The 6th RMT Company would carry riflemen of 6 Infantry Brigade into the Libyan campaign.

Possibly never in the history of the New Zealand Division was the forming of a unit attempted in so short a time. But Captain (soon Major) Hood's previous experience as Adjutant of HQ Command NZASC proved

invaluable. He knew the make-up of operating NZASC units, the stores and equipment needed, and the depots through which they were drawn. He knew how 4 RMT Company worked, and on these lines 6 RMT Company would take shape.

The task was a big one. Within three weeks 127 vehicles had to be collected, plus all mechanical parts necessary to maintain such a fleet. On top of this were tons of stores, rations, ammunition, and equipment needed by a company operating for weeks in a barren desert. The men to form the basis of this company—6th Reinforcements, plus a sprinkling of echelon men—were away from **Maadi** ferrying vehicles to the **Western Desert**. On their return they were posted at once to the company.

Ordnance depots were asked for stores and vehicles. By 18 October the OC, his two lieutenants, and 57 other ranks marched out from Base Training Depot NZASC to 'Q' area, at the end of the road beyond the **Lowry Hut** and underneath the escarpment dividing **Maadi Camp** from the city of **Cairo**. The area was shared with men of 2 New Zealand General Hospital, from whom tents were borrowed to hold 400 men. This party for the next two days slogged away erecting tents, cookhouses, and other houses in readiness for more men and more stores. The first vehicles, 50 of them, arrived from Eighth Army vehicle park at Tel el Kebir on 23 October. The rest were collected by company drivers from the same park within a few days. By 21 October most of the men were settling down, some of them from the Infantry Training Depot, for the NZASC had suffered 80 per cent casualties in **Greece** and **Crete**. A bustling week changed the once-barren 'Q' area into a busy, tented village. Stores rolled in from depots all over the Delta. The men were keen. Vehicles were thoroughly checked, and any suspicion of a loose nut or a mechanical fault received quick treatment. Anyhow it paid to look brisk and occupied, for the OC had ordered route marches for those not on duty. Nobody wanted two-hour exercises climbing up the escarpment and marching along to the Citadel.

The largest administrative task was organising the men into three

operating sections, a workshops group, and the headquarters administration group. ¹³ The fourth operating section, D, was to be added later. Each operating section received 36 vehicles, 33 of them 50-cwt. Chevrolet load-carriers, and three 15-cwt. vehicles, two for section officers and the third for section defence. The Workshops Section, or E Section, started off with six load-carriers and two breakdown vehicles equipped with winch, and an officer's car. Headquarters group consisted of an orderly room, quartermaster's store, cooks' wagon and a baggage wagon, all of which were three-tonners, plus the OC's car, a water cart and a defence lorry. Two drivers took turns in driving each lorry. One driver signed for his lorry, and it was his responsibility to see that it was properly and regularly looked after.

As with 4 RMT Company, each section of 30 load-carriers and three spares could lift an infantry battalion. Each section was divided into sub-sections of six lorries, with a corporal and lance-corporal in charge. Within each section was a small headquarters group: the section officer, a subaltern, a sergeant in charge of administration, and a transport sergeant. Also on the strength of section headquarters travelled the cooks (two to a section), two spare load-carriers with reserve petrol and stores, and three men working the light anti-aircraft defence.

Workshops Section, though not up to full strength, started out with the latest in mobile repair equipment. Two load-carriers carried machine shops which, complete with lathes, could repair everything except major breakdowns. Two vehicles carried the stores and spare parts Workshops would need, and the Workshops carpenter and blacksmith had a vehicle apiece. Two vehicles with winches operated as breakdown repair wagons. Completing Workshops' total of ten vehicles were a load-carrier used by the cooks and a car for the Workshops Officer.

Headquarters Section handled all the administrative duties of the company and could also travel as an independent unit. Its vehicles were the OC's car, a three-tonner for the orderly-room staff and also for the company quartermaster's stores, a baggage lorry, a petrol-carrier, and a cooks' truck. There was also a water cart and a 15-cwt. defence truck.

Other men in headquarters were the postman and the RAP orderlies.

In nine days the company was formed into a self-contained and fully-operating unit. At night drivers picketed vehicles, spending most of the daytime checking and rechecking the lorries' mechanical parts. Despatch riders were particularly pleased with their new Matchless motor-cycles. And the company's first job turned up, a small but pleasant duty only remotely connected with the business of war: three lorries left on 23 October for the **Western Desert crammed with Christmas cards and tobacco for the Division.**

Moving the complete 2 General Hospital (except, bad luck, the nurses) and the Casualty Clearing Station to their field station at **Garawla was the company's first big job. From Tel el Kebir trucks took the complete stores for a 600-bed hospital. They also picked up 120 Flint stretchers and brackets. These were fitted later to the truck trays so that in an emergency lorries could be used as ambulances.**

The company was away, 310 strong, at 10 a.m. on Sunday, 2 November, Captain Collins ¹⁴ leading the long line of over a hundred vehicles up the hill, past the **Lowry Hut, and then to the right through **Maadi Camp**. Men gathered by the roadside: 'What outfit's this?' Vehicle after vehicle flashed by: three-ton Chevrolets with four-wheel drive, extra-wide sand tires and high sand-coloured canopies; the lighter vehicles of the administration and defence sections; the despatch riders; and, at the end, vehicles carrying the hospital's men and stores. Down the leafy streets of **Maadi**, along the river road to the Khedive Ismail Bridge, where donkey carts are laden with market-bound water-melons, then past Cheops Pyramid on the way to the 'blue'. Past Mena House and vehicle parks, then three miles on to the desert proper under the shimmering haze of midday heat.**

A halt for lunch—drivers in the rear feeling they had no sooner stopped than the leader pulled out again—then on 45 miles to **Wadi Natrun for the night halt. The tarsealed highway covered old caravan tracks linking **Alexandria** and **Cairo**. The swish of the tires, the haze,**

the heat from the engine made drivers drowsy; the spare drivers dozed off in their seats, one leg in the cab, the other resting on running board or mudguard (it was impossible to find a comfortable spot for the head). At Wadi Natrun vehicles dispersed, 100 yards apart; drivers stepped down from the high cabs, walked to the wheels, then to petrol tanks, and then, satisfied that oil levels, radiator and tire pressures were correct, looked after themselves. They slept in bedrolls spread on the clean sand.

Before 8 a.m. 6 RMT was under way again, following the black streak of bitumen 45 miles to **Amiriya**, the Arab village near the crossroads leading to **Alexandria** and to the **Western Desert**. Palm trees dotted the settlement, almost lost among the Army's dumps, large petrol, water and ration points, a transit camp and an airfield. Refuelled, the convoy crossed the causeway over broad salt marshes onto the coastal road, passing blue flashes of the **Mediterranean**, odd clumps of tall date palms and patches of small fig trees. Thirty miles on, near **El Imayid**, urchins from Burg el Arab village raced beside trucks to swop eggs (fresh and otherwise) for biscuits and cigarettes. More petrol and water were taken on at **El Daba**, 30 miles short of **Fuka**, and with seven miles to go the company bivouacked for the night. Next morning, 4 November, the trucks with medical men and stores went on to **Garawla**, while the rest of the company pulled in to **Fuka**, settled down next to 4 RMT Company, and dug in.

Two men sharing a bivvy tent, only six feet by five and about three feet high, usually dig down a foot or more then run a foot-deep trench along the centre. This makes two firm ledges for the bedrolls and gives a man a chance to move about without crouching too much. In time the place is prettied up. Odd bits of sacking, canvas, or cardboard turn up to line the walls and to check the sand from trickling down. A box at the top of the trench makes both a fine table and a container for a spare primus, over which tea, toast (sopping in margarine) and tinned bacon are prepared for night feeds. If parcels have been arriving lately, there's cake, shortbread or gingernuts, and tinned oysters too. Unfortunately not only bivvies but underground orderly rooms and cookhouses have to

be dug as well. B Section cooks of 6 RMT settled on a small rocky plateau surrounded by acres of good diggable sand-soil. For two days half of B Section rapped, scraped, and cursed away until a better cookhouse site was chosen.

From **Fuka** A Section was the first of 6 RMT to move off, leaving before dawn on 6 November with 9000 gallons of water for Eighth Army's forward base at Bir el Thalata. The trip was completed by moonlight and the unloaded water containers camouflaged with scrub and netting. Two days later **General Freyberg** inspected the company, the first time he had inspected a complete New Zealand transport company, and told Major Hood that the formation of 6 RMT was a British Army record, so far as he knew. In the evening the company suffered its first death when an **RAF** lorry ran over Driver **Talbot**,¹⁵ of Workshops Section, in the blackout. Early next morning Second-Lieutenant Pool led 56 load-carriers from B and C Sections westwards of **Siwa** Track and dumped 25,000 gallons of petrol. It was an important job, for here the Division would refuel on the move towards **Libya**, and 6 RMT's cargo was to have kept the entire Division going for another 50 miles. But this petrol had been loaded very carelessly by Arab labourers the day before at **Sidi Haneish**. The flimsy petrol tins had received rough handling and, despite drivers' protests, dented and sometimes leaking tins had been loaded. Jolting on the way damaged more containers. Although this dump would be increased by the Divisional Petrol Company, the Division would be short, and 6 RMT drivers wondered just how much those leaky containers had affected the Army's plans.

Leaving behind guards from **21 Battalion** who had travelled with the convoy, the two sections returned to **Fuka** to find A Section had gone off temporarily¹⁶ to 5 Brigade to carry **28 (Maori) Battalion** forward on the 11 November move. B and C Sections stocked up with water and spare petrol (16 gallons for each lorry) and joined 25 and 26 Battalions for their first troop-carrying tasks. The company came under 6 Brigade's command, and Company Headquarters and Workshops joined 6 Brigade Headquarters group.

Capturing a fort in the desert is the scheme. The fort is protected by mines and barbed wire. The gunners open the attack, their squatting 25-pounders pumping across a thick fog of smoke, which spreads neatly, quickly, good and thick, between mines and the fort. As the shells ripple through the air, from four to eight 4 RMT lorries speed forward, filled with the first wave of the attackers, 100 to 200 riflemen, about one or two companies. The drivers see that the wind is blowing towards the fort. Good. No chance now of the man behind the wheel getting smoke-blinded and hitting mines, or wire, or emerging apologetically on the enemy side of the fog. Don't waste time getting the boys up there—while you're mucking about the arty is using up its ammo. Up to the minefield, the smoke coiling strangely just beyond, and out dive the riflemen, bayonets fixed. They sprint 25 yards straight ahead and lie down, so the RMT lorries can turn without delay. Now get those lorries out of it, smartly, before the smoke goes. They may be wanted badly later on.

The smoke is thinning and the gunners switch to high-explosive shells. That keeps the enemy's head down, and so does fire opening up from the tanks and mortars, nice and handy. The riflemen advance by bounds, now up, now flat, 'close as you are brave enough' to the advancing barrage of exploding shells.

The barrage lifts. The riflemen charge and seize a patch in the enemy's front line. Now, alone, they must hold on at least twenty minutes. The tanks are halted by the mines, the guns have fired all the rounds they can spare, and the smoke has gone. So watch for the counter-attack; open up at the machine guns and any movement, get the two-inch mortars going, hold on. Hold on up there while the engineers clear lanes through the minefields, freeing the tanks to bite forward again. Now the dust flies once more as up to the mines comes the RMT again, lorries packed with riflemen for the killing blow, about a thousand of them, the bulk of the brigade's men with bayonets. Out they come; away go the 4 RMT lorries. Behind the tanks, now moving up the cleared lanes, go the infantry as a second wave of tanks joins in the attack.

The first tanks are into the fortress; in a moment the riflemen are in too. One by one clumps of defenders smash up or surrender until the riflemen well and truly hold the fort. Prepare now for the coming counter-attack. See there's no snarling up of the transport now pouring in: lorries and trucks with ammunition and tools, carriers, medical chaps, wireless trucks, the odd staff car, anti-tank guns, 25-pounders, maybe a few light anti-aircraft guns.

Victorious. But the cook's truck is lost again....

That was a dummy fort. Those were just exercises, the New Zealand Division's three brigades rehearsing for war near **Baggush** in the mellow October of 1941. Not a single shot flew in anger. Those 'tanks' were just stand-ins for the real thing, just a few lorries with a superiority complex. But those exercises and other trips into the desert gave the Division experience of movement and manoeuvre; gave drivers the feel of flag signals, of keeping position among the 800 and more vehicles strung out in long columns of each brigade, of orderly driving over the quickly changing surface of the desert, now rocky and pitted, now hard and smooth, now soft with wind-piled sand. It got them into the routine of mobile warfare. As **General Freyberg** reported to New Zealand's Prime Minister in October, this, like all modern battles, was in the first place a battle of machines and exploitation by lorry-borne fighting troops of all arms.

So on to 'NZ Div Exercise No. 4', everyone pretending this was just another stunt, and few indeed being really misled. The Division rose out of the ground, like some great conjuring trick, left its camouflaged tents and dugouts, and climbed into 2836 vehicles—just 300 more vehicles than all the taxis throughout New Zealand in 1953. The fleet moved off in three massive groups:

Fifth Infantry Brigade Group (Brigadier **Hargest** ¹⁷) moved in 1006 vehicles, 33 of them B Section 4 RMT lorries containing not troops but supplies. For the campaign the section was attached to the Divisional Supply Column. Carrying the **Maori Battalion** (for three days only) was A

Section 6 RMT. Moving other riflemen of the brigade were lorries of 309 General Transport Company, the British Army unit lent for the purpose by the RASC. Completing the group, and also making up the other two brigade groups, were field artillery and anti-aircraft and anti-tank gunners, engineers, machine-gunners, the Petrol Company (complete within 5 Brigade Group), part of the Divisional Supply Column, a field ambulance, and a section of Divisional Ordnance Field Workshops.

Fourth Infantry Brigade Group ([Brigadier Inglis](#) ¹⁸) had 803 vehicles, 132 of them of 4 RMT Company (A Section carrying 18 Battalion; D Section, [19 Battalion](#); C Section, [20 Battalion](#)). Complete in this group was the Survey Troop. Moving independently at the end of the group was New Zealand Divisional Headquarters Group ([General Freyberg](#)), containing the Division's headquarters staff and signalmen, the headquarters of the Division's artillery, engineers and ASC, a field hygiene section, military police, the postal unit and the pay office, 136 vehicles in all.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group (Brigadier Barrowclough ¹⁹) had 918 vehicles, 129 of them from 6 RMT Company (all together when A Section returned from 5 Brigade to carry [24 Battalion](#)). B Section carried [25 Battalion](#); C Section, [26 Battalion](#). The Ammunition Company travelled complete within the group.

Out on to the bitumen road at [Baggush](#) emerged each brigade in turn. Down dozens of tracks on both sides of the road, only 20 to 25 feet wide, came 5 Infantry Brigade's one thousand lorries, trucks, Bren carriers and staff cars, converging on the starting point on the morning of 11 November—Armistice Day. The halt was about 60 miles away: up to [Mersa Matruh](#), south-west to the end of the bitumen on [Siwa Track](#), then into the desert for ten miles. Brigade vehicles, booked to cover 15 miles each hour, were supposed to be spaced ten to the mile, making a column more than 100 miles long and taking nearly seven hours to pass one point. But there were several mix-ups, none serious. B Section of 4 RMT, attached to the Divisional Supply Column, moved off at noon and reached the desert rendezvous at 8.30 p.m. The 6 RMT section

bivouacked with the **Maori Battalion** at dusk.

Next day 4 Infantry Brigade and **Divisional Headquarters** groups were off to join 5 Brigade in the desert. Among the 939 vehicles were 4 RMT's Company Headquarters, Workshops, and three operating sections. They pulled up near 5 Infantry Brigade from just before sunset to after dark. Two-thirds of the Division was together now. The RMT sections found the ten-mile desert strip very dusty and rough travelling. The Divisional Petrol Company had set up a petrol point nearby where the 25,000 gallons dumped by 6 RMT lay, enough it was thought to take the Division 50 miles. The Petrol Company began issuing petrol and oil.

About midnight on 13 November 6 Infantry Brigade Group's 918 vehicles settled down in the desert. The trip had given 6 RMT drivers little trouble. The Division was now complete and ready to go. Engines silent, the transport, 200 yards apart, rested in a great oblong about twelve miles long and eight miles wide. No advance took place on 14 November. The only movement was the occasional turning of vehicles to keep tell-tale shadows as small as possible as the sun slid across the sky. The story was out, officially, that the 'exercise' was over; the Division was bound for **Libya**.

The entire Division, together and fully mobile for the first time, moved forward on 15 November. From 16 to 20 infantrymen were packed together under the canopy of each RMT lorry. They had with them all their equipment and their reserve rations. A dozen squatted on their bedrolls laid out along the sides of the truck tray; the odd-men-out settled down where they could among the boxes of ammunition, petrol, water, and rations stacked in the centre of the tray. Nobody could call this luxury travelling. The truck jolted, bucked, bumped, dodging potholes and boulders to lurch over bushes of camel-thorn rooted under hard-packed mounds of wind-blown sand. Still, the infantry said, riding under any conditions was better than marching—any day.

The Division's mass movement towards the frontier is an amazing scene.... *This day I will remember always, always. The sand below is*

stiff with bones of old armies with all their banners and bravery since the year dot. Ai-wah. But they never travelled like this, never looked like this. Never sounded like this. Never felt this way. Never....

Vehicles stretch from horizon to horizon. Any rise in the ground reveals to men looking back further black dots of yet more trucks appearing in the far distance and grinding on at a steady pace of seven miles each hour to cover 50 miles by nightfall. From time to time sand-coloured **RAF** fighters pass over the advancing New Zealand fleet. 'It seems impossible that such a colossal array of vehicles can keep order,' writes Captain Coleman, of 4 RMT. 'Now we realise the value of the exercises rehearsed again and again during manoeuvres, where every driver learned with almost uncanny instinct his relative place in the group. Keeping place in convoy, by day or by night, adds to the success of the moves. It's only achieved by rigid concentration of the drivers.'

'Our drivers are grand,' writes Lieutenant **Clubb**,²⁰ of **26 Battalion** (carried by C Section 6 RMT). '“Lofty”, veteran of a dozen service routes in New Zealand, handles his lumbering three-tonner loaded with men, kit and rations, with a skill that has merited the reputation of the A.S.C.'

Before dawn on 16 November, from 5.30 to 6.30 a.m., men stand to, well muffled, greatcoat collars turned up, balaclavas pulled well down. ASC commanders are worried. Too much petrol has been used up in yesterday's 50-mile move, about 40,000 gallons instead of the estimated 25,000. One gallon, instead of taking a vehicle the estimated six miles, has lasted for only three and three-quarter miles.²¹ The Petrol Company draws more petrol in special trips to No. 2 Forward Base while drivers, LADs, and mechanics make sure trucks are in trim for the night move ahead of over 25 miles. The 4th RMT's first casualty of the campaign, Corporal Jaspers,²² of B Section, is buried after a fatal accident the previous day. It's strange, think drivers attending the funeral of their comrade, that a man should survive the perils of Carson's patrol in **Crete** only to meet death a little later in a peaceful desert.

With the return of darkness vehicles close up to ten-yard intervals

and move off, the leading brigade followed by the two groups of the other brigades. Engineers and MPs have gone ahead, placing shaded green lights on poles at two-mile intervals to mark the track by night. Each brigade has a leading car just ahead with a panel of dim lights at its rear. This discreet 'glow-worm' car follows the lamp-marked route; behind the car follow the nine blacked-out parallel columns of the brigade. But all is not easy going this night of 16 November. Soft sand ahead joggles the columns into 'concertina' movements; boulders, shingle, rough patches and clouds of dust add to the scramble in the darkness. Some vehicles close up nose-to-tail, others draw apart and in trying to catch up speed up to 30 miles an hour—bad for the lorries, worse for the flung-about passengers. Major Stock writes:

The column, rumbling in low gear through the blackness of the night, suddenly slows down. This usually means bad going in front. Drivers strain eyes trying to pick out what's ahead. In five or fifteen minutes they approach a bad dip, with three or four of the earlier vehicles just discernible, bogged down. This is it, you look for the tailboard ahead and it has already disappeared, speeding up for its run through the bad going. You put your foot down, your only thoughts being to get through and not to lose contact with the truck in front. As you are almost into it a Div Provo looms up from the blackness and shouts 'Straight ahead Dig—watch the bump at the bottom' or 'Give her the gun, the going's good.' You give her the gun, keeping your fingers crossed that no springs will be broken, and away you go like Ben Hur and up the other side of the wadi, hoping the chap in front has cleared it in time to let you keep going. We've made it this time, but luck doesn't always hold.

The November nights are cold. The driver's hands become numb on the wheel, pain develops at the back of the neck through constant straining to see into the night ahead, and the eyes are running with the cold wind coming through the open windshield. Everything is going along nicely when the truck in front brakes—you do the same and find yourself in a soft spot. Out spare driver and out spare man at the back to

wave the other vehicles on so there'll be no break in the column. Then to the work of getting her out of the bother. You try her again and the big four wheels just thrash around and dig in deeper. All right, get the blokes out at the back and let them push. Then the fun begins. The infantry are mostly asleep or dozing—they are all as cold as blazes. Once out from the shelter of the canopy they get colder still. The RMT stops some fancy names.

But with sturdy shoulders to the wheel the truck is soon on her way again, trying to get back into the column. Every driver is jealous of his own position in the line, and woe betide the chap who tries to break it, unless he is known. Our driver has to find someone he knows before he can get back into the line. He peers into the darkness. 'That's Jim, he's got his spare covered with a bivvy—yes that's Bill with the camel tank strapped on the bumper, so Mick must be next—Hey Mick, let me in after Bill.' So in we go and the advance continues.

The 25-mile march ends. Before dawn lorries scatter according to plan so that first light will not give enemy aircraft a juicy target of closely packed vehicles. Each battalion moves separately, and quite a distance is covered before the brigade's hundreds of vehicles are properly spread out. While the infantry brew up drivers cover vehicles with camouflage nets—like fish-nets stuck with strips of subdued pink and green material, sacking and tufts of scrub. Now is the time, while others take it easy, when the LAD men and the driver-mechanics go to work, examining engines and chassis with the skill and understanding of surgeons, anticipating and detecting trouble, swiftly and thoroughly repairing damage done during the move. In the campaign ahead they will work tirelessly, keeping trucks mobile, giving drivers complete confidence in their vehicles. Keeping the Division rolling is the work of the LAD ²³ and the Workshops men. They are dependable.

Daily maintenance tasks done, 6 RMT drivers swop impressions of their first night move carrying troops. Some can't believe such a large fleet of 2800-odd vehicles could move so far at night without some trucks getting lost for keeps. Other drivers discuss falling asleep during

halts and the rotten feeling on waking to find the truck ahead vanishing. The young 6 RMT Company, with no other experience of brigade manoeuvres at all, is learning the hard way.

More lessons and shocks lie ahead of new drivers in the second night march on the evening of 17 November. Within an hour of their moving off on the 30-mile journey a violent electrical storm slashes the darkness. A 6 RMT driver, **Gibbs**,²⁴ writes:

Soon the lightning sheets shoot over the brigade column and in an instant every vehicle is seen lurching crazily forward. In the same flash the driver has a chance to note his position in the convoy, and he makes a desperate effort to correct his place. If he is far behind and the ground in front is flat he risks a dash forward, but this must be done in the blinding blackness following the lightning flash. Perhaps the next flash reveals him charging headlong toward another vehicle and he has barely enough time to avoid a smash.

Voices are lost in the roaring din of the thousand motors; drivers work overtime, one minute changing up, the next down, braking, swerving, in short giving their utmost to keep up with the inexorable moving force.

Following a three-tonner is like driving along a lighted highway compared with the lot of the driver who has to follow a gun limber. The black outline of the large three-tonner can be seen at least a couple of yards away and a driver coming out of a dust cloud has sufficient time to brake. The driver behind the artillery waggons has no warning until he sees a gun barrel poking almost through his windscreen.

Nobody ever wants to travel behind the ack-ack.

The route this night leads 6 Brigade briefly through a patrol camp of 4 Indian Division. These unfortunates must feel that all the devils in North Africa are on the loose. Long before the Brigade Group reaches the Indians' area they hear the thunder of its approach. New Zealand

infantrymen looking back from the lorries see many near-tragedies as the Indians leap from the path of one vehicle into the line of another. Some vehicles stick in unseen slit trenches, which means more delays, but still the advance goes on.

Past the Indians low ridges of invisible miniature escarpments sometimes send lorries leaning over to angles of 30 degrees or more. Each driver keeps going, hoping in the darkness that the old bus will right herself again.

In daylight a small eight-foot escarpment is summed up quickly and the driver makes the best approach. Even then several attempts may be necessary to get the lorry over it. At night the driver's first warning of coming to a sand bank is the front of his vehicle rearing up and the motor stalling. Then the only thing to do is to send the co-driver out to see if the following vehicles are far enough back to allow the stalled vehicle to reverse. Both front and rear low gears are engaged and the driver sets the lorry to it, with all the petrol power it can take.

The performance of the four-wheel-drive lorries this night is amazing. Truck after truck lurches up steep gradients and with a final twist rights itself and continues after the vanishing column. On worse than usual banks, tracked vehicles and breakdown wagons from workshops sections come to the assistance of the struggling drivers and trucks. Descending the escarpments is, if anything, a more tricky process and many a driver suddenly finds himself running along the edge of an escarpment with the lorry gradually leaning more and more to one side. How does the land lie out there in all that blackness? To even the truck up now, should the driver pull the steering wheel to the right or to the left? That many vehicles don't capsize is a compliment to the drivers and to the makers. One 6 RMT driver, skilled in the handling of coal lorries for years before the war, comes down one of these escarpments safely. Reaching flat ground he changes, he thinks, to normal gear. He doesn't know he has changed into reverse gear, and back he goes, retreating innocently into the night until his spare driver notices something's not according to Hoyle. Other weary drivers had the

illusion that they are driving down a vast tunnel or along the bottom of an enormous cutting.

The jolting in the dust-clouded blackness confuses even expert drivers and exasperates into silence even the most expert swearer among the flung-about infantry behind.

At 1 a.m. the nightmare journey ends. Down the lines passes the message 'bed down' ... 'bed down' ... 'bed down'.... But some drivers don't hear. Slumped over the wheel, already they are fast asleep.

¹ **Maj I. E. Stock**, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 24 May 1914; clerk; OC 4 Res MT Coy 26 Jun 1941–12 Sep 1943; OC NZ Adm Gp Oct 1942–Sep 1943; OC NZ VRD, **Bari**, Sep-Dec 1943.

² In the November 1941 campaign the officers with the sections were: A Sec, Capt Julian and 2 Lt Burt; B Sec, Lt Surgenor and 2 Lt Battersby; C Sec, Capt Coleman and 2 Lt Fernandez; D Sec, Lt Blanch and 2 Lt Smith; Workshops, Capt Broberg.

³ **Capt J. M. R. Julian**; **Wellington**; born **Hawera**, 13 Mar 1913; motor mechanic.

⁴ **Capt W. R. Blanch**; **Wellington**; born **Scotland**, 18 Mar 1909; insurance clerk; wounded Jun 1942.

⁵ **Maj A. H. Burt**, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Auckland**, 18 Jul 1917; cutter; OC 4 RMT Coy 20 Jul-28 Aug 1944; wounded 18 Dec 1942.

⁶ **Maj A. G. Gray**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Scotland**, 29 Dec 1914; clerk; Adjt HQ Comd NZASC Jul 1942–Sep 1944; Amn Officer HQ Comd NZASC Sep 1944–Jan 1945.

⁷ **Capt S. V. Fernandez, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 9 Jul 1903; clerk.**

⁸ **Maj D. A. Smith, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 16 Jul 1916; draper; CO NZASC Base Depot Jul 1944–Jan 1945.**

⁹ **Later known as the Alamein Line.**

¹⁰ **Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); born Dunedin, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915-19; CRASC 2 NZ Div 1940-45; commanded 2 NZEF (Japan) Jun-Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in Japan, 1948-49.**

¹¹ **Maj A. G. Hood, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 29 May 1912; company manager; OC NZASC Sec 14 Lt AA Regt Aug-Oct 1941; OC 6 RMT Coy 14 Oct 1941-2 Feb 1942; Assistant Director Supply and Transport Army HQ (in NZ) and O i/c NZASC training May 1942-Jan 1946.**

¹² **Maj R. T. Brown, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 5 Nov 1912; advertising manager; OC 4 RMT Coy 28 Aug-30 Oct 1944, 6 RMT Coy 30 Oct-6 Nov 1944.**

¹³ **A Sec: Capt A. E. Collins and 2 Lt A. T. Rimmer; B Sec: 2 Lts J. Pool (ex 4 RMT) and R. A. Todd; C Sec: 2 Lts R. T. Brown and A. E. Irving; E Sec (Workshops): Lt J. D. Fenton.**

¹⁴ **Capt A. E. Collins; Kerikeri, Bay of Islands; born Te Awamutu, 18 Jun 1913; motor salesman.**

¹⁵ **Dvr R. C. Talbot; born NZ 22 Mar 1911; contractor; accidentally killed 8 Nov 1941.**

¹⁶ **D Sec 309 (British) Gen Tpt Coy, which carried infantry of**

5 Bde into the Second Libyan Campaign, was working at **Siwa** on 10 Nov. A Sec 6 RMT took this section's place, carrying the **Maori Battalion** until 14 Nov. Returning from **Siwa**, the British section took 24 Bn forward in 6 Bde's first move on 13 Nov. Next day, with the Division together, the two sections returned to their companies, A Sec 6 RMT now carrying 24 Bn as first intended.

¹⁷ **Brig J. Hargest**, CBE, DSO and two bars, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Honour, MC (Gk); born Gore 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP 1931-44; Otago Mtd Rifles 1914-20 (CO 2 Bn Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde Jan 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, **France**, 12 Aug 1944.

¹⁸ **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Palmerston North**; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915-19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Jan-Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde 1941-42, 4 Armd Bde 1942-44, 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, **Germany**, 1947-50.

¹⁹ **Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold Barrowclough**, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre; **Auckland**; born **Masterton**, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915-19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in **UK** 1940, 6 Bde May 1940-Feb 1942; GOC **2 NZEF** in **Pacific** and GOC 3 NZ Div Aug 1942-Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

²⁰ **Capt F. C. Clubb**, MC; born Liverpool, England, 27 Aug 1917; medical student; died on active service 7 Mar 1944.

²¹ The Division's petrol position caused anxiety until the frontier was crossed. Rough travelling in low gear and the rigours of two night moves played havoc with estimates. Besides, much petrol must have seeped away from leaky, flimsy containers. Plans had been affected, too, by many shrewd drivers taking good care to stock up well beyond their petrol quotas. The Division, poised on the frontier on 18 November, had only

enough petrol for 90 miles instead of 150 miles. The emergency was met by taking a lorry from each section of the RMT companies and adding them for a day to the Petrol Company. The trucks intercepted a convoy near **Conference Cairn** and returned with 44 lorry-loads, 28,160 gallons. (4 RMT's 166 vehicles, travelling from **Fuka** until 4 p.m. on 18 November, averaged 5.75 miles to the gallon.)

²² **Cpl E. C. Jaspers; born Waipawa, 12 Nov 1915; electrician; accidentally killed 15 Nov 1941.**

²³ **Light Aid Detachments were manned by driver-mechanics. One vehicle was set aside for this work in each operating section. LADs formed the liaison with Workshops Section and were entirely responsible for keeping all vehicles mobile while in action. They carried spare spring assemblies (when available) and main leaves, spare petrol pumps, radiator hose, spark plugs, tires (when space permitted), tubes, and in fact all parts necessary except for major breakdowns. They would fit or oversee the fitting of spring assemblies, etc., and generally kept their section vehicles in tiptop shape.**

²⁴ **Sgt K. H. Gibbs; Auckland; born NZ 4 Feb 1915; grocery manager; wounded Nov 1941.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

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4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[SECTION]

NOW it's over the border into **Libya**, the barbed-wire hedge cut and rolled back 300 yards for the Division's 2800-odd vehicles to pour through, a river of metal and engines, grumbling and creaking and revving through the midnight hours of Tuesday, 18 November 1941. Military police with dim lamps stand by directing the flood. They're as calm and collected as cops on a country-town street corner, and men look out at them with admiration as they pass. But only briefly, for within vehicle after vehicle someone, responding to the power and the force close about him, infects his comrades, and they sing, shout and yell as never before, or after. For this is the great advance, heralded the night before by tremendous flashes of light from the north, a curtain-raiser from the gods.

But it's **Onward**, as the fernleaf badge of the Division says, onward nose-to-tail in the night, after resting by day, far apart, dug-in and camouflaged. British tanks arrive to escort the Division. The approach is over. This is **Libya**. And any time now the target will be firing back.

In the afternoon of 19 November the Division rolls off again ten miles north, just out of range of **Sidi Omar's** guns feeling for the advancing Indian Division. Dusk comes and with it parachute flares from enemy planes in the dark, wondering.

Ahead in the night the barren Libyan plateau stretches more or less smoothly to near **Bardia**, where it breaks up into a group of about five small escarpments pointing like a bony hand to besieged **Tobruk**. There is little difference in the heights of these small escarpments. Starting from near the coast, each escarpment is overlooked by the next by a few feet, a slight difference but a most important one to any army driving to **Tobruk**. Where the fingers draw close to **Tobruk** the New Zealand Division will meet its bloodiest fighting. No civilians live in this wilderness, no cities or settlements remain. The names which will flash

round the world and linger for a few brief years around bar rooms and reunions in shabby halls— **Sidi Rezegh**, ¹ **Gambut**, **Belhamed**, **Bir el Chleta**—are only map names for lonely inconspicuous ridges, patches of sand, hills little more than mounds, or an occasional drab well containing a meagre amount of flat, wretched water. The only road, held of course by the Axis forces, runs along the coast from the frontier to **Tobruk**. Faint tracks, worn by traders and camels across the centuries, criss-cross the plateau above the escarpments. The best-known trail leading from the east through the escarpment country is **Trigh Capuzzo**. This ‘trigh’ (Italianised Arabic for a caravan route) runs from near Fort **Capuzzo** past the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment and into the far west.

¹ **Sidi (Saint) Rezegh**, a learned Moslem scholar thought to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, headed a religious school and had many followers. He died about seventy years ago and was buried near **Gambut**, **Libya**. His son is buried in the same tomb, which is visited at the beginning of every spring by many Moslems from **Libya**, some of them barren women. Pilgrims annually whitewash the tomb and plant sticks with rags on them. Bodies buried nearby are thought to gain sanctity from the saintly bones.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

THURSDAY, 20 NOVEMBER

Thursday, 20 November

The New Zealand Division stays put.

The 4th RMT Company orders its Christmas dinner: chicken 117 lb., pork 176 lb., Christmas pudding 119 lb., Christmas cake 90 lb., mince pies 950, mixed nuts 50 lb., beer 480 bottles, cigarettes 5000. ²

² **Everyday rations, although they improved grudgingly as the war went on, were inferior to German rations. A man's daily ration in this campaign added up to about 2 lb. in all of tough brown biscuits, cheese, margarine, tea, sugar, jam (marmalade or fig), tinned milk, bully beef more often than M and V (meat and vegetable), and a fragment of tinned bacon and tinned herring. Where cooks' trucks could work men ate at least hot stews, porridge and perhaps rice (sometimes with dates or currants in it). Otherwise it was mainly bully and biscuits. Men with trucks handy would buy with their own money a reserve of tinned food and fruits, and odds and ends such as split peas. Fifty flat-tasting cigarettes of weird makes, the most notorious being Vs, were issued weekly. Not until 22 December 1943 did 4 RMT's war diary record: 'Capstan cigarettes received in weekly issue in lieu of much discussed V brand.'**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

FRIDAY, 21 NOVEMBER

Friday, 21 November

The New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division begin a sweep around the enemy's southern frontier forts to sever them from the west. Screened by tanks and with the Divisional Cavalry in its light tanks and Bren carriers scouting ahead like sheepdogs, the Division continues north in the afternoon. In front the Divisional Cavalry's armoured fighting vehicles capture surprised **Sidi Azeiz**, and an even more surprised Italian officer taking a bath, at dusk. First blood.

Now the Division splits: 5 Brigade swings east to behind the frontier forts of **Capuzzo**, **Musaid**, and **Sollum**; 6 Brigade turns west, ready to go to **Gambut**, about 25 miles away and halfway to **Tobruk**; 4 Brigade continues north to cut the **Bardia- Tobruk** road.

Drivers have taken their vehicles safely through dust and darkness and over rock, potholes, shingle, and thornbushes. But not through mud. It's here now, mud in the desert, mud in your eye, glutinous, deep, dirty. The mess spreads wherever heavy rain fell during the night of the electrical storm. Before the mud is struck, **26 Battalion** in C Section's (6 RMT) lorries are singing 'Silent Night, Holy Night'. Once in the mud, the night is no longer silent or holy. Drivers and passengers work flat out before they are free. In every column bunches of cursing men, overcoated and hooded with balaclavas, are slithering and sliding, shoving and heaving from the side, from the back, from anywhere they can get a grip for hand and foot. Battalion Bren carriers do a great job rescuing and towing. In some of the worst spots drivers must back repeatedly before slushy tires begin to grip properly. Other lorries keep going only as long as nobody changes gears or slows down. The mud-spattered passengers pant behind for a chain or more, struggling

through ooze to catch up to the tailboard, to clamber in, only to hear the truck stick again. Some Headquarters RMT trucks carrying no obliging infantry risk being left behind in their plight. One spare driver, frantic to get the truck moving, flings personal gear, webb-equipment, anything he can find, under the rear wheels for traction.

The most extraordinary incident of the night, according to a 6 RMT driver, takes place when leading vehicles of **25 Battalion** run into bogged transport. The 6 RMT driver pulls up near two bogged Ford trucks and the riflemen in the lorry jump out to lend a hand. Not until the two trucks are almost clear do the riflemen discover they are liberating grateful Germans 'driving Australian trucks captured in **Greece**'. Rounded up altogether are eight enemy vehicles and twenty very startled Germans from an isolated tank-repair unit.

Soon 6 Brigade, fed up with the floundering, camps for the night, ready to move on at dawn to attack **Gambut**. The 4th RMT lorries with 4 Brigade take up to 14 hours to cover 36 weary miles. Confounding confusion, an ambulance convoy mixes with C Section. The woes of D Section increase when an anti-tank ditch 12 feet deep and 15 feet wide yawns unexpectedly ahead. 'Much credit is due to the MT drivers for the manner in which they navigated this exceedingly difficult piece of going,' notes **19 Battalion**'s war diary.

Fifth Brigade is in action: a company of **23 Battalion** sent to reconnoitre **Capuzzo** during the night captures it; **21 Battalion** reconnoitres **Bir Hafid**.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

SATURDAY, 22 NOVEMBER

Saturday, 22 November

Sixth Brigade, its plans suddenly changed by a crisis ahead, moves off at a top speed of eight miles in the hour. The pace, no scorcher, allows for rough patches and defiles through which the Brigade's transport must pass. The speed also includes regular halts. Along with the vehicles the escorting tanks must average ten to twelve miles an hour to cover eight miles of open desert within the hour. Sixth Brigade is moving towards **Sidi Rezegh**, 20 miles from **Tobruk**, where deadly tank fighting rages.³ Our tanks, told to seek out and destroy the enemy armour, fight with dazzling bravery, but in vain; the well-trained and shrewdly used German armour gives them a terrible pasting. We lose about four hundred while the Italians lose some forty and the Germans no more than fifty. Few know of this at the time.

Sixth Brigade, travelling part of the way along **Trigh Capuzzo**, brushes into an enemy unit and takes twenty prisoners. The march ends at 9 p.m., transport officers making sure all vehicles under their command have arrived. If one RMT troop-carrier were lost half the fighting strength of a platoon would be missing.

Fourth Brigade tests the defences of **Bardia**.

At daybreak 4 RMT's headquarters, with the brigade's B Echelon, sees 4 Brigade, despite its hectic night of bog and ditch, still holding good formation except for a few stragglers. Now close to the coast and behind the northernmost fort, **Bardia**, the convoy halts about 7 a.m. Already battalions have moved off from the brigade on tasks to sever **Bardia** from the enemy forces in the west. Everyone with B Echelon is tired after 18 hours' continuous travelling over 39 miles—one of the company's toughest trips in its life. Everyone is hungry too, for the last

meal was at 10.30 a.m. the previous day. An hour after B Echelon halts, a hostile plane circles its area in a thick curtain of ack-ack fire. The 4th Field Regiment's guns, a hundred yards from 4 RMT's headquarters vehicles, are soon in action supporting the infantry ahead, and before noon a hundred German prisoners are brought in. One Company Headquarters vehicle joins B Echelon transport carrying prisoners to cages already built and waiting behind the gap in the frontier wire.

With the dawn drivers of 4 RMT's operating platoons carrying the three battalions run into their first engagement of the campaign. A Section, carrying 18 Battalion and moving east to **Bardia**, hits a startled enemy camp at first light. The enemy, abandoning a number of vehicles, is chased towards **Bardia**. By 9.30 a.m. the battalion has occupied high ground above **Bardia** and begins patrolling the escarpment. About a dozen miles west of **Bardia**, near **Menastir**, are 19 and 20 Battalions. The 19th remains in laager on top of the escarpment over-looking the coastal road to **Tobruk**, and the D Section 4 RMT drivers with this battalion fill in time kicking a football about. The war does not seem very real. Already one company from **20 Battalion** has gone down the escarpment on foot and has cut the coastal road a mile below. From the escarpment drivers look down on surprised and confused enemy units and trucks on the flat. Another company debusses and attacks across the flat. Some C Section drivers take D Company to rout an enemy camp of some sixty tents a mile east along the escarpment. Surprise is complete. Prisoners say they thought the British were a hundred miles away. Before noon fresh Germans, with six tanks supporting, counter-attack on the flat from the west. Fire from mortars and 25-pounders holds them. Early in the afternoon **20 Battalion's** C Company, 500 yards behind infantry tanks, cuts down the escarpment on foot and wheels west to meet the counter-attack. The German tanks, outnumbered, promptly flee. A large gun mounted on a tank chassis and a number of mortars are captured, together with overrun German and Italian infantry and engineers. The only error concerns B Company, poised in RMT trucks on the escarpment for a strategic descent when needed. This company is kept from getting down to the scrimmage on the flat by fire

from the over-energetic and ill-informed British tanks. C Company triumphantly continues mopping up and by dusk **20 Battalion** will have collected more than 400 prisoners.

Drivers are elated and keen for more. They study captured vehicles and C Section bags two Opel Blitz trucks, Sergeants **Ritchie**⁴ and Walker taking over a truck loaded with new rifles, new boots and, alongside a body, the answer to every soldier's dream—a unit's payroll, gloriously complete. Drivers see the badge of the *Afrika Korps*, a palm with a swastika on the trunk. A belt—like a scout belt—has *Gott mit uns* on the metal clasp. Curiously, drivers examine the enemy's personal little belongings, abandoned and pitiful: his writing paper, his photos from home, his shaving outfit, his strange magazines, a handful of sweets in paper stamped with patterns of flowers. There's his uniform too, khaki or blue-green, his gourd-shaped water bottle, his queer mess kit. And somewhere a pet dog circles in bewilderment.

Fifth Brigade masks **Sollum**. The 21st Battalion attacks **Bir Ghirba**, comes under heavy fire, loses some transport and suffers heavy casualties. The attack is called off. The 23rd Battalion reaches out from **Capuzzo** towards **Musaid**, which is captured in the afternoon, and arrives at the escarpment overlooking **Sollum**. Many prisoners, mostly Italians, are taken and the pipeline to **Sollum** is cut.

³ Estimate of enemy's total strength: 110,000 men, about 380 medium tanks, 1140 field and anti-tank guns. Eighth Army: 127,000 men, about 120 light tanks, 500 cruiser tanks, 200 infantry tanks, 850 field and anti-tank guns.

⁴ **Sgt W. Ritchie; Wellington; born Wellington, 25 Oct 1914; general carrier.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

SUNDAY, 23 NOVEMBER

Sunday, 23 November

Sixth Brigade wins most of Point 175, east of Sidi Rezegh, in a fierce and bloody attack and takes 350 prisoners. Fifth Brigade remains holding the Bardia- Sollum area. The Maoris capture Sollum barracks, with 160 prisoners. Fourth Brigade moves to support 6 Brigade in the march on Tobruk.

Sixth Brigade moves off at 3 a.m., with anti-tank guns and tanks guarding the flanks, drivers weary, riflemen in the rear huddled together for warmth, aware that today they will go into action. Dawn comes and the grey columns fan out in desert formation, then halt. As men start primuses or gather scrub to boil the billy, the peaceful scene rips wide open to the hammer of machine guns. Somebody has spotted an enemy group moving nonchalantly through the brigade, a ridiculous situation. Vehicles scurry like alarmed fat bugs, gunners swing 25-pounders into firing positions, Bren carriers race to cut off escape, the nearest riflemen (25 Battalion) come under fire and return it with good measure. Many 6 RMT drivers dash for their rifles, attempting to join the infantrymen, only to be ordered back to stand by their lorries. One driver, sent back because he has no bayonet for his rifle, curses his luck. Enemy armoured cars, perplexed, dart here and there; one gun knocks out five of them. Tracer bullets streak the air. And cooks continue to prepare breakfast until the enemy, scattered and confused, escapes, leaving two hundred of his men captured, together with many valuable documents. An error in navigation has run 6 Brigade into part of the headquarters of the *Afrika Korps*, no less.

In B Section Drivers Proud ⁵ and Mitchinson's ⁶ vehicle is out of action, damaged by rifle fire, and a shell, miraculously dodging the

seated infantrymen, has gone clean through the tray of the truck driven by Drivers **McMurtrie**⁷ and **Cleator**.⁸ A few A Section drivers are told to carry prisoners to the rear and on the way Drivers **Brian**,⁹ **Burfield-Mills**,¹⁰ **Borcoski**,¹¹ and **Smithson**¹² are in turn taken prisoner.

Leaving the **Bir el Chleta** area, 6 Brigade continues west to **Point 175**, the threshold of **Sidi Rezegh**, where **25 Battalion**, later supported by **24 Battalion**, dismounts, riflemen cheerfully adjusting packs, examining weapons, and speculating on the coming attack. Before the main attack is launched **Mitchinson** and **Proud** (whose truck was knocked out in the morning) temporarily join A Company **25 Battalion** to deal with troublesome fire penetrating the assembly area. Both drivers are without bayonets and they enter the bayonet attack with determination and apprehension. They survive.

Company by company the riflemen move off from the start line in open formation. **Point 175** is thought to be lightly held. The attack is mounted with haste and the infantry, who could have been carried most of the way by 6 RMT lorries, set off on a trying one-and-a half mile march under fire to reach the enemy. Drivers stand by their vehicles and watch with mixed feelings their passengers steadily advancing, steadily growing smaller and smaller until they disappear into their realm of smoke and dust, erupting explosions of mortar bombs, and the continuous spatter of machine-gun fire. The fire intensifies, the enemy directing the full weight of his weapons upon the infantry. Mostly overs land among the transport. Many drivers take cover alongside their lorries, the rocky desert preventing much digging of slit trenches. Some men heap up loose stones for cover while others protect their vehicles by filling sandbags and placing them round the radiator and bonnet. And a significant incident takes place. A 6 RMT cook, watching his sweating sergeant finishing a fine slit trench, suggests adding a wing in case of attack from another direction. Half an hour later the L plan is finished. The cook warns of possible attack from yet another angle; after another 30 minutes' excavating the Y plan is complete. At that very moment of triumph all transport is ordered to move up 100 yards. Here, in a

nutshell, is the story of the Second Libyan Campaign.

Five trucks go forward to help evacuate wounded. Drivers **Jones**,¹³ **Mason**¹⁴ and **Finlay**¹⁵ take their truck well up into a wadi still partly held by the enemy. In a tense silence they pick up stretcher cases while both sides hold fire. The four other lorries are not so fortunate, and Driver **Masters**¹⁶ is evacuated with a wounded knee. To relieve **25 Battalion's** RAP, now working at full pressure, Sergeant James **Baird**,¹⁷ with three lorries, runs a shuttle service to the brigade's Advanced Dressing Station.

When the attack on **Point 175** opens, C Section has taken **26 Battalion** five miles south-west to link 6 Brigade with 5 South African Brigade soon after noon. The transport laagers in desert formation, the infantry taking up positions in front, and stray shells begin to land in the transport, a mortar blowing up Captain Brown's vehicle and wounding his driver, George **Rowland**.¹⁸ British tanks are seen making sudden dashes, stopping to fire, then jerking on again. Out of sight German panzers are wresting higher ground from the South Africans, whose remnants retire hastily, leaving an isolated **26 Battalion** to beat off a determined attack. Pat **Ward**¹⁹ sees a South African, a wheel suddenly blown from his truck, shake a fist first towards the enemy then at the sky, uncertain whom to curse. Drivers **Ross**²⁰ and **Reid**²¹ drive forward taking mortar men into position, then make a second trip loaded with mortar bombs. After this, and still under fire, the two help RAP men gather wounded, Reid walking ahead to guide the truck. Both are mentioned in despatches later. After dark **26 Battalion** draws back to 6 Brigade, some RMT men carrying wounded, but Drivers **Elliott**²² and **Davies**,²³ uncomfortably lost after a mine has destroyed their truck, wander round enemy lines for several hours before an armoured car rescues them.

Scattered as they are over a wide area, drivers have different impressions of the day's battle, the company's first introduction to warfare. The 6th RMT is but five weeks old. Drivers are not experienced. Some are unduly impressed by the tumult of battle; a few give too much

heed to the flying rumours of the day; others underestimate the dangers about them. But all have done, and are prepared to do, their duty. Some go further; for instance, the driver who acquires two machine guns, mounts them in a weapon pit, and finds an anti-tank gun moving into position in front. Bitterly the driver complains to the gunner officer that his line of fire is being obstructed. Every hour has its alarms. Sudden explosions a few feet away rock Drivers **Griffin**²⁴ and **Hampton**.²⁵ Unknown to them an anti-tank portée—one of those gallant desert knights without armour—has ripped into position alongside their truck to blaze away at an enemy tank appearing over the escarpment. A Section drivers watch three British tanks pass by their trucks to support the attack. The tanks travel only a short distance before German anti-tank gunners knock them out. Survivors walk back through the lines and Drivers **Mattson**²⁶ and **Ewing**²⁷ give them cups of tea.



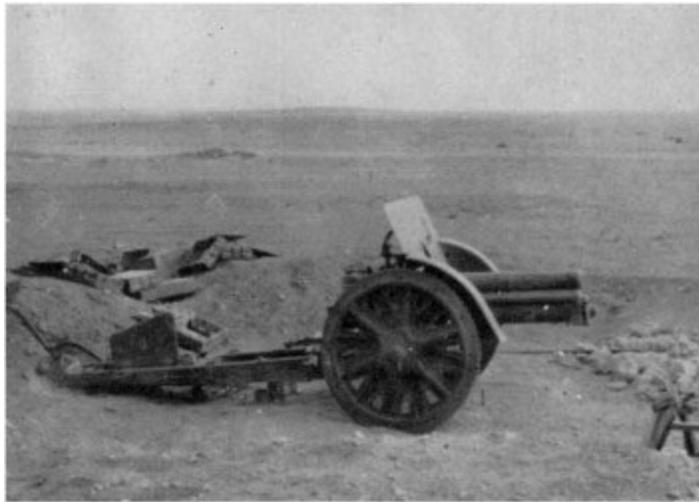
The approach to Sidi Barrani

The approach to **Sidi Barrani**

On the frontier



On the frontier



An Italian gun at Tummar West
An Italian gun at Tummar West



Fort Capuzzo
Fort Capuzzo



Signing for parcels on Christmas morning, 1940

Signing for parcels on Christmas morning, 1940



RMT graves at Sollum after the air raid of Christmas Eve

RMT graves at Sollum after the air raid of Christmas Eve



A land mine, Tobruk

A land mine, Tobruk



Laager area near Derna
Laager area near Derna



The tanks burn savagely. A heavy pall of smoke billows back over the transport lines. There's smoke from other fires, too, and dust and the thud of angry weapons, until at last the light thickens, dusk comes, then merciful night. A great silence settles over the wadis where weary, wounded, and dead men lie. Now drivers help gather more wounded from the battlefield, one man walking in front to guide the lorry around weapon pits and to make sure no wounded are run over. Many a driver is close to tears. He remembers these men two nights ago under 6 RMT's canopies singing 'On the Ball' and 'When Irish Eyes are Smiling'. The dead lie very thick round about. In some places New Zealanders and Germans lie on top of one another.

By midnight Baird's drivers hear that Brigade ADS intends to

evacuate the present spot, believing it will be a battlefield next day. When the last of the wounded and the RAP staff are taken to the dressing station, drivers rest. It's 3 a.m. There's no rest in 6 Brigade's dressing station where 'the sight was ghastly. There appeared to be hundreds awaiting attention. Men were lying on stretchers and on the ground moaning and groaning.... I ²⁸ felt really sick in this atmosphere and wondered how these medical blokes could stand it hour after hour and day after day.'

Other 6 RMT drivers moving wounded, rations, and ammunition learn that all spare drivers are to be organised into a rifle platoon for fighting, but the plan is abandoned. Instead 6 RMT Company, carrying wounded and prisoners, will leave at first light, 24 November, for 13 Corps, B Echelon area, about 15 miles to the east. Trucks move into little groups in widely separated clumps and drivers sleep at last.

The day, which began with 6 Brigade leaving for **Point 175**, sees 5 Brigade remaining holding the **Bardia- Sollum** area, where that brigade, less **21 Battalion**, will stay. The 21st Battalion is brought up to join battle south-east of **Tobruk**. Fourth Brigade is on the move again, soon to join 6 Brigade on the march westwards. The 4th RMT's A and D Sections, ²⁹ with 18 and 19 Battalions aboard, move off, A section running into shellfire which kills Driver **Maxfield** ³⁰ at his seat on the Bren gun defence mounting. The going is rough and ahead lies the enemy, dug in, poised for his attack on **Tobruk**, yet confident in his tanks and in his ability to smash the invaders. The two sections unload the infantry at **Gambut** aerodrome at 3 p.m., then drive back under heavy fire while the airfield falls. Wait now for the next job, see how the lorry is taking it, keep her in running order. From now on it's a fight to the finish on and around the gaunt escarpments of **Sidi Rezegh** and the bare, rocky slopes of **Belhamed** commanding the approaches to **Tobruk**. The dead, the wounded, and the wreckage pile up in the Division's bloodiest battle of the war.

⁵ **Dvr L. N. Proud; New Plymouth; born NZ 26 Aug 1912;**

labourer.

⁶ Cpl M. E. Mitchinson; Palmerston North; born NZ 4 Apr 1918; grocer and storeman.

⁷ L-Cpl W. G. McMurtrie; Invercargill; born NZ 3 Mar 1913; truck driver.

⁸ Dvr J. T. Cleator; Lower Hutt; born England, 6 Oct 1909; slaughterman.

⁹ Dvr W. C. Brian; Christchurch; born Waiiau, 10 Apr 1917; tin worker; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁰ Sgt P. O. G. Burfield-Mills, EM and two clasps; Wellington; born Dunedin, 18 Apr 1906; traffic inspector; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped 1943.

¹¹ Dvr J. L. Borcoski; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Feb 1915; carpenter; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

¹² Dvr H. H. Smithson; Wellington; born Wellington, 9 May 1915; tram conductor; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped to Switzerland 24 Sep 1943; repatriated 24 Sep 1944.

¹³ L-Cpl G. W. Jones; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 20 Dec 1912; lorry driver.

¹⁴ Cpl R. L. Mason; Wellington; born Tasmania, 5 Oct 1914; monumental and quarry worker.

¹⁵ Dvr J. D. Finlay; Tauranga; born Frankton Junction, 17 Sep 1915; bushman.

¹⁶ L-Sgt D. W. Masters; Auckland; born NZ 5 Jan 1919; motor

driver; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁷ S-Sgt J. D. Baird, m.i.d.; Nelson; born NZ 10 Jun 1916; fruit and produce merchant.

¹⁸ Dvr G. A. Rowland; Christchurch; born NZ 26 Jan 1917; truck driver; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁹ L-Sgt P. F. Ward, m.i.d.; Greytown; born Greytown, 2 Jan 1907; civil servant.

²⁰ Dvr R. A. Ross, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born NZ 24 May 1915; lorry driver.

²¹ Dvr R. R. Reid, m.i.d.; Woodville; born Northern Ireland, 19 May 1907; carpenter.

²² Dvr E. Elliott; Auckland; born Auckland, 31 Aug 1919; labourer.

²³ Dvr R. W. Davies; Onehunga; born Dargaville, 30 May 1921; truck driver; wounded 7 Jul 1942.

²⁴ Dvr B. Griffin; Whakapara; born NZ 10 Apr 1918; farmhand.

²⁵ Dvr T. R. Hampton; Ashburton; born Ashburton, 10 Feb 1919; farm labourer.

²⁶ Cpl L. C. Mattson; Auckland; born Auckland, 16 Jul 1918; labourer.

²⁷ L-Cpl E. B. Ewing; Oamaru; born Cromwell, 3 Oct 1912; farm labourer.

²⁸ **Maj H. G. Burton, CO 25 Bn.**

²⁹ **On the way up six 4 RMT trucks carried a company of 19 Bn to an escarpment. The party tried without success to make contact with the harassing guns. Towards late afternoon a conglomeration of transport was sighted on the horizon and the RMT group, scattering, was shelled thoroughly but harmlessly. Gambut and the battalion were reached safely.**

³⁰ **Dvr L. E. Maxfield; born NZ 28 Sep 1911; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

MONDAY, 24 NOVEMBER

Monday, 24 November

Fourth Brigade gets into line with 6 Brigade, which is bringing in its dead from dusty, blood-stained **Point 175**.

Behind the two brigades is an enemy pocket near **Bir el Chleta**. There, at midnight, 4 RMT's C Section lorries have brought **20 Battalion**, last of 4 Brigade's infantry to move west from near **Bardia**. The night journey has been particularly difficult and rough. Every half hour the convoy halted while navigators checked distances and bearings by torchlight under a blanket. The enemy group had to be avoided, and the course was altered more than once when enemy flares soared just a little too closely. The new day brings **Divisional Headquarters** under fire from big guns to the east and north-east. The heavies crunch into the escarpment among the lorries. Their fire ceases, but **20 Battalion's** transport close by is now under fire from the enemy group bypassed in the night. The battalion is to wipe out this enemy group before resuming the drive to **Tobruk** with 4 Brigade.

Now it's C Section's turn to drive **20 Battalion** into battle in the RMT's closest approach so far to those rehearsals around that dummy fort near **Baggush** in October. On a front of about 1000 yards, the 28-odd RMT lorries form up abreast in two lines 600 yards apart. The riflemen, bayonets fixed, jump up under the canopies. Beside each driver and now in command of the truck sits an infantry officer watching for the signal to go. Three miles away the objective, about a hundred German trucks, with guns and infantry in front, moves uncertainly, restlessly. Machine guns, anti-tank guns, and carriers prepare to send covering fire from the right flank.

A squadron of tanks forms up in line abreast and charges, the RMT's

troop-carriers hard behind in the dust. But plans and practice are not always the same. The compass bearing the attackers are to follow from the start to the enemy is 40 degrees. The tanks swing off course, see the Bren carriers, open up and knock out two before they are corrected, while the artillery comes down with a flourish—on the wrong target, miles away. RMT sticks stubbornly to the correct bearing, advancing towards the enemy at a steady 15 miles an hour. The going is fairly rough and from the bobbing lorries drivers glance from side to side to hold good formation. Ahead they see the enemy drawing closer minute by minute, and occasionally they have the uncomfortable thought of ‘one smacking clean through the windscreen’, which at times seems as wide as a barn door. Some drivers meet little fire; others experience a fair amount of mortar and anti-tank fire, laced with lurid streaks as tracer shells zip past. Luckily most of the fire seems about wheel-high, and Captain Coleman and Lieutenant Fernandez, standing through the cab hatches in their pick-up vehicles, are relieved and surprised to see every truck moving with parade-ground precision. When most of the distance is covered, strong small-arms fire shows the objective is reached and, with the first wave of trucks almost on top of the enemy positions, the signal to debus is waved by the leading battalion officer. From their pick-ups the two RMT officers pass on the signal to the trucks. Fire intensifies every moment and, watching the anti-tank shells skimming past their pick-up, Fernandez and his driver agree they are rather like flying-fish. As each three-tonner turns about the riflemen spring from the back and engage the enemy, while the trucks, still in drill order, return considerably faster than they advanced. A number of drivers, in their understandable haste to turn about, forget to refasten tailboards. Several, realising this after travelling some hundreds of yards, come to a swift stop and spring around collecting scattered personal gear and oddments which have fallen out. At a previously arranged place C Section halts to await further orders from the battalion. Immediately drivers check vehicles for casualties. Surprised, they find, apart from a few dents and holes, the only serious damage is a few springs snapped during the vigorous cross-country charge. The old Tummar tradition still lives.

‘The show has gone like clockwork and I feel a justifiable pride in my section,’ notes Coleman. ‘Over what we feel to be a well-earned brew-up, experiences are swapped and only then we realise what a colossal cheek we had to attack an enemy position in a mass of highly vulnerable trucks. But the success of the show proves once again that a well planned move executed with sufficient dash can have a very satisfactory result. The only flaw in the operation from our point of view is the delay in the order from battalion for the re-embussing of the troops. Had the order arrived earlier we could have gone forward and picked up the infantry, saving them an unnecessary march back.’

With the enemy routed, 260 Germans taken for the loss of 21 men, seven tanks and two carriers, and the threat from the rear removed, the men drive on in high heart to the advancing 4 Brigade.

In the meantime on this day, 24 November, the enemy is carrying out a bold and probably rash stroke which spreads confusion and panic far behind the forces grasping towards **Tobruk. Convinced he has soundly defeated the British armour, Rommel decides to overwhelm the forces on the frontier and then return to master **Tobruk**. Leading two German and one Italian armoured divisions, he dashes to the frontier. For two days he will attempt to pin and to crush British forces against the forts, but opposition will be too stiff. By the evening of 26 November the critical state of the Axis forces around **Tobruk** will force the raiders to return. Rommel's roving bands, however, convince many an unarmed unit its last hour has come. And among these startled groups will be 6 RMT Company.**

At 1.30 a.m. a despatch rider, saying he has been seeking Major Hood for about two hours in the darkness, awakens 6 RMT's OC with the news that his company is to get out of it; all lorries will move back to B Echelon 13 Corps at first light. Major Hood calls at Brigade Headquarters at 3 a.m., and then, to make certain all trucks will be released promptly, tries to get in touch with the battalions.

Assembling the company in a hurry is a tricky task. Nighttime duties with the battalions have split sections into small parties. Some guard prisoners or take urgently needed supplies to different destinations. There is ammunition to lug forward, wounded to be gathered and taken back. Not until 7 a.m.—a good half-hour after first light, when the company was supposed to be on its way—is the first section (A Section, under Captain Collins) formed up behind 6 RMT's Company Headquarters group and ready to move with loads of wounded from the ADS nearby. Even now few of B and C Sections' drivers know a company move is on. One moment they are obeying a local order to disperse among the wadis; the next they are being ordered to report to a rendezvous at Company Headquarters, at Brigade ADS, or at Brigade Headquarters which, to complicate matters further, has changed position in the night. Vehicles weave to and fro, the confusion increasing when the enemy's artillery awakes. Soon the ADS comes under shellfire, driving the RMT vehicles so far assembled into a wadi for shelter. The brigade staff captain gives a brief farewell message to Major Hood: 'For God's sake get up rations, ammunition, water and petrol as soon as you can.' The Major returns to help Second-Lieutenants Brown, **Todd**,³¹ and Pool round up into the wadi as many of B and C Sections' trucks as they can find, including captured lorries loaded with hungry prisoners bitterly complaining of exposure to shellfire. **Jim Mackay**³² and **Jack Lash**³³ turn up with a shrapnel-slashed radiator after a night in no-man's-land. Drivers **Gilmore**³⁴ and **Armstrong**³⁵ are missing—later confirmed prisoners of war. Second-Lieutenant Brown, whose offsider, Second-Lieutenant **Irving**,³⁶ is sick with dysentery, says there is still plenty of transport scattered about, and Major Hood goes out in a last effort to collect all his company, ordering every ASC vehicle he sees to drop its load of equipment and make for the wadi. At last, about 9 a.m., two and a half hours late, the RMT transport is off on its 15-mile journey. Sergeant Baird has gone on ahead leading a hastily assembled ambulance convoy made up mainly of RMT lorries.

At least six drivers and three vehicles remain with the battalions. Two C Section lorries, working late carrying **26 Battalion** wounded,

reach Brigade Headquarters well after 6 RMT's convoy has left. Given the compass bearing and vaguely told to follow on, the drivers decide to stay, particularly as prowling tanks are battling in the vicinity. So Corporals **Wells** ³⁷ and **Morris**, ³⁸ Drivers **Whyte**, ³⁹ **Worsnop**, ⁴⁰ **Halliwell**, ⁴¹ and **Beale** ⁴² remain with 6 Brigade, sharing with the infantry the bitter experiences of the following week and returning with the remnants of the New Zealand Division to **Baggush**.

The 6 RMT convoy, heading for where B Echelon 13 Corps is said to be, passes dozens of scurrying vehicles, many of them driving north in the direction the RMT has just left. 'What the hell's going on?' drivers ask, puzzled or angry, or maybe too tired to care. Nothing makes sense. Bowling along, Drivers Hampton and Griffin remain unaware their canopy is blazing from an incendiary bullet until flames lick the cab door. In a flash the two are out, slashing ropes, freeing and flinging aside the canopy, throwing off the reserve of petrol, and tossing sand on to the flames. They save the truck.

Fifteen miles covered and B Echelon of 13 Corps nowhere in sight, Hood leads the convoy on five miles further, then halts for reconnaissance. The last stretch of going has been tough, particularly for the German-made lorries carrying the prisoners. Drivers transfer the captives into empty 6 RMT lorries, tip petrol over the Jerry vehicles, and burn them. On the five-mile run a camouflage net falls from an A Section cooks' truck and a cook, showing devotion beyond the call of duty, leaps out crying 'Keep going, I'll get it'. The net saved, the cook turns to see the last RMT truck vanish in the dust. Alone, with yards of stringy netting streaming from his shoulders, he plods after the convoy's dust. Luckily a **YMCA** van appears from nowhere and gives him a lift for three miles. Afoot and abandoned again, the cook walks calmly on until Captain Collins and Lieutenant **Rimmer** ⁴³ on reconnaissance emerge from a haze. Astounded, they rescue the cook and accept the camouflage net.

Still no trace is found of the 13 Corps area. Vehicles form into column for easier control, one driver at last finding time to change a

tire punctured by a bullet at **Point 175** the previous day. Even with a flat tire he has kept up with the convoy over twenty lively miles.

Suddenly, at 11 a.m., enemy shells spurt not far off from the head of the columns. Rommel's raiders from the west are on the job in the neighbourhood. On again smartly, lorries zigzag for ten miles down shallow wadis, hoping to avoid the enemy's eye. They find an armoured car patrol with a story that everything in the vicinity is clearing out to the border. The 6th RMT carries on, passing wreckage of burning trucks and armoured vehicles. At last, at 4 p.m., the convoy reaches 13 Corps Headquarters, but it too is starting to move now. Hood decides to follow Corps Headquarters group, hoping to get rid of the prisoners and to see if supplies can be sent to hard-pressed 6 Brigade back at **Point 175**. Just then 16 Divisional Petrol Company trucks turn up, bound for the New Zealand divisional administration group through the wire to the south-east. The OC is about to lead the convoy off to the New Zealand area when armoured cars appear. The latest arrivals are dead against going south where, they say, the armoured brigade is fighting a rearguard action against panzers. Instead they urge to head for the wire gap at **Sheferzen**.

Pandemonium lies ahead at **Sheferzen**, where hundreds of vehicles are milling and churning in attempts to crowd through the narrow gap. Avoiding the confusion, 6 RMT tries to sneak down to the **El Beida** gap, about nine miles south. Everything seems quiet but, after the company has gone only half a mile on the way, shells land ahead and transport can be seen under attack. The convoy immediately turns about towards **Sheferzen**, finds a gap, and scurries through.

In Egypt hundreds of vehicles, fleeing like sheep before wolves, are racing north. Rather than add to the chaos the 100-odd RMT trucks continue east, halting in the dusk to count and straighten out the vehicles, but sorting out is considered hopeless when South African and British trucks and cars are found tacked on behind the RMT columns. 'Everything seems to have joined us except Noah's Ark.' The cavalcade,

warned of new dangers ahead (a soldier jumps on to Ed Ewing's vehicle shouting 'Stop! You're heading straight into a minefield!') now moves off north-north-east until the Very lights and gunfire fade away. Again the convoy is stopped about 9 p.m., this time by an officer of a Royal Artillery regiment attached to 4 Indian Division in position at Point 204. 'You're running bang into two Jerry strongholds. Our batteries have been in action against 'em all day.' The company laagers near the gunners. The prisoners, now found to be 280 Germans altogether, are brought into the centre and kept in their trucks under guard by spare drivers.

Drivers are stupefied by events. Questions and rumours fly from man to man. Bewildered and angry knots of men gather in the dark. *Why have we abandoned the battalions we are supposed to be carrying? Aren't we supposed to be going for urgent supplies for the battalions? What about 6 Brigade now? Didn't anyone know panzers are on the loose all over the show? What are we doing? Doesn't anyone know ?* A wan hopelessness fills some of the drivers, worn out not only by long hours of continuous driving but also by irregular meals, the last of which was at least 36 hours ago. They have had no orders. Always it has been—follow the lorry in front. *Follow the ... lorry in front.* Swinging with the convoy away from heap after heap of smouldering wreckage. Turning left, turning right, avoiding risks of bumping into Jerry. Meeting columns and not knowing whether they are friend or foe. The story of [Bir el Chleta](#)—but the other way round it's not so funny. A story spreads that the company is surrounded, to be destroyed or captured in the morning. No reassuring information circulates to deny this. And all this in Egypt, too, Egypt.... What has happened to the ambulance convoy? Nobody knows. So, exhausted, hungry and tired, the drivers bed down beside trucks while other drivers stumble like sleepwalkers to guard trucks where the prisoners sleep soundly.

The ambulance convoy's grim story fortunately is not repeated in RMT's history. Before 6 RMT's main convoy leaves [Point 175](#) in the morning about thirty vehicles, a good many of them RMT lorries, leave under Sergeant Baird for a South African dressing station 15 miles to the

rear. This convoy is attacked on reaching its destination. An armoured column, guns blazing, scatters RMT men and the South Africans. A South African native, trouserless, mounts a motor-cycle and, prostrate over the petrol tank, speeds off, only his enormous naked rear visible. In the frantic escape over ten miles some trucks reach up to 40 miles an hour. The flung-about wounded behind, New Zealanders and enemy alike, bounced and jolted unmercifully, rise to a supreme peak of courage and endurance. Some fleeing lorries carry eight stricken men, not lying in reasonable comfort on stretchers but prostrate and without even blankets on the truck's bare steel tray. The wounded endure their terrible ride without complaint, but at least three men die.

Helpless with a shrapnel hole in his back, Private **Grant**, ⁴⁴ of **25 Battalion**, blesses the RMT driver who thoughtfully and thoroughly roped him into a top stretcher just before the attack began. Lying on his good arm, his other arm numb, Grant watches sky and earth seesawing crazily behind in the frame of the canopy, and realises his life depends on the rope.

‘At this stage I very nearly kick the bucket as the roads [sic] are very rough,’ recalls Private **Hoppe**, ⁴⁵ of **25 Battalion**. Two machine-gun bullets had struck him the previous day on the right shoulder, injuring his spine and emerging from his left shoulder. His right leg and left arm are useless.

‘Some of the wounded suffer great pain as the truck drivers have to go flat out over very bumpy ground,’ notes Private **Robb**, ⁴⁶ also of **25 Battalion**. ‘I can see **Ron Burden** ⁴⁷ with his two hands full of hair that he has pulled out, so great is his pain.’

RMT drivers attempt to act as medical orderlies during halts, and through the day divide their rations and blankets among their stricken passengers, for the convoy has not been stocked with food or water. Only one of the three medical units met during the day gives food and morphia to the wounded. RMT men manage to group together again under their sergeant and laager for the night. Next morning (26

November) the ambulance convoy passes through the frontier wire near **Sidi Omar**. South African medical men take off some of the most severely wounded and give morphia to one uncomplaining New Zealander who, without legs, has survived the stampede. He never regains consciousness. The convoy makes for the **Conference Cairn** area and spends another lonely night in the desert. Drivers watch with growing concern the state of neglected dressings and wounds. Next day (27 November) the convoy safely delivers its brave patients to the railhead.

³¹ **Capt R. A. Todd, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 15 Dec 1917; clerk; twice wounded.**

³² **Cpl R. J. Mackay; Te Rehunga, Dannevirke; born Dannevirke, 18 Nov 1913; butcher.**

³³ **Dvr J. G. Lash; Petone; born Shannon, 16 Aug 1907; labourer.**

³⁴ **Dvr A. J. Gilmore; Te Puke; born Te Puke, 25 Aug 1915; butcher; p.w. Nov 1941.**

³⁵ **Dvr V. A. C. Armstrong; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 17 Mar 1916; storeman; twice wounded; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.**

³⁶ **Capt A. E. Irving; Green Island, Otago; born England, 21 Feb 1914; clerk.**

³⁷ **L-Sgt S. G. Wells; Nelson; born Nelson, 4 Jun 1901; commercial traveller; wounded 6 Mar 1943.**

³⁸ **Cpl D. G. Morris; Rotorua; born Ngaruawahia, 17 Dec 1919; labourer.**

³⁹ **Dvr R. S. Whyte; Katikati; born Hamilton, 6 Sep 1919;**

farmer.

⁴⁰ Sgt S. R. Worsnop; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 5 May 1917; lorry driver.

⁴¹ Dvr F. W. Halliwell; born NZ 6 Jan 1918; milkman; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁴² Dvr T. Beale; Te Awamutu; born Onehunga, 27 Jun 1912; seaman.

⁴³ Capt A. T. Rimmer; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 1 Apr 1915; clerk.

⁴⁴ Pte L. Grant; Oamaru; born Dunedin, 27 Nov 1915; general labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁵ L-Cpl B. Hoppe; Lower Hutt; born Samoa, 23 Apr 1918; storeman; wounded Nov 1941.

⁴⁶ Pte B. H. Robb; Wellington; born Inglewood, 8 Jun 1918; warehouseman; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁷ Pte R. D. Burden; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 9 May 1918; deer culler; wounded Nov 1941.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

TUESDAY, 25 NOVEMBER

Tuesday, 25 November

Sixth Brigade captures a troublesome blockhouse just west of Point 175, takes 200 prisoners, and then gathers for a night attack which fails to break through to Ed Duda. Opposition is fierce, casualties on both sides severe.

Fourth Brigade, to the north, moves four miles forward after dawn, runs into heavy fire, and digs in. The three sections of 4 RMT Company draw back south of Belhamed and Zaafran, awaiting further orders. From now until entering Tobruk their job is to stay put and wait. Except for one air raid—and now enemy bombers and fighters appear daily in moderate strength—the day passes fairly quietly for 4 RMT. In the evening white flares from enemy positions prick the sky. Fourth Brigade's 18 and 20 Battalions, on foot, in moonlight capture Belhamed by bayonet.

The Division's ammunition is low, supplies and water are short, and now with no link-up to the east, hundreds of wounded and almost a thousand prisoners are further problems.

With plenty of problems of its own, B Section of 4 RMT, on water supply work, is worried by roving tanks, artillery fire, occasional bombing, and shifting water points. One water point has changed its position three times in two hours. One B Section convoy runs into seven lost Germans, accepts their surrender, and hands them over to a tank brigade headquarters. Driver Hewlett⁴⁸ is last seen searching an abandoned car when a staff car pulls up beside him. Thought to have been taken prisoner, Hewlett later is reported killed.

B Section 4 RMT acts as a water-carrying section in the Divisional

Supply Column, which comes under the **Divisional Administration Group**, at first located just through the wire where the Division entered **Libya**. Stationed with the group are the workshops sections of the two RMT companies, together with similar sections from other NZASC units. From the front **Divisional Headquarters** sends messages (usually by radio) concerning supplies, reinforcements, ammunition, wounded, and so on, to the **Divisional Administration Group**, which tries to carry out these orders. Near the group is **50 Field Maintenance Centre**, an enormous open-air dump handling all the stores, ammunition, petrol, water, and supplies necessary to maintain 13 Corps in the field. The 50th FMC also receives prisoners from the front. B Section is supposed to help supply the Division with water from water points established wherever operations permit, starting first of all from the water point in 50 FMC. Between 23 and 28 November their efforts to supply the Division are largely thwarted by the movement of enemy armoured divisions.

The 6th RMT's trials are by no means over when the new day, Tuesday, 25 November, begins. The company's laager in the dark near Point 204 lasts only about four hours. The Indians and the gunners are moving back to near the wire gap at **Sheferzen** to form a defensive position around a feature, Point 203. The company follows, twice getting lost. Point 203 is reached after dawn, but transport must move immediately because it is a sitting target for enemy artillery.⁴⁹ On the suggestion of the Indians, the company, led by Major Hood, leaves for **Conference Cairn**, 21 miles away, intending from there to follow the telephone wire east to 5 Indian Brigade headquarters. Once reached, the brigade headquarters could take over the prisoners and 'contact by phone N.Z. Division' for orders for its unhappy waif, 6 RMT.

Seven miles on the way to **Conference Cairn** Hood halts the company for a badly needed breakfast. Many of the men and most of the prisoners have not eaten for two days. Everything seems wonderfully quiet and peaceful at last. Only a small knot of drivers argues fiercely. A rifle has gone off accidentally. Half of them maintain, half deny, that a rifle with safety catch on can go off if dropped on the ground. Abruptly the debate

breaks up to a volley of shots, and from the west enemy armoured cars are coming hard and fast out of the haze.

Drivers race towards their lorries, intending to seize their rifles and fight it out, but in a moment the enemy is among the transport and it's every man for himself. Major Hood, watching prisoners lining up for breakfast, waves them to get aboard and shouts to nearby drivers, 'Get the transport out!' Drivers at the end of the convoy see the enemy race in at high speed, an officer in a people's car bolt upright and spraying the area with tommy-gun bullets. From the rear the raiders seem to be heading straight for the top of the column, attempting to cut it off, but those in front see the German fire on his own men, the prisoners near the cooks' wagon. Major Schmidt, an English-speaking officer, runs out waving a white flag. By the time the German officer leading the armoured cars and the half-tracks mounting light guns reaches the head of the convoy, 6 RMT is on the move.

The celebrated 'Tewfik Stakes' ⁵⁰ is off to a flying start, destination unknown.

Those taking cover spring for their lorries the moment fire slackens. Some get away to a perfect start, others muff the mechanical side of starting, such as the Whangarei man cranking furiously with the ignition key turned off. Some, too far from their lorries, leap on to running-boards of passing vehicles. Even then a few do not get far, suddenly blocked by gallant or demoralised prisoners throwing themselves in front of the lorry to form a human road block. In No. 1 Sub-section, where most of the prisoners are lost in the mad rush, Drivers Barron ⁵¹ and Boyes ⁵² find their lorry stalls at the first run. A prisoner (or ex-prisoner) is sheltering under a wheel. Whether he stays there or not, the second run certainly succeeds, and away they go, their prize passenger, Major Schmidt, missing, believed free. An armoured car heads off two lorries and forces them to a standstill. The breakdown wagon towing the vehicle belonging to Claude Steadman ⁵³ and Jim Cartwright ⁵⁴ has little chance, but doing his best Driver Dick ⁵⁵ drives on, Germans firing directly alongside him until he is killed at the wheel.

Jim ('Dave') Kiihfuss, ⁵⁶ his truck loaded with surplus timber, refuses to move until the stubborn tailboard is fastened properly. His truck whips to a safe spot dead behind a German armoured car, slows down to gather up **Sandy Roger,** ⁵⁷ then charges off at full speed. Jim Mackay's damaged truck, towed by **Bill Macey** ⁵⁸ from **Point 175,** is soon abandoned. Bill, falsely told 'All aboard', speeds off, and a stranded Jim, sprinting east, is picked up by **Eric Newcombe.** ⁵⁹ Further back one driver lolls dead at the wheel. His co-driver, grasping the wheel and pressing the dead man's foot hard down on the accelerator, escapes.

Everywhere spare drivers and passengers give drivers plenty of advice, urging them to 'give her the gun', shouting directions, warnings, encouragement. They shout warnings to anybody met on the way, and in one superb movement stray linesmen at work slide down telephone poles, fling ladders into trucks, and vanish. The enemy pursues for perhaps three miles before returning to the scene of the original attack. He has killed two drivers, captured 17, and taken about five lorries and two motor-cycles. The danger receding, trucks slow down, groups form, stragglers come in, and the lost and scattered bands, still ignorant of the company's official destination, continue east.

When the German strikes, **Sergeant Lionel Jemmett** ⁶⁰ recalls, a far-ranging 6 RMT driver passes through a quiet area where a high-ranking British officer is fondly feeding a cackling crate of fowls lashed to his truck.

'Tanks!' yells the driver, slowing up.

'Poppycock!' says the Briton, tossing another biscuit to his hens. 'We've a couple of armoured brigades exercising near the wire, old man.' Just then a cannon shell rips through the crate. The Briton disappears in a cloud of feathers.

Some time later and a good many miles nearer **Cairo,** the driver passes the same British officer once more. This time, alone and henless, he is anxiously sweeping the desert with an enormous pair of binoculars.

‘Old man,’ shouts the driver, ‘you’re ... out of luck if you’re looking for them ... fowls.’

At Conference Cairn Major Hood finds Second-Lieutenants Pool and Todd, two sergeants, and a bare horizon. The sergeants set out to seek and collect transport. The officers go part of the way to the scene of the attack, remove Driver **Kenning⁶¹ from a riddled lorry and bury him at **Conference Cairn**, then follow the telephone wire nine miles east and set up Company Headquarters. Sergeant **Toogood**⁶² turns up with 39 three-tonners, two 15-cwts. and three motor-cycles. Still nobody knows how many trucks to expect, for nobody knows how many trucks have stayed with the battalions, how many are in the ambulance convoy, how many are lost or captured, and how many are still ploughing east. Second-Lieutenants Brown and Todd arrive. The latter begins to sort out the trucks and Brown leads an armed party to near the scene of the attack and captures two German motor-cyclists engrossed in mending a puncture. In the meantime Hood has found 13 Corps Headquarters (‘near the frontier wire’) and is told to await further orders. Pool goes east, calling at the railhead for scattered drivers and evacuating to hospital the dysentery patients, Second-Lieutenant Irving and two drivers. For most of 6 RMT the campaign is over.**

⁴⁸ **L-Cpl W. Hewlett**; born NZ 5 Aug 1916; labourer; killed in action 3 Dec 1941.

⁴⁹ **Waiting behind until facing capture by an enemy attack were Capt Collins and Lt Rimmer. They were to redirect six RMT trucks which did not turn up. These six trucks belonged to a small convoy of twelve RMT trucks which went ahead of the main convoy in the night carrying soldiers of a Sikh battalion to near Point 203. On the way Dvrs Cartwright and Steadman struck a very deep slit trench which put their lorry out of action. The drivers ‘cooeed’ in the dark trying to keep touch. Trucks were scattered at dawn when an infuriating order arrived to turn about and return the Sikhs to Point 204. Six trucks, not receiving the order, dumped the Sikhs near Point 203 and joined the main convoy. The remaining five trucks returned their Sikhs**

to Point 204, collecting on the way Sikhs earlier and wrongly debussed. Trying to find 6 RMT Coy, these five trucks got lost, were shelled, scattered, and by good fortune eventually managed to rejoin the company. Dvr Frank Bushell was killed at this time when his truck was ambushed. Germans were about to help the relief driver, Doug Nicol, bury his comrade, but vanished when a South African patrol appeared.

⁵⁰ Commemorated in a 6 RMT song to the tune of 'Bless 'em All'. Amended, one chorus runs:

Follow me, follow me, follow me,
And we'll be in Egypt for tea.
You can join the rearguard
Of your local Home Guard.
Get cracking, my lads, follow me.

⁵¹ **L-Cpl D. I. Barron; Lower Hutt; born Lower Hutt, 2 Sep 1913; clerk.**

⁵² **Cpl P. R. Boyes; Masterton; born Wellington, 10 Jan 1919; clerk.**

⁵³ **L-Cpl C. C. Steadman; Moerewa; born NZ 30 May 1905; lorry driver.**

⁵⁴ **Dvr J. A. Cartwright; born NZ 9 Aug 1903; farmer; killed in action 20 Jul 1942.**

⁵⁵ **Dvr W. H. Dick; born NZ 10 Nov 1918; shepherd; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.**

⁵⁶ **Dvr J. Kiihfuss; Patea; born Waverley, 17 Jun 1914; farmer.**

⁵⁷ **L-Cpl A. J. Roger; Owaka, South Otago; born Owaka, 27 Jun 1918; truck driver.**

⁵⁸ Sgt W. O. Macey; Wellington; born Wellington, 20 Jun 1917; lorry driver; wounded Mar 1943.

⁵⁹ Cpl E. R. Newcombe; Auckland; born NZ 8 Jun 1915; butter factory assistant.

⁶⁰ Sgt L. F. Jemmett; Lower Hutt; born Faversham, England, 21 Jan 1919; warehouseman.

⁶¹ Dvr R. J. Kenning; born NZ 1 Sep 1906; truck driver; died of wounds 25 Nov 1941.

⁶² Maj E. S. Toogood; Gisborne; born Featherston, 25 Jan 1910; chain store manager; manager NZ Forces Club, Cairo.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

WEDNESDAY, 26 NOVEMBER

Wednesday, 26 November

The RAF's Marylands and Blenheims heavily bomb the enemy about **Belhamed** (and the Essex Regiment on **Ed Duda**, causing 35 casualties), where 4 Brigade holds on, with the **Tobruk** garrison almost within reach. Sixth Brigade, exposed, is under heavy fire. The escarpment as far as the mosque, a solitary and weird landmark ahead, must be taken. All troops are steadily tiring and the long lists of dead, wounded, and missing mount steadily.

All day 4 RMT Company, dispersed, waits for orders in its park south of **Zaafran**. Some trucks move prisoners; drivers of others guard captives, bury the dead of both sides, and help move slender rations and ammunition towards the battalions. Then in the night **19 Battalion**, which has been in reserve for most of the campaign, is on the move. Escorted by tanks clean through surprised and demoralised groups of enemy, it goes on foot over the four miles west to link at last with the **Tobruk** garrison. The meeting is at **Ed Duda** just after midnight, with only one man killed—a cook run over by a Bren carrier. **Tobruk's** long isolation is over—momentarily. (A famous message by the 13 Corps' Commander, Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen runs: ' **Tobruk** is as relieved as I am.')

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

THURSDAY, 27 NOVEMBER

Thursday, 27 November

At **Capuzzo**, in part of 5 Brigade's area, raiding German tanks and infantrymen overrun the B Echelon area of **23 Battalion**. The attack comes from a totally unexpected direction. No infantry are near. Headquarters Company of **23 Battalion** rallies for a brave counter-attack, assisted by drivers from 309 General Transport Company (carrying 5 Brigade). In one group of British drivers is Captain George G. Berry.⁶³ Armed only with a pickaxe handle, he leads the charge until he is killed. His prompt and courageous action does much to save the position. Some 18 British drivers are captured; all but seven are freed later.

At dawn, after bloody night fighting, **Sidi Rezegh** is in the hands of a sadly depleted 6 Brigade. Just to the north 4 Brigade defends the precarious link with **Tobruk**. The 4 RMT vehicles receive occasional shelling which continues until they leave for **Tobruk**. Slit trenches are deepened hurriedly and tin hats become suddenly popular. Many vehicles are peppered with shrapnel, and radiators, tires, and canopies are slashed. Major Stock and his driver, Charlie O'Cain,⁶⁴ just dodge a foot-long fragment which passes through the roof of the car, through the seat and through the floor. The LAD men work swiftly to repair all damage, and among them Corporal Harry **Waddell**⁶⁵ makes sure no D Section trucks are unserviceable. Driver **Waddick**⁶⁶ drives his truck through heavy shelling, mortar and machine-gun fire to gather up seriously wounded infantrymen. Warned by an infantry officer that he would be under heavy fire, Waddick replied he would 'give it a go'. His courage won him the MM.

Quartermaster-Sergeant **Skeates**⁶⁷ and others set out on daily missions for supplies and water, hoping to contact Divisional Supply

Column's vehicles coming forward from the wire. Wandering enemy patrols drive them home. Drivers continue to bury the dead of both sides.

⁶³ Capt Berry, an Oxford graduate, was a partner in the Berry Brothers' wineshop at the bottom of St. James' Street, London. The shop dates from about 1670 and inside and out is practically the same as when it was first built as a coffee house.

⁶⁴ Dvr C. T. O'Cain; Christchurch; born Australia, 8 Jan 1918; butcher.

⁶⁵ Cpl H. Waddell; Wellington; born NZ 4 Jun 1903; contractor and accountant.

⁶⁶ Dvr A. H. Waddick, MM; Woodlands, Southland; born NZ 4 Nov 1918.

⁶⁷ S-Sgt J. H. Skeates, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 23 Feb 1913; clerk.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

FRIDAY, 28 NOVEMBER

Friday, 28 November

This is the day when the enemy's three armoured divisions, having returned from their rampage to the frontier, prepare to sweep aside the wounded New Zealand Division. They make a good start by overrunning two companies of **24 Battalion.**

In the afternoon the Divisional Administration Group, having moved westwards to near **Point 175 the previous day, comes up, despite shelling, to 4 RMT's area behind the battalions. Still with the group are B Section 4 RMT (what precious water it has left goes to the Main Dressing Station patients and prisoners of war) and the two RMT workshops sections. These new arrivals wait until darkness and then, all intact, leave on a hectic journey for the comparative safety of **Tobruk**. A, C, and D Sections 4 RMT remain with Headquarters near **Zaafran**.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

SATURDAY, 29 NOVEMBER

Saturday, 29 November

The day opens with a mass of 300 vehicles, with tanks, moving towards the Division. Whose? With the *Afrika Korps* closing in on all sides, the supply column has broken through, led by Colonel Clifton⁶⁸ in a bullet-riddled staff car. Heartening too is the arrival of more ammunition from **Tobruk**. Shelling continues on both sides, together with heavy bombing by the **RAF**, as the enemy probes. Enemy tanks masquerading cheerfully as British help enemy infantry win **Point 175** from the remnants of **21 Battalion**. At dusk Sergeant-Major Gay and six men escort German prisoners along the narrow corridor to **Tobruk**. Captain Blanch, in charge of D Section, is evacuated with influenza to the 6 Field Ambulance ADS, which is overrun, and he is taken prisoner but later escapes in a truck. Second-Lieutenant Smith takes over D Section.

⁶⁸ **Brig G. H. Clifton**, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Green-meadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; CRE 2 NZ Div 1940-41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps 1941-42; commanded 6 Inf Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped in **Germany** Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1949-52; Commandant Northern Military District, Mar 1952-Sep 1953.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

SUNDAY, 30 NOVEMBER

Sunday, 30 November

Another mess of transport——Italian——is sent packing. German and Italian guns rake the area. The link with **Tobruk** must be held. The mauled battalions hang on desperately. With the sun behind them 51 tanks attack, and **Sidi Rezegh** falls in the twilight. Most of 24 and 26 Battalions are lost.

By tomorrow the Division's killed, wounded, and captured will total over four thousand.

When night brings relief from shelling and mortar attack 4 RMT Company is ordered into **Tobruk**, along with all the Division's surplus transport. Drivers are most unhappy at being ordered away from the infantry, and the feelings of most men are summed up in one lieutenant's view: 'Apparently the powers that be believe trucks are irreplaceable while men are not.' Actually there were now so many trucks and so few infantry that the task of protecting the surplus transport was impossible. The three sections and headquarters, empty, move off over the desert. Dim shapes rise up and are gone——broken guns, dead tanks, smashed trucks. In one burnt-out tank a mysterious light glows steadily. An eerie sight. The trail leads through narrow gaps in barbed wire, along paths marked by white tape through minefields, past hollows and flats swept with tracer. One by one the blacked-out trucks file from the battlefield to enter the defences of **Tobruk**, and only shadows lie under canopies where singing riflemen sat shoulder to shoulder but twelve nights ago.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 8 – BEYOND TOBRUK

CHAPTER 8

Beyond Tobruk

ADRY moat, barbed-wire entanglements, and deeply dug fortifications made up the outer defences circling well into the desert to protect **Tobruk**. Like drawbridges, bridges which could be whipped away at a moment's notice spanned the anti-tank ditches. Across such bridges and through narrow but strongly guarded openings in the entanglements appeared 4 RMT on the first morning of December 1941. The convoy struck the bitumen coastal road—it felt like velvet after the desert—leading past large dumps of Italian guns and vehicles of all descriptions, together with tall stacks of bombs and shells. The earth was torn and furrowed with bomb craters and scarred with old earthwork defences. The convoy passed the prisoner-of-war camp and the British cemetery. Both had grown a great deal since the company called in at **Tobruk** a year ago on the way to **Benghazi**. In the harbour all types and sizes of stricken ships were seen, some practically submerged, others resting on the sea bottom with sterns jutting up duck-fashion. ¹ Still in the same position after more than a year lay an Italian cruiser and two grounded and burnt-out Italian liners.

Praying they would never be evacuated by sea, ² drivers skirted the battered township and about 10 a.m. drove into the dispersal area below the escarpment running south of **Tobruk**. Empty dugouts harbouring enormous rats and fleas were taken over promptly. A few enemy shells came over and artillery in a wadi replied. Before nightfall aircraft bombed **Tobruk** in a thunder of anti-aircraft guns. More raids followed daily, but not until 8 December—a black day with news of **Japan** now at war—was 4 RMT ³ affected: six D Section lorries were damaged by 22 diving Stukas. In no time Workshops, flat out all this month on repairs of all kinds, had them running again.

For four days gangs of RMT men worked on the wharves, handling between air raids and occasional shelling a great deal of ammunition and explosives. One party under Second-Lieutenant **Battersby** ⁴ worked

non-stop for 13 hours before a relief under Lieutenant Burt took over to carry on from dawn to dusk. Among mail received at this time was a glum newspaper cutting saying wharf workers in **Auckland** were demanding 'danger money' for loading 303 ammunition for overseas. Turning briefly from wharf work, a party helped stretcher-bearers move wounded, among them survivors from the shambles of the *Chakdina*. This ship, crammed with prisoners and wounded men, was torpedoed on 5 December on leaving **Tobruk**. Some of those rescued told of a pipe-smoking officer among about eighty New Zealanders who went down. Severely wounded and without tobacco, he accepted a cigarette, his first for many years, and smoked silently to the end.

With **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed** again occupied, **Tobruk** once more was encircled. Wasting no time, the enemy struck against the garrison's outer defences, to make slight headway in his final attack on 4 December before being driven off. But by now growing pressure from mobile columns, reaching out from reorganised 30 Corps in the south, began to tell. With reluctance or relief, depending mainly on nationality, the Germans and Italians turned west and **Tobruk** stood free.

The job of rooting the enemy from defences at **Gazala**, west of **Tobruk**, was handed over to 13 Corps. This sent 4 RMT Company on the move again, out into a raging dust-storm. Back to the frontier, Major Stock navigating, nosed A, C, and D Sections, to pick up riflemen of 5 New Zealand Brigade. The RMT trucks, with 22, 23, and 28 (Maori) Battalions aboard, made off towards the enemy at **Gazala**, together with 4 Indian Division and British and Polish units from **Tobruk**. Bringing up the rear came B Section, springs weighed down with supplies for the brigade. On 11 December the three-tonners had taken 5 Brigade infantry to **Acroma**. From here C Section, carrying **23 Battalion**, drove along the main **Derna** road, the other two sections moving with the rest of the brigade along the inland track running west from **Acroma**. C Section watched precise British gunners support **23 Battalion's** successful attack on a well-defended ridge, Mengar el Hosci, which yielded 500 prisoners. D Section spectacularly carried the **Maori Battalion** into a triumphant

and bloodthirsty assault on Sidi Mgherreb. Charging into heavy shellfire, the RMT lorries kept on to within 100 yards of enemy positions, then swung about while the Maoris vaulted out and, in full battlecry, bayonets up, swept over the ridge. Italians streamed back in hundreds until 1123 were rounded up, the Maoris losing only five killed and eleven wounded.

Mustering his last resources, Rommel counter-attacked with dive-bombers and tanks on 14 December, the day the **Polish Brigade** from **Tobruk** came into line alongside 5 Brigade. The thrust failed—and Driver **Martin** ⁵ was dead out of luck. He had just had a poisoned finger dressed and bandaged when the first bombs fell. A fragment severed not only the poisoned finger but its neighbours as well. Driver **Park** ⁶ was also injured. Another driver sheltered unhurt in a cave while, ten yards away, his load of ammunition blasted to bits for an hour.

By the following afternoon the advancing Poles and Maoris had won parts of the escarpment overlooking **Gazala**. Enjoying a modest triumph of their own were Captain Coleman, Bill Ritchie, Joe **Boland** ⁷ and Bryan **Ward**. ⁸ After investigating a 10-ton Fiat diesel truck stranded in a slit trench, the four towed it out and were about to leave when Coleman, peering through field-glasses, saw a party moving along the bottom of an escarpment. 'We're going to bring this crowd in,' Coleman told his drivers. The canopy of the three-tonner was let down (to give the impression of infantry concealed within), and the two lorries charged boldly towards the escarpment. A white flag went up. Led by a major, 24 Italians surrendered their arms, climbed back happily into their diesel truck, and were delivered by the RMT men to a rather astonished Brigade Headquarters.

The Maori and Polish successes left a strained **Gazala** line in poor shape to meet further attacks on 16 December. That night the enemy fled, abandoning equipment and guns, and leaving behind many smashed and derelict vehicles. Fifth Brigade had fired its last shot in the Second Libyan Campaign, but 4 RMT was to continue behind the advance into the west. Pursuing along the coastal road, British forces reached the plain south of **Benghazi** by 21 December, while others

hunted enemy columns across the inland desert to **Agedabia**. From there the enemy drew back to strongpoints behind salt marshes at **El Agheila** and his retreat ended.

By New Year's Eve 4 RMT was working at **Msus**, about 200 miles on from **Tobruk**. For the last supper of 1941 D Section enjoyed four gazelle, shot by a hunting party which also collected one chicken from a bedouin for 'a small cup of tea and two packets of biscuits'. Drivers were now back on the old routine of bringing up supplies and building dumps, for although barges were expected to unload at **Derna**, the advanced army still depended on petrol and supplies brought up by the lorries of three RASC companies and 4 RMT. In four days the New Zealand drivers saw two field supply depots filled and another dump moved. Some 25,000 gallons of petrol were brought on from **Tobruk**, but the company's vehicles alone had almost used up this amount of petrol in covering practically 160,000 miles in December. Christmas Day—and that Christmas dinner—passed almost unnoticed except for a bottle of beer and 50 cigarettes for each driver.

The 6th RMT celebrated a dusty, gritty Christmas in 'the hell-hole of the desert,' **Bir Abu Misheifa**, at the end of the desert railway in Egypt. With trains running no further, trucks took over supplies for the desert soldiers still attacking **Halfaya** and **Bardia**. From the **Conference Cairn** area the scattered company had gone back to **Fuka**, where counting and reorganisation showed that about seventeen vehicles had been lost. ⁹

A mean, dusty wind scraped almost ceaselessly across **Misheifa's** rocky, barren plateau, too arid for even the tough camel-thorn bush. Sand sneaked by the spoonful into food and tea, piled up against dusty bivvies, buried possessions left outside for a day or two, and plagued mechanics working behind a meagre awning for a wind-break. Marquees or even bits and pieces of building material were unobtainable. Entertainment or sport was nil. The only bright moments came from the visits of Captain (bogus) Jackson to the **Naafi**, where his legally worthless signature and fictitious regiment won alcohol reserved for

officers. Yet in this desolation a sudden act of gallantry deeply impressed drivers. A young Hurricane pilot, on his first flight after leaving the green aerodromes of England, crashed to his death rather than pancake his faulty machine in 6 RMT's lines.

From their wretched base 6 RMT lorries jolted westwards at a steady twelve miles an hour. On their two-day return trips they carried supplies, petrol, water, ammunition, food, and mail to **Sheferzen**, a forward base for the siege of stubborn **Halfaya** and **Bardia**. This rocky run was among the worst in North Africa. 'When dust storms weren't about we made ones of our own. Dust clouds rising from trucks ahead merged into a dirty swirling curtain which boxed all sense of direction,' noted one driver. 'The inside of a cab, no matter how sand proof you thought it, soon became like the inside of a vacuum cleaner, choking and blinding both drivers. Men used handkerchiefs and goggles, or eyeshields for protection, but before long these felt hot, sticky and irritating and were chucked away.' When **Bardia** caved in on 2 January two sections switched to the **Tobruk** run, a six-day return trip soon cut to four days. This inland trail was more interesting. C Section drivers one day swore they had seen lions near **Gambut**—a statement open to doubt. When **Halfaya** fell 15 days after **Bardia**, trucks took to the damaged coastal road, using **Sollum** Pass on the way up and returning through **Halfaya** **Pass**. Backloads varied from troops to empty (and often worthless) petrol tins. One lot of anti-aircraft shells was taken to **Tobruk** and back again, just another unsolved military mystery.

Well to the west of 6 RMT Company, 4 RMT's convoys from **Msus** shuffled nearly 2000 tons of supplies to Bir Rgheua and to **Saunnu**, a dismal outpost with a windmill and a decayed fort. Once tracks were established, delivering the goods became routine work. Dissatisfied with the beaten track, Second-Lieutenant Smith navigated a direct route from **Msus** to the windmill, saving 15 miles.

'Towards the end of our stay the newly formed 1 Armoured Division arrived, mostly straight from England, no desert training, and as raw as you like,' recalls Major Stock. 'They had come across from **Tobruk**. Our

first notification of their arrival was a few trucks in our area one day with a large white elephant [rhinoceros] as the Divisional sign, which soon became known as “the pregnant pig”. They were completely lost, had no food and not enough petrol to get them any further. Their destination was vague. From then on, for a good fortnight, trucks, scout cars, despatch riders, and tanks were continuously pulling in to ask information as to their destination. It was bitterly cold, and the varied dress of the officers was astounding. Sometimes we had to look hard to find the face, almost submerged by the huge collar of the sheepskin coat, etc. Corduroy trousers were everywhere. This was our first introduction to the motley dressed English officer, later caricatured as the “Two Types”. However, for all their odd outfits they put up a great show later on—the few who got out.’

In the middle of January, when heavy rains turned sand into mud, the German swept out in strength yet again, to bypass **Agedabia** and thrust towards Antelat. **Msus** had to be evacuated, and once more 4 RMT with little delay turned to **Tobruk**, leaving a group of lorries to lend a hand in the evacuation. After much shuffling and scuffling of orders this group, except for twelve lorries under Sergeant Gill, returned through **Derna** to **Tobruk**.

Events now taking place led to two remarkable escapes, both by 4 RMT men. While carrying two companies of **Welsh Guards**, Gill's party of twelve lorries was attacked six miles out of blitzed and broken **Benghazi**.¹⁰ After giving an order to ‘abandon vehicles and make a get-away’, Gill attempted a breakthrough, but the road was mined. He split his men into small groups, each party managing to raise a compass and a map, and led off a group of three RMT men, Corporal **Roa**,¹¹ Drivers **Blackburn**¹² and **McKinnon**.¹³ Behind followed Drivers Martin and **Wyatt**¹⁴ with two Welshmen. The plan was for all RMT men to rendezvous eight hours later and about 24 miles south. Nobody turned up, and although one or two got as far as **Derna**, all but Gill's party were captured.¹⁵

Daylight showed Germans on the hunt. In vain Martin and Wyatt

covered themselves with a blanket. A kick in the ribs told them they were in the bag, together with the two Welshmen. Crouched behind a stone wall, Gill's party held their breath while Germans filed past little more than a yard away. When the enemy moved off at last Gill, who spoke fluent Arabic, questioned a passing **Senussi** woman and learned that British troops were nearby. Sure enough distant trucks turned out to be British, but the occupants were Germans. The party crept away and the long trek across the desert to freedom began. In the afternoon enemy forces bobbed up in all directions, and capture seemed inevitable. As luck would have it, a few camels appeared on the scene to give the sergeant a brainwave.

He and his men walked in among the camels while the helpful owner drove them towards an abandoned cemetery. Leaving the sheltering animals, the drivers leapt over a low wall and hid among rubble and graves until dark. In the night they walked south for eight hours, waiting in vain through a quiet day for RMT men to appear. In the dark they headed due east, aiming for **Tobruk**. If the port were cut off again, they would swim for it. McKinnon, who had injured a leg, was limping badly. He showed great spirit in his determination not to handicap the party. Blackburn, the fittest of them all, was very tired that evening. Whenever the party halted he crumpled to the ground, instantly asleep. That evening the party learned its first lesson: never to walk in pitch darkness. In the gloom they wandered into a German aerodrome, passing within a few feet of Germans sound asleep in their cars. Fortunately the enemy troubled as much about sentries as we did.

In the moonlight next evening dogs started barking furiously, and from the shadows four armed **Senussi** lifted their rifles. This looked like the end. Yet the moment the sergeant explained his men were British flashing smiles appeared. Delighted at the drivers' escape, the **Senussi** mixed flour and water and baked a damper on a strip of tin over a small fire. McKinnon, fascinated at the ritual of making tea, noticed that first a half-filled teapot was brought to the boil, then tea, sugar, and mint were added. Next the teapot was filled to the brim and boiled again. The

eldest man tasted the brew, strengthened and sweetened it until satisfied, poured it three times, and then handed it around. The warm food tasted delicious after the day's meagre allowance: one small bar of chocolate each for breakfast and lunch and a tin of meat and vegetables divided among the four for tea. Questioning the **Senussi**, Gill, whose compass and map readings never once were at fault, checked and pinpointed their position on the map and learned of areas where friendly nomads could be found. Most of the tribesmen detested only the Italians.

After this the four, walking sometimes by day, sometimes by night, went from one **Senussi** family to another, passing through the shifting, tiny communities sprinkled over the desert and the worn-out hills inland. The men averaged a steady 24 miles daily. The leader, holding the compass to his belt, would guide the rest for 50 minutes. After a ten-minute spell the next man would take over. They were never desperate for water—for the first few days it rained steadily—their boots were good, and not even 'a pitiless sun' drove them mad, but they certainly got mad at one another now and then, and several times one couple nearly came to blows. The **Senussi** kept them comfortably supplied with water and food (some of it British bully beef). One well-meaning Arab insisted that the refugees should share his precious store of army biscuits, badly soaked in kerosene. Feigning hunger, the drivers put on a good act and departed belching kerosene for the rest of the day. Occasionally they discussed the food they would eat when free, and later an over-sympathetic press report, describing how their stomachs 'were groaning for oysters and juicy steak with half an inch of lovely fat around it', resulted in Gill receiving tinned oysters from New Zealand until he hated the sight of them.

The main trouble came from blistered and bleeding feet caused by having no change of socks, and the hem of soaked greatcoats chafed more skin away from the backs of their legs. **Senussi** women healed this with camel fat, for the nomads in their homespun tents were sympathetic and kind. On the New Zealanders' arrival a bowl of milk passed from hand to hand, and from this milk was sucked vigorously and

noisily, never gently swallowed. Copying the custom, the drivers nearly choked themselves. McKinnon liked sheep's milk best of all: 'a lovely drink very much like a vanilla milkshake.' After the milk came a bowl of sour curds or macaroni, scooped up sandwich-fashion between bits of flat bread. Titbits were barley or wheat toasted over a fire on a tin tray and eaten husks and all. Over coffee the nomads questioned the drivers for hours, showing insatiable interest in farming and education. 'Priest, schoolteacher, everything' in the community was one man, sometimes little better than an ignorant loud-mouth. Late at night drivers bedded down with the family under one blanket. Womenfolk were usually sent to another tent, but after they had gone curious eyes could be seen peeping under the tent. One night a young **Senussi** girl looked adoringly and silently at one of the RMT men. The RMT man looked at the muskets near by and coughed sadly. Approvingly, the old man handed him more baked barley.

The drivers learned how the nomads with small flocks of goats, long-tailed sheep, and a few camels moved steadily from place to place in the desert and in the scraggy hills, following centuries-old tracks which invariably travelled due east and west. Once a year a couple of men would go to the sea for salt and to town markets for trade and provisions. Everyone else remained in the desert, eternal in their simplicity. The New Zealanders saw how an old man would sit singing and talking for hours to his sheep. The moment he stopped the sheep huddled round him, for his silence warned of foxes and other beasts of prey.

The drivers skirted El Mechili after circling Italian staff-cars had spotted and then lost them as they took prompt cover in shallow hollows. Next morning an **RAF** plane flew overhead, dipping its wings while the party waved coats, shouted, and danced up and down with joy. Surely transport would pick them up now. But nothing happened. In the late afternoon Gill went forward to investigate transport which he thought was captured German and Italian vehicles. Drawing close, and seeing with a start that the soldiers had peaks to their caps, he lay flat

on the ground until dusk, and then failed to find his three companions. How could he identify himself without giving himself away? The sergeant moved in widening circles, calling softly 'morepork' in the dark until he heard: 'Is that you, Tom?' It was McKinnon's voice. He was back in the fold again.

Following familiar tracks the four made for the south of **Tmimi**. Thirst now threatened. Only half a bottle of water was left. Systematically shaking and kicking a litter of tins and scattered junk, Roa found a 44-gallon drum of water. 'We cleaned up fine, drank as much as we could, and went on. Sleeping one night until the moon rose we woke up to find Jerry transport had moved in all round us, a fine setup. They were all sleeping by their trucks. We tiptoed through unchallenged and walked like hell.' The new day brought dust trails in the distance and, sick and tired of delays and alarms, Blackburn went on alone, to return, beaming, on the bonnet of a South African armoured car. It was all over now. Taking all chances, the four had walked 300 miles, zigzagging over desert and foothills to safety near **Gazala**, in twelve days and nights they would never forget.

On the morning Gill's party escaped, Drivers Martin and Wyatt were whisked from the cover of their blanket to a cage near **Benghazi** and separated. With 14 other prisoners, Hori Martin received no food or water for 36 hours. Then each man got a mug of water and a piece of brown bread daily.

After ten days Martin could stand no more. His hopes soared when he noticed one evening that the guard outside their barbed-wire pen did not close the padlock properly on the gate. Inside the pen he found and scraped free a large rock from the soil. The Maori smuggled the rock to the gate and settled down to watch the guard like a cat. Two hours after midnight his chance came. The sentry, yawning, turned his back on the prisoners and seemed to lean wearily against the wire. Martin seized the rock, wormed his way towards the guard, 'and it was a comparatively easy matter for me to reach through the fence and tap him on the head with the stone. The guard dropped without a sound. I then aroused the

rest of the party, opened the gate, and we escaped, splitting into parties of twos and threes.' With an English sergeant who had a compass, Martin headed for Soluch, meeting a friendly **Senussi** who gave them food and water and hid them for the day. They then made north and followed the coast east for two days without food or water. Again a **Senussi** came to their aid. After hiding all day from enemy transport streaming east, they struck south into the desert and sheltered in a cave. Avoiding long lines of German traffic next day they kept on south, suffering severely from rain and cold in the night. Morning brought them close to a native village where they received food and water before pressing on, but they soon grew weak, covering less and less ground as the days passed.

One day, like a vision, a white house appeared behind trees. In spite of all Martin's warnings the Englishman went forward and was seized by a sentry. Martin fled, running into a native who took him to a **Senussi** officer and his wife. The two treated him kindly, offering food and details of how to reach the British lines. After four more days in the desert, when 'nothing very eventful took place', Martin met more nomads, among them to his astonishment an English-speaking Italian, a deserter from the Italian Army, 'and quite a nice chap too, married, with a wife and kids. Maybe he'd deserted from them too. He was very happy.' Here the RMT man rested for several days. Now and again he and the deserter would chat amiably about the war. When Martin left the Italian gave him a complete Arab outfit. In these robes and with battledress and rations in a sack slung over his shoulder, he strode manfully over the desert, passing from one band of helpful **Senussi** to another, until early in April he walked into British soldiers around **Tmimi**, nearly 200 miles away from **Benghazi**. He received the MM for this escape.

The retreat which began at **Agedabia** slowed up and stopped at the **Gazala** line, where only a few weeks ago the enemy had manned his second line of defence. Behind a dusty, windblown strip of no-man's-land, each side worked night and day to build yet more powerful barriers of strongpoints. The importance of efficient transport increased.

Weaving like ants between the frontier, **Tobruk**, and the **Gazala** line, columns of 4 RMT lorries carried South Africans, the President Stein Regiment (Palestinians), Sikhs, the Durham Light Infantry, Poles, and the Louis Botha Regiment. At the end of February, when sandstorms licked gaunt escarpments and swirled unchecked down desolate wadis, the news came through that Libyan duties were drawing to a close. Drivers and their trucks were creaking for a spell, for 4 RMT's men had driven, altogether, more than 1,109,000 miles in the last six months.

During the last few weeks, with the final resistance at **Libya's** frontier overcome, 6 RMT Company had moved up from the dreary frontier area to **El Adem**, handy to **Tobruk** and not far from the battle zone at **Gazala**. On this move the company had helped 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, fresh from training in the Gulf of **Suez**, travel from the railhead to **El Adem**. Captain Good had replaced Major Hood as OC 6 RMT on 2 February, and Captain 'Boundary Bill' **Davis**,¹⁶ soon to win wide popularity, took over A Section from Captain Collins. Settling down at **El Adem**, 6 RMT remained on transport duties to and from **Tobruk**.

A convoy arriving in the **Tobruk** supply depot would disperse among the food stocks until its turn for loading came. Loads were always mixed, from all kinds of canned goods to fresh vegetables. Many Greek and Cypriot labourers worked in the dumps. They were rather inefficient and seemed incapable of checking a load. Often drivers got odd tins of preserves 'buckshee', and inevitably this grew into full cases. Around each bivvy tent in the camping area rose small stocks of supplies. More and more drivers stopped going over to mess. Men lived on the best of food until the company went on to petrol-carrying. This coincided, perhaps significantly, with one enterprising chap taking a small truck extra to **Tobruk** for 'buckshee' supplies. Away from the luxuries of running supplies were 18 RMT trucks attached to **22 Battalion**. Their lot was manoeuvres and patrols, and drivers congratulated themselves that the enemy was never sighted.

Calling at **El Adem**, Colonel Crump, commander of the NZASC, told

of RMT changes. From now on the RMT sections would be known as platoons. The fourth operating platoon was training in the Canal Zone before becoming part of 6 RMT. With the fourth platoon added, the company would be able to lift the riflemen of a complete infantry brigade.

A large Saint Andrew's cross was now ordered to be painted on each truck canopy for air identification. Although the **RAF** outnumbered the **Luftwaffe**, the enemy was active over the **Tobruk- El Adem** area and occasionally swooped to bomb and strafe concentrations of vehicles. German planes often flew high over the area, leaving vapour trails by day; at night their uncanny alternating drone drifted down from the stars. Strict air-raid precautions were taken and relief drivers on convoy work spotted for planes. The first morning 2 Platoon's (formerly B Section) spotters began work they saw trouble aloft. The 6 RMT trucks had just left camp and were moving past the **El Adem** aerodrome. Aircraft were flying south, low, a few hundred yards apart, parallel to the road. Traffic was two-way and fairly dense. One 2 Platoon relief driver standing on the running-board said 'Ours' and began counting, 'one, two—twelve—fourteen—eighteen— *and they are Jerries!*' At that moment the formation broke up, drivers slammed on brakes, bolted, and flattened out in the desert while planes raked the convoy. Corporal **George McWhinnie**,¹⁷ wounded, was the only casualty, but incredibly enough no trucks were damaged seriously. Drivers grinned at a newspaper report later on, boldly headed: 'NZ TRANSPORT DRIVES NONCHALANTLY ALONG HIGHWAY AS PLANES STRAFE'.

No grins came from 3 Platoon drivers stuck nose-to-tail in a congested area in **Tobruk** on 7 March when the air-raid alarm sounded and twelve escorted Stukas swept overhead. Anxious eyes watched the raiders turn, then open their tearing dive on shipping in the harbour. Heedless of fierce anti-aircraft fire the planes concentrated on a hapless oil tanker. Seamen could be heard screaming as they frantically tried to leap from the blazing decks. The tanker was still burning eleven days later when the company moved back to **Maadi**.¹⁸ On their daily

deliveries of petrol from **Tobruk** to the dump at **El Adem**, drivers often thought of the great loss of the precious stuff through leakage. They thought, too, as they handled dented and leaky cans, of the seamen who risked their lives in bringing petrol from far-away places. These petrol containers included flimsy tins, captured Jerricans (the best of the lot), 44-gallon drums, and recently arrived American cans, similar to Jerricans but still using a screw plug.

The desert farewelled young 6 RMT Company with a flood and a sandstorm. Heavy rain swamped the camp, and in one badly flooded area trucks bogged down for days. Rain brought grass, the grass brought bedouin, the bedouin brought low dark tents and a few animals from nowhere. Their supply problems were simple.

¹ Over the last eight months the Royal Navy had lost 27 ships on the **Tobruk** run, the two largest of them destroyers. The Navy took into **Tobruk** 32,667 men, 33,946 tons of stores, 72 tanks, 92 guns, and 108 sheep, and took out of the port 34,113 men, 7516 wounded, and 7097 prisoners of war. The Navy's other losses were: 28 ships damaged, 469 sailors killed or missing, and 186 wounded. The merchant service casualties during the same period were: 70 men killed or missing, 55 wounded, one schooner and six ships sunk, and six ships damaged.

² Capt Broberg (Workshops) was evacuated to hospital in **Tobruk** and sent to **Alexandria** in a warship. He then returned to New Zealand. He was the last of the original officers to leave 4 RMT.

³ In the 1941 Libyan campaign 4 RMT's casualties were: Killed in action: **Dvrs W. Hewlett** (3 Dec), **A. G. P. Kirkwood** (27 Nov), **L. E. Maxfield** (23 Nov); wounded: **Dvrs C. E. Driver**, **F. J. Keogh**, **S. L. Lobb**, **D. M. L. Martin**, **A. D. Park**, **H. A. Price** and **E. W. Sinclair**.

⁴ **Capt T. M. Battersby**, m.i.d.; **Rotorua**; born **Auckland**, 30 Apr 1911; sales manager.

⁵ **Dvr D. M. L. Martin; Dunedin; born NZ 14 Sep 1918; milk roundsman; wounded 14 Dec 1941.**

⁶ **Dvr A. D. Park; Lower Hutt; born Oamaru, 26 Nov 1910; motor mechanic; wounded 14 Dec 1941.**

⁷ **Cpl C. J. Boland, BEM; Tutaki, Murchison; born Blaketown, 28 Nov 1911; farmer.**

⁸ **Cpl B. E. A. Ward; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 9 Feb 1921; shop assistant.**

⁹ **Twenty-five lorries on loan from Div Amn Coy saw much service with 6 RMT. In January 52 reinforcements arrived, and Capt W. Swarbrick replaced Capt Pool in B Sec.**

¹⁰ **Aircraft based in Egypt raided Benghazi 1014 times between June and November and also attacked Bardia, Derna, ports and bases in Greece and Crete, and enemy shipping. In the same time Malta planes made 548 raids on ports and bases in Southern Italy and Sicily, 544 raids on Tripoli and Benghazi, 373 attacks on enemy shipping, and other raids on coastal camps and aerodromes. Between them in these months the Navy and the RAF accounted for nearly 50 per cent of the total Axis shipping between Europe and Africa. Of 95 ships (totalling more than 370,000 tons), 43 were sunk by planes and 52 by the Navy.**

¹¹ **L-Sgt S. Roa; Te Hapara; born Te Awamutu, 16 Sep 1915; carpenter.**

¹² **Dvr A. N. Blackburn; Claudelands; born New Plymouth, 14 Oct 1909; farmhand.**

¹³ **Dvr S. G. McKinnon; Auckland; born Whangarei, 30 Jun 1902; labourer.**

¹⁴ **Dvr M. Wyatt; Wellington; born NZ 5 Oct 1916; hardware assistant; p.w. 25 Jan 1942.**

¹⁵ **They were: Cpl R. A. Smith (died while p.w., 16 Apr 1942), L-Cpl H. A. Rowse, Dvrs D. C. Adams, J. H. Bush, W. C. Casey, F. E. P. Frickleton, M. N. Hibberd, C. W. Kennedy, L. J. McFadyen, E. J. McGeady, R. H. McGillivray, G. F. McHugh, F. Y. Martin, L. J. Morris, S. E. Purdue, S. G. Thear, and V. O. Wilkins (wounded).**

¹⁶ **Capt W. McM. Davis, MBE, m.i.d.; Waverley; born Waverley, 21 Jan 1907; farmer.**

¹⁷ **WO II G. B. McWhinnie; Christchurch; born Scotland, 12 Oct 1907; motor-body builder; wounded 28 Feb 1942.**

¹⁸ **6 RMT carried salvage and enemy ammunition to Cairo; 4 RMT left Libya with 5 Inf Bde.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 9 – TO TEHERAN AND SYRIA

CHAPTER 9

To Teheran and Syria

AJOB had to be done in a hurry: perishable serum had to be sent from Egypt to **Persia**. There, at **Teheran**, the capital, Polish refugees from **Russia** waited for aid. They were ragged, starved, diseased, and without sanitation. Dozens died every day. The serum—5600 lb. of it—would save many lives.

Armed with tommy guns and rifles **Berny Roberts**,¹ **Sandy Kelman**,² and **George Newton**³ got going in No. 120, a 3-ton Ford truck from 13 Section of C Platoon 4 RMT. They took two-hour shifts at driving because, without refrigeration, their two and a half ton cargo would become useless after a time, and because **Teheran** was 1673 miles away. None of the three RMT men had been that way before, and the strange roads across five countries rambled through desert, plains, and barren mountain passes.

The first night, 5 April 1942, saw them into Palestine, with 320 miles clipped from the journey. Up at daybreak and driving until dark, they crossed Palestine and entered the **Transjordan**. It was spring, and the young barley and wheat reminded them of home. No. 120 took on oranges until George thought it looked like a greengrocer's van. The day's mileage: 315.

By eight o'clock on 7 April they had left the **Haifa- Baghdad** road, to press along a hard desert track across a dead waste covered in small shingle. Close by ran the twelve-inch pipeline, carrying its 2,000,000 tons of oil each year over the 600 miles from **Kirkuk**, in **Iraq**, to **Haifa**, on the Palestinian coast. The sun was hotter here. They felt its warmth and thought of the serum behind them.

At 10 a.m. a sudden halt: a rear tire had blown out. The wheel was changed in double-quick time. The second halt was voluntary, to give water and a tin of bully beef to an Arab who was thoroughly lost and nearly crazy with thirst. After lunch at **Rutba**, well into **Iraq**, they had to

drive the next 100 miles through the gritty fog of a sandstorm. When night brought a wayside halt, 262 more miles had gone. They slept on the ground and awoke half-buried, to find a second sandstorm raging. Having reached **Baghdad** at noon on 8 April, they put the serum away safely in cool storage. The first stage of the journey, 1040 miles, was over, but the worst—rough lands with a sketchy service—lay ahead.



Waiting to descend the Sollum escarpment after the 1940 Libyan campaign

Waiting to descend the **Sollum** escarpment after the 1940 Libyan campaign



Entering Piraeus, Greece

Entering Piraeus, **Greece**



Arriving in Athens

Arriving in Athens

On the main road to Albania



On the main road to Albania



Transport coming down with Greek troops from
the Pindus Mountains north-west of Trikkala

Transport coming down with Greek troops from the Pindus Mountains north-west of Trikkala

Bombing in Nikaia



Bombing in Nikaia



RMT men evacuated from Greece to Crete haul their possessions in a donkey cart

RMT men evacuated from Greece to Crete haul their possessions in a donkey cart

During a three-day rest, while No. 120 was overhauled and given a new engine, the three New Zealanders found Baghdad disappointing: ‘just another Wog town: a few modern buildings and the rest a collection of hovels. The Tigris is as big and as dirty as the Nile, and there's no visible evidence of caliphs, harems, or Eastern glamour.’ George, told the veil had been abolished and seeing the now uncovered faces, fully understood why they had it in the first place.

The three RMT men were off again, serum aboard, in the afternoon of 12 April, crossing 118 miles of desert to Khanaquin, where a British rest camp turned on eggs and tinned beer, ‘the best ever’. Over the

border next day, they were the first **2 NZEF** party to enter **Persia**, though New Zealand soldiers had been there in 1918 with Dunsterforce. The country seemed to change in a flash. Instead of flat wastelands there were green hillsides where flocks of sheep and goats grazed. The three delighted New Zealanders sang, shouted, and yelled greetings to Persian labourers working on the good metal roads. They climbed over Patack Pass, about 5000 feet above sea level, where the wind blew cold from the snow. A vexing delay ('trust the 13th,' they said), lay ahead at Kermanshah at 4 p.m., with 125 miles covered. The British Army post insisted on a chit before issuing petrol and oil. The chit was collected eight miles away, and the lorry was set to go when a rear main leaf in a back spring was found broken. The local workshops, without spares, would not weld the leaf until next morning. By noon next day, after one and a half hour's run, the leaf had broken at the weld. The country was still mountainous, but the serum could not wait. Risking a total breakdown, they crept to Hamadan, where the spring was patched and riveted. Mileage still down: 140.

Leaving at 8 a.m. on 15 April they soon knew two of the rivets had broken. Nursing the three-tonner, they managed the rest of the 150 miles to the Polish transit camp at Kazvin. That night in a café the New Zealanders decided they had no ear for Iranian music. The orchestra consisted of three unshaven ruffians playing a flute, a whistle, and a tambourine.

Now only 100 miles remained, with **Baghdad** 533 miles behind them and **Cairo** 1573 miles away. Could they make it? Berny Roberts told the end of the adventure in his report next day:

16 Apr 42:

0700 hrs: Departed KAZVIN.

1100 hrs: Arrived at TEHERAN.

1300 hrs: Delivered serum to POLISH HQ and received receipt for same.

What a relief to take it easy, to forget times, schedules, tire pressures, crossroads, and the eternal drumming of the big tires.

Pitiful refugees filled **Teheran**. Every day brought more and more deaths among ragged men, women, children and babes-in-arms, and the RMT men were thankful further help was on the way.

The city itself was modern enough in some ways with wide streets, big shops, and traffic lights which didn't work. But sanitation was scanty indeed. Persians washed themselves, their dishes and clothes, in streams at the edge of streets. To get a hot bath seemed hopeless. Finally, at the best hotel the drivers found a chip heater, stoked it up, and soaked luxuriously.

The two successes, the trip and the bath, called for celebration, and a friendly Polish soldier obliged. To their surprise, the drivers held their vodka far better than the Pole. Orchestras in **Teheran**'s cabarets were a distinct improvement on the one in Kazvin, and at a floor show George recorded seeing 'more white girl than one would think possible'. Scottish residents took the drivers to their homes and entertained them until 19 April, when the long trip back to 4 RMT Company began.

While the serum-loaded truck was crossing the **Transjordan** most of 4 RMT Company, after only four days' break at **Maadi**, left **Africa** for the second time. They too were **Baghdad** bound, loaded with drugs, dressings, and clothing and blankets to be distributed among the unfortunate Poles. This was by far the company's longest single convoy journey, and it went without a hitch. Over the glittering white sands of the **Sinai Desert** rolled the 110 vehicles, averaging 100 miles between dawn and dusk across trails where camels with their patient 30 miles a day plodded since time beyond memory. The rich orchards of Palestine and the **Transjordan** gave way to desert and the oil pipeline, a lonely thread to the skyline. Soon the convoy entered the desert country served by the Nairn brothers, Diggers of the First World War, who had pioneered the **Baghdad- Damascus** bus service. Sure enough, out of a distant dust cloud appeared a bus, about the size of a New Zealand railcar, passing by to cheers from the drivers. Across the Euphrates on 13 April, with **Baghdad** in sight, the company dumped the supplies at a Polish camp.

Leave sent drivers to the Nairn brothers' office to fire professional questions, to swap experiences in desert travel, and to hear that the air-conditioned buses, made in the **United States**, cost from £12,000 to £17,000 each. After this pay, in dinars, seemed to vanish even more smartly in exchange for **Baghdad's** remarkable silverware—and in beer at 4s a bottle.

Two nights later Driver **Heginbotham**,⁴ of D Platoon, awoke to find an Iraqi robbing his kit. The thief shot at him and escaped. At dawn Heginbotham saw three natives escaping and, firing a warning shot, seriously wounded one in the head. From now on gear and trucks had to be watched closely. Routine orders quoted these thefts from a Ford utility car left by the roadside for only a few hours:

1 radiator	1 distributor
2 radiator top hoses	1 coil and condenser
1 generator	1 HT lead assembly
1 carburettor	1 battery
1 air cleaner	2 battery cables
1 fuel pump	2 domelights
1 oil filter pump	3 window blinds
4 body window glasses	1 front bumper
2 windscreens	2 headlamp glasses
4 inside door handles	2 headlamp bulbs
2 outside door handles	1 wheel, tire and tube
1 rear seat	2 electric horns
2 pedal rubbers	



The **Baghdad** convoy carried Indians of 9 Battalion Jat Regiment—963 men—to **Haifa**, on the way taking them on at hockey and soccer and losing. Stopping by a camp, Bryan Ward crammed some sixty men in his lorry and headed for the camp cinema. An officious red-cap sergeant barked: ‘You can't leave that truck there.’ Jim **Churton**,⁵ dry as a chip, said: ‘Let's fold the b—— up and take it inside.’ The sergeant, tottering, was led away. During a few days at Attira Camp, which was untidy, dirty and full of flies, parties under Padre Jamieson escaped thankfully to tour **Nazareth** and Mount Carmel. After one last visit to **Damascus**, delivering 7560 cases of petrol and oil, the convoy settled down at **Rayak**, where the rear party of 61 vehicles, after a five-day trip from **Maadi**, was already at home. Quarters were in huts and in a large concrete building on **Rayak** aerodrome. Two ranges of mountains sheltered a broad plain and vineyards.

The 6th RMT had reached **Rayak** well before its brother company. From Libya it had returned to **Maadi** on 29 March, camping opposite the **Lowry Hut**. Second-Lieutenant **Aickin**⁶ and 82 other ranks (but no trucks) marched in from Base Training Depot NZASC to form the new D Platoon. After a brief 42 hours in **Maadi Camp** the company was off again, heading for **Haifa** with stores, and then settling down in **Rayak's** barracks on 5 April. Quickly making themselves comfortable at **Rayak**, where a rousing show by the **Kiwi Concert Party** helped everyone feel at

home, the platoons went to work on local duties with railway, engineer, and base supply units. A Platoon left for local duties in **Aleppo**. Major Good arranged accommodation for three-day leave parties in **Beirut** (at the **Palmyra**, 25 beds; the **Amerique**, 25 beds; the **National**, 30 beds), and the first leave party went off promptly. On 25 April (ten days after 4 RMT's advance party arrived at **Rayak**) 6 RMT moved to **Aleppo**. D Platoon had gone on ahead by train, and was taken to **Vanniere Barracks**⁷ by Ammunition Company transport. The new platoon then took over from the Australians 26 three-tonners, 15 of them in fair condition, the rest faulty and peevish. The vehicles had no spares or tools, but they managed to carry the platoon off to **Raqqa**, where Tommies (isolated, forgotten by entertainers) were building a new military bridge over the Euphrates. The RMT platoon, carting materials for these engineers, pitied the lonely Britons. **Doug Hessey**,⁸ **Reg Donald**,⁹ **Johnny Gash**,¹⁰ **Charlie Moore**,¹¹ **George Sheddan** and others staged several concerts. They didn't have one musical instrument in the platoon, so drivers gave duets, solos, comedy items, hakas, and so on. The Tommies said the second concert was one of the best they had ever seen. 'Surprisingly enough,' said one driver, 'our songs, parodies of popular hits, were mostly as clean as snow.'

During a beer drought at **Raqqa** **Aickin** collected the payroll from Company Headquarters in **Aleppo** and on the way home 'found a source of beer supply'. The only cash was the platoon payroll, so to his lasting credit the lieutenant promptly invested 75 per cent of it in beer. Next day at pay parade drivers had the option of taking their pay in beer or in cash. Says Lieutenant **Aickin**, 'We had to ration the beer, not the cash.'

At **Aleppo** 6 RMT continued local duties all through May, carting mail, stores, explosives, labourers, supplies, and running up to **Deir ez Zor** with ammunition and petrol. Now, apart from preparing defences, some New Zealanders were concerned in distributing food (mainly flour) to destitute civilians. One day two 6 RMT men, Lance-Corporal **Williams**¹² and Driver **Don Fraser**,¹³ left **Aleppo**, taking a truckload of flour away up into the northern hills to the monks in a little village. **Williams**

recalls:

When we arrived in the village there was great excitement. Swarms of children and grown ups closed in around us, and I told Don that he had better stay and keep them away from the truck while I located the monks, all of which seemed quite a job. However before I got going one of the monks arrived through the crowd, and asked us both to follow him. Don and I looked at each other a bit nonplussed. In the end I thought: 'Well, we've delivered the flour any way, even if they do help themselves.' And thinking as usual of the light-fingered Wog, I said aloud: 'Well, we can't leave our rifles, anyway.'

The old monk said very calmly: 'But you do not understand—this is a Christian village.' He then spoke quietly and gently to some of the people, and led us away. I could almost see Courts Martial looming ahead for deserting all that Army gear. But there was such a terrific sensation of good and peace about the whole thing that it seemed to engulf us too.

We were led up into the monastery, given a wash, and fed on eggs and everything they had. It was all spotlessly clean and very bare. We each had a glass of glorious wine. Then we were told that the Father Superior would like to welcome us. We now began to wonder if they had mistaken Lance-Corporal Williams and Driver Fraser for Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden. Then it began to dawn on us that perhaps after all we *were* the representatives of the British Government to that little village.

We were taken up a big flight of stairs and ushered into another big room and presented to an old, old man with a kindly face whose skin was like parchment. All the monks spoke English beautifully, and were so unworldly, and courteous, and homely. While the Father Superior was looking us over (I don't think he spoke English) the highlight was brought in. This was tiny thimblefulls of a liqueur, which we drank with the old man. They must have been keeping that for such an occasion from the beginning of the century. We felt ourselves true representatives of the Crown.

We were escorted back to our truck, which we found had been unloaded during our absence—three tons of flour. Nothing else had been touched, and there were still crowds of smiling children playing round it, but not *one* in or within feet of it. Those monks must have had something in the way of discipline that the Army never had.

Sounds a bit like a missionary yarn, doesn't it? But it wasn't even as if we had been R.C.'s—our religion or our politics didn't count. And war seemed very far away. It was just a Christian village—but I've never seen another like it—anywhere in the world.

Syria was plump and pleasant after bare-boned **Africa**.

It was good to look around at living hills and the far-away snowline and to soak up the clean air. There wasn't much doing in the little villages poked away in the long valleys or gummed to the hills. Set grandly on commanding heights were signs of old invasions. The Crusaders had left behind them picture-book forts, often with underground stables where their transport — big-boned horses and liverish mules — had kept medieval workshops sections sweating. Those ruins of the Temple of Venus at **Baalbek** 'were grouse—the best of all the ruins'. [*Build, build the ramparts of your giant town, yet they shall crumble to the dust before the battering thistledown.*] With a guidebook handy, a chap in his letters home could toss about dates and queer names to his heart's content. But fond memories of the home-town pub got a severe jolt alongside the beer gardens of **Zahle**. Wealth in Syrian pounds (worth 2s 6d each) did not last long on leave in **Beirut** and **Aleppo**; still there was always the **Kiwi Concert Party**, EFI shows, or the New Zealand Mobile Film Unit.

But there was malaria—a man felt a fool in anti-mosquito Bombay Bloomers, which the Army never knew whether to call short longs or long shorts. Nobody was happy about the Japs drawing steadily nearer to New Zealand, and news of American assistance wasn't always entirely reassuring. Summer coming on brought heatwaves, beer wasn't too plentiful, and the local drink, arrack, was wicked.

The country had been done over thoroughly the year before in getting rid of the Vichy French, and the Syrians, many of them Arabs with dignity and intelligence, were rather aloof and poor. Thieves stole anything, from the rubber flaps on mudguards to goods from a moving truck.

The Division's job in **Syria** was to build a fortress, just in case of German invasion, covering the northern entrance to the **Bekaa Valley**, about 30 miles from **Rayak**. Within elaborate defences would run a network of roads, and tracks for mules would cover the roughest parts. Dumps of ammunition, food, petrol and oil would fill caves and pits. Here the Division could shelter, self-contained and secure, for at least 60 days, and sweep out to harass the invaders. Fourth Brigade worked hard on these defences while 6 Brigade patrolled near the Turkish border. Later 5 Brigade arrived from **Libya** and took over from 6 Brigade, which came back to work on the defences.

Tying in with 4 Brigade's task was 4 RMT. Operating platoons, which on 1 May had changed designation from letters to numbers (A Platoon becoming No. 1 Platoon), carted material for road builders, explosives, rations, working parties, stores, gravel for 9 New Zealand Railway Survey Company, prefabricated huts, ice, and even potatoes and fertiliser by the ton. And, for good measure, a few Bren carriers (3 tons 13 cwt.) as well. One break from this work came with a ceremonial parade at **Wavell Barracks, Baalbek**, when **General Freyberg** presented awards won by the NZASC in the Second Libyan Campaign.¹⁴ A less formal parade later 'of dogs in charge of company personnel' eliminated all mascots and pets except 'Acker' and 'Ben', in charge respectively of Driver **Barnes**,¹⁵ 3 Platoon, and Driver **Huggins**,¹⁶ 4 Platoon. An unfortunate accident happened at this time when Driver **Foster**,¹⁷ of 3 Platoon, fell to his death from a top-story window in the **Rayak** barracks.

After comfortable **Rayak**, **El Aine** camp, further up the valley, seemed doubly dismal. The company settled there, among rocks and wind, on 20 May. The place was handy to the **Bekaa Valley** fortress, now

in fair shape, near which large-scale divisional manoeuvres were about to begin.

Using about 8000 gallons of petrol, 4 RMT Company manoeuvred with men of 4 Infantry Brigade over rough desert. The exercises gave units practice in co-operation and in day and night movements by road and desert. Further flag signals for halting and changing formation were tried out, along with experiments in formations and methods of movement. Out of these exercises came the desert formations used so successfully later by the Division.

Back to **Baalbek** went 4 RMT Company on 4 June. Four days later three operating platoons went to **Aleppo**, to lift 5 Infantry Brigade for a desert exercise. A week later everyone knew the Division would be on the move again—heading south, certainly, but how far this time? Even to Enzed, maybe? The move was top secret, yet Syrian dealers instantly began debt-collecting. Shoulder titles, hat badges, and the divisional signs on vehicles were all removed. Farewell parties were forbidden. The 6th RMT fortunately had just celebrated its 1941 Christmas dinner, postponed until June 1942 ‘owing to circumstances beyond our control’.

Main Headquarters **2 NZ Division** was off from **Baalbek** at 6 a.m. on 16 June, opening for business again five days later 900 miles away, near **Mersa Matruh**. By 18 June 4 RMT was on the way carrying 5 Brigade and 5 Field Park Company, while 6 RMT took its place in 6 Brigade. The sun beat down from summer skies over the convoys winding mile after mile through old biblical lands, across the Delta, and up into the Desert, where the German, triumphant, was sweeping all before him.

¹ **Lt B. W. Roberts**, MM; **Christchurch**; born **Napier**, 6 Dec 1914; truck driver.

² **Cpl A. W. Kelman**; **Geraldine**; born **NZ** 13 Jan 1915; farm worker.

³ **Sgt G. T. Newton; Hawarden; born Christchurch, 11 Jun 1916; shepherd.**

⁴ **Dvr E. Heginbotham; Tauranga; born NZ 23 May 1915; bridge construction worker.**

⁵ **Sgt A. J. Churton; Mangonui; born NZ 17 May 1905; contractor.**

⁶ **Capt F. C. Aickin, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Scotland, 21 Jan 1910; farmer.**

⁷ **Coy HQ at Vanniere Barracks, Workshops at the French Barracks, and 1 and 2 Pls at The Farm; 3 Pl stayed at Rayak.**

⁸ **Cpl D. R. Hessey; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 Oct 1918; cutter.**

⁹ **Dvr W. R. Donald; Papatoetoe; born Wanganui, 3 Dec 1913; painter; wounded 6 Apr 1943.**

¹⁰ **S-Sgt J. B. Gash; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 11 Jun 1919; clerk and electrical worker.**

¹¹ **Cpl C. McC. Moore; Wellington; born Wellington, 15 Sep 1902; photo engraver.**

¹² **Cpl F. L. Williams; Ohope; born Pukehou, 21 Jun 1905; farmer.**

¹³ **Dvr D. R. Fraser; Moerewa; born Scotland, 10 Jun 1912; labourer; twice wounded.**

¹⁴ **These included: Capt R. E. Rawle, MC; 2 Lt A. B. Cottrell,**

MC; Sgt R. G. Aro, MM; Sgt M. K. Gibbs, MM; Sgt N. J. Prichard, MM; and Dvr A. H. Waddick, MM.

¹⁵ Dvr S. J. Barnes; Wellington; born NZ 21 Apr 1914; carpenter.

¹⁶ Cpl G. I. Huggins; born NZ 10 Jan 1907; company director; died 30 May 1948.

¹⁷ Dvr J. T. Foster; born Timaru, 2 May 1905; tram conductor; died of accidental injuries 15 May 1942.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 10 – MINQAR QAIM

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Minqar Qaim

WELL behind the Division tagged Hugh **Wareing**¹ and George Newton. Their 4 RMT truck, after breaking down, had been fixed at **Maadi**. On the outskirts of **Cairo**, near the Pyramids, they swung the truck into a side street, dropped into the home of some English friends, and were deep in a steaming bath when a servant burst in yelling that the truck was being stolen. Stark naked, the two raced into the street. Sure enough the old bus was just under way, a red-cap at the helm. After abuse on both sides they got the truck back. 'I can't book you for being improperly dressed, for damn me you're not dressed at all,' said the red-cap, much aggrieved.

No driver was sorry when the record dash from **Syria** to **Mersa Matruh**—900 miles in five days—ended. The sweltering summer heat messed up carburettors everywhere. At first drivers thought engines jibbed and played up because of petrol blockages, but they soon found that the heat and the burning hot wind were vapourising petrol in the pipes between pump bowls and carburettors. Engines failed all over the place through lack of petrol. To cool them off a little, drivers removed bonnet covers and, whenever the chance came, flung water over the simmering works. One good remedy on the V8s was half a big grapefruit pushed over the petrol pump. Usually motors ran at 180 degrees Fahrenheit, but during part of this trip they registered 212 degrees or more, a dangerously high level. Tires burst apart unless pressures were checked constantly and methodically kept down. On top of this was the hot and tiring business of driving in convoy.

Like climbing into a baker's oven was the descent to Lake Tiberias, or the Sea of Galilee, which is almost 700 feet below sea level. Petrol vapourising had thinned out convoys, and trucks seemed to be travelling independently. Skirting the lake men kept an eye out for a good swimming place. In one lovely spot a stream gurgled under gum trees. Here motors conveniently petered out again. Drivers and passengers

douched the boiling engines then lolled and rolled gloriously in the cool water. With everything from clothes to motors thoroughly drenched, and with wet towels knotted round their heads, drivers set off again.

During the long pull out of the depression steep corners held up lorries. When halts took place one or two hospitable Palestinians would ask a few New Zealanders into their homes. Over cups of tea flavoured with lemon or cognac instead of milk, one Jew, mopping his brow, explained that the heatwave had been in full swing for three days. The temperature in the shade of his verandah was 125 degrees, and he reckoned it would be at least 135 degrees by the lakeside. The evening came in cool beauty to heat-exhausted bodies. Standing on the running-board and dressed only in shorts, a man swore he never wanted to be hot again.

Palestine, except for the orchards, was burnt brown. Families threshed and stacked crops. Wherever fat water-melons lay basking the travellers stopped to barter or to swipe.

While men at the tail end of the convoy splashed under the welcome showers set up at the water and petrol point of **Asluj**, word came through that **Tobruk** had fallen. Silent, frowning men bunched around the radio. *How the hell? Tobruk gone? Tobruk? Just like that? Over 30,000 men and all their stuff in the bag? Tobruk* had stood as a symbol of guts and defiance. Now even that had been wrenched down.

The last 150-odd miles across the **Sinai Desert** ended. Some trucks halted near enough for men to dive and swim in the **Suez Canal**. Even when paid in Egyptian money many still believed they were going back to the **Pacific**. A few clung stubbornly to hopes of home until they had gone as far as **Cairo** and **Mena**, where red-cap yells of 'Improperly dressed! Put on your shirts! That's an order!' passed unheeded. Realising the anxiety of the hour, newspaper boys made special efforts to sell copies of the *Mail* and the *Gazette* to drivers whisking past. Round the next bend disgusted men found the papers were weeks old.

Sixth Brigade stayed in reserve at Amiriya and three operating sections of 6 RMT ² went on to Matruh to join 4 RMT in carrying riflemen of 4 and 5 Brigades to Minqar Qaim.

Racing along the ruddy Amiriya- Matruh highway, drivers watched with growing surprise the mass of traffic speeding in the opposite direction towards Alexandria. Every unit in the desert seemed to be represented in the race: supply columns, troop-carriers, the RAF. For the RAF to be pulling back looked sinister. One of its convoys swept past, store wagons piled high with equipment and the litter of camp life: tables, chairs, latrine seats, and even bicycles roped precariously on top of the loads. Weary-eyed troops straight from rearguard actions would shout: 'You're going the wrong way, chum.'

All rumours of Pacific duties were dead, buried, and forgotten.

The 4th RMT's operating platoons, after taking battalions of 5 Brigade to positions on the outer defences of Matruh, had joined Headquarters and Workshops at Smugglers' Cove, about a mile away from the area the company had occupied just two years ago. All through 23 June transport and tanks, ambulances and guns, streamed east. Two days later Headquarters and Workshops left for Fuka. A night air raid over Workshops' area at Smugglers' Cove had set fire to and completely destroyed a load-carrier packed with spare parts and replacements, a severe loss. Slightly wounded were Drivers Brattle ³ and 'Wally' Boneham ⁴ and Corporal Marriner. ⁵ An outraged driver, Tony Shand, ⁶ was blown from his bed in a truck.

When the Fuka move began 4 RMT's operating platoons were ordered to collect 4 Brigade's battalions for Minqar Qaim: 1 Platoon, 28 (Maori) Battalion; 2 Platoon, 18 Battalion; 3 Platoon, ⁷ 20 Battalion; 4 Platoon, 19 Battalion. A weary 2 Platoon, reporting back from Amiriya at dusk, was sent immediately to 18 Battalion. Drivers buckled down to the job without complaint. Every man was very tired after two nights and two days of almost continuous driving. The platoon had taken a company from each of the two brigades' battalions to Amiriya and had hurriedly

returned against swarming traffic in 19 hours.

Moving from **Matruh** the Division set off to make a stand at **Minqar Qaim**, 25 miles south, where an escarpment over 100 feet high ran perversely east and west. Had it stretched the other way it might have served as some sort of barrier against tanks. Fifth Brigade sat on top of the escarpment, with 4 Brigade to the east on open desert. Before 5 Brigade neared the escarpment in the night move of 25 June, a lonely enemy bomber flew over the head of the column and dropped bombs. Five riflemen were wounded. A few fragments struck but did not stop a 6 RMT truck driven by Rex **Cooper**.⁸ The explosions roused every RMT man, dog tired after long hours of almost continuous driving over the last week. The bombs came as a rude awakening and introduction to the third desert campaign. Next morning, while formations of nine to twelve **RAF** bombers passed over the Division, sometimes at only fifteen-minute intervals, drivers carried out overdue maintenance and in the afternoon drove battalions into their fighting positions. The 4 RMT trucks stayed near their battalions. The 6 RMT trucks, however, withdrew and dispersed on the flat below the escarpment. No. 2 Platoon of 6 RMT, carrying **21 Battalion**, continued 20 miles south to **Bir Khalda**, where a petrol dump had to be guarded and the Division's southern flank protected.

Through the rest of the day and into the night the New Zealanders hacked away, carving defensive positions in the stubborn rocky desert of **Minqar Qaim**. Where parts of the escarpment were too rocky weapon pits were made in the form of stone sangars—shallow holes with laboriously built-up parapets of stones. Guns were being sited in pits designed to give the greatest sweep, but most barrels pointed to the north over the heads of 6 RMT, indicating the direction of the expected attack. Ammunition-carrying lorries lumbered up to gun sites, Bren carriers scurried about on patrol, signallers ran communication wires from command to operational posts, and infantry officers supervised forward defence positions. Anyone at the top of the escarpment could watch a hundred men hurrying over a hundred different tasks all with the one object:

preparing to meet the enemy. Down on the flat lay the dispersed groups of divisional transport, about two thousand vehicles. Around each vehicle moved drivers, digging, working, or gathering round a petrol fire while the billy boiled. Each man was puzzling over the turn of events which had hauled him back to a desert he had farewelled so finally only three months ago.

While picks and shovels were still hewing slit trenches two waves of bombers attacked in the failing light. First the escarpment and then the eastern perimeter were hit and machinegunned. Bombs falling in a wide arc plastered trucks and men alike, but the RMT companies escaped serious damage. Among billowing clouds of dust angry fragments of rock whined past men dazed by the explosions. Rumours, remarkably close to the real total of 7 killed, 55 wounded, reported 60 casualties. Bofors struck back and in turn were attacked, one anti-aircraft crew near **19 Battalion** receiving a direct hit. Practically the entire crew was wiped out. Walking over to the scene of the tragedy, Lieutenant Jack **Rich**,⁹ of 4 Platoon 4 RMT, found that his brother was one of the casualties. In the thick of the raid 3 Platoon 4 RMT, under Captain Coleman, reached 4 Brigade after delivering 20 loads of water to the Division's supply point. The platoon then went to 4 Brigade reserve, except for three trucks whose drivers included Corporal Berny Roberts (of the **Teheran** trip), Drivers Hugh Wareing, Pat **Kerrisk**,¹⁰ and George Newton. Driving to A Company **20 Battalion** to replace three trucks knocked out in the air raid, these drivers found riflemen rather depressed. A comrade running for shelter had been killed. Berny pricked up his ears at the sound of a name: Bert O'Brien.¹¹ 'Was that the name of the bloke who was killed?' he asked. It was. O'Brien had been a schoolmate of Berny's at West Christchurch High School, a prominent athlete and a football team-mate.

Before the raid the first situation report had come through. Drivers heard that the enemy had broken through the minefield at **Charing Cross**, 18 miles away. A division was swinging left to cut the main coast road east of **Matruh**. Action was imminent.

In the night gunfire rumbled from the west.

While the brigades continued digging in, ill-fated 21 Battalion, to the south, already was counting its dead and wounded. As the convoy neared the petrol dump the last reflections of the sun still lingered in the sky and touched the battalion's leading vehicles climbing an escarpment. The rest had bunched up, not wishing to lose sight of the leaders once the top of the escarpment was reached in the fading light. At that moment enemy bombers soared past. Ten of them peeled off and struck at the battalion with bomb, cannon, and machine gun. Through the thudding explosions drivers heard the scream of fresh bombs on the way, and columns of black smoke sprang up from the freshly torn desert. Some riflemen flattened in nearby depressions or dived under trucks. Many were trapped under the canopies. When the haze lifted troops and drivers rushed to the aid of their comrades. Twelve men were killed and 45 wounded, and 14 vehicles, including three ammunition trucks, were destroyed. Loads of ammunition began to explode. Six hundred rounds of spigot mortar ammunition went off.

Not to be caught again, trucks scattered smartly. Only one 6 RMT lorry was totally destroyed; two were immobilised and others were hit with flying fragments. Lance-Corporal Overton,¹² wounded in the arm, was evacuated through the battalion RAP. Doug Graham¹³ and Edge Officer¹⁴ were suffering from concussion. Flames and explosions from an artillery quad near Ian Hutton's¹⁵ truck worried nearby transport carrying, among a variety of ammunition, the new spigot mortar bombs. Ian had much trouble in shifting his lorry, unwieldy and ponderous with two punctured tires. Eventually he got it away and joined other RMT men helping to evacuate the wounded. Doug Graham's truck was also uncomfortably close to the exploding quad. Rex ('Snow') Whyte immediately jumped into the truck and raced it to safety.

Shaken, the men settled down for the night, but the medical orderlies worked on. After midnight, when all seemed quiet, a single plane returned, spotted the light in the medical station and strafed the

RAP, causing yet more casualties. RMT lorries shifted the wounded to the sheltering lee of the escarpment. Rousing the drivers, Sergeant **Thomas**¹⁶ was abruptly held up by Gordon **Ozanne**¹⁷ who, taking no chances, had carried his rifle to bed with him. One of the busiest men that night was Corporal Allan **Hedley**,¹⁸ who reassembled and cleared vehicles during the two raids. A few weeks later he won the MM for gallantry when he evacuated wounded under heavy fire. His decoration was the only award 6 RMT Company received for specific bravery in the field.

Next morning, 27 June, all but one of the 6 RMT trucks attached to **21 Battalion** were in running order. Towing the damaged lorry, a party of seven¹⁹ set off for Headquarters at **Fuka**, but were captured on the way. The morning passed quietly for the isolated **21 Battalion** at **Bir Khalda**. Unfortunately radio men could not contact 5 Brigade Headquarters to the north (and vice versa), where the foe was encircling the two brigades. At noon Lieutenant Todd attempted to get through to Brigade and ran into heavy shelling which killed his driver, **Inglis**.²⁰ At 1 p.m. a squadron of Divisional Cavalry's Bren carriers turned up and the battalion set out in desert formation, optimistically attempting to rejoin 5 Brigade to the north. After about eight miles the convoy came under fire from unexpectedly large concentrations of the enemy directly ahead. A number of RMT lorries met brisk anti-tank and machine-gun fire, but only one was hit heavily. An anti-tank shell passed through the tray of the truck driven by Jock Jones and Ron Mason, mysteriously leaving the riflemen aboard unharmed. The convoy withdrew hastily, some groups becoming temporarily isolated, and laagered for the night with British units 30 miles to the south-east. The battalion had passed below beleaguered **Minqar Qaim**, and its brief association with the stand was over. Next day, 28 June, the RMT lorries carried **21 Battalion** towards **Kaponga Box**, a fortified position among sandhills 20 miles inland, near the southern end of the Alamein Line.

While **21 Battalion** was attempting to contact Brigade Headquarters from the petrol dump at **Bir Khalda** on the morning of 27 June, trucks of

1 and 3 Platoons of 6 RMT remained in laager on the flat in front of 5 Brigade at **Minqar Qaim**, ready to move on brigade orders or if heavily shelled. They hadn't long to wait. Shortly after breakfast trouble in large quantities appeared in the haze on the horizon. From specks to dots to shapes, a mass of enemy transport led by tanks spilled over the far desert and came on in steadily growing strength and size as the moments passed. Tanks peeled off from the leading enemy group and made cautiously towards the transport caught between them and the defences. With profound relief drivers saw New Zealand artillery immediately making its way forward to check the tanks. A heavy artillery duel began. Thickening shellfire blanketed 5 Brigade's area, a situation which was bad enough for the dug-in infantry but worse for drivers in their all-too-exposed trucks. The two 6 RMT platoons and 5 Brigade's spare trucks lost no time in carrying out an order to scurry back two miles at full speed, climb the escarpment, and disperse on the quieter plateau not far from 4 Brigade's surplus transport which, under Major Stock, had been ordered back from the infantry defences. No. 3 Platoon 4 RMT was with this group.

Major Stock had scarcely finished the move back when lookouts he had posted reported a long column appearing in the far north. The trucks seemed to be British, but among the convoy suspicious-looking tracked vehicles appeared. A heavy haze, intensified by dust from the moving vehicles, made identification difficult. Stock, circling on reconnaissance while Captain Coleman stayed with the transport, had his suspicions confirmed when he noticed infantry dismounting. The British vehicles apparently had been seized at **Tobruk**. Heavy shelling broke out and continued to build up in strength. Gunfire drummed and rolled almost continuously. Shellbursts bit into the escarpment and flecked the flat where fresh swirls of smoke and flame marked the end of yet more vehicles.

By mid-afternoon the enemy had worked round the eastern flank of the Division. Nothing stood between the leading tanks and the two groups of transport drawn back from the brigades. Inevitably an enemy

column bore down on the transport, engaging everything in sight with machine-gun fire and tank weapons. Ducking and weaving, crouching and cursing, drivers hastily whipped their 4 Brigade vehicles east to Rear Division. Next day they linked up with the Division after the breakthrough and continued east to **Kaponga Box**.

Tank shells sped the 5 Brigade drivers in another direction —south. Having covered nine miles in double-quick time, the trucks halted and reformed. The transport was now lopped away from an immobilised 5 Brigade, which seemed certain to be captured *en masse*. While the convoy was preparing to return towards the Division, three Indian patrol cars appeared. Drivers in the rear mistook the Indians for the enemy and, thinking the change of direction suggested attack, broke formation and began careering away in panic. The flap was on again. Some time passed and another five miles were covered before order was restored among 5 Brigade's scattered transport.

The innocent Indian patrol exchanged information with the transport officer and an attempt was made to contact 5 Brigade on the Indian's wireless. A message came back instructing the transport to return by direct route, but the Indian patrolman was suspicious. He said the voice answering him over the radio was not the one he had heard in the morning. 'Don't act on these instructions,' he warned. Further efforts were made to get in touch with 5 Brigade, whose sets were in poor shape as the charging sets for the wireless batteries were in one of the trucks of the retreating transport column. Over and over 5 Brigade called to its transport on failing sets: 'Go east to **Amiriya**.' The officers with the transport dismissed these calls as fake messages from the enemy. Awaiting 'genuine' instructions, the transport stayed put, hoping to get back to the brigade.



THE BREAK-OUT AT MINQAR QAIM, NIGHT 27-28 JUNE 1942

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One incident in the night startled 1 Platoon drivers when a blazing **Wellington** bomber tore through the darkness and crashed near the platoon. To everyone's relief the flames lighting up the area did not draw fire. Not long after this the roar of the breakthrough to the west began. Undaunted by loss of vehicles and encirclement, the Division's two brigades were smashing through the enemy's barricade. After dawn, well behind the fighting troops, the 5 Brigade trucks made off to **Kaponga Box**.

By nightfall on 27 June, then, 4 and 5 Brigades were surrounded by the enemy at **Minqar Qaim**. B Echelon transport ²¹ of 5 Brigade was on the **Alexandria** side of the encirclement and a good 15 miles at least south-east of the trapped Division. Also outside the enemy ring was **21 Battalion**, laagered with British units about 30 miles east of the Division, and the surplus transport of 4 Brigade.

While the unwanted trucks of the RMT kept one jump ahead of pursuing enemy tanks isolating the Division in the east, to the west three platoons of 4 RMT were held within the ring of the New Zealand defences on 27 June. The drivers were not expected to man front-line defences, but they readily made themselves useful in every possible way. Many passed the day collecting wanted parts from smashed trucks and patching up damage to their shrapnel-peppered vehicles. Tires gashed by

shrapnel were changed as soon as punctures occurred. Others worked further afield. Here a group of drivers could be seen brewing up tea and taking it to infantrymen and gunners during quieter moments when shelling slackened. In more than one tight corner drivers worked alongside stretcher-bearers gathering up wounded and taking casualties to RAPs. Some carried fresh ammunition to the sweating gunners. Few drivers did not experience moments of tension. From behind one RMT truck came a sharp cry of pain: 'You fool! "Minnie's" bad enough without you trumping my — ace!'

No. 1 Platoon, spread out a mile behind the **Maori Battalion**, had taken up defensive positions early in the day along the side of a wadi, with Bren and anti-tank guns manned and grenades handy in case of a breakthrough. No. 2 Platoon remained with 18 Battalion protecting Divisional Headquarters. One 2 Platoon vehicle was battered with shrapnel and both of the injured drivers, **Bill Hutton**²² and **Bill Wright**,²³ were evacuated to the field ambulance. No. 4 Platoon stayed near **19 Battalion**, which was defending the eastern flank.

In mid-afternoon drivers saw tanks and a large number of infantry-carrying vehicles draw near to 4 Brigade's area from the north-east. Among the closest RMT witnesses was Corporal Roberts's party, dug in alongside its trucks about 75 yards behind **20 Battalion's** forward defences. To the left a six-pounder waited and, on rising ground behind, machine-gunners crouched. The background noises of the day swelled: tank tracks squeaking in the distance, tank and field guns firing. Then shells started scouring the battalion area. A near miss grazed one truck and George Newton found an infantryman lying stunned in his slit trench.

From the distance British trucks bore down. 'Goodoh,' thought the drivers, 'Div Supply on the job.' At about 800 yards the trucks swung about neatly, the tailboards fell, German infantrymen swarmed out and flattened, while the trucks, which had been seized at **Tobruk**, sped off.

This was all so painfully familiar to the startled RMT men. The

battalion blazed at the attackers. Back came everything except the kitchen sink. On the left the anti-tank gun went up. Trucks burnt on both sides. A German ammunition wagon burst into a Guy Fawkes bonfire. The air shrieked and whined. From the front line Berny Roberts began driving out wounded. Drivers watched him, saying it took real guts to roar up and down the escarpment like that chased by 88s. How could they miss such a target? Berny carried on, taking on one trip a stricken cousin of George Newton's. Nobody's luck could hold forever under such fire. Returning empty from the RAP, Berny slammed on the brakes and hit the sand as a mortar smashed into his truck, leaving a fist-sized hole in the back of the driver's seat. He kept going in another lorry until the enemy withdrew at dusk, firing a parting airburst which scattered shrapnel over a hundred yards of desert. ²⁴

The four drivers blessed A Company's cookhouse truck lumbering into sight with dixies of hot stew aboard. An hour later troops embussed and the brigade massed for the breakthrough.

In the late afternoon 1 Platoon's passengers, the **Maori Battalion**, opened up with vigorous small-arms fire. As enemy infantry faltered and halted, two Maori companies made a characteristic rush with the bayonet. They took ten prisoners, but over twenty dead were counted in front of one company alone. The Maori casualties were one killed and two wounded. Prisoners said that all troops met on the drive until this day had surrendered when threatened by such a powerful force. This attack on the Maoris' staunchly held position ended the day's vain attempts to penetrate the Division's defences. Fifth Brigade, on the west, had not been even threatened by a direct attack. No forces had ventured within small-arms range of its infantry, although the brigade positions, the artillery, and the transport had received much shelling. Over the whole area shelling faded towards dusk.

All through the day Lance-Corporal Ted **Benfell** ²⁵ and Driver Johnny Gash had been working busily with their 6 RMT truck evacuating wounded from a forward RAP. The two had brought some 4 Field Ambulance medical men ('darned good chaps, really grand workers')

down from **Baalbek** and had stayed with them under their medical officer, Captain **Kennedy**.²⁶ The two 6 RMT men ferried wounded until the medical dressing station, accurately and intensively shelled, had to be dismantled. All tents and marquees were taken down. More wounded kept flowing in. Ted and Johnny left cover to help place patients in slit trenches or in ambulances. Then they dived for cover again.

‘Under my truck about a dozen of us shook and shivered with fright,’ Johnny remembers. ‘All bar two who read all the time. Except when they went out to attend wounded, those two were completely wrapped up in their books. Believe it or not, the titles were “Gunshot Valley” and “Dead Men Tell No Tales”.’

Late in the afternoon the two took their truck to **Divisional Headquarters** and were given the important task of following close behind the wounded General during the breakthrough. If his caravan were disabled, **General Freyberg** would be moved on to their three-tonner.

Another 6 RMT party had featured in a remarkable incident which began early in the morning out in front of 5 Brigade. Two brigade and two 6 RMT lorries had driven out to pick up a group of Indian troops spotted marching disconsolately across the desert. These men had lost their transport and had not eaten for two days. They were without water. The two 6 RMT lorries from 3 Platoon were driven by Corporal ‘Lofty’ Williams, Dave **Topping**,²⁷ Johnny **Sanderson**,²⁸ and Andy **Thomas**.²⁹ The drivers took the isolated Indians into 5 Brigade's lines and waited on the shell-swept flat while the Indian major in charge of the party went off to **Divisional Headquarters** for rations and instructions. After an uncomfortably long wait Williams decided to move the trucks to a safer area on the escarpment. Here the party was joined by another 6 RMT truck, freed from carrying ammunition, driven by John **Glossop**³⁰ and Ken **Grace**.³¹

With still no orders arriving, Williams decided to go to **Divisional Headquarters** and find out why the Indian major had not returned. He

soon learned the reason. The major had walked into his death an hour ago when a shell landing in **Divisional Headquarters** had killed six and wounded seven. At that time, noon, the **Divisional Headquarters** area was lashed with shellfire. Corporal Williams, getting an insight into the works of the Division, was deeply impressed with the casual air of the senior officers. Completely ignoring the shelling, they coolly squatted on the ground, working out plans and positions on their maps and weighing the chances of a successful withdrawal in the night, while everyone else seemed to be well under cover.

Given a guide, the corporal safely took the five trucks to the Indians' headquarters, about 15 miles east of **Minqar Qaim**. Before returning the drivers brewed up in the early afternoon and enjoyed their first hot meal of the day. Retracing the route, Williams followed the telephone line leading towards **Garawla** until he reached a pole against which on the way out he had propped an old tire. From there he picked up his wheel tracks and followed them towards the starting point.

Nearing the rear of 5 Brigade area, where the escarpment dropped to a shallow ridge, forming a gap, Lofty saw transport dispersed on the flat following the sweep of the escarpment. Innocently rounding a cone-shaped mound he found himself among a convoy. Men stood by their vehicles, eating or smoking, and idly watching the new arrivals driving slowly among them. Only one thing was wrong. The few British vehicles among the convoy were captured ones. The column was German to the core. Unwittingly, 6 RMT Company was represented in the enemy encirclement of the Division.

Williams, sucking his pipe, 'felt terribly conspicuous. I think old Sir Richard Grenville must have sympathised with us: "As the little *Revenge* sailed on, sheer into the midst of the foe...." '

The only hope, slender indeed, was to carry on casually, trusting to luck and breaking away at the first favourable chance. All went well until suddenly from a wadi crawled a German tank. It nosed directly towards the New Zealanders. Instantly Lofty—'I didn't think about it; it

was more like instinct'—stood on his truck's running-board and thrust a hand high above his head in the universally recognised halt sign—or Heil Hitler salute. The tank stopped and started back down into the wadi again. Some time later drivers resumed breathing.

The five trucks, still 200 yards behind one another, had not gone far before a German staff car drew level a hundred yards away, carefully studied the New Zealanders, turned, and sped off. In quick time shells pricked right and left and the lorries bolted. Dodging among wadis in the now more broken ground, the five trucks shook off pursuit. Lofty's driver, Dave Topping, resolved to shoot the next person or object on sight which, absurdly enough, turned out to be a poor bedraggled bedouin tending a gaunt flock of goats. Touched, Dave put down his rifle. The New Zealanders drove south safely until, to their great relief, they breasted a ridge and arrived among Indian scout cars. Indian troops were busily laying a minefield. Evidently the doubly lucky trucks had driven through a gap. With nobody managing to raise **Divisional Headquarters** or 5 Brigade by radio, the drivers trundled back with the British armour guarding the southern flank of the withdrawal, and later reached **Kaponga Box**.

Meantime the anxious wait of 4 RMT's three platoons lasted until a lull in the fighting in the afternoon. Messages came down for drivers to return after dusk to the positions where they had dropped the riflemen. This showed that the infantry had lost no ground during the day. When 2 Platoon drove back to 18 Battalion's area two drivers were shown a dark stain on the sand. 'Take a look at that,' they were told, 'It's some of "Tiny's" blood. That's something you'll never see again.' **General Freyberg**, while making a tour of defensive positions at 5 p.m., had been wounded in the neck. The command of the Division was taken over by **Brigadier Inglis**.

As the sun set a deep calm spread over the battlefield. Word came through that a break-out to the east was planned for the night. Fourth Brigade, the spearhead of the attack, would open a narrow passage about a mile long near a point called **Mahatt Abu Batta**. The infantry, after

clearing the way, would be picked up by the rest of the Division following close behind. The 19th Battalion would lead the attack, timed to begin 30 minutes after midnight. The battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel **Hartnell**,³² held a brief meeting of officers, detailed the plan of action, and gave these instructions:

1. **19 Battalion** will lead the attack.
2. At 11.45 p.m. transport with troops aboard will assemble five abreast, nose to tail.
3. At 11.55 transport will move 1000 yards to the start point.
4. The battalion will debus and move forward until the enemy is contacted.
5. The enemy will be attacked and a gap cleared in his lines.
6. When the gap has been cleared, a success signal of red over green will be fired.
7. The transport will then move forward to meet the battalion which will at once embus and set off in an easterly direction through the gap.
8. Major **Pleasants**³³ will be in charge of the transport.

The point that struck more than one officer was that the question of a second plan—in the event of failure—was not mentioned. All depended on a quick and violent success by the infantry, and on the coolness and resourcefulness of the drivers.

Feverish activity began in the dusk. With so much transport driven off by the enemy, it seemed that 5 Brigade would have to march out on foot. Every spare thing on wheels was pressed into carrying the brigade. A few surplus RMT trucks were commandeered from 4 Brigade. Men were packed and jammed into and onto quads, ammunition vehicles, pick-ups, office trucks, water carts. Some even sat on 25-pounders. Just before midnight 5 Brigade, perched and clinging like roosting starlings but triumphantly mobile, rolled off to assemble at the rendezvous.

Thin clouds passed over the moon. The night was quiet. From all parts of the compass lorries and trucks and guns moved up into position like shadowy starters in some strange race. They didn't make much noise. All weapons were ready, each bayonet was unsheathed, every man had cast aside the fatigue and strain of the day. Close by to the east the

enemy slept soundly in pits, in holes, on the ground, beside still guns, inside the arching canopies of lorries.

No. 4 Platoon drivers brought **19 Battalion**, the point of the spear, to the start line, where carefully shaded lights glinted. The riflemen climbed out and formed up, two companies wide, two companies deep, over about 350 yards. 'All was still, as only a desert night can be,' says Captain Bill Blanch. 'Not a sound was to be heard. Then came a mysterious touch. A figure appeared and in a cultured English voice asked for the officer in charge of the column. On Major Pleasants appearing, something was said about immediately turning hard right and moving off. However the figure apparently would not or could not give his orders in writing, and it was decided in view of Colonel Hartnell's explicit instructions to stay put, sticking to the original plan.'

Next came **20 Battalion**, which had fallen in by fifteen minutes after zero hour. Officers moved here and there among the men, quietly giving last-minute instructions and little-needed encouragement. The last of the breakthrough men, the Maoris, were late. They had had to wait for men out on patrol to return. No. 1 Platoon drove the Maoris, some shivering with excitement, to the start line, and returned to 4 Platoon and **20 Battalion's** empty trucks in the vehicle column. Seventy-five minutes after zero hour, the **Maori Battalion** was in position. Five minutes later the infantry went forward into the shadows and the moonlight.

All was quiet for a thousand yards. Then, like a beast aroused in pain, the enemy awoke, tearing the night apart in flame. Undaunted, the resolute riflemen carved the bloody way out with tommy gun, rifle, bomb and Bren. Bullet and bayonet ³⁴ struck down partly clad Germans clambering wildly from slit trenches. Directly in the path of the attackers lay a mass of enemy vehicles. Here slaughter was heaviest as grenades burst within trucks packed with half-awake troops. Vehicles stampeded, firing haphazardly as they went, a few sticking helplessly in fatally soft sand, some smashing into withering Bren-gun fire, others

racing over their own men coming forward to surrender. Retreating German troops lived long enough to realise they were moving with, sometimes even among, the New Zealanders. German machine-gunners frantically lit petrol fires or blazed away from the light of burning trucks. Their action was brief.

From the haze of smoke and flame and dust the red over green success signal soared. Down the cleared mile roared the transport. Excitement was intense. Everyone fired his weapon, Bren, rifle, or tommy gun, out into the desert, to the right or left. 'Looking back from the front,' Captain Blanch recalls, 'the column looked like a huge porcupine with innumerable bristles.'

Suddenly in the moonlight 19 Battalion was sighted waiting for the transport. At once the firing stopped, the trucks pulled up and the riflemen began searching for their particular vehicles. All was deathly still until the enemy, quickly reorganising, opened up with small-arms fire directly on to the convoy. Soon an order was shouted: 'Mount any truck you can and move!' Quickly the infantry leapt into the trucks. Enemy fire flickered, strengthened, increased. A mesh of tracer streaks spread out to net yesterday's prize. It was too late. This was the moment when months of convoy discipline and desert exercise rewarded drivers and infantry to the full. Riflemen swarmed aboard. Hands swung to gear levers, tires gripped again on rock and sand, down pressed accelerators, and drivers took 4 Brigade onward into the night and to freedom in the east.

As two 4 RMT platoons drove with 4 Brigade through the enemy laager, Divisional Headquarters and 5 Brigade turned south to break through on their own. This convoy ran into an enemy tank laager. Pandemonium broke loose. In a wild charge the divisional convoy wrenched past, losing several vehicles on the way, miraculously none of them from 2 Platoon 4 RMT with 18 Battalion aboard.

In all of the three RMT platoons few drivers or infantrymen were wounded on the way out. The only casualties were Captain Blanch, shot

through the foot, and Driver O'Brien, ³⁵ who escaped with a wounded hand when an anti-tank shell struck his truck. No. 1 Platoon, with three vehicles destroyed, was the heaviest loser, while in 4 Platoon Drivers 'Stump' Burleigh ³⁶ and Meares ³⁷ made the sprint of their lives to the nearest truck when their own went up.

A helpless ambulance was one of the first brigade vehicles hit near a 4 RMT platoon. It burnt fiercely, revealing the long lines of transport and guns in sharp relief against the skyline. By the time the enemy, who had been firing too high, had adjusted his range, however, most of the trucks were past. Through the enemy lines the burdened trucks advanced, passing dead and wounded, lurching over slit trenches, and ploughing through confused groups of enemy troops. The ambulance evacuating Bill Wright received a direct hit, but the 4 RMT man, forgetting his injuries, scrambled on to another truck and escaped, later to find that he had been reported killed in action.

Five RMT trucks wove through the inferno of tracer and anti-tank shells with every possible care, each abrupt lurch and jolt sharply reminding drivers of their helpless loads of heavily wounded men packed behind on the trays. These trucks, taken from 3 Platoon 4 RMT early in the morning to act as ambulances, were under Corporal Somerville. ³⁸ Near them was a British ambulance, captured at Sidi Rezegh and unwittingly returned to the fold by a bewildered and hopelessly lost Italian. Drivers Neilson ³⁹ and Volker ⁴⁰ saw Major Grant, ⁴¹ of the Divisional Signals, blown up in his car. They immediately turned back and picked up the Major and two wounded men. Driver Pat Hermanson, ⁴² swerving just in time, narrowly escaped from tanks directly in front of him, and made off to safety with his load of 27 men, many of them wounded. Enterprise and quick thinking carried drivers through. In one such instance a driver, his truck hit in the differential, switched to front-wheel drive and managed to break clear. The large number of men and vehicles rescued from Minqar Qaim told a proud story of calm, intelligent, faithful drivers in a night of complete chaos. ⁴³

Directly behind the wounded General's caravan drove Captain Kennedy in a pick-up. Close behind the pick-up reassuringly loomed the 6 RMT three-tonner. 'Things got so hot it was a case of going like hell,' said Johnny Gash. 'Everyone else did the same. I was too busy driving the three-tonner and dodging about and scared as hell to think of anything at all except "Go for your — life. Go for your — life" over and over again. In the confusion and firing it was almost impossible to keep on the heels of Captain Kennedy and the caravan. We would never have followed them through if it hadn't been for Captain Kennedy standing up through the hole in the roof of his Pickup and signalling. He seemed the only one exposing himself to all the stuff flying through the air. I'll never forget his coolness and courage during that hectic night.'

The caravan got through. The 6 RMT truck was not used. Eye-sore and worn out, Ted Benfell and Johnny Gash followed the caravan to an airstrip at **Daba**. The drivers saw the General, weak from loss of blood, refuse a stretcher and, under the orders of a medical corporal, walk stubbornly to the plane. After watching until the dot vanished in the sky, the two drivers climbed back into their three-tonner and headed towards **Kaponga Box**. On the way they grinned a lot. 'Old Tiny's a beaut,' they told each other. They'd heard that the General had got very annoyed during the breakthrough. The caravan pitched and lurched about so much that it kept flinging him off balance. It completely prevented him from firing his revolver out of the window.



Mess parade near Galatas

Mess parade near Galatas

Troops returning from Galatas towards Canea.
Olive trees on the left gave good shelter



Troops returning from Galatas towards Canea. Olive trees on the left gave good shelter



Lt W. N. Carson, 4 Field
Regiment, who com-
manded a patrol of
4 RMT in the Galatas
fighting

Lt W. N. Carson, 4 Field Regiment, who commanded a patrol of 4 RMT in the Galatas fighting



Bamboo and oats used as cover in Crete. The weapon is a Boys anti-tank rifle

Bamboo and oats used as cover in Crete. The weapon is a Boys anti-tank rifle



A stick of bombs bursting, November 1941

A stick of bombs bursting, November 1941



Sidi Rezegh battlefield

Sidi Rezegh battlefield



Entry to Tobruk, 1 December 1941
Entry to Tobruk, 1 December 1941

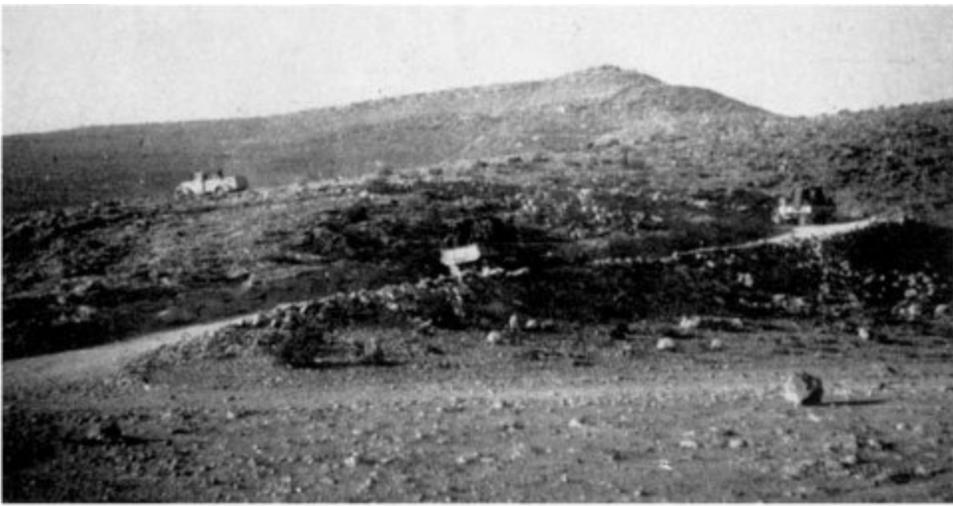


Bomb and shell damage,
Tobruk

Bomb and shell damage, Tobruk



The move west after Tobruk
The move west after Tobruk

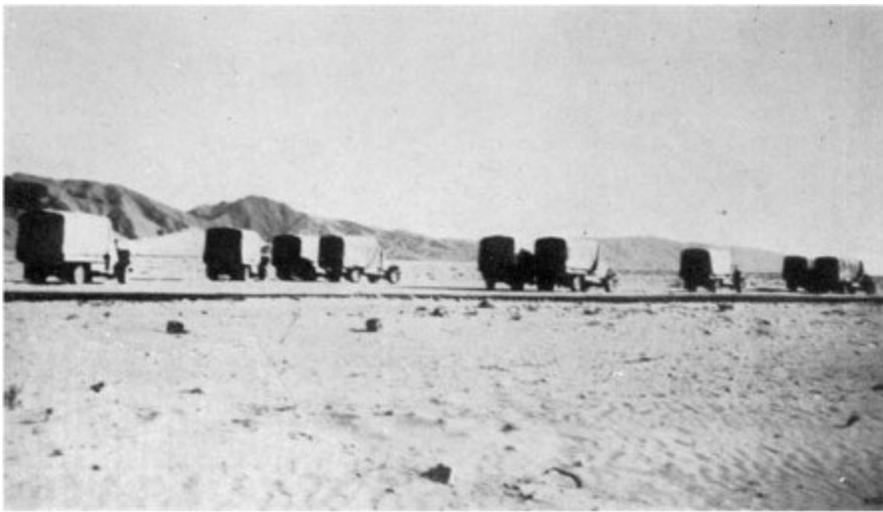


Climbing the Gazala escarpment
Climbing the Gazala escarpment



Sgt T. W. Gill's escape party. FROM LEFT: Cpl S. Roa, Sgt Gill,
Dvrs A. N. Blackburn and S. G. McKinnon (see pages 160-4)

Sgt T. W. Gill's escape party. FROM LEFT: Cpl S. Roa, Sgt Gill, Dvrs A. N. Blackburn and S. G. McKinnon (see pages 160- 4)



Halt for lunch in the Sinai Desert
Halt for lunch in the Sinai Desert



Ancient and modern transport on the road from Damascus to Beirut
Ancient and modern transport on the road from Damascus to Beirut



The break-out at Minqar Qaim—from a painting by Peter McIntyre
The break-out at Minqar Qaim—from a painting by Peter McIntyre



Petrol truck on fire,
Deir ez Zor, Syria.
The driver, Cpl Pat
Ward, was badly
burnt trying to take
the blazing truck off
the road

Petrol truck on fire, Deir ez Zor, Syria. The driver, Cpl Pat Ward, was badly burnt trying to take the blazing truck off the road



In a slit trench under shellfire in the Alamein Line
In a slit trench under shellfire in the Alamein Line

¹ **L-Cpl H. T. P. Wareing; Rangiora; born Temuka, 29 Oct 1915; motorcar salesman; wounded 31 Dec 1941.**

² **4 Pl 6 RMT was booked for water-carrying with Div Sup Coy. From Matruh HQ 6 RMT and Workshops went to near Fuka, following later to the Kaponga Box.**

³ **Dvr P. H. Brattle; Wellington; born Wellington, 6 Jan 1911; painter; wounded 24 Jun 1942.**

⁴ **Dvr H. A. W. Boneham; Hamilton East; born Perth, 4 Nov 1907; butcher; wounded 24 Jun 1942.**

⁵ **Capt G. R. Marriner; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 10 May 1913; service manager; wounded 24 Jun 1942; now Regular soldier.**

⁶ **Sgt A. A. Shand; Taiaroa; born Lawrence, 28 Feb 1918; taxi driver.**

⁷ **3 Pl 4 RMT, returning after taking 26 Bn to Amiriya, did not pick up 20 Bn (carried instead by Amn Coy trucks), but was held in reserve to 4 Inf Bde. On 27 Jun Capt Coleman took platoon vehicles and joined B Ech transport under Maj Stock.**

⁸ **Cpl R. W. Cooper; Gisborne; born NZ 4 Jun 1919; truck driver.**

⁹ **Lt J. H. Rich; Darfield; born Christchurch, 4 Aug 1916; sawmill hand; wounded 21 May 1941.**

¹⁰ **Dvr C. P. Kerrisk; Mangapehi; born Patea, 25 Oct 1906; farmhand.**

¹¹ **Pte B. O'Brien; born Pleasant Point, 20 Jan 1915; school-teacher; killed in action 26 Jun 1942.**

¹² **Cpl C. H. Overton; Wingatui; born Ratanui, Otago, 16 Mar 1918; clerk; wounded 26 Jun 1942.**

¹³ **Dvr D. G. Graham; Auckland; born NZ 9 Apr 1918; despatch clerk; p.w. 27 Jun 1942.**

¹⁴ **Dvr R. F. E. Officer; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 6 Sep 1915; bus driver; p.w. 27 Jun 1942.**

¹⁵ **Dvr I. D. Hutton**; Gore; born Dunedin, 31 Oct 1915; labourer.

¹⁶ **Sgt L. L. Thomas**; Wellington; born NZ 10 Mar 1900; commercial traveller.

¹⁷ **Dvr G. T. Ozanne**; Taumarunui; born Taihape, 17 Jan 1918; railway surfaceman.

¹⁸ **Cpl A. R. Hedley**, MM; Putorino, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 24 Jun 1914; station manager.

¹⁹ L-Cpl Arthur Milne, Dvrs T. D. McKay (who later escaped), G. T. Harvey, A. P. Brown, E. H. Lapwood, D. G. Graham, and R. F. E. Officer.

²⁰ **Dvr W. E. A. Inglis**; born NZ 31 May 1917; storeman; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

²¹ 6 RMT's part at **Minqar Qaim** was virtually ended with 1, 2, and 3 Pls separated from 5 Bde, and 4 Pl (now divided between Div Sup Col and 4 Fd Amb) to the east at **Kaponga Box**, except for three lorries. Two of these three 6 RMT lorries were at an RAP at **Minqar Qaim**; the third, driven by Johnny Gash and Ted Benfell, was attached to **General Freyberg's** caravan, with orders to follow it at all costs.

²² **Dvr W. C. Hutton**; Upper Moutere; born NZ 2 Jun 1913; seasonal worker; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

²³ **Dvr W. Wright**; Oakura; born England, 16 Oct 1906; labourer; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

²⁴ For this Roberts received the MM.

²⁵ Cpl E. R. Benfell; Fairfield; born Dunedin, 8 Oct 1916; fellmonger.

²⁶ Lt-Col D. P. Kennedy, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 19 May 1915; medical practitioner; OC 4 Fd Hyg Sec Oct 1942-Aug 1943; DADH NZ Corps Feb-Mar 1944; DADMS 2 NZ Div Apr-Nov 1944; DADMS 2 NZEF Nov 1944-Feb 1945; OC 4 Fd Hyg Sec and DADH 2 NZ Div Feb-May 1945; CO 5 Fd Amb Jun-Oct 1945.

²⁷ Dvr D. D. Topping; Dunedin; born NZ 20 Apr 1916; wool scourer.

²⁸ L-Cpl J. T. Sanderson; Patumahoe; born Kuaotunu, Coromandel, 4 Oct 1914; farm manager.

²⁹ Dvr A. B. Thomas; Dargaville; born NZ 9 Jan 1914; farmer.

³⁰ L-Cpl J. G. E. Glossop; Otorohanga; born NZ 29 Aug 1912; butcher.

³¹ Sgt K. H. Grace; Gore; born Dunedin, 20 Dec 1918; milk contractor.

³² Brig S. F. Hartnell, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ, 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO 19 Bn Oct 1941-Apr 1943; comd 4 Armd Bde Jun-Jul 1943; 5 Bde 9-29 Feb 1944.

³³ Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942-Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep-Nov 1944; 5 Bde Nov 1944-Jan 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander Fiji Military Forces, 1949-53; Commandant, Northern Military District, 1953-.

34 Some New Zealand prisoners of war recall infuriated enemy captors telling them in the morning about an enemy corpse slashed with from 12 to 20 bayonet wounds. The body seemed to have remained half-propped up in a dip through which many riflemen had swept in the night. The prisoners, after being told, 'Last night you New Zealand pigs did not fight fairly,' were stood in the sun all day, were not allowed to move, and were denied food and water.

35 Dvr V. H. O'Brien; Waitetuna; born NZ 2 Oct 1916; farmhand; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

36 Dvr F. J. D. Burleigh; **Christchurch**; born NZ 12 Feb 1902; billiard marker.

37 Dvr J. W. D. Meares; Hira, **Nelson**; born **Tauranga**, 5 Oct 1916; private-hotel keeper.

38 L-Sgt W. J. Somerville; **Auckland**; born NZ 14 Jul 1917; garage attendant.

39 Dvr M. D. Neilson, m.i.d.; National Park; born NZ 23 Feb 1918; lorry driver.

40 Dvr W. J. Volker; Mangapiko; born NZ 12 Feb 1919; labourer.

41 Col R. L. C. Grant, OBE, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Leeston, 25 May 1906; telegraph engineer; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs Sep-Nov 1942, Jun-Dec 1943, Mar-May 1944, Jun 1944-Jan 1945; CSO NZ Corps 19-27 Mar 1944; served in United Nations Military Observer Group, Pakistan.

42 Cpl E. Hermanson; Maharahara; born **Te Kuiti**, 26 Jul 1919; dairy-farm hand.

⁴³ 'A young German despatch rider, complete with motorbike, rode into our convoy and was smartly grabbed by 28 Battalion men,' writes Capt Burt, of 1 Pl 4 RMT. 'Showing a complete reversal of feelings, the Maoris made a mascot of this prisoner (a mere boy), who spent most of the next few days cleaning our cooks' pots and pans. Only on a direct order from Brigade was he sent away. He had become quite attached to us and cried miserably when he was marched off.'

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 11 – ALAMEIN

CHAPTER 11

Alamein

SO back the New Zealanders rattled and bounced and bumped just ahead of the enemy, back to the Alamein Line, and sheltered and shook themselves out in a miserable clump of sandhills known as **Kaponga Box** (holes, mines, gun emplacements) where 6 Brigade had settled down during the **Minqar Qaim** affair. Sixth Brigade held the Box itself and the rest of the Division, on the alert, waited a few miles east.

Rommel reached for the **Nile** on 1 July. His men struck first near the sea at **Alamein** railway station, around which the South Africans were ready and waiting. The Springboks held. Trying to isolate them, Rommel's forces swung at the centre of the line and won ground on **Ruweisat Ridge**. Feelers reached out for weaknesses further south. Units probed to the brink of the impassable sands in the **Qattara Depression** without getting much further towards **Alexandria**. By mid-July the line from the **Alamein** station stretched almost directly south over 35 bone-bare miles. There it stayed, both armies groggy, until the end of a sweltering August.

The three-tonner headed off to the water point, a heap of empty cans jangling and thumping behind. Slipping, skidding, gripping again, she just made it through a patch of loose sand. Sighing thankfully, Shortie eased her out into two-wheel drive. He wiped his sweaty palms hard against the sides of his pants, spat happily out the window, and grasped the wheel again.

‘Waddyer know, **Alf**?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Same here.’

‘You know now in the ’14–18 war....’

‘Arr heck, **Alf**, turn it up.’

'No, this is straight, Shortie. Now in France a line was a line and no mistake, but here the blokes are all over the shop. One day we drive 'em up six miles, next we cart 'em back seven.' He spotted a distant plane, stiffened, relaxed. **'We're split up, bombed up, — up. Your tires are a goner with shrapnel and there's no replacements. "Use your initiative, driver."** Arr hell. **Either that or your radiator or your petrol tank cops it.'**

He stretched uncomfortably and, cupping his hands, scratched himself thoroughly. 'We're shifting in and shifting out, just get dug in and off again like a cat with the skitters. And boy oh boy they even had poor old 4 Platoon digging slitties for trucks in bloody great sandhills. I ask you now.'

A platoon (No. 4) from 4 RMT Company swung into action in the morning of 3 July and took 19 Battalion in to lend a hand when the Italian Ariete Armoured Division led the first attack on New Zealanders in the Alamein Line. One three-tonner joined vehicles ferrying back 300 prisoners taken with 44 field guns. The Italians pulled back with crippling losses. While this was going on 6 RMT Company's lorries rumbled west to the south of the attacking Italians, then drove north of the Box with 5 Brigade's riflemen to El Mreir. This move was one of the most dramatic sights of the desert war. A staff car led 6 RMT's three-tonners, about a hundred of them, like a convoy at sea. The fleet was shelled heavily and it seemed few could survive such a hammering. Yet, showing superb control and holding perfect formation, the lorries rolled on until they disappeared from sight. 'I watched with a proud emotion that was somehow near to tears,' writes one RMT man.

Then 4 RMT Company carried riflemen of 4 Brigade on a surprise swoop south of the Box and up to just west of 5 Brigade, now dug in at El Mreir. The trip was about 25 miles. The day, 5 July, was black for 4 RMT Company. Just after noon drivers of I Platoon, with the Maori Battalion, ran into savage dive-bombing. Drivers McGillicuddy ¹ and Moss ² were killed instantly, Drivers Jensen, ³ Peters, ⁴ and McLeod ⁵ died of wounds, and Corporal Dan Ford ⁶ and Drivers Lithgow ⁷ and

Reisima ⁸ were wounded. A truck was ruined and another almost wrecked. A few hours later the platoon endured another bombing attack. This time only a couple of tires were blown off. Bombs raked yet did not harm the other two platoons. The settled-in 5 Brigade experienced heavy mortaring and shelling, and fragments killed Driver **Seaman**, ⁹ of 6 RMT Company.

‘We've copped it a bit this time, Shortie.’

‘We have that, Alf.’

‘Well if you've got it coming there's nothing you can do about it, I say.’

‘No more bombs to dodge, anyhow.’

‘Well, you only die once.’

‘Trouble is some jokers never even live once.’

‘Howzat?’

‘Skip it.’

A few days later a Stuka's bomb burst four yards from a vehicle loaded with ammunition, grenades, and mortar bombs. The lorry began to burn. Risking his life, Driver **Robinson**, ¹⁰ of 4 RMT, extinguished the fire and saved the load and the vehicle. He later received the MM.

The two brigades settled down in the heavily bombed **El Mreir** area and prepared for a thrust to the north. Fifth Brigade already had made a good start by inflicting heavy casualties on the Italian Pavia Division in a strong attack at night. The plan for a drive north was called off, however, and enemy forces seeping south threatened to outflank the Division. This sent the RMT on the move again, back with the two brigades to behind the Box and not far from the starting-out point of a few days ago. This difficult night move on 7–8 July took from seven to eleven hours to cover some twenty miles. Everywhere vehicles began to

stick in soft sand. Towed out, they stuck again. Weary drivers felt more and more the strain of long hours with little sleep. The night seemed endless to several 6 RMT men towing out vehicles damaged by bomb and shell.

‘Ah, it's a crook life and no mistake. I tell you nobody knows what We're doing. Nobody. Roll us one, Alf. Desert Mould, eh? Fair enough. You struck it lucky in the mail, Alf. Arr, these stinkin' matches....’

‘They say old Doug Coleman's crowd darn near dug down to **Temuka** getting the blokes to **Amiriya**.’

‘Ha!’

‘Yep. Soft sand everywhere. You never saw the like of it. Stuck they were by the dozen. The Brens got 'em out in the end. Took 'em five and a half hours to make **Amiriya**, it did. Wouldn't it?’

A composite company ¹¹ of NZASC vehicles under Captain Coleman took 6 Brigade riflemen from the Box into reserve at **Amiriya**. The company got through after floundering in soft, sandy patches. On the trip two vehicles used up eight and ten gallons of water, and drivers used up reserve curses. The Box lay empty. German and Italian units laid on a full-scale attack, sent back exuberant progress reports, were congratulated and urged on by the **Afrika Korps**, occupied the Box, realised it was empty, and received sharp words from the **Afrika Korps** for fooling about. Out of the inferno emerged the solitary occupant, an indignant New Zealander who, asleep in his slit trench, had missed the brigade move.

RMT movement slowed down—but not the bombings—when 4 and 5 Brigades, retiring from **El Mreir**, took up positions running across the **Alam Nayil** ridge some miles east of the ‘vanquished’ Box. A determined tank attack on the ridge was beaten back. Trucks near the infantry's positions were shelled heavily. Two drivers were killed, Driver **McKay**, ¹² of 4 Platoon 4 RMT, and Driver **Anstiss**, ¹³ of 1 Platoon 6 RMT. The pause ended a few nights later when 6 RMT set off with 5 Brigade in the

first stage of an attack north on **Ruweisat Ridge**. The 4th RMT followed with 4 Brigade on the night of 14–15 July, 1 Platoon leaving the **Maori Battalion** in reserve and carrying in its place **26 Battalion**, ‘keen as mustard’, just back from **Amiriya**. The attack on **Ruweisat Ridge** ended in disaster, ¹⁴ and among the Division's dead were Drivers Halliwell and **Martin**, ¹⁵ of 1 Platoon 6 RMT. Sadly 6 RMT's 3 Platoon drove back in the general withdrawal towards **Alam Nayil** ridge with the remains of **22 Battalion**. But in a few hours the platoon's trucks were filled again with lively new passengers, men of the rested **Maori Battalion**, ‘one of the greatest lot of chaps we've ever carried’. Before the next move another 6 RMT man, Driver Jim Cartwright, was to meet his death. He was killed while with a detachment from 1 Platoon picking up mines with the Engineers. Although units now were beyond the range of most enemy guns, from sunset to sundown Stukas, Heinkels, and Dorniers prowled and struck.

‘Hey, what's that? Stukas?’

‘Can't see, Alf.’

Dust-caked eyes peered into the blue. Shortie suddenly grinned, then thumped the steering wheel delightedly.

‘What an army, **Alf**, what an army! Joe Hunt isn't in it! With Jerry over every day, now what do they start bitching about? I ask you!’

‘You tell me.’

‘Pigeons, Alfie boy, pigeons! Can you beat it? Remember that order?’

ROUTINE ORDERS NO. 242/42

18 Jul 42

940. DISPOSAL OF CARRIER PIGEON MESSAGES:

(1) Flights by Carrier Pigeons carrying messages for all the Services are now taking place in the . Under normal circumstances, the birds on release fly direct to their loft without alighting. Occasions will arise,

however, when pigeons through injury or exhaustion may be found away from their lofts. Personnel finding such birds will take the following action:—

- (Endeavour to catch the pigeon by approaching it cautiously and
a) throwing a cloth or jacket over it, then take it as quickly as possible to the nearest HQ without attempting to interfere with any message it may be carrying.
- (If it appears unlikely that the pigeon can be caught, an attempt
b) should be made to note the type of message container attached to its leg. If this is made of metal, every effort must be made to destroy the bird, since only the enemy use this type of container. The message will be recovered and conveyed by the quickest possible means to the nearest HQ. A note giving the place and time of finding should accompany the message. If the container is bakelite in any of the following colours:— red, blue, black, green or white, the bird is one of our own and should be left alone (assuming it cannot be caught).
- (If, after catching a pigeon, it is impracticable to convey it quickly
c) to a Signal Office or HQ, the message container must be removed and sent unopened by the quickest means to the nearest HQ with a note showing:—
 - (i) The time and place of finding.
 - (ii) The letters and numbers stamped on the small metal ring which will be found on the pigeon's leg. Enemy birds should then be destroyed and our own either taken later to a HQ or released.
- (If dead pigeons are found, any message container attached to
d) them will be dealt with as in para (c) above.

(2) On no account must pigeons in flight be shot, unless they have just been identified as enemy birds as in para (1) (b) above.

(3) All ranks must realise the vital importance of carrying out these instructions.

‘Wish I was a pigeon,’ said Alf.

‘Magnoon,’ said Shortie.

‘Pigeons can go home,’ said Alf.

‘Wouldn't mind even being back in Syria.’

‘Wouldn't mind even a few days back in [Maadi](#) myself, flap or no flap.’

‘Boy, how they did their scone. Even the cooks burnt the tucker, they reckon.’

‘Wish I was back home.’

‘Looks as if there's a new stouch coming up.’

Shortie groped for a damp, crumpled cigarette. ‘Arr, these stinkin’ — matches.’

On the night of 21–22 July 6 Brigade struck north-west to [El Mreir](#), with 5 Brigade guarding the flank. Once [El Mreir](#) was reached the new British 23 Armoured Brigade was to follow through and up to the north behind the Germans. Sixth Brigade ran into tanks and had heavy casualties. The British tanks arrived a little late but broke through and penetrated the enemy lines before they were knocked out. Drivers saw 80 tanks go forward and about 15 return. Scattered shelling killed Driver [Baillie](#),¹⁶ of 1 Platoon 4 RMT. The RMT platoons gathered up the weary riflemen and went back with 6 Brigade in the direction of [Alam Nayil](#) ridge. Both sides had fought to a standstill. The whole front became stabilised and remained so until the end of August.

‘Next time I'm in [Cairo](#) I'm going to buy a dirty big galabieh.’

‘Sandhappy? Desert getting you, eh?’

‘My oath. Grab a Wog bint an’ settle down.’

‘Ten kids and a camel. Sweet as a nut.’

‘No housing problems, son. Just dig a new slittie for each new kid.’

It was an accursed spot—bare, dusty, windy, evil, without protection from a spiteful sun or sudden bombers. Flies gathered in detested myriads. They swarmed over food and liquid, even appearing drowned,

with a gritty layer of sand, at the bottom of mugs of tea, no matter how carefully a drink was protected. They formed dirty chains over the sweat-smearing steering wheels of trucks and pestered and bit men lying in slit trenches with canvas or cardboard propped over their heads for pathetic patches of shade. 'Maddened by tormenting flies,' one man recalls, 'I covered myself in a ground sheet and howled and sobbed like a kid. I'd never cracked up before.' One night winds from far swamps brought a wave of mosquitoes. Men veiled themselves and sweated under infuriating folds of netting. In cabs hot as ovens RMT drivers brought up supplies, helped shift ammunition, mines, petrol, and barbed wire, and took part in one or two infantry moves. Desert sores and tinea increased. Men envied comrades going out to cool, clean hospitals with malaria, jaundice, or dysentery. Everyone was browned off, fed up, sick to death of the heat, the sand, the flies, and a war gone stale.

Every day was the same. Every piece of desert looked the same. For weeks the dreary desert lay dotted with trucks. Some vehicles began to look as if they had taken root. They looked stocky, squat, and rather sullen. Men lay alongside in shreds of shade or sprawled in nearby slit trenches. Other trucks joggled about like important bugs. Trailing wisps of dust, they moved in any and every direction. What pattern, what plan if any, lay behind all this?

Alf's voice rose in contemplation from the tiny patch of shade in the lee of the three-tonner: ' "Good God", said God, "I've got my work cut out." '

Shortie's oily hands flapped at a halo of flies then fumbled the half-inch butt in his mouth. 'Arr,' he said, 'these stinkin' bloody *Wog* matches.'

A roar in the sky, and Corporal Bert [Millis](#)¹⁷ dived neatly into the nearest slit trench. He climbed out black as a sweep, covered all over from head to foot in soot and ashes. The slit trench had been used repeatedly as a fireplace. 'But it could have been much worse,' grinned Bert.

The crisis had come. A small group sat in anxious debate. Every possible fact was considered, weighed, and discussed. At last Bruce Creswell,¹⁸ Kenyon-Ormrod,¹⁹ 'Lofty' Williams, and Alick Trenwith²⁰ convinced Andy Thomas that now was the time to act and open the two tins of beer he had picked up long ago at Daba. Just as a screwdriver punctured the two precious tins and the delicious froth oozed out invitingly, a German fighter roared overhead, turned, and dived. Seldom had one German aircraft received such a barrage of muffled curses from the bottom of slitties. At last four furious men emerged. In a moment they were all smiles, congratulating and thumping on the back their hero of Alamein, the fifth man. He had stooped down to place both tins reverently on the ground before bounding for cover.

A few inches of sand saved the lives of Allan Crawford,²¹ Ron McCarthy,²² and Will Willcox²³ when Stukas dropped two bombs, one on either side of their truck. Crawling out from their shallow shelter, the three found the load of petrol had been blown to bits. Why the petrol did not catch fire is still a mystery.

Captain ('Boundary Bill') Davis chose a day thick with German 88s to tour his platoon with the payroll. At every lorry he found drivers at home in their slitties. Nobody would pop up for a moment to sign the roll. At every trench Davis stooped obligingly. Not once did the foe catch the captain bending.

From cups of tea Jim MacKay, Ian Hutton, 'Snow' Whyte, Bert Millis, and Jim McKenna²⁴ looked up to a dogfight breaking high overhead. A pilot parachuted out. Then his plane, riddled and abandoned, tipped into a roaring dive straight at the drivers. A mad dance broke out, directed by the plane which zigzagged as it fell. To and fro the drivers raced unhappily. His eyes fixed on the falling aircraft, Jim MacKay, the fastest sprinter, ran backwards, overtaking and passing the rest as they tacked desperately about the desert, until he vanished with a lost cry into a deep slit trench. A final twist from the plane wheeled the running drivers about. They flattened just before the awful, sickening crash. Five shaken

drivers crawled to their knees. Breathlessly, they thanked their lucky stars. Then the air became blue. All the racing about could have been avoided. They had gone to ground exactly where they had been taking tea.

Daytime bombing, shelling, and mortaring took a toll of men and vehicles. Then the medical men and workshops experts took over. So it went on.

Night usually brought relief to a good many RMT drivers, but others warmed up their engines when the shadows deepened. RMT parties threaded their way through minefields into the darkness of no-man's-land, carrying either fighting patrols or mines, barbed wire, and iron standards for new defences. Dark nights made drivers as careful as cats. Even short trips took a long time. Usually a driver had to find his own way to a rendezvous. Finding safe tracks through the wire and the mines and then returning were further tricky problems. The need for silence—‘*wet*’ on the chains and stop ‘em rattling!’—was always impressed on drivers taking part in working parties. Few needed reminding that enemy units probably were out and working close by on the same thing. Work had to be done without lights. Loads had to be distributed to a number of different places where the engineers took over. This kept drivers out for most of the night. Often they would leave no-man's-land just before dawn. More than one RMT driver, bushed in ‘friendly’ minefields, waited for the dawn to guide him to safety and risked the chance of observed shelling. Many drivers became experts at navigating their own way home by taking a bearing on a distant cluster of stars which rose in the east about 2 a.m. One such way home led them through a wadi where a solitary palm tree grew. This palm was deeply loved by all night drivers.

25

While munching a wayside snack drivers of 4 Platoon 4 RMT saw a stolid figure in boiler suit, topee, and dark glasses go past in a staff car. Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime leader, was coming to see for himself.

Mr Churchill sent a special message to the New Zealanders towards the end of August, when the two RMT companies, platoons now withdrawn from the well-dug-in battalions, were stationed in the Swordfish area, a few miles behind the Alamein Line: ‘... I heard someone say the New Zealanders were “a ball of fire”.... You have played a magnificent part, a notable and even decisive part, in stemming a great retreat.... You will be cherished by future generations who, through your exertions and sacrifices, will go forward to a better and a fairer and a brighter world.’

Now General Alexander replaced General Auchinleck as Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Forces, and General Montgomery (‘there will be no withdrawal and no surrender’) took command of Eighth Army. Before this the Duke of Gloucester had made a brief call. Sergeant Tom Gill went off to see the Duke, who gave him the BEM for his thermosbomb action in the early days. Tom returned overjoyed. ‘Look’ — and he showed himself off proudly to envious comrades—‘see what they handed out for the doings. Lovely fit, eh? Brand new outfit all over!’

After Ruweisat 4 RMT's long association with 4 Brigade came to an end. Badly mauled, the brigade, fated to play no further part in the African campaign, was sent to **Maadi** to reorganise as an armoured formation, and many drivers missed good and gallant companions. To complete the Division 9 (British) Armoured Brigade later joined 5 and 6 Brigades. From 19 September **2 New Zealand Division** faced the future two-thirds Kiwi and one-third Tommy, a trusty and happy combination. The newcomers were three tank regiments— **3 Hussars**, **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry**, and **Warwickshire Yeomanry**—and a battalion of **Sherwood Foresters**. They brought 145 beautiful tanks with them. When British tanks adopted the silver fernleaf sign, ²⁶ an English veteran remarked, with a sigh: ‘This white fever don't look good to me, chum.’

Lance-Corporal Max Tait ²⁷ bent down, picked up a message, and blinked as he read: ‘Men of New Zealand ! ... The English in New Zealand have one sole object; to take advantage of the natural wealth of your

country and to make themselves rich at your expense....' Hard on the heels of the enemy pamphlet came a timely routine order announcing 6d and 3d rises in domestic and wife's allowances and ending: ' "wife" and "children" have the same meaning as hitherto.'

Ironically enough, no sooner had the two RMT companies pulled back from the front than Driver **Green**,²⁸ of 6 RMT, was killed in an accident.

The RMT men thought Swordfish area, inland from Burg el Arab, a vast improvement on **Alamein**. Few flies were about; the move back coincided with the arrival of a large mail from home; and the sand in parts was good enough for football, cricket, and baseball. PT before breakfast began and, although the 'stand-to' for an hour at dawn and again at dusk was unpopular, 6 RMT promptly rounded up two German airmen when their plane crashed in flames. The stand-to originated, 4 RMT's war diary reported, 'through information that Germans have massed 4,000 paratroops.' All that fell, however, were the 'Men of New Zealand!' pamphlets, a few bombs (a delayed-action one blasted a crater seven feet deep and 21 feet wide), and pyramid-shaped devices called 'Caltraps', metallic contraptions with sharp and barbed points designed to puncture tires. Caltraps had been used in **Greece** but were rarely seen in the desert.

The 'Pass' plates, taken from slots in front mudguards, were returned with the top half sporting a silver fernleaf on a black background. The bottom half, in red and green, bore in the centre the unit number: 48 for 4 RMT, 37 for 6 RMT. Drivers had always taken pride in their vehicle insignia, looking on it as a symbol of unity, purpose, and spirit. The importance and responsibility of an RMT driver's job was emphasized by the very stiff sentence of 180 days' detention given a 4 RMT driver who had left his lorry on the eve of an attack. (The driver who took this man's place was captured and later lost his life.) Two 6 RMT drivers, charged with drunkenness in the field ('... did consume rum knowing it to have been dishonestly acquired'), converting a lorry, and drunken and negligent driving, were sentenced to 90 and to 60 days' detention

respectively.

Evacuating lock, stock, and hookah an entire Arab village, no less, was a highlight of this month. Once all natives were cleared from this area in the deep south, any movement would be only that of the enemy. The wells at **Maghra** (as the place was known) would be poisoned. The drivers were told that enemy patrols might be about. Perhaps this knowledge gave men the necessary *iggri* to drive or tow their vehicles out of this desolate spot. This particular job tested drivers as no other sand had done, and the performance of drivers of heavily loaded three-tonners was astounding. RMT again lived up to its reputation for taking vehicles through the worst country imaginable.

Captain Burt, in command of this job, brought up the rear, a necessary precaution as things turned out. Captain Sam **Ellingham**,²⁹ from the **Long Range Desert Group**, led the convoy.

The 40-mile journey south for the 61 RMT trucks began at 6 a.m. on 24 August. Some of this country was supposed to be impassable—and it was. The sand seemed to flow like water up to axles at times. Going down into the blazing hot depression, drivers had the advantage of momentum and empty trucks. Coming back was a different story: engines overheated and three motors gave up the struggle by blowing the top out of a piston or a con-rod through the sump.

At **Maghra**, 32 feet below sea level, they gathered up the whole village, including the animals: goats, dogs, sheep, hens, lice, bugs, ticks—and hideous smells. ‘These Wogs,’ wrote an RMT man, ‘were the most evil smelling of any we had the misfortune to meet. Even after much cleaning and hosing, the vehicles still had smells clinging to them.’ ‘You have never seen such a collection as we had on our trucks: tents, bedding, cookpots, personal gear, sheep, dogs, goats and Wogs all in together of course, and not forgetting the scraggy chooks and chickens. Luckily camels had been sent on ahead,’ said Ellingham. ‘Whenever we halted for a meal most of the animals bolted and had to be recaptured before we could move off. I have never seen such a circus. Smell! You

couldn't get within 100 yards of the trucks. How the drivers took it beats me. But what surprised me most was how those Wogs knew that desert. To them it was like the streets of anyone's hometown. They could tell you all the tracks and what they would be like, soft, hard or stony.'

After going about 18 miles the circus stopped for the night, the tail close to **RAF** beacons. Captain Burt gave orders to move. Curses and, 'Doesn't Boy Blue know his own mind?' Safely bedded down a few miles off, the drivers watched Jerry trying to bomb out the beacons. Awakened at 4.30 a.m. by talking, chanting, crowing and bleating, drivers looked out in amazement on to a mass of small fires: 'The damned Wogs boiling up. It was no good trying to do anything about it then; we just had to hope for the best.' Moving off, drivers felt most reassured at seeing the massed tanks of 7 Armoured Division guarding the far end of the Alamein Line. To their disappointment, these proved to be old vehicles with cardboard dummy tanks fitted over them, most realistic from about 300 yards away but most docile close up. The Tommies were not at all pleased that outsiders had dared to look upon this clever deception. 'On seeing my hat badge,' Ellingham recalls, 'the OC asked me what unit I belonged to. On telling him 4 RMT he quickly thawed out, became most hospitable, and asked after many of the chaps who had been on the first trip west with them in 1940.' The 1940 reputation always stood 4 RMT in good stead with the Desert Rats and 4 Indian Division.

Describing the journey's end near **Alexandria**, Captain Burt writes: 'While Captain Ellingham was having a trying time convincing the headman that we had not absconded with his dreadful women (a few lorries were temporarily missing), we for our part were doing our very best to get rid of our great unwashed, together with all their livestock, large and small.'

While the RMT went about its tasks behind the line, on the night of 30 August Rommel threw the whole of the *Afrika Korps* into a final attempt to master Egypt. The main attack came in a 'right hook' in the south. General Montgomery allowed the attackers to penetrate several

miles then pounded them from the flanks with artillery, anti-tank guns and dug-in tanks, while the **RAF** struck against transport columns. The invaders ran into strong fortifications, and the right hook stopped short. Out on a limb, the enemy reluctantly returned to his sheltering minefields while the New Zealand Division harassed him on the flanks, first with gunfire, then with an infantry attack. The *putsch*—or, as Rommel preferred to call it afterwards, the ‘reconnaissance in force’—was dead within a week. The German had met his master.

The New Zealand Division was due for a spell. RMT platoons brought up British troops to take over the New Zealand defences and then helped withdraw the Division to a rest area. Next, three-tonners took parties of battle-weary riflemen to precious leave in **Alexandria** and **Cairo**. Thirsty crowds mobbed the beer bar at the **New Zealand Club**. Those old pinpricks began smarting again. Six New Zealanders attacked a British field security officer, another six landed up in jail for breaking windows, and sixty raided the banned Berka. The OC Cairo area, Brigadier J. I. Chrystall (a New Zealander in the British Army), took a dim view of this. Complaining of ‘drunken and disorderly behaviour’, he suggested closing the beer bar. Promptly **General Freyberg**, now fully recovered from his **Minqar Qaim** wound, said that this would only make things worse. Disturbances were no more than could be expected ‘under the circumstances’.

Divisional leave over, in mid-September RMT platoons mailed off to New Zealand their Christmas cards—about 5000 altogether—and returned to business with the riflemen,³⁰ while the Workshops and Headquarters men pulled back to new areas. As luck would have it, the 4 RMT party camped ‘adjacent to the target range for the arty and during the morning shells were landing in the W/Shops area.’ This camp site was remarkably temporary.

Platoon drivers took their battalions into a dummy attack which would duplicate the Division's assault in deadly earnest on **Miteiriya Ridge** next month. Already ‘enemy’ positions protected by minefields had been carefully prepared in a special training area. The plan began

with a night approach. RMT's job after dusk was carrying riflemen about 14 miles to the point where battalions spread out and took up attacking positions. From 8.30 p.m. on 24 September laden lorries grumbled forward into the night. The 4th RMT, in two dark columns 50 yards apart, followed along the 5 Brigade trail which MPs had marked with a shaded red light every 1200 yards. The going was tough, and soft patches of sand soon brought trouble. A hot pace set by the leaders quickly caused stragglers. In such bad going speed should have been kept at four miles in the hour, with halts to allow the tail to catch up. Time and again many vehicles had to be helped out of difficulties, and quite a few did not cover the 14 miles until a foggy dawn was breaking. The 6th RMT struck it lucky, moving peacefully enough past 6 Brigade's green lights at a steady seven miles each hour.

For the next two days, while troops kept as still as possible to avoid observation, drivers worked on vehicle maintenance and replaced broken springs.

The artillery opened the night attack exercise with a creeping barrage. On foot the riflemen advanced between boundaries marked by smoke shells and tracer. Sappers, among drivers' best friends, and with good reason too, ³¹ cleared lanes through minefields ahead, their sensitive detectors changing from a low-pitched hum to a high note near any metal. By 2 a.m. battalions were on their objectives. Next morning, when Crusader and Sherman tanks had beaten off a mock counterattack, the battle was considered over. RMT trucks gathered up the victorious battalions and took them back to the ceremonial parade for General Montgomery. Much shuffling and cursing took place during a rehearsal on 29 September for the parade next day. Lining up trucks neatly took a long time. When this was done, drivers marked their positions for the next day with little heaps of stones or with petrol tins. After two hours' work, when the trucks were straight at last from front to rear and from the sides, 4 RMT was ordered 150 yards forward.

For the parade each RMT company formed up in five rows, with each

truck about fifty yards from the next. The 4th RMT's 133 vehicles stretched over almost a mile. After a brief talk the short, shrewd-eyed General ('rather like a jockey'), wearing an Australian slouch hat with the fernleaf glinting among other Eighth Army badges, made a quick inspection of the vehicles. He showed keen interest in drivers and their trucks, and asked many questions on the general work done, the number of original members with the companies, and the condition of vehicles. He left saying all looked well, fit, and confident.

General Montgomery's interest in vehicles' performances and condition had been underlined by an urgent appeal from General Alexander to cut waste in the **Middle East**. Waste not only was 'gravely impeding our operations' but 'unless checked may lead to disaster'. The new commander gave hard facts about army wear and tear. Calling for strict economy, he explained that the replacements over 24 hours were enormous. Every day 104 vehicles were written off beyond repair, 2000 tires went out to replace worn-out ones, 2000 tons of petrol and 85 tons of lubricating oil were used up, and 140 tons of tin-plate were made into petrol tins.

October had scarcely begun when a violent storm brought hailstones as large as golf balls. For two weeks both RMT companies worked hard on day and night manoeuvres and exercises with their brigades. Battalions practised mounting and dismounting, and in one typical move 500 vehicles of 6 Brigade, spaced with 150 yards between them, moved about ten miles with three changes of direction, at night drawing into a column with a nine-vehicle front and about twenty yards' dispersion.

By flag signals, which in turn were passed back by other flag-wavers, leaders controlled and manoeuvred their motorised fleets with increasing skill. These flag signals were as familiar as winking traffic lights to RMT drivers:

'Prepare to advance'

blue flag held vertically and dropped to indicate move forward.

'Halt'	red flag held vertically.
'Form desert formation'	blue flag held vertically.
'Form column of route'	yellow flag held vertically.
'Right wheel'	blue flag pointed to the right.
'Left wheel'	blue flag pointed to the left.
'About turn'	blue flag waved in a circle above the head.
'Right turn'	red flag pointed to the right.
'Left turn'	red flag pointed to the left.
'Close to 100 yards interval and distance between vehicles'	series of 'dots' with yellow flag.
'Close to 150 yards'	red and yellow flags held horizontally.
'Armoured fighting vehicles in sight' (Halt. Guns in action.)	red flag punched in direction of attack.
'Aircraft attack'	red and yellow flags held vertically.
'Calling officers for brigade orders'	red and blue flags held horizontally.

By the time the Division had driven back to await new orders in the coastal sand dunes near Burg el Arab, both brigades (about 1160 vehicles altogether) could roam featureless desert by day or by night with the compact precision of naval convoys.

In two night moves under a full moon, RMT drivers took riflemen of 5 and 6 Brigades to their fighting positions within striking distance of [Miteiriya Ridge](#), and then pulled back to the coastal camp. On manoeuvres, moonlight glinting on windscreens had given the show away from quite a distance. This time drivers carefully camouflaged all windscreens with sacking and smears of oil and sand, and drove with them laid flat or fixed open.

The fuse was laid, awaiting the match.

Then, when the air grew full of metal wings, when a thousand hungry guns awoke and the infantry went forward, the RMT men went for a swim, had their teeth inspected, and went to the pictures.

¹ **Dvr P. J. McGillicuddy**; born NZ 31 Oct 1917; farmhand; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

² **Sgt A. R. Moss**; born London, 28 Oct 1913; journalist; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

³ **Dvr G. H. Jensen**; born England, 9 Jun 1905; freezing worker; died of wounds 5 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Dvr R. B. Peters**; born Pukehou, 12 Aug 1918; farm contractor; died of wounds 6 Jul 1942.

⁵ **Dvr T. McLeod**; born Matura, 7 Feb 1918; labourer; died of wounds 7 Jul 1942.

⁶ **L-Sgt D. Ford**, m.i.d.; Gladfield; born Gore, 16 Oct 1908; cheese maker; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁷ **Dvr N. E. Lithgow**; Morrinsville; born Otorohanga, 16 Jan 1916; farmer; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁸ **Dvr W. R. J. Reisima**; Wellington; born NZ 25 Jan 1917; labourer; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁹ **Dvr M. C. Seaman**; born NZ 19 Dec 1914; hotel porter; killed in action 6 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ **L-Cpl C. F. Robinson**, MM; Rakaia; born Lyttelton, 7 Oct 1911; labourer.

¹¹ After a brief rest at **Amiriya** detachments from the composite company brought back 6 Bde's battalions in turn, and 3 Pl returned to 4 RMT Coy. 6 RMT Coy remained intact except for 4 Pl which, attached to Div Sup Coy, delivered up to 15,000 gallons of water daily. Both companies' workshops and

headquarters remained behind the Box.

¹² Dvr S. B. McKay; born NZ 27 Nov 1913; butcher; died of wounds 10 Jul 1942.

¹³ Dvr C. J. Anstiss; born Christchurch, 7 Sep 1918; truck driver and salesman; killed in action 11 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ New Zealand losses in killed, wounded and captured were over 1,400.

¹⁵ Dvr R. A. Martin; born Putaruru, 11 Nov 1917; grocer's assistant; killed in action 16 Jul 1942.

¹⁶ Dvr K. M. Baillie; born NZ 7 Nov 1918; grocer's assistant; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁷ Lt A. J. Millis; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 3 Nov 1916; motor business; wounded 31 Oct 1942.

¹⁸ Dvr B. C. Creswell; Wellington; born NZ 27 May 1918; farmhand.

¹⁹ L-Cpl E. Kenyon-Ormrod; Wellington; born England, 17 May 1913; clerk; p.w. 4 Jul 1942.

²⁰ L-Cpl A. Trenwith; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Nov 1918; warehouseman.

²¹ Dvr A. R. Crawford; Dunedin; born NZ 26 Dec 1913; fur dresser.

²² Dvr R. A. McCarthy; Pukekohe; born Auckland, 31 Oct 1917; motor driver.

²³ **Cpl A. E. Willcox; Masterton; born London, 14 Apr 1916; salesman.**

²⁴ **Dvr A. J. P. McKenna; Wellington; born NZ 24 May 1904; motor driver.**

²⁵ **Over the weeks 4 Platoon tirelessly carried petrol and ammunition to the front. Formations were settling down. Riflemen and engineers had more time to strengthen forward positions. Men from this platoon and some from 6 RMT, working with other NZASC companies, also carried up hundreds of sheets of corrugated iron, load after load of barbed wire, thousands of mines, sandbags, and netting. With little labour available, drivers usually loaded and unloaded. The platoon had a change for a night or two when it was switched to 22 Bn for a local move at the end of August. Detached from the main convoy, drivers under Cpl Tom Cushing and L-Cpl Harry Dodd ferried two companies of the West Kent Regt to forward defences and brought back Maori Bn men. These trucks were held up for several hours by intense shelling. A number of heavy shells burst in garish sheets of flame, providing a startling initiation for the unseasoned West Kents.**

²⁶ **Granted later in the war to 3 Hussars as a battle honour, the fernleaf is still worn on the regiment's vehicles.**

²⁷ **L-Sgt W. M. Tait; Invercargill; born Benhar, Otago, 14 Nov 1915; coal merchant.**

²⁸ **Dvr C. W. Green; born NZ 15 Jun 1919; van driver; accidentally killed 20 Aug 1942.**

²⁹ **Capt S. W. Ellingham; Ormondville; born Whetukura, Hawke's Bay, 4 Oct 1907; sheepfarmer.**

³⁰ **4 RMT Coy: 1 Pl to 28 Bn, 2 Pl to 22 Bn, 3 Pl to 21 Bn, and 4 Pl to 23 Bn. 6 RMT Coy: 1 Pl to 25 Bn, 2 Pl to 26 Bn, and**

3 Pl to 24 Bn. 4 Pl 6 RMT continued water-carrying duties.

³¹ Between 5 July and 20 October the enemy laid 249,849 anti-tank mines and 14, 509 anti-personnel mines at Alamein. British mines from captured areas brought the total along his front to 445,000.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 12 – ADVANCE TO TRIPOLI

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4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[SECTION]

And when we drove old Rommel from the Alamein Line

Winnie cabled us and said 'You're doing fine,'

But Monty said 'We'll go right on to Tripoli,

'And the quickest way to get there's by the RMT'.

Another verse to RMT's old 'Steamboat Bill' song.

THE hunt was on. Hard after the enemy they swept, through the smoking wreckage of Alamein, past bands of prisoners escorted or carrying white flags, and inland south of the coastal road, where men had yelled not long ago: 'You're going the wrong way, chum!' Keen drivers and engines in tip-top condition (Workshops had seen to that before the breakthrough) gave of their best. It was good, this pursuing and hunting at last.

But the breakthrough had taken eleven bloody days. On the night of 23-24 October the New Zealand Division had stormed and won Miteiriya Ridge. All along the front Eighth Army's infantry had advanced about four miles, but the Axis defences had sprawled deeper than this. British armour still had been unable to break out to the west. For a week Eighth Army had bored in, dug in, held on. Four nights after seizing Miteiriya Ridge the New Zealand Division had been withdrawn. The RMT men, some under stray fire, had collected the battalions and watched, fascinated, ant-like recovery units dragging back crippled tanks in the night. With no breakthrough at Miteiriya, an immense push two to three miles further north had been planned. This attack, controlled by New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, had been called Operation SUPERCHARGE. Four British Brigades—151 and 152 Infantry Brigades, 9 and 23 Armoured Brigades—and the indomitable Maori Battalion,

supported by an even heavier artillery barrage, had determinedly pushed forward on 2 November, while along the entire front the enemy had fired back about 500 tons of ammunition. A tank battle at Tell el Aqqaqir was decisive, and next day, 3 November, despite the Fuehrer's orders to hold on, ¹ the enemy withdrawal had begun.

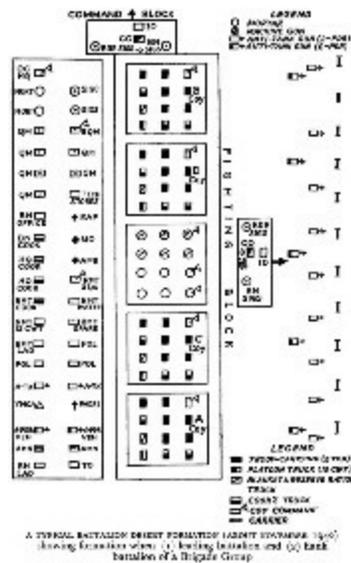
By the afternoon of 4 November the New Zealand Division, steel-tipped with armour, was after him, every driver fully extended for most of the ensuing night. The afternoon and the night boiled with traffic. Every 700 yards MPs marked the trail with petrol tins, each with a diamond cut from a side and a storm lantern placed within. These signs, replaced from **Bardia** onwards by ready-made diamond-shaped signs fastened to an iron stake, would be ripped up and planted again, time after time, along the 1400 miles from **Alamein** to **Tripoli**. Past the first signs of this tremendous trail rolled the RMT's three-tonners, the riflemen packed behind. ²

On they went, 4 RMT pulling up with 5 Brigade after midnight, having covered about 20 miles to bring them south of a **Daba** aflame with demolitions and the Desert Air Force's poundings. Rough travelling over the inland desert had strung out the brigade. As it reformed in the dark an enemy party in trucks struck at the New Zealand vehicles towards the rear. Right in the way were 1 and 4 Platoons of 4 RMT. Sergeant-Major Jack **Calvin** ³ saw tracer rip a canopy, and heard an angry driver cry out to his infantry passengers behind: 'You know you jokers aren't allowed to fix bayonets under a canopy!' Out jumped the infantry to help beat off the hour-long attack. In the brisk engagement Driver **Ashton** ⁴ was fatally wounded and Lance-Sergeant Ford showed great coolness in bringing the dead driver back under heavy fire. Driver **Roddick** ⁵ received a shrapnel wound over an eye. Corporal **Riordan**, ⁶ driving the truck, went off for medical aid. An ammunition truck caught fire and lit up the area. No. 4 Platoon's **23 Battalion** passengers suffered the most, with six riflemen killed and 19 wounded. Two RMT men, Drivers **Paris** ⁷ and **Chamberlain**, ⁸ were captured for a few hours, and a couple of riddled lorries were temporarily abandoned, the other belonging

to Drivers Dave **Jefcoate**⁹ and Norman East.¹⁰ Eight tires were punctured, a serious business because the platoon had only seven spares. Luckily a search among derelict vehicles gathered enough replacements.

Some twenty-four hours later 6 RMT also saw action when an enemy column plunged towards 6 Brigade. No. 2 Platoon had a grandstand view of **26 Battalion's** two-pounders in action. Some 600 prisoners were rounded up.

Before dawn on 5 November **Charlie Lee**¹¹ and **Reg Wolfe** were ordered to find and salvage valuable radio equipment from a 10-ton wireless control vehicle which had broken down. In an all-day hunt over a hundred miles Charlie, helped by Mr Blair,¹² of the Church Army, found the vehicle at last. Reg, out of the picture, remained looking after the Church Army's faulty vehicle which was being towed along in the general advance.



A TYPICAL BATTALION DESERT FORMATION (ABOUT NOVEMBER 1942) showing formation when (1) leading battalion and (2) flank battalion of a Brigade Group

Zigzagging over the desert to find the precious truck, Charlie and Mr Blair kept running into little groups of stranded and bewildered enemy troops. Some, still full of fight, opened fire on the three-tonner. Charlie drove his best this day, especially when an anti-tank gun got him in its sights. Later he turned the tables. A party of about 130 Italians spotted

the New Zealand truck, but their flight ended when the RMT man circled them and threatened them with a spandau. They surrendered and, after searching them for hidden weapons, Lee ordered them off towards British vehicles on the horizon. 'As a parting gesture I tossed a tin of bully beef among them and you should have seen them head off for the home stakes. They thought it was going to explode.'

Finding the truck, which had been salvaged already, the two bedded down for Guy Fawkes' Night, ¹³ which the RMT workshops and other NZASC units, camped past the **Alamein** station, celebrated with carefree flares and tracer until enemy bombers arrived. Just before dawn a shadowy figure began prowling round the lonely truck. Waking with a start Lee bailed up a German paratrooper, 'aged 21, a shifty-eyed rooster', who had escaped from **Daba**. This captive was handed over later to MPs and, 131 prisoners to his credit, Lee rejoined 5 Brigade, now past **Fuka** and struggling with the Division through rain and mud over 22 laborious miles to **Baggush**. ¹⁴

This rain, falling over two days and halting practically all Eighth Army transport, probably saved the Axis forces from annihilation. Where shells and mines had failed, the rain succeeded. While British wheels bogged down in the desert quagmires, German and Italian forces sped west over the bitumen road by the coast to a refuge beyond the border.

The Division, supposed to move on to **Minqar Qaim**, stayed put, cursing the mud and the storm clouds. But there was another side to the story. The 6th RMT drivers found their petrol tanks practically empty; their three battalions of 6 Brigade were stranded. The 4th RMT, holding enough petrol for another hundred miles, was in a better position. It had been on the job longer. The earlier experience was paying off now.

Fortunately the mud and the petrol shortage coincided. The Division had left **Alamein** carrying eight days' water and rations and enough (in theory) oil and petrol for 200 miles, three-quarters of the way to the frontier. Once again the lesson of November 1941 was repeated. Slow movement over bad going, plus leakages from the detested flimsy petrol

containers, had devoured the petrol ration to within just half that distance. A 200-vehicle column carrying water, petrol, oil, and supplies was on its way up from **Alamein**, but this group too had been delayed by mud and rain. Now in another role, further RMT men were coming to the Division's aid.

These men, with their three-tonners, had been withdrawn from the battalions before the breakthrough at **Alamein**. Spare RMT trucks had been caused by battalion casualties, few infantry reinforcements, and by battalions (especially the **Maori Battalion**) gradually picking up or 'acquiring' vehicles of their own. Through this, 30 surplus three-tonners from 4 RMT had been released from the battalions and were organised into a composite platoon under Captain Burt. A similar platoon had been formed in 6 RMT. Sometimes they carried ammunition, sometimes petrol. ¹⁵ Loaded with petrol, the party under Burt left **Alamein**, struggled through slush past Alam el Halif, reached **Baggush** on 8 November, and joined the Petrol Company in issuing 50,652 gallons to the Division's parched motors. The 6 RMT Composite Platoon carried prisoners of war to **Daba**, where it loaded petrol and went forward to the Petrol Company. While petrol was being distributed among the Division, 4 Platoon 6 RMT, still with the Supply Company, helped issue water.

The advance now under way had enormously extended Eighth Army's supply services.

'.... any advance would be into a desert, completely barren of any kind of resources beyond some rather indifferent water, and all supplies would have to come still from the same base,' wrote General Alexander in his despatch of 5 February 1948. 'This would mean that very large quantities of motor transport would be needed. In previous campaigns there had never been sufficient third-line transport to support a strong advance over a long distance. We were better off now and by August 1942 Eighth Army was provided with the equivalent of 46 General Transport Companies to carry stores, ammunition, petrol and water, and six tank transporter companies; seven more General Transport companies were held in reserve. ¹⁶

.... in spite of all difficulties of geography and enemy demolitions, the provisions made were so ample and the problems so well appreciated that the rate of development of ports, roads, railways and pipeline nearly always exceeded estimates and we were never obliged to pause longer than had been calculated for lack of supplies, equipment or reinforcements.

... At that time the ports of the **Middle East** were handling 466,000 tons of military stores per month; 300,000 troops and half a million civilians were employed in all rear services and contracted labour represented about 1,500,000 more.'

While awaiting petrol at **Baggush**, men scraped off mud and dried out blankets and clothes soaked in the downpour over the last two days. Moving again, at first through mud which troubled two-wheel-drive vehicles particularly, drivers bivouacked south of a crumbling **Matruh**. On the way they glimpsed the old **Minqar Qaim** battlefield, and the talk went back to the other breakthrough, not led by armour and barrage but by highly vulnerable trucks. Then over the **BBC** came reports of American landings in French North Africa.

The 4th RMT drivers got in a good burst of 70 miles next day, 9 November, when they reached and pressed along the main road towards **Sidi Barrani**, while ahead and well inland British armoured cars entered **Libya**. The German Air Force, in one of its remarkably few sallies during the advance, struck briefly at part of the convoy in the afternoon. Driver **Rountree** ¹⁷ was wounded and evacuated to hospital, to join other drivers (about a dozen) who on the way up had been knocked out by jaundice. Driver Rolfe, sprinting for cover, ran into three Germans, surrendered, changed his mind and, although threatened with a revolver, ran back to his truck, grabbed his rifle, and rounded up the trio.

No longer driving west, 6 RMT carried 6 Brigade's three battalions in to garrison **Mersa Matruh**. The switch was made because maintenance further on would be difficult. **Mersa Matruh** had been left in a filthy state

by retreating Italians who seemed to have had not the remotest idea of hygiene. The 6th RMT drivers, compensated a little for insanitary conditions by masses of abandoned wines, food, and sweets, also saw with satisfaction ships bringing petrol and oil into the port.

Three hours after midnight 5 Brigade (by darkness compact in column of route, by daylight dispersed in desert formation) moved off towards the last of the resistance in Egypt. No. 3 Platoon broke away from the convoy in the morning of 10 November, carrying **21 Battalion** to flush the small coastal town of **Sidi Barrani**. And flush it they did, 40 prisoners yielding without a fight. The riflemen returned to the lorries and to the brigade, except for one company which stayed behind on a three-day job clearing litter and booby traps and guarding an airfield. Ten drivers, with their vehicles, stayed with this company, lending a hand with pickets and tidying up. ¹⁸

The rest of **21 Battalion** drove forward, unaware of the 'brilliant and important' success it would score before next day's dawn. Crossing the desert south of **Sidi Barrani**, 4 RMT's old hands became reminiscent again. They had caught sight of the remains of the old Tummar camps, occupied by the Italians in 1940. Traffic was now streaming west, interfering seriously with the convoy's pace. No. 3 Platoon found 'fast progress impossible', while behind it 4 Platoon reported 'convoy conditions very bad, speed excessive ... four front springs broken'. Everyone knew the convoy was now hard on the heels of the enemy. The road and the roadside were littered with burning and burnt-out vehicles. Sometimes drivers had to swing their three-tonners off the road to avoid still-glowing wreckage. Ahead, to **Tobruk** and beyond, Desert Air Force planes seared the roadside with yet more destruction.

On until past midnight drove the 4 RMT sections, covering up to 81 miles, 3 Platoon, carrying **21 Battalion**, pulling up six miles short of **Halfaya Pass**. Other units were strung out for miles along the road to the east. In no time drivers were sound asleep, but within three hours 3 Platoon was shaken awake and told to get moving smartly. A surprise attack on **Halfaya Pass**, six miles away, had to be rushed through before

dawn. Within 15 minutes eight three-tonners were off, drivers wondering how the mere 110 men they were carrying could storm a pass which had held out successfully all day. The shadowy lorries passed through the sleeping army to the foot of the pass and unloaded the two **21 Battalion** companies. The riflemen, greatcoats dumped, climbed out grasping sticky bombs, rifles and light machine guns. Without artillery, without mortars, without anti-tank guns, the slender force began to climb. 'Good luck, boys. Kia Ora.' And Halfaya Pass was cleared.

Some 5000 vehicles were in the vicinity, all waiting for the go-ahead on the one passable road up **Halfaya**, for **Sollum** Pass was well and truly blocked by demolitions. **Halfaya Pass** became chock-a-block. Painfully, with many a halt and with many a rueful glance at mines on the edge of the road, the brigade ground through and passed into **Libya** at last. It was 11 November—just one year after the Division had begun to leave **Baggush** for the second Libyan campaign. On the way drivers picked up the victors of the pass—108 now, for one rifleman had been killed and one wounded, astonishingly low casualties. The men were angry. Drivers heard how a treacherous party of prisoners had regained weapons and opened fire on the backs of the New Zealanders. Yet with only two casualties the night attackers had killed about seventy and captured 612. The enemy's divisional motto was 'I am valiant unto death'.

Fifth Brigade camped and remained south of **Bardia** to rest and refit. Here it was joined on 22 November by 6 Brigade, freed from unloading work on shipping at Smugglers' Cove and **Matruh** and also on trains, the first of which puffed through from **Alexandria** on 14 November.

On the day 5 Brigade crossed **Halfaya Pass** its vehicles received another 31,000-odd gallons of petrol. The two RMT composite platoons, along with Petrol Company, camping the night at the foot of the hopelessly congested pass, moved on with 34,020 gallons of petrol, considered enough to refuel the brigade on 12 November.

Egypt was free. Prisoners captured totalled 30,000, including nine generals. 'There is some good hunting to be had further to the west ...

this time, having reached **Benghazi** and beyond, we shall not come back,' said General Montgomery.

And throughout **Britain** the church bells rang.

They were very happy. They wouldn't have called the King their uncle, this detachment from 2 Platoon 4 RMT. They'd liberated a splendid supply of Italian plonk, and being back in old **Libya** again called for celebration. By tea-time the party was in magnificent form. Captain Burt, vexed, swept down and destroyed all he could see of the swag. But after dark the RMT men rushed up strategically concealed reinforcements, and the adventures of Samuel Hall and Poor Little Angeline were honoured in quavering song far into the night.

It was quite a different story a few miles away for most of 2 Platoon, attached to **22 Battalion** at **Sollum**. Small flights of two or three planes had been coming in from the sea to straddle transport along the road. A stick of bombs falling in the platoon area injured Drivers Nielsen ¹⁹ and **Jaspers**. ²⁰ Nielsen had to be evacuated to hospital, but Jaspers, after treatment, returned to duty. Then drivers turned east, **Maadi**-bound, taking their last trip with **22 Battalion**, which was about to be reorganised into a motorised unit. The platoon returned with reinforcements—and two truckloads of mutton birds for the Maoris.

Yes, morale was good, with or without captured vino. In fact, 'The field security section considered that relations between New Zealand troops and civilians encountered during the advance were amicable,' writes one narrator. 'As it happened, the troops met very few civilians....'

Once again 4 RMT ordered its Christmas dinner, five days earlier than last time, and this time with a great deal more assurance. When the **BBC** reported on 21 November the landing of a well-equipped New Zealand force in **New Caledonia**, 6th Reinforcement drivers, veterans of **Samambula** and Momi Bay, explained **Pacific** tactics and prospects.

Until the end of the month the company's job was carting petrol,

landed by barge at **Bardia**, up to an even more battered (and insanitary) **Tobruk**, a trip of about seven and a half hours each way, and helping NZASC units distribute petrol and water to the resting Division. The 6th RMT turned up from **Matruh** among 6 Brigade's 2700 men and 502 vehicles. They had covered about 170 miles in three days, and they camped at night not far from well remembered **Conference Cairn**. The composite platoons, which had put in good work at a critical time, were disbanded and the stray three-tonners attached to the medical units came back to the fold. Winter clothing and leather jerkins were issued, and between jobs drivers got busy on clearing away scrub and levelling patches of likely desert for football grounds. Soon the old familiar thud of bouncing and punted footballs began and the divisional Rugby competition got under way. The Maoris flattened 6 RMT's A team 15—0, but the B team triumphed 11—0 over **26 Battalion**. After a hard, exciting game 4 RMT beat 41 Anti-Aircraft Battery 9—0. The 4 RMT Association football team (from 4 Platoon, except for Sergeant Richards of 3 Platoon) beat **4 Field Regiment** by one goal to nil in a hard, even game. The happy opening of the season—'with the jerseys and the barracking mob you almost thought you were back home'—was rounded off by an issue of two bottles apiece of 'Black Horse', superb Canadian beer, in the evening. Later two travesties of teams, ' **Bardia Belles**' and 'Halfaya Haughties', scrambled happily about the field. Before the competition was interrupted (**General Freyberg** made it quite clear the finals would be played in **Tripoli**, and the sports gear would be carried along too), 4 RMT decisively licked **25 Battalion** 14—3, and 6 RMT drew 3—3 with 4 Field Ambulance.

On the last day of the month a big transport job came up, sending an impressive host of 163 three-tonners (73 from 4 RMT, 90 from 6 RMT) to gather up 1 Royal Greek Brigade arriving by road and rail at **Matruh**. After a good deal of milling around and strange cries, 926 Greeks with their 95 tons of baggage were tucked aboard and taken to their destination near the New Zealand Division.

Now news circulated of a quick move coming up. Rommel had sped

back 800 miles from **Alamein** to his old lair, the 'impregnable' salt marshes and soft sands at **El Agheila**, beyond which no British forces had yet passed. Once again the two RMT companies were shuffled, ²¹ all surplus three-tonners going mainly to strengthen the Petrol Company. This time there would be no hold-up through petrol running out. Still, supply headaches were by no means over. Until **Benghazi** port was working properly, most of Eighth Army's necessities had to be carried forward 300 miles to the **El Agheila** front by truck from the railhead and from **Tobruk**. The railhead opened at **Capuzzo** on 20 November and reached **Tobruk** on 1 December. The first ships entered **Tobruk** and **Benghazi** four days after capture.

The whips were cracking on 4 December. With rations for five days plus petrol for 200 miles stowed away, drivers took their seats, switched on, revved up, and started off on the 350-mile advance over trackless, dull desert to **El Haseiat**, a barren reference point within striking distance of the enemy at **El Agheila**. Once gathered at **El Haseiat**, the Division would sweep further inland to play a secretive and key part in the capture of the **El Agheila** positions.

New Zealand vehicles streamed far beyond the horizon. Along the trail blazed with diamond signs drove 6 Brigade, followed next day by 5 Brigade. This time each brigade travelled in three columns 150 yards apart, 15 vehicles to the mile, swaying along at a speed of ten miles in the hour. Both brigades got off promptly, for everyone knew that if any vehicle failed to start its driver, NCO, or officer would be on charge. This time if a vehicle broke down on the way it would return to its old position only when the convoy had halted—racing back into position was banned. And a good thing, too, for sometimes other trucks would tag helplessly and hopefully on to a truck hell-bent for its old position. This could cause an irritating knot of confusion right in the heart-of-a convoy. Drivers were also told to keep their daytime positions at night, and not to close up in case bombers came over in the darkness.

Speed was very slow the first day. The trail was rough for most of the 69-mile journey along **Trigh Capuzzo** to the old battlefield areas. Trucks

halted for the night near **El Adem**, where RMT detachments helped hand out petrol and supplies. The going improved next day, the lorries taking comfortably many flat, smooth wadis. Plenty of aircraft, **RAF** and American, dotted **El Adem** aerodrome. Wrecked tanks and other debris of defeat lay about **Bir Hacheim**, lost in action during the collapse in mid-1942. A good stretch of 111 miles (20 up on the previous day) brought drivers to the south of **Msus**, where the convoy turned southwards with the next sunrise. For a while it was very cold and raw, a wasted mist hanging over the desert. Near Saunnu vehicles formed column of route to cross small surrounding hills and gullies. In the afternoon, the day's mileage up to 69, the men rested, 340 miles covered from **Capuzzo**. Next day, 9 December, 5 Brigade joined 6 Brigade, eleven miles ahead, and the Division halted. ²²

Again RMT was called in to meet a petrol emergency.

This was the reason. Once under way the Division, completely isolated, would have to look after itself for about 300 miles. This called for enormous stocks of petrol. Helping the Petrol Company out of a jam, 100 troop-carrying vehicles briefly left their brigades, loaded from British stocks near **Agedabia**, came back to swell the Petrol Company's pool by 60,000 gallons, and returned to their riflemen. By the evening of 12 December everything on wheels in the New Zealand Division had enough petrol for 300 miles. In case this was not enough, the Petrol Company was to follow on with sufficient to carry the Division another 150 miles. The company finally left loaded with over 83,000 gallons.



Cookhouse at Burg el Arab, before Alamein

Cookhouse at Burg el Arab, before Alamein



Parade at Alamein for General Montgomery

Parade at Alamein for General Montgomery



Watching the Alamein barrage by moonlight

Watching the Alamein barrage by moonlight

Muddy going and a rainbow, south-west of Fuka



Muddy going and a rainbow, south-west of Fuka



Bogged south of Daba

Bogged south of Daba

Over the top of Halfaya Pass



Over the top of Halfaya Pass



On the left hook south
of El Agheila

On the left hook south of El Agheila



Marble Arch

Marble Arch



Olive trees at Kairouan, Tunisia

Olive trees at Kairouan, Tunisia



1 NZ Mule Pack Company in Tunisia

1 NZ Mule Pack Company in Tunisia



Crossing the Sangro

Crossing the Sangro



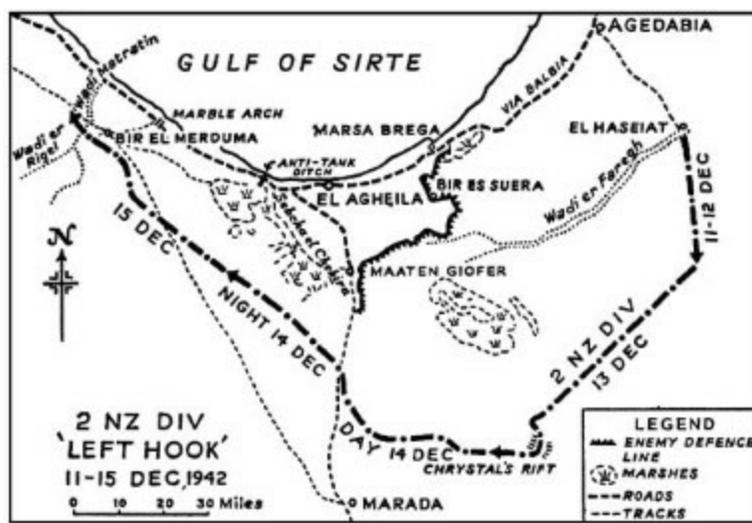
Convoy carrying mules snowbound at Capracotta at 5000 feet in the Apennines

Convoy carrying mules snowbound at Capracotta at 5000 feet in the Apennines

The New Zealanders, 11,000-strong,²³ were now in position, the approach march over, ready for the swing at the 'impregnable' **El Agheila** line. Full use was made of camouflage. The strict radio silence continued. And in the night drivers pricked up their ears at the solemn, faint grumble of artillery fire. The front was within 50 miles.

Swelling the force to about 3000 vehicles, 4 British Light Armoured Brigade, including the **Royal Scots Greys** with Sherman tanks, joined the Division, and on 13 December, just after dawn, the 'left hook' round the **El Agheila** positions began in strictest secrecy. Far to the south they would go, hoping not to be seen. The sands south of the line had been found passable after all. This was the hush-hush report of the **Long Range Desert Group** and a British armoured car patrol. Defying capture, the LRDG adventurers all the time during the **Alamein** battle were not only roving impudently south of the foe at **El Agheila**, but day by day were counting the enemy as he passed by on the road near **Marble Arch**.²⁴ The armoured car patrol's favourable report, saying all would be well if bulldozers cleared certain bad sand drifts, had sent the Division from **El Haseiat** to sweep round this strongest natural fortress in all **Libya**.

All went well on 13 December. Rain, not too heavy, had laid the tell-tale dust, and low cloud helped the secrecy of the move. RMT vehicles, mostly in second and third gear, covered up to 93 miles, crossing on the way a spooky spot, an ideal Hollywood setting for a desert tragedy of enormous proportions: a barren sea of sand absolutely devoid of vegetation. It was just made for heaps of bleached bones. Parts of it were wet and spongy after the rain. Sometimes deep drifts lay in front and, despite the work of the bulldozing engineers, the going was hard for the RMT men. Hundreds of wheels carved deeper and deeper ruts in the fine sand. Here the three-tonners revved and lurched crazily, but drivers got through, using all their skill, patience, and hard-won experience. This time the rain had helped in parts by packing down and partly hardening some of the sand. Several RMT lorries foundered but were towed out without much difficulty.



LEFT HOOK ROUND EL AGHEILA

LEFT HOOK ROUND EL AGHEILA

One spot in particular—Chrystal's Rift, named after the British armoured car patrol officer who had discovered this obstacle—was expected to give a great deal of trouble. Six miles broad, with steep to precipitous sides, the rift lay across the first day's route. The explorers had found no satisfactory way round this broad wadi. Approaching the rift the Division pulled into three columns, safely crossed at a narrow spot prepared by bulldozers, and with relief fanned out again in desert formation.

At night tired drivers learned they had taken the Division south of the enemy at last. With the moon appearing, the convoy reached the low limestone hills, some 15 miles of broken country. Travelling on firmer ground was less difficult and the three columns of vehicles swayed along a well-lit track. Toiling behind came the petrol-carrying trucks, hampered by freshly churned ruts and channels. The rougher the trail the more precious grew their loads, for the RMT troop-carriers this day averaged just under four miles to the gallon. Oil consumption, too, was very heavy.

Gradually a heavy fog peeled back next morning above a division spread out over perhaps as much as 60 miles. The day was interrupted by several halts. One reason behind this was the difficult business of issuing petrol for a further 100 miles. The New Zealand petrol trucks

away behind at the rear had to push up through the Division to establish a petrol point towards the front. While they were doing this the Division also would be moving on a few miles further. The first of the petrol trucks, the detached 1 Platoon from 4 RMT, got through and began issuing petrol in the late afternoon, greatly to the relief of the Greys, whose tanks, impatiently awaiting petrol from their own delayed trucks, were stranded. Within 30 minutes the platoon had disposed of its 27,800 gallons (5 Infantry Brigade Group alone needed 17,000 gallons). Usually a three-tonner on a petrol job carried a load of about 620 gallons.

Later a platoon from the Petrol Company and the attached platoon from 6 RMT arrived to issue 18,300 gallons and 1000 gallons apiece. This brought the day's issue up to 47,100 gallons. The advance resumed until about midnight, 80 to 90 miles covered. On the way a petrol wagon caught fire, sending grotesque shadows leaping over the desert and lighting up the area like a beacon. As luck would have it the Divisional Administration Group (including Petrol and Supply Companies), now under Major Ian Stock, halted for 15 interminable minutes beside the furious blaze. Any aircraft about would have wreaked carnage among the supply trucks, packed and jammed nose-to-tail.

The 'hook' was now well and truly accomplished. The final move on 15 December took drivers to the coastal belt behind **El Agheila**. The plan was to seize the hilly ground overlooking the coastal road near **Marble Arch**, some 35 miles west of **El Agheila**, and to play hob with the enemy, trapping him or at least forcing him to abandon heavy equipment. But already the wily Rommel, his front under strong British attack, was abandoning the **El Agheila** position and hustling back for his next stand at **Nofilia**. The *Afrika Korps* alone remained holding the **Marble Arch** area.

Drivers headed towards **Marble Arch**. Many springs had broken, and after approaches to Brigade LAD and Ordnance and Field Park had drawn a blank, drivers had to carry on as best they could without replacements. A derelict Ford turned up; drivers and mechanics passing by pounced on it. The canopy bars went to a 4 Platoon truck in the free-

for-all. Within 15 minutes even a locust would not have given the truck a second thought.

Finding the **Marble Arch** approaches strongly held, the New Zealand Division, still bent on outflanking, moved further west in the afternoon to a little beyond Bir el Merduma, just a jump ahead of an enemy force coming up to the same place. After dark **General Freyberg** ordered 6 Brigade north to cut the road while the rest of the Division held the inland flank. The administration group, including RMT drivers on petrol-carrying vehicles, was to get back well out of the way; and back it went, 20 miles in all, leaving the area clear. For now, in theory, the whole of the **Afrika Korps** was cut off.

Taking up positions on rough, quite unknown country in the dark was tremendously difficult. Sixth Brigade had a particularly hard time and, looking back next day, 6 RMT drivers with the battalions wondered how they had done it. The land became more and more rough and exasperating. Grinding up rocky inclines, troop-carriers jerked down into wadis where the going was soft, damp, and treacherous. Eyes strained to avoid crashes in the failing light under a watery moon. Grunting and groaning, trucks hauled their heavy loads in a manner which astonished and deeply impressed most outsiders. Painfully the brigade ground on, advancing in jerks of a mile at a time until it had covered about seven miles. Then the infantry debussed within a couple of miles of the road, and drivers bedded down behind the battalions.

The RMT's job was over. They had delivered the goods. Over more than 300 miles of trackless desert they had nursed their three-tonners, with the fitters, the mechanics, the workshops men all playing their part in keeping vehicles in good condition, in keeping engines going. The rest was up to the men behind the guns. But in front in the night, after all this, Germans of *go Light Division* stubbornly stopped the infantry from getting on to the road. The enemy transport withdrew along the road below, practically without interference. Minute by minute the **Afrika Korps** slipped past a checked 6 Brigade, whose guns, unable

to register on the road in the dark, were virtually useless.

Fifth Brigade found settling into positions on the inland flank no picnic, either, and soon a disturbing discovery was made. In the darkness on the rough, unknown ground the brigades had settled down about six miles apart. A broad passage ran clean through the divided Division. And through this gap ran the Merduma- **Nofilia** track.

After dawn drivers heard our artillery open up and the enemy reply. Then through the six-mile gap, over scrub and rock skirting the **Nofilia** track, sped the enemy fleet, the last of the defenders, **15 Panzer Division** from Merduma, composed and compact in a fighting withdrawal. The gap and the breakthrough were appreciated fully by drivers when tank and antitank shells came uncomfortably close to their vehicles. One 6 RMT driver, of 1 Platoon, was wounded. Within a couple of hours the panzer rearguard had escaped for the loss of one or two tanks and a few trucks.

The left hook, as a hook, was fine. There was just one thing wrong. The hook had no barb. As one letter home said: 'After all our work in getting here and the time and thought besides keeping the plans so secret! Gosh honey it would make a Saint swear, and as you know I am no Saint.'

Christmas. At last. 'Surrounding AA and Arty Units ushered in Christmas Day with several salvos in the early morning and the day broke fine,' runs that day's entry in the war diary of 2 Platoon 4 RMT.

Wherever possible drivers came back to their company headquarters, to listen to Padre Jamieson's church service and to greet and yarn with comrades. To quote the 4 RMT war diary:

'Commencing 1300 hrs Coy HQ personnel queued up for their Xmas dinner. Various items of the menu were served by Major Stock, Padre Jamieson, and the Sgts. Order of issue: pork, seasoning, apple sauce, boiled potatoes, baked potatoes, beans, peas and gravy. The digestion of this course was aided by the consumption of 1 bottle of beer per man.

After a reasonable time, men were ready for the second course—fruit salad, Xmas pudding and sauce. There was an abundance of food, and armed with issue of 50 cigarettes, men made their way to their various couches to relax and prepare their appetites for the meals to follow. At 1600 hours cakes and tea were served, after which Colonel Crump addressed the officers and men, passing on messages of good will and appreciation from the GOC. At 1730 hours a further excellent meal—sausage rolls, salad of carrots, beans and mayonnaise, followed by jellied fruit and blancmange, the appetiser for this feast being a double issue of rum. The splendid efforts of the cooks were very much appreciated by all ranks, special enthusiasm being displayed as this is the first occasion since the inception of 4 NZ Res MT Coy on which Xmas dinner has been able to be served.

Heavy with food, 1 Platoon enjoyed an impromptu sports meeting in the afternoon. Driver Smith had his time cut out as a bookie, and Driver Townsend made a witty judge. Results:

El Alamein Maidhim Scurry of 50 yards: Driver **Arkininstall**.²⁵

Artillery barrage (25-pounder)—putting the shot:

Second-Lieutenant **Cotton-Stapleton**.²⁶

Montgomery Challenge Cup of 220 yards: Driver Arkininstall.

[Deleted by Censor] Fryburg Steaks of 100 yards:

Driver Arkininstall.

Fanny Hunt's Handicap of 50 yards:

Corporal **Cussen**,²⁷ off 7 yards.

Rommel's Mistake—long jump: Driver Arkininstall.

Tug-of-war: No. 5 Section.

No. 3 Platoon shared a substantial dinner with the **Maori Battalion** which, just in case, earlier in the month had devoured an enormous Christmas dinner of mutton bird, dried kumeras, pork preserved in fat, and pauas, and went to the church service, in Maori, at night.

And with 4 Platoon: '1 OR remained 23 NZ Bn RAP for med observation.'

Christmas passed away happily enough at **Nofilia**, about 45 miles westward from where **15 Panzer Division** had slipped between the two brigades on 16 December. The intervening nine-day period had seen its moments. Giving the enemy no rest and stretching petrol supplies to the limit, the Division, still isolated, had set out after him early on the 17th, after awakening, in the words of one platoon, to 'an amazing scene, 100 or more fires brilliantly dispelling the darkness as company, platoon and section cooks prepared breakfast in complete disregard of possible air or land attack. Brush and wood set the flames leaping. Brigade had approved this extraordinary display of confidence, yet the majority had eaten in awe and watchfulness.' **Maori Battalion** had wistfully compared the brigade area with 'a little town in peacetime, with all fires as lights'.

The Division had aimed beyond **Nofilia**, which had been held in strength. Once again a 'hook'—a baby one—had been attempted to outflank the village. While armour engaged German tanks to the south, 5 and 6 Brigades had moved off under uncomfortably brisk shellfire. Fifth Brigade had been given the job of cutting the road west of **Nofilia**. Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons' troop-carriers had soon been in the thick of it as their battalions went forward. Moving towards the coast, drivers had run into a pocket of enemy supported by Mark IV tanks and artillery. The tailboards had gone down to a hail of tank and shell fire. No. 4 Platoon, leading the way with **23 Battalion**, had been forced down a mile short of the road, shells bursting among vehicles and wounding Driver **Cox**.²⁸ No. 2 Platoon drivers (with **21 Battalion**), crawling for cover and taking 'a damned sour view of the situation', had managed to avoid casualties. Corporal Phillips'²⁹ truck had been struck by a tank shell which had

ripped up the tray and reduced his bedroll to a rat's nest of ribbons. Despite continual shelling of the wadi and strong crossfire, the platoon carriers had not been sent back until daylight next morning. Several 3 Platoon vehicles had had near misses but no direct hits. Their men, 28 Battalion, had taken up positions with less trouble, for 23 Battalion, on higher ground to the west, had drawn most of the fire. Meantime 6 RMT drivers, the hectic trip of a couple of nights earlier still fresh in their minds, had been glad the day was 5 Brigade's.

In the night riflemen and engineers had got through to cut and mine the road, but once again the prize had vanished. The Germans had escaped before dawn.

Outside a Nofilia stiff with mines, the travel-stained Division now camped in peace. The success of the Division's moves, said General Freyberg, had been due to the drivers and the men who had maintained the vehicles. He asked brigadiers to see that these men were told of his appreciation and given full credit. Passing on the General's message, Colonel Crump pointed out that while the Division had advanced 600 to 700 miles, petrol trucks had had to cover twice that distance—1400 miles—to keep the Division going.

While the Division quietly occupied the Nofilia area, the attached 1 Platoon from 4 RMT, back with the petrol trucks, was striking a heap of trouble. These drivers were a good way off the petrol point east of El Agheila, some 120 miles distant.³⁰ The enemy had gone but danger remained. A lot of antipersonnel mines were about. Onto one of these mines drove Drivers Harrison³¹ and Gilbert.³² Going to help the wounded drivers Captain Burt and Corporal Bruning (attached from 3 Platoon) set off another mine, luckily without any more damage. After the two wounded men had been attended to, more drivers gathering to help, two other mines went off, wounding Captain Burt, Corporal Bruning, Drivers Brewer,³³ Lutze,³⁴ Harvey,³⁵ Corporal Wilson³⁶ and Lance-Corporal Baker.³⁷ The injured were taken to a dressing station and the petrol gathering work went on. Four days later, in 6 RMT, an S-mine killed Driver Coombe,³⁸ and hope was given up for Drivers Dewe³⁹

and **Kimmins**,⁴⁰ taken prisoner a week before.

Soon hastily painted notices would be going up. For example, on a smoke-blackened building: 'This building is full of boobytraps—you have been warned.' A card on a shattered truck: 'I was too close to the truck ahead of me—are you?' Or: 'One bomb, one truck: keep your bloody distance.'

At isolated **Nofilia** several 6 RMT drivers doubly appreciated regular food parcels from a First World War man at **Maadi Camp**. He was Private **George Tolhurst**⁴¹ (possibly the only New Zealand soldier to wear a beard for a few days in **Trentham**). These 'adopted' drivers received few parcels from home. 'I got lots of parcels,' said George.

Just before Christmas drivers helped bring up parcels and mail, including the 7 December issue of *NZEF Times*. One front-page item quickly went from mouth to mouth. It read

¹ '... In your present situation nothing else can be thought of but to hold on, not to yield a step, and to throw every weapon and every warrior who can be spared into the fight... You can show your troops no other road but that to victory or death.'

² 4 RMT Coy: 1 Pl carrying 28 Bn; 2 Pl, 22 Bn; 3 Pl, 21 Bn; 4 Pl, 23 Bn. 6 RMT Coy: 1 Pl, 25 Bn; 2 Pl, 26 Bn; 3 Pl, 24 Bn; 4 Pl, water.

³ **Lt J. A. Calvin; Wellington**; born Preston, England, 23 Jan 1917; grocery manager.

⁴ **Dvr M. Ashton**; born **Chatham Islands**, 22 Sep 1919; farm worker; killed in action 5 Nov 1942.

⁵ **Dvr K. Roddick; Timaru**; born NZ 8 Aug 1920; grocer; wounded 5 Nov 1942.

⁶ **WO II M. B. Riordan, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born NZ 19 May 1919; motor mechanic.**

⁷ **Dvr E. F. Paris; born NZ 22 Jun 1904; insurance agent; died 16 Apr 1952.**

⁸ **Dvr L. B. Chamberlain; Ashburton; born Leeston, 30 Dec 1914; farm labourer; wounded 24 Jun 1942.**

⁹ **Dvr W. D. Jefcoate; Dunedin; born NZ 3 Aug 1902; taxi proprietor; wounded 5 Nov 1942.**

¹⁰ **Dvr N. E. East; Hamilton; born Christchurch, 18 Mar 1918; clerk.**

¹¹ **Dvr C. Lee; Dunedin; born London, 29 Mar 1909; seaman; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; released 2 Jan 1942.**

¹² **Mr R. W. Blair, MBE; Burnham; born Takapau, 1 Sep 1916; Church Army worker; now Chaplain, Burnham Military Camp.**

¹³ **On Guy Fawkes' Night 3 Pl 4 RMT camped uncomfortably but safely in an area sprinkled with butterfly bombs, an aircraft-dropped gadget designed along the lines of a sycamore seed. Further odds and ends reported about this time included a water bottle which exploded when the cork was withdrawn, and an innocent-looking can, marked 'SPEED WELL Motor Oil—Engine Running made easy', with a picture of a tiger chasing a man.**

¹⁴ **Capt Ellingham's Dodge gave trouble: a broken piston rod and two valve stems bent. With few tools the LAD men, Dvrs West and Lector, by 2 p.m. had the worst of the job done. They worked on the move and at halts up to 10.30 p.m. to get the engine running again, 'a fine piece of work typical of the LAD'.**

¹⁵ **Besides this several RMT lorries, issued with Red Cross**

signs, were loaned to work as ambulances with NZ medical units. One group joined 5 Fd Amb after the opening barrage at **Alamein** and 'gave great assistance', working continuously evacuating walking wounded and stretcher cases, for within 24 hours 838 patients (504 of them New Zealanders) went through this dressing station. After the breakthrough four 4 RMT trucks with 6 Fd Amb ran into a skirmish on 6 Nov. 'Visibility was poor,' said L-Cpl Telford, 'and the convoy nearly collided with some "Long Toms"'. "You can't run over my guns, you know," said the colonel.'

¹⁶ 'Theoretically one General Transport company can maintain one division 50 miles from railhead or a port, i.e., for every 50 miles of an advance you need one extra company per division. This rule of thumb calculation is based on working seven days a week and ten hours a day, over good roads; in the desert it needs modification and on one occasion it took six companies to do the work of one.'

On the other side of the picture: 'An adequate supply system and stocks of weapons, petrol and ammunition are essential conditions for any army to be able successfully to stand the strain of battle. Before the fighting proper, the battle is fought and decided by the Quartermasters. The bravest man can do nothing without guns, the guns nothing without plenty of ammunition and guns and ammunition are of little use in mobile warfare unless they can be transported by vehicles supplied with sufficient petrol. Supply must approximate in quantity to that which is available to the enemy and not only in quantity but also in quality... None of the conditions to which I have referred were in any way fulfilled and we had to suffer the consequences.'—Rommel on **Alamein**, quoted in *Rommel*, by Desmond Young (Collins).

¹⁷ **Dvr M. S. A. Rountree; Wanganui**; born **Wanganui**, 21 Sep 1917; platelayer; wounded 9 Nov 1942.

¹⁸ Bringing the cleaning-up party back to 5 Bde on unlucky 13 Nov, these RMT drivers struck 'the father of all traffic jams' at **Sollum** Pass. 'We thought we'd never make it. It took us nine hours to climb the pass so dense was the traffic.'

¹⁹ Dvr T. F. Nielsen; Eketahuna; born **Denmark**, 8 Mar 1918; labourer; wounded 16 Nov 1942.

²⁰ Cpl R. M. Jaspers; **Nelson**; born Waipawa, 15 Jan 1919; yardman; wounded 16 Nov 1942.

²¹ 4 RMT Coy (with 5 Bde): 1 Pl (complete) to Pet Coy; 2 Pl, 15 trucks to 21 Bn, 15 to Pet and Amn Companies; 3 Pl, 25 trucks to 28 Bn, 6 to Pet Coy; 4 Pl, 18 trucks to 23 Bn, 9 to Amn Coy. 6 RMT Coy (with 6 Bde): 1 Pl to 25 Bn, 2 Pl to 26 Bn, 3 Pl to Pet Coy, 4 Pl to Sup Coy, still carrying water. A 6 RMT Composite Pl, under Lt Todd, was attached to 24 Bn.

²² In 2 Pl 4 RMT Lt T. M. Battersby was sent to **Maadi** on promotion, Capt Ellingham and Sgt Jim Mulligan, sick, were evacuated, and Sgt Chapman ('The Divepecker') took over transport attached to 21 Bn until 2 Lt Jack Rich arrived.

²³ 4 RMT Coy: 10 officers, 373 other ranks (one officer, 58 other ranks short); 6 RMT Coy: 11 officers, 383 other ranks (48 other ranks short).

²⁴ **Marble Arch** (Arch Philaenorum), a tall, narrow arch straddling the **Via Balbia**, was built by Mussolini at the spot where, in the fourth century BC, the unfortunate Philaeni brothers had been buried alive to settle a frontier dispute between Carthage and **Cyrene**. The late Philaeni brothers, stories say, competed in the frontier marathon against two runners from **Cyrene**, who slacked on the job. Meeting where **Marble Arch** is now, the uneasy **Cyrene** couple accused the brothers of getting off to a flying start. They suggested the brothers allow them on a few miles west, where they, the Cyrenians, would be buried. The Philaeni brothers, a good victory up, refused, choosing burial on the spot in honour of Carthage. Recording his impression, one RMT driver wrote: 'A strange sight, this monument in marble. Its two legs, striding the road, stretch perhaps 60 ft towards the sky with a recumbent nude figure of a warrior athwart it. Bizarre, theatrical, yet strangely vital: Mussolini's monument to a man's

futility.'

²⁵ **Dvr K. S. Arkininstall; Auckland; born Newcastle, Australia, 19 Apr 1918; clerk.**

²⁶ **Lt G. H. Cotton-Stapleton; Te Puke; born Hastings, 29 Dec 1914; milk vendor.**

²⁷ **Cpl J. J. R. Cussen; Picton, born NZ 16 Dec 1908; garage attendant.**

²⁸ **Cpl H. M. Cox; Plimmerton; born Wanganui, 19 Jun 1917; clerk; twice wounded.**

²⁹ **L-Sgt J. S. Phillips; Auckland; born Whangaruru South, 15 Dec 1918; carpenter.**

³⁰ This 100-lorry convoy, containing 1 Pl 4 RMT, had to pick up 60,000 gallons of petrol, for the Division had halted at **Nofilia** with only enough petrol for 50 miles. This petrol the RMT men helped pick up near **El Agheila** was part of a river of supplies flowing from the east. Piled with petrol, supplies, ammunition and so on, British trucks were racing up from liberated **Benghazi** port (which was handling 3000 tons a day by early January until a three-day storm played havoc among the ships) and from **Tobruk**. From this river the Division drew its quota, RMT men helping other NZASC units. On 20 Dec the petrol lorries issued 50,860 gallons to the Division, enough for 100 miles at five miles a gallon. The build-up went on until the Division had enough petrol for 350 miles and rations and water for 11 days. As for water, 4 Pl 6 RMT (with the Div Sup Coy) helped draw water in cans and drums near **Marble Arch** area. In turn this water was being carted up from **Tobruk** about 350 miles back. The 6 RMT platoon ferried water from **Marble Arch** area until engineers had wells at **Nofilia** cleared, cleaned, and working again. Not only petrol, supplies, and ammunition were coming from the east. Along this route also came the Division's Christmas mail (over 60,000 parcels) and the precious beer ration for Christmas and New Year's Day. Incidentally, it took two tons

of petrol to bring three tons of beer from **Cairo** to the thirsty throats at **Nofilia**.

³¹ **Dvr J. N. Harrison; Wanganui East; born Mataroa, 13 Dec 1911; hairdresser; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³² **Dvr H. W. Gilbert; Hamilton; born England, 19 Jul 1908; labourer; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³³ **Dvr P. Brewer; Wellington; born NZ 19 Feb 1910; truck driver; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³⁴ **Dvr H. L. Lutze; Midhurst; born Halcombe, 24 Nov 1901; motor driver; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³⁵ **Dvr A. H. Harvey; Auckland; born Cromwell, 3 Oct 1918; garage attendant; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³⁶ **Sgt K. McK. Wilson; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Aug 1918; clerk; wounded 18 Dec 1942.**

³⁷ **L-Sgt M. C. Baker; born NZ 25 Apr 1903; motor mechanic; wounded 18 Dec 1942; killed in action 23 Apr 1945.**

³⁸ **Dvr H. J. Coombe; born Hastings, 9 May 1913; labourer; killed in action 22 Dec 1942.**

³⁹ **L-Cpl E. A. Dewe; Auckland; born Invercargill, 9 Aug 1912; timber-mill hand; p.w. 16 Dec 1942.**

⁴⁰ **Dvr R. Kimmins; Mangaroa; born Invercargill, 16 Nov 1919; p.w. 16 Dec 1942.**

⁴¹ **Cpl G. M. Tolhurst; Wellington; born Wellington, 27 Mar 1900; estate agent and secretary.**

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

NEW BATTLEDRESS IN NEW ZEALAND

NEW BATTLEDRESS IN NEW ZEALAND

. The new battledress being worn in N.Z. overcomes the difficulty of the close fitting collar for summer wear. The new jackets have lapels and the men are permitted to wear collars and ties, irrespective of rank.

‘Just like the Army to stop us opening our battledress where it is stinking hot,’ protested one letter writer. ‘No, Sir! We have to have it done up around the neck and have our neck sawn off into the bargain.’

Home mail and newspapers also had some interesting angles:

Old Alf crossed one enormous boot over the other. He turned a page and read mincingly: ‘“Cupid in **Kaikohe**. Felicitations aplenty shower Myrtle, vivacious raven-haired daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ned Mump, and fiancé Private First Class Wilbur K. Platz, Junior, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa”.’ Shortie half-opened an eye. ‘Let's all back the attack—in the sack,’ he mumbled drowsily.

Somebody should have filmed faces as the mail was handed out. The boyish delight of the huge driver, built like a draught-horse, as his enormous red and hairy hands closed on the letters with the little, delicate writing of his fiancée. His disappointment when none arrived....

For by now many long-service men were becoming thoroughly ‘browned off’. They wished for a lot of missed things, and they wished a lot of things were missing: the now too-familiar laugh or joke from the same old faces, the damned dead desert, the dirt and grime and grinding routine (mentally too), the same old food sloshed up and the same coarse battle dress, greasy at neck and wrists. They missed faces and figures,

the home garden, just being alone, the favourite corner in the pub, the radio by the fireside, a carpet on the floor and flowers in a vase.

‘The only man I really hated in the war,’ writes one driver, ‘was the person who used to say with truly horrible regularity, “The happiest hours I spent in my life, were spent in the arms of another man's wife—my mother,” and then, looking as wise as Bernard Shaw, roar with laughter.’ Another driver says: ‘This fairly old bloke was a holy terror to tell longwinded yarns and as he got going (nothing could stop him) he'd carefully roll a cigarette and lick the paper across and back again. This double-licking wasn't too good, but after it came the part that got me. Looking you dead in the eye and still talking away, the old joker would put the smoke between the palms of his long hands and slowly roll and rock the cigarette backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, until I nearly yelled, “For Christ's sake, smoke it!” It got that I used to watch and wait for this rolling-between-hands business, and it always came and I always felt mad—half hypnotised too.’

Christmas went and the New Year came with a wave of optimism. A news flash from Radio Moscow reported that the enemy at **Stalingrad** had been wiped out ‘with 95,000 dead and 72,000 prisoners of war.’⁴² **Russia** had won her **Alamein** in probably the decisive battle of the war. On the other side of the world the sprawling Japanese armies had been halted, and Allied offensives were warming up in the islands and in **Burma**.

So on to **Tripoli**, the last colonial city in the crumbling Italian empire. ‘We shall go by the desert,’ said **General Freyberg**. ‘The road will be mined and smashed.’

Before three-tonners nosed out again along the diamond trail supplies had to be built up. Except for 30 6 RMT lorries—these were held for carting some riflemen to build an aerodrome—all troop-carrying three-tonners left their battalions and the day after Christmas switched to the old task of building up advanced dumps. These 120 lorries (60 from 4 RMT, 30 from 6 RMT, and 30 British), commanded by Captain

Coleman, plied between dumps near **El Agheila** and **Marble Arch**, and carried the power behind the next thrust—hundreds of tons of petrol, oil and grease—on to new dumps rising west of **Nofilia**. They met with heavy rain and clouds of Allied traffic. But these were by no means the only hindrances. Back towards **El Agheila** many bridges had been blown up, and the roads, roadsides, and tracks were sown with mines, many of them still dangerous, as Lance-Sergeant Bennett and Driver **Cooper**,⁴³ wounded in a sudden explosion near **Marble Arch**, found to their cost. Where mines had been removed potholes gaped, and these were hard on springs and axles. Such convoy work kept up the pressure on LAD men and on workshops. The 4th RMT Workshops, fitting 15 new motors, reconditioning many more, and replacing 141 spring assemblies and main leaves, had worked through a hard month. The staff, in common with 6 RMT Workshops, was worried by shortages, especially tires, and often worked far into the night.

The dumps piled up. The preparations for the next move drew to a close. Rumours thickened. Before the RMT fleet under Captain Coleman broke up to return to the riflemen,⁴⁴ and before the travelling storehouse, Divisional Administration Group, formed up again, Coleman led his lorries about 80 miles into the west to **Wadi Tamet**, to dump more petrol for the Division to pick up on the advance. On the way back they ran into a vicious sandstorm which blotted the sun from the sky and brought in a stinging, suffocating twilight. All landmarks disappeared. The last 50 miles had to be covered by dead reckoning. Muffled drivers, coughing and cursing, bound for King Solomon's mines for all they knew, ground nose-to-tail through dust clouds. Each stuffy cab was a world apart.

At such times a driver might think of the co-driver close alongside him. He either thanked his lucky stars his companion was a good sort, a fine joker, a cobbler, or silently swore at fate for bottling him up with a crashing bore, a crank, an ill-tempered know-all, or an unnecessarily over-dirty lout. For life in an RMT truck consisted of spending about 18 out of every 24 hours with the same man. 'This gypsy caravan

existence', some called it: shoulder to shoulder by day; by night together under the truck canopy, or jammed in a little brown bivvy under the shelter of the truck. (Wandering trucks in the night discouraged camping in open desert.) With the trouble light burning brightly, and every possible chink stuffed with paper to preserve a total blackout, a man would look gratefully at his companion simply because he wiped his feet daily with a damp rag. The cloth usually came from the packing round parcels. A few, getting few parcels, also dried their mess gear with the foot cloth. It paid not to be too squeamish.

Drivers had a golden rule: 'Remember the bloke on your left has a bloke on his right.' Remembered, that rule could make life pleasant enough; forgotten, life could be a little hell. Every platoon had a lone eagle, a man who for various reasons could not—or would not—team up. Often he drove alone.

In a 6 RMT truck in this sandstorm a driver, face expressionless, grinned deep inside himself. He'd recently returned from hospital in Egypt to find his cobbler gone, replaced by a lone eagle. That day he'd quietly put one across the lone eagle.

It all started through the lone eagle's billy, a dirty billy. The driver bit his lower lip, remembering how the petrol flames curled round the black sides, and how flakes of dust, oil scum and grease would float on the already not-so-clean issue of water. So the driver suggested making another billy. The lone eagle was up in arms. 'Be damned. It's my good luck billy. Had it since I joined five months ago, I have. If you don't like it, you know what to do.'

The driver knew what to do. He'd just had a few months in hospital. He'd had doctors and nurses for friends in civvy life. Once he had sold insurance. For three days he edged conversation round to the ills that rack mankind—haemophilia, myocarditis, anthrax, amoebic dysentery, and a host more. What he didn't know he filled in.

That day, during a spell just before the sandstorm broke, he'd seen

the lone eagle hammering away at a seven-pound marmalade tin.

'What's up with the old billy?' asked the driver, so very casually.

'Got a hole in it,' said the lone eagle.

Old drivers called this 'the process of being educated'. It was always going on.

The Division got down to business again near El Machina where 5 Brigade, its RMT lorries busy with petrol-carrying, had gone on, partly on foot, partly by lumping any trucks of its own into an impromptu passenger service. At El Machina 5 Brigade, between air raids, had cleared an aerodrome for the Desert Air Force, while most of 6 Brigade stayed in the **Nofilia area.**

It was just about a Cook's Tour, that eleven-day, 250-mile trip which began on 12 January and landed the Division in **Tripoli on the 23rd. Drivers, expecting constant challenge from the **Luftwaffe**, disappeared beneath camouflage nets at bivouac areas, energetically dug slitties while anti-aircraft units kept constantly on the alert, remained well spaced, dodged dusty and well-worn tracks where possible, and at every halt turned vehicles north to reduce reflection from windscreens. But dun-coloured fighters of the Desert Air Force gave enemy dive-bombers few good opportunities. The New Zealanders travelled inland and north-west, leaving other Eighth Army units to deal with Axis forces holding the coast past **Buerat**. Anyhow, really strong defences were not being developed, for most Axis men and material were going to **Tunisia**.**

While 51 (Highland) Division chased the enemy along the coastal road through **Misurata and **Homs**, the New Zealand Division, with 7 Armoured Division on its right, the two more or less side by side, advanced inland through **Sedada** and **Beni Ulid** where, in a happily temporary flurry, the New Zealand Division began travelling in two directions at once, and past **Tarhuna**.**

The only opposition the New Zealanders brushed against were mobile

forces guarding the inland flank, and these obligingly withdrew when guns and infantry deployed. Nos. 1, 2, and Composite Platoons of 6 RMT were held up for a while on 15 January. Ahead British armour, backed by artillery, carried out a brilliant attack, and the enemy left in the night.

In the dark a driver, off course with a broken-down truck due for workshops treatment, sought fresh directions from a tank. Nobody answered. He climbed on to the turret and peered down to see a few inches away the upturned face of a corpse. For a few weeks afterwards he was absurdly careful.

Striking the main road 28 miles south of **Tripoli** on 22 January, 3 Platoon 4 RMT (carrying the **Maori Battalion** and claiming at 1.40 p.m. next day to be the first NZASC transport to enter **Tripoli**) ran into enemy fire and dispersed in soft sand; later, eight miles on, it met fire again. No. 2 Platoon (**21 Battalion** up) met similar alarms. Several shells landed near the cooks' vehicle. No damage was done and supper was served with a steady hand. A puzzled 4 Platoon (with **23 Battalion**) tasted the tail end of the shelling and promptly scrubbed stories of peaceful, occupied land ahead.

North-westwards they had travelled during the last week, where never such a fleet had driven before, by way of dead and dry **Wadi Zemzem** to life at **Beni Ulid**, an oasis and Italian colonial outpost inhabited almost entirely by semi-nomadic Arabs; to the rocky, twisted **Gebel Garian** range, dividing desert plateau from coastal plain; through **Tazzoli** (an Italian colony near **Tarhuna**) and past **Azizia**, where 5 Brigade engaged the last German rearguard. Grimy bulldozers had torn tracks. It had been a driver's show, crossing many miles of bad going, sometimes in the dark or under a moon murky with dust clouds, winding along precipitous canyon-like wadis, frequently mined, bobbing over wavy and pitted desert, and toiling painfully across the rocky escarpments and defiles of the final range.

A 6 RMT man, Corporal Pat Ward, who was petrol-carrying, saw it like this:

... riding over going where a sensible man might have hesitated to lead a packhorse, a little like walking over that crazy platform at the Centennial Exhibition in **Wellington**. Water was scarce. The few wells had been blown in, or made undrinkable by the fleeing enemy.

The Arabs in this part of the world must have had queer thoughts in their heads; their mode of existence is pitiable—a world almost denuded of vegetation, and destitute of water. Their emaciated figures, flapping rags, and the queer things they call tents tell their own stories. For hundreds of years they have been undisturbed save for a passing camel or the birds of the air—suddenly the few desert tracks are busier than the busiest streets in the world, and the air is never still with the drone of planes.

Gradually the desert changes—little bushes appear; a wadi covered in flowers, blue or yellow predominating; an oasis with its straggling palms; patches of miserable barley; donkeys, goats, camels and the weird things they call sheep.

Over the top of a hill one comes across the first Italian colony [**Tazzoli**]; from then onwards everything is sharply etched— ordered rows of olive trees; avenues of slim cypresses, bluegums, pines, almond trees—a mass of blossom; hardly a blade of grass, but many crops coming up, for this is spring. The soil is all red sand, everything has to be forced; vegetable plots—dozens of square white houses at ordered distances, which would no doubt have pleased the NZ Minister of Housing, so monotonously alike were they. Wells everywhere—a ‘Digest’ says that between here and the next town there are more than a quarter of a million—the purest and sweetest water we have tasted in **Africa**. The slow clank clank of countless windmills; the road a ribbon of purest bitumen, like a smooth dream after the desert; everything immature—a Colonial experiment just bearing fruit.

The date palm country; the trees incredibly tall and incredibly straight; east, north, south and west they stretch endlessly and close together. The road runs for mile after mile in their shadow....

On one of the houses I saw scribbled in large black charcoaled letters: **MUSSOLINI DON'T LIVE HERE ANY MORE, HE USETA.**

An ancient Turkish castle perched on a granite hill; the ruins of a Roman city in a valley. The Italians had placed several statues, a little shattered by the centuries, on pedestals by the road-side. A driver, pointing them out, said sententiously: 'There's a good example of how much these Wogs hate the Italians, they even smash their statues.'

Here and there a colonist, braver than his comrades, flies a white flag from his farmhouse and carries on. But in the main the houses are stripped and deserted. Gradually the peasant folk are drifting back. It makes one realise a little of the ugliness of all that must be happening in **Europe**. But it's only an inkling—for we treat them with kindness and a kind of rough courtesy ... the penalty for looting is two years. ⁴⁵

Tripoli—the pride of II Duce's African Empire, the dream of hundreds of Italian architects all working independently. In its way beautiful—shattered a bit, of course. A motion-picture magnate, undecided which picture to start first, orders that the settings for French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, and Egyptian pictures be all plonked down on the Californian desert. Somebody mixes them hopelessly. A magician tosses a few thousand trees on the scene, the ocean creeps up to one edge of it, a hurricane comes along to mess it up a bit. The actors and actresses dressed in all manner of costume wander lost through it all. The result would not be unlike **Tripoli**; the last, lone and loveliest of them all.

Once upon a time, in a place called Piazza Castello, which is the main square of **Tripoli**, Mussolini sat on a horse. He had just presented himself with a sword and a brand new title: Protector of Islam. He told the parade on 18 March 1937:

'Moslems of **Tripoli** and **Libya**, young Arabs of the Fascist Empire ! My august and mighty Sovereign, His Majesty Victor Emmanuel III, King of **Italy** and Emperor of **Abyssinia**, after 11 years has sent me once more to this land where the tricolour flutters in the wind, to learn your needs

and to meet your legitimate wishes.

‘A new epoch in the history of **Libya** has begun... Within a short time Rome will prove to you by her legislation how much she is interested in improving your future. ⁴⁶

‘Moslems of **Tripoli** and **Libya**!

‘Spread my word through all the houses of your city and your country, and to the distant tents of your shepherds. You know that I am a man sparing of promises, but when I make them I keep them.’

And while uniformed lackeys cheered and the great man sat with his chin thrust towards the photographers, a pretty fountain, held up by rearing horses, played nearby. Now all those brave uniforms had gone away. Hobnailed boots scraped and scrunched over the Piazza Castello. Khaki and webb lolled against the white walls of the square and under the ornamental olive trees, and voices of another language spoke of beer in Dundee and in Dunedin. And on top of the fountain stood something new: two bits of tin, two black diamond signs marking the latest end of the New Zealand trail.

Eighth Army paraded in **Tripoli**, and the New Zealanders paraded in lovely country, which some thought looked like home, outside the city. Mr Churchill came from **Britain**, and he said:

‘All are filled with pride for the Desert Army; all are full of gratitude to the people of New Zealand who have sent this splendid Division to win fame and honour across the oceans. By an important victory, the Battle of Egypt, the Axis Powers who had fondly hoped and loudly boasted they would take Egypt and the Nile Valley, found their armies broken and shattered, and since then, by a march unexampled in history for speed and for the force of its advance, you have driven the enemy before you, until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of **Tunisia**. These events will live long in the annals of war and will be studied minutely by other generations than our own. These feats of arms entitle the army of the desert to feel a deep-

founded sense of comfort and pride, based on valiant duty faithfully done.'

Then, to drum and bagpipe, the Division, in its pride, marched past the Prime Minister, and then, uplifting hearts with sound and power, came the engines which had conquered the desert: the tanks, the slanting guns and joggling limbers, those busybodies the Bren carriers, and snub-nosed trucks.

With Mr Churchill were General Brooke, General Alexander, General Montgomery, **General Freyberg**, and other senior officers of Eighth Army.

And they too were not indifferent to the photographers.

The soldiers went back to their bivvies in the soft soil under the olives and the blossoming almond trees. They were happy with so many flowers, so many fresh vegetables, and so much fresh and sweet water. They parked their vehicles between rows of trees and a little snow of petals fell on to the hard, cracked canopies. People came to sell eggs. Little food remained in the city and drivers were content with a few visits to the marine parade and the ruined port.

February slipped by. RMT convoys carried petrol, rations, and rum to as far as **Ben Gardane**, 180 miles to the west. They appeared with their loads two days after the settlement had fallen. They claimed, apart from the **Long Range Desert Group**, to be the first New Zealand vehicles to enter **Tunisia**.

And the **Maori Battalion** won the football competition.

Orders came through on 1 March. The same night 4 RMT Company was on the move, away from the olives and the almonds and into the west.

The last of the blossom fell and the tiny fruit buds formed. The bivouacs fell in and nobody leaned against white buildings to remember

the taste of Dunedin beer.

And, when nobody was looking, the two black diamond signs proudly planted on top of the fountain in the Piazza Castello quietly disappeared, for ever.

⁴² A little premature. German resistance ended at **Stalingrad** on 2 Feb 1943.

⁴³ **Dvr J. W. Cooper; Christchurch**; born England, 4 Nov 1908; chauffeur; wounded 30 Dec 1942.

⁴⁴ 4 RMT Coy: 1 Pl with Div Pet Coy; 2 Pl, 16 lorries to 21 Bn, remainder to Pet and Amn Coys; 3 Pl, 27 lorries to 28 Bn, 4 to 23 Bn; 4 Pl, 19 lorries to 23 Bn, 9 to Amn Coy. 6 RMT Coy: 1 Pl to 25 Bn; 2 Pl, 19 lorries to 26 Bn; Composite Pl (8 from 1 Pl and 10 from 2 Pl, under Lt A. E. Irving) to 24 Bn; 4 Pl with Div Sup Coy carrying water.

⁴⁵ The military occupation of **Tripoli** was strictly enforced. A 4 RMT corporal who threatened a stationmaster and a bus driver with a pistol and entered a house was reduced to the ranks and sentenced to 90 days' field punishment.

⁴⁶ ' **Libya** has an Arab population of 1,085,000 ... and of that number only 16—yes, 16—have had a college education.... Perhaps 250,000 Libyans can write their own names, but it is believed that not more than 60,000 of those are sufficiently literate to go beyond that. More than 750,000 Libyans, if faced with a document to sign, use their thumbprints. Of all the backward countries of North Africa, **Libya** is the most backward.'—Joseph Wechsberg, in *The New Yorker*, 10 Nov 1951.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 13 – THE END IN AFRICA

CHAPTER 13

The End in Africa

THROUGH the night and all next day they drove into the west, leaving behind **Tripolitania** and entering the enemy's final African stronghold, **Tunisia**, a French possession well and truly under Axis control. They drove for almost 200 miles, first through cultivated countryside, then back to the old familiar desert, along a main road packed with traffic travelling to and from the front. Regularly, reassuringly, overhead passed large fighter formations of 30 to 40 planes of the Desert Air Force. Steering along the banked road, drivers looked twice at vehicles sprawled upside-down or canted at crazy angles on the edge of the road. Many of these accidents probably had been caused by incautious drivers trying to pass slow-moving tank-transporters in the darkness, only to feel the soft edge of the road crumble and yield beneath their wheels. Drivers looked, and remembered.

West of **Medenine**, where the artillery was rumbling and rolling once more, the RMT companies delivered the riflemen of 5 and 6 Brigades, dug in and camouflaged vehicles, carried out maintenance, and took good care to observe strict orders that there were to be no fires, and no hanging out of laundry. Air activity was increasing. An occasional dogfight broke high above, and sneak-raiders came in to defy both fighters and powerful anti-aircraft barrages. Just after 35 of our fighters had passed by in the late afternoon of 4 March, six enemy planes bombed **23 Battalion**'s area. No. 4 Platoon drivers at first congratulated themselves on escaping scot-free. Then they discovered that Driver **Sykes**¹ had been killed in the act of digging his slit trench, and Driver **Sam Leggat**² was suffering from severe shrapnel wounds. A cross, made by Workshops, was placed over Sykes's grave. He had been a Second Echelon man. Friends remembered how only the night before he had discussed what he would do if he returned home. Two days later, with the RMT men still on the fringe of the front, a dozen Focke-Wulfs 137 broke through massed anti-aircraft fire and swung to strafe vehicles along the whole of the NZASC area. No 4 RMT drivers or vehicles were

damaged, but in 6 RMT's lines Lance-Sergeant Wells and Drivers Macey and **Roberts**³ were wounded and evacuated. This brought RMT's casualties up to seven within a week, for Driver **King**,⁴ with 1 Platoon 4 RMT, had been killed when his truck accidentally capsized one night. Driver Townsend, suffering from shock and abrasions, was evacuated to **5 NZ Field Ambulance**. This accident took place when the platoon, attached to the Ammunition Company, was establishing an ammunition point near **Medenine**.

The day the dozen Focke-Wulfs strafed the NZASC area, Rommel swept out on his last attack in **Africa**. His bold thrusts, headed by tanks to break or to turn the flank and then destroy the infantry, vulnerable as an unrolled hedgehog behind its prepared defences, had carried him victoriously through **France** in 1940. They had reduced many an Egyptian-border unit to a confused antheap on 24 November 1941 and had swept aside, almost contemptuously, opposition at **Gazala** on 27 May 1942. But at **Alam Halfa** on 30 August 1942 his tactics had ended in disaster.

This last attack came from 'the African Maginot', the **Mareth Line**, formidable defences built by French military engineers between the sea and the hills about 20 miles beyond **Medenine**. Enemy guns opened up in an early morning mist which rose to reveal advancing armoured columns and infantry. The most southerly of three main thrusts came towards the **Maori Battalion** on 5 Infantry Brigade's front, and most of the day passed for 3 Platoon drivers in a roar of artillery as shells from both directions sped over the platoon area. No. 2 Platoon, behind **21 Battalion**, saw Stukas, considerably hampered by **RAF** fighters, in action over forward positions, and 4 Platoon (with **23 Battalion**), experiencing some long-range shelling, watched a knocked-out Spitfire crash from a dogfight. The 6th RMT, with three men wounded in the Focke-Wulf raid, had the heaviest losses in 6 Brigade which, behind 5 Brigade and in second-line positions, suffered only two other casualties during the day.

As the hours passed heartening reports trickled back to 3 Platoon drivers. Their passengers, the Maoris, knocking out at least one tank,

had succeeded in heading the attackers into British anti-tank guns concealed in an innocent-looking wadi. Enemy infantry following up were scattered by devastating shelling, which also broke a second attack on the New Zealand front in the late afternoon. Eighth Army's advanced anti-tank guns, backed by massed artillery, had mastered the panzers and, with a third of his armour (52 tanks) shot to a standstill or destroyed, Rommel withdrew his mauled forces to the sheltering **Mareth Line**. Rommel's reign in **Africa** ended. A sick and weary man, ⁵ he left for **Europe** a week later, well and truly 'hit for six out of **Africa**', as General Montgomery had predicted. General Messe was left in command of the Axis forces in the south.

And General Montgomery, in a personal message to Eighth Army men, declared:

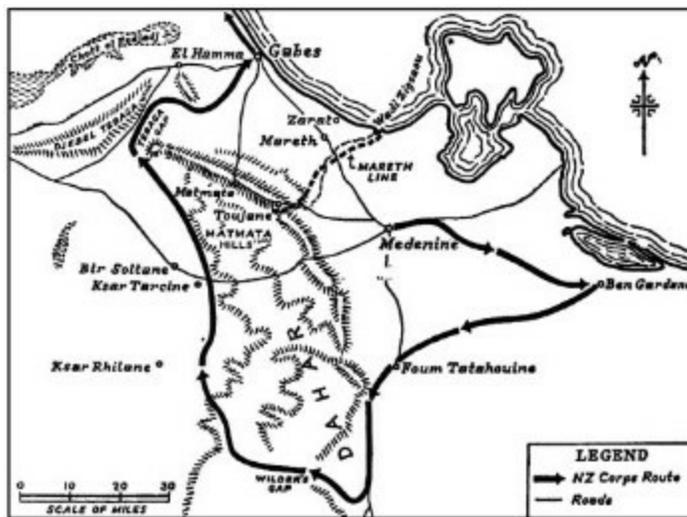
On 5 March Rommel addressed his troops in the mountains overlooking our positions and said that if they did not take **Medenine**, and force the Eighth Army to withdraw, then the days of the Axis forces in North Africa were numbered.

The next day, 6 March, he attacked the Eighth Army. He should have known that the Eighth Army NEVER WITHDRAWS; therefore his attack could only end in failure—which it did.

We will now show Rommel that he was right in the statement he made to his troops.

Montgomery added that Eighth Army would next destroy the **Mareth Line**, burst through the **Gabes Gap** and then drive north on **Sfax**, **Sousse** and, finally, **Tunis**. He ended his message: 'Forward to **Tunis**! Drive the enemy into the sea.'

A little later a 6 RMT driver unscrewed his fountain pen, wiped flecks of sand from the nib, and wrote: 'Dear Mum, This letter may be quite a long time before it is posted. We are travelling along a queer pathway where the postman never calls....'



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

For the RMT were off again on another 'left hook'. This hook would sweep inland below the jagged **Matmata Hills** guarding the southern end of the **Mareth Line** and completely bypass the intricate defences. ⁶ The force, known as the New Zealand Corps, ⁷ would appear disconcertingly in the desert plains of **Gabes Gap**, near **El Hamma**, well behind the **Mareth Line**. Once again, the security of solid fortifications would be challenged by a powerful, mobile striking force.

The 6th RMT's infantry-carrying platoons led off bright and early on 11 March with 6 Brigade. Each vehicle had enough petrol for 300 miles; rations and water to last six days were carried. To help the secrecy of the move, all hat badges and shoulder titles were out of sight, every fernleaf sign had been concealed or painted out, and the press announced that the New Zealanders were in the **Mareth Line**. The 6 RMT lorries first moved back to **Ben Gardane** (passed on the advance to **Medenine**), then swung away from the coast and headed south, after a time leaving the road and following the old familiar signs and the old familiar dust trails leading to the assembly area. The 144-mile journey ended at daybreak after the brigade had passed through a defile, known as **Wilder's Gap**, in the **Matmata Hills**. Without headlights, the platoons had travelled through a completely dark night made more trying for drivers by frequent concertina movements in the columns. Once the assembly area was reached camouflage nets went up. Men dug in and

rested, awaiting the arrival of 5 Brigade and the rest of the Corps. About eighteen hours later—around midnight—4 RMT came in with 5 Brigade and settled down. Engines on the way gave no hint of trouble, a tribute to workshops men who had fitted no fewer than sixteen new motors in ten hours on the day before the move.

Until nightfall on 19 March the New Zealanders remained as still and as inconspicuous as possible. About the only RMT movement came from a couple of platoons: 3 Platoon 6 RMT on the 'moya' (water) service with the Supply Company, and 1 Platoon 4 RMT which, with the Ammunition Company, gathered supplies back at the roadhead at El Dehibat and took them on to the New Zealand Field Maintenance Centre,⁸ about six miles east of the assembly area.

This Field Maintenance Centre, the first ever run by New Zealanders, was the heaviest responsibility yet tackled by the NZASC. Through it would pass all the supplies, ammunition, petrol, food, equipment, spare parts, and so on needed by the advancing host. It was, so to speak, the heart of the left-hook punch. Lorries, working like packhorses, had crossed the desert bit by bit building up the stocks: 1500 tons of ammunition, 3170 tons of petrol, and 672 tons of supplies which included 336,000 rations and 72,000 lb. of flour for the field bakeries.

Some Eighth Army officers doubted if the New Zealand organisation, which until then had only looked after a Division, could tackle the responsibility of supervising supplies for an entire corps. 'This will prove the exception,' said Colonel Crump, head of the NZASC.

The New Zealanders did it, and did it well. On 12 March Major Stock, Captain Coleman, Second-Lieutenant Cotton-Stapleton and 24 men left 4 RMT to begin duties at the Field Maintenance Centre. Major Stock took charge. Working in close co-operation, Major Good, Lieutenant Gray, Second-Lieutenant **Markby**,⁹ and twelve men from 6 RMT went to special duties at the roadhead back at El Dehibat.

For **New Zealand Corps** the balloon went up at 6 p.m. on 19 March.

Drivers climbed into their seats, the infantry settled down beneath the canopies, and the move began. On a nine-vehicle front, with 50 yards between vehicles, and travelling at a speed of eight miles in the hour, **New Zealand Corps** went forward 30 to 40 miles over sand dunes and wadis clear and sharp and lonely under a bright moon. When the sun returned and the march was resumed, drivers looked out in awe to a desert horizon crawling with vehicles—6000 of them, if one could only see them all. In the vehicles were 27,000 men; the New Zealanders numbered 14,500. 'It seemed an endless procession of vehicles spread over gullies and wadis from one horizon to the other, in jolting swaying lines of guns, carriers, tanks, trucks, jeeps, transporters, bulldozers—all the varied clanking array of modern war,' wrote one observer. Drivers found the route 'fairly good' for the first few miles, then it became rough with hills, soft sand, and rock. Later in the day gunfire sounded ahead, and drivers heard that patrols had pushed back enemy reconnaissance units. Several burnt-out vehicles were passed on the way to a small minefield, where a tank and a few trucks had foundered.

At one stage the advance took on a madhouse complexion: three-tonners screaming in four-wheel drive over sand dunes; trucks getting stuck and excited parties darting about flourishing sandtrays; bunches of men sweating and pushing and cursing while others, more lucky, swept past, coating the heavens in dust and shouting infuriating advice such as 'Get a bicycle, Dig!'; odd blighted groups standing hopelessly, helplessly, almost tearfully, beside thoroughly bogged down transport until someone came to curse and shout and rouse them out of it; British staff officers, erect, unsmiling, beside stranded vehicles, attempting with many an imperious gesture to commandeer Kiwis to push them free, and the Kiwis telling them what to do about it; and then a woebegone Arab encampment, slap bang in the way—good relations with natives or not, it was just too bad. But it all worked out, somehow, in the end.

At last light **New Zealand Corps** halted within sight of **Tebaga Gap**. The following afternoon, 21 March, armour, artillery, and infantry

moved up towards enemy positions covering the six-mile gap. Long ago this weakness had been recognised, for the Axis defences faithfully followed the lines of an ancient Roman wall. The success of the hook now depended on 6 Brigade, which was to make the attack, with the armour pushing through the breach next morning. In full moonlight two 6 RMT platoons brought up 25 and 26 Battalions. On the way a solitary enemy bomber swooped to strafe harmlessly. Before midnight drivers saw the artillery open up, and the infantry moved forward to a brilliant success, capturing all objectives (including the dominating hill, Point 201, which commanded the defences) and taking about a thousand Italian prisoners. A dent had now been driven in the enemy's positions, but for the next four days the enemy, stiffened by the arrival of two German divisions, held the **New Zealand Corps**. RMT's platoons remained handy to the battalions, while the two detached platoons distributed ammunition and water. A few trucks assisted in moving back the prisoners. Drivers saw a great deal of air activity as the **RAF** struck again and again, 'tank busters' taking part in some of the raids. 'Owing to the closeness of the opposing forces it is not always possible to tell which is on the receiving end,' noted 3 Platoon 4 RMT.

Who was who became unmistakably clear on 26 March. The 1st Armoured Division (released from the bulk of Eighth Army, which was assaulting the **Mareth Line** in full-scale frontal attack) had arrived by the New Zealand trail and joined the **New Zealand Corps**. In the afternoon RMT drivers, experiencing some shelling and mortaring without casualty, watched the furious assault on **Tebaga Gap**. Another deeply interested spectator was **General Freyberg**, who wrote:

At three o'clock as I drove up the valley in my tank all was quiet except for an occasional shell. There was no unusual movement or sign of a coming attack. Exactly half an hour later the first squadrons of the **RAF** roared overhead, and relays of Spitfires, Kitty Bombers, and Hurricane 'tank busters' swept over the enemy positions, giving the greatest close air support ever seen in the desert. At four o'clock 200 field and medium guns opened up in a bombardment on a front of 5,000

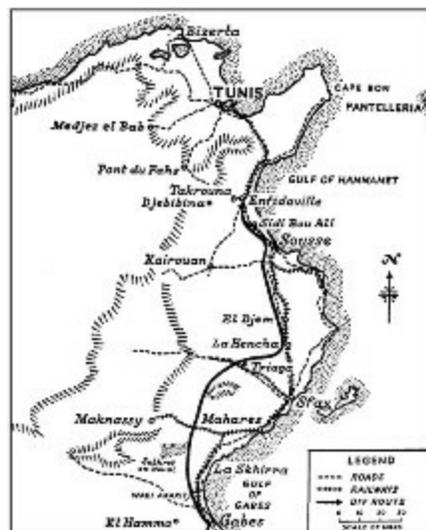
yards. In an instant the attack developed, and 150 tanks of the 8 Armoured Brigade and three battalions of infantry appeared as from nowhere advancing in the natural 'smoke' screen provided by the dust storms. The roar of bombers and fighters ahead of our advance merged with the intense barrage of bursting shells. Following close behind the advancing barrage came waves of Sherman tanks, carriers, infantry and sappers on foot, preceded by three squadrons of Crusader tanks. Behind the assault of the **2 New Zealand Division**, coming down the forward slopes just in the rear of our front line, were another 150 tanks of the 1 Armoured Division followed by their motorised infantry in nine columns of lorries. It was a most awe-inspiring spectacle of modern warfare.

All resistance ended at **Tebaga Gap** next day, 27 March. Over a battlefield strewn with wreckage and many dead drove the RMT, passing swarms of prisoners, 5000 to 6000 in all, including many a tough veteran of the *Afrika Korps*. Beneath the canopies rested the exulting infantry, and in the lorries of 3 Platoon 4 RMT Maoris refought their assault on Point 209, where a battalion of Panzer Grenadiers, engaged man-to-man and mown down in counter-attacks, had finally been wiped out. Here Second-Lieutenant **Ngarimu** ¹⁰ had lost his life and won the VC. It had seemed the RMT's luck had held at **Tebaga Gap**. However, with the worst over, 3 Platoon 6 RMT, moving up the road to **El Hamma**, struck one of the last bursts of shelling, which killed Driver **McLean**, ¹¹ fatally wounded Driver Jepsen, ¹² and wounded Driver **Hyde**. ¹³ Next day a bombing raid wounded Drivers **Fraser** ¹⁴ and **Parnwell** ¹⁵ in 4 Platoon 4 RMT.

With **Tebaga Gap** won, the **Mareth Line** became untenable. Overnight the enemy withdrew his front 40 miles back to **Wadi Akarit**. Through **El Hamma**, then to **Gabes** (where men swarmed into a hot spring and bathed delightedly), then to **Wadi Akarit** drove the Division. The end seemed near.

Bill McGhie ¹⁶ and Ted Benfell, of 6 RMT, had acquired a little pet bantam rooster. The Division had stopped for three hours. 'We were all lolling in the sun and enjoying the countryside, so pleasant after the

eternal sand,' writes Ted. 'Second-Lieutenant Henry Brandon ¹⁷ started the ball rolling by discussing just how palatable the little bird might be, along with some tinned potatoes acquired in Tripoli. The wee joker must have read his doom in Bill's eyes, but he was no match for about fourteen hungry Kiwis. Fair dinkum it was a shame, mate, to see that fowl surrounded by spuds frying away merrily in our pan and hemmed in by the boys. He was about as big stripped as a decent sized blackbird. Henry, with the ceremony befitting such an occasion, shared the wee fellow evenly and neatly with the grace offered fervently all round: "God bless our little Bantie".'



GABES TO ENFIDAVILLE
GABES TO ENFIDAVILLE

From Gabes onwards (one driver wrote) Tunisia at this time of the year is almost a paradise. At one stage we travelled for 25 miles through an orchard (or a series of orchards): 400 square miles of matured olive trees, lane after lane, so many metres apart. Hundreds of miles of wheat and oats and barley: the vivid greenness of it, tinged crimson by millions and millions of poppies. The wild flowers—marigolds, daisies and dandelions predominating—make every untilled acre a dream of colour. It is one huge garden.

The number and variety of wildflowers are beyond belief. I wish I knew half their names. They stir vague memories of other flowers raised

long ago from gaily coloured packets of seeds. Here and there are other orchards where the almond tree predominates. The Army seems to make certain we avoid the towns, and so the trucks plough on over the smiling countryside, up hill and down dale, through the crops and the olive trees, and over the wild flowers. There are no fences of course. The fine dividing lines between properties are raised lines of sods, or an occasional hedge of prickly cactus. Occasionally one sees a big mob of ewes being milked at night or in the early morning, the women as usual in the East doing most of the work, the men doing the talking. Here and there you see an occasional herd of excellent jersey cows, a rarity in the East.

Sometimes in the encampments the women are sent away to a safe refuge in the hills, but there's little need for this because the average Bedouin woman has very little beauty or charm. The French welcome us with open arms, but we see very little of them. Some of them are very pretty but our social contacts consist of a wave in passing, a kiss blown with the fingers, a gleam of teeth ... the convoy clumps on.

Wherever we stop hordes of Bedouins spring from nowhere. In their ragged pockets are seemingly endless dirty notes on the Banque D' **Algiers**, Banque D' **France**, or surcharged ' **Tunisia**'. They want to buy anything and everything. Looking back one sees little groups gathered at each truck. The boys are hocking everything hockable. The demand seems endless; sukra (sugar), chai (tea), sabots (shoes), cigairo (cigarettes), tabac (tobacco). One of the boys had a German pushbike, lugged over hundreds of miles of desert from **Mersa Matruh**. I think it went for 1440 francs (£7/4/-). A pair of old shoes, polished until they looked like new, brought 250 francs. A pleasant-faced lad paid 25 francs for a worn pair of underpants in a mistaken idea it was a newfangled kind of Anglaise shirt. The more he tried to struggle into it, the more we laughed. At last we pitied him and gave him back his money. They're mainly quite honest, though Shylocks when it comes to bargaining. ¹⁸ Their speech is a queer mixture of French, Arabic, German, and English.

The weather is beautiful, the days still and warm, the nights

pleasantly cool ... a shade too cool when you suddenly dive out of the trucks into a slit trench and forget to grab your trousers...

The stand at [Wadi Akarit](#), with the sea on one side and salt marshes on the other, had been brief. Nos. 1, 2, and 4 Platoons of 6 RMT, briefly leaving their battalions, picked up riflemen of the veteran 4 Indian Division and drove them into forward positions. Simultaneously 1 Platoon 4 RMT hurried off with the Ammunition Company to a new Field Maintenance Centre at [El Hamma](#), gathering ammunition to build up dumps of 300 rounds beside each 25-pounder gun. The turn-round distance from the company area to the FMC was over 90 miles.

On one such ammunition convoy Driver Ronald [Cook](#) ¹⁹ had his lorry laden with mines and detonators. One set of detonators exploded, setting fire to the canopy and the wooden mine crates. Driver Cook received the BEM for coolly unloading the remaining detonators and putting out the fire with his extinguisher and sand.

Dumps complete, the Indians on the left flank of two British divisions attacked beneath a tremendous barrage, and passages across the wadi were cleared. During the assault a detachment from 2 Platoon 4 RMT had a hot time taking forward a company from [26 Battalion](#). These riflemen were to protect and assist engineers clearing a minefield and an anti-tank ditch. Under brisk shelling and small-arms fire the job was done and crossings completed. Once the breach had been made the New Zealand Division cut through, to mop up and harass the enemy retreat.

Fanning out into desert formation and nobly supported by aircraft the attackers pressed north, cutting off stragglers and isolated units and keeping a constant stream of prisoners moving back to cages. Some Italians still had their own transport. Thankful and docile, they drove from the battlefield, suitcases packed. Decidedly more uncomfortable driving lay ahead of RMT men before undefended [Sfax](#) was left behind. Ordered ahead with [23 Battalion](#), 4 Platoon 4 RMT bogged down overnight in most difficult country. Out of this trouble, the platoon ran

into more in the shape of two bombing and strafing raids. Corporal **Stewart** ²⁰ and Driver **Benge**, ²¹ both wounded, were evacuated. In the general advance drivers found the going very heavy over cultivated soil. Knots of confusion spread among the strung-out columns when clumps of vehicles stuck repeatedly in the soft earth. Travelling improved along hard roads by the coast, but south of **Sousse** the main road, heavily mined, again slowed things up. In the lead 5 Brigade group, forced at one stage to advance in single column, was stretched out over 40 miles of the road. Demolitions forced the leading RMT platoon (3 Platoon carrying 28 Battalion) to bypass **Sousse** on 12 April, but 2 and 4 Platoons (with 21 and 23 Battalions), passing through in the evening, ran into wildly rejoicing citizens handing out flags, flowers, V for victory signs, and much more welcome gifts of wine.

Close behind this outward happiness lay resentment, bitterness, hate. Soon pathetic stories of enemy oppression circulated freely. Jews exhibited yellow stars which had to be worn in public, and told how enemy soldiers kicked them at every opportunity and delighted in giving them menial and also highly dangerous tasks. One Jew, in peacetime employing over a hundred Arabs, had his savings confiscated. Forced by the enemy to work on the wharves under Arab overseers equipped with whips, he told a New Zealand NCO: 'When the **RAF** and Americans came over and bombed the town, I laughed even though five of my family were killed and lying dead about me. I laughed and laughed for sheer joy for I knew that Germans and Arabs too were being killed.' The New Zealander recorded these impressions: 'I have never listened to so much concentrated bitterness from human lips. Listening to this man it sank into the core of one's being that here was a hatred which would never die. With such hatreds throughout the world what possibility ever is there of a real sound peace? With people like this—and they are not isolated instances, but millions—the death or downfall of **Hitler** and his regime will not suffice. Nothing short of total extermination of the German race would satisfy them. Even were this achieved it would breed fresh feuds and hates in its very achievement.'



Agnone, on the move from the Sangro

Agnone, on the move from the Sangro



Company HQ at Piedimonte d'Alife, near Cassino

Company HQ at Piedimonte d' Alife, near Cassino



With men of 28 Battalion in Forli
With men of 28 Battalion in Forli

UNIT COMMANDING OFFICERS



Maj G. H. Whyte
Maj G. H. Whyte



Capt J. A. McAlpine
Capt J. A. McAlpine



Maj B. A. N. Woods
Maj B. A. N. Woods



Maj I. E. Stock
Maj I. E. Stock



Maj D. F. Coleman
Maj D. F. Coleman



Maj A. H. Burt
Maj A. H. Burt



Maj R. T. Brown
Maj R. T. Brown



Maj R. O. Pearse
Maj R. O. Pearse



Capt R. J. Robertson
Capt R. J. Robertson



Maj R. K. Davis
Maj R. K. Davis



Maj A. G. Hood
Maj A. G. Hood



Maj G. G. Good
Maj G. G. Good



Maj J. J. Hunter
Maj J. J. Hunter



Now north of **Sousse**, a chain of rocky mountains rose clear and gaunt in the April skies. Rough and forbidding, this last barrier stood between Eighth Army and its final African prize, **Tunis**, a mere 55 miles away. Pass and road, gully and pinnacle, all were manned and guarded along the 110-mile front twisting down from Cape Serrat to **Enfidaville**. The enemy, encircled completely now that British, American and French forces from the west had linked with Eighth Army, knew he would not be evacuated. He knew that his dusty defences among the African heights were the last between the Allies and the European continent. He sighted his guns with resolution and waited.

The RMT brought riflemen of 5 and 6 Brigades to the approaches of **Enfidaville**. On the way one 4 RMT man, Driver **Lunjevich**,²² had been wounded by shrapnel. Near **Enfidaville** both brigades would bite into the hills, advancing three miles on a three-mile front. One objective was a cone-shaped hill, on which a white building perched 600 feet up on the rocky summit. The hill, dominating all important positions on the plain below, was called **Takrouna**. This last big attack by New Zealand riflemen in **Africa** would clear the ground behind **Enfidaville**, force the enemy to quit the town, and allow Eighth Army to move on up the coast.

Before battle began two 4 RMT platoons had an odd little job all to themselves. Taken from troop-carrying they went to **Sfax**, 100 miles away, to collect—of all things—mules.

'How many tons did you say?' asked an RMT officer, receiving the order over the phone.

'They don't go in tons, man! *Mules*, I said, *mules*, not fuel.'

Tremendous confusion waited at [Sfax](#). The selection committee, scarcely knowing the difference between mules and donkeys, wove unhappily and apprehensively among shouting Arabs offering dejected or dead-beat beasts at fabulous prices. Finally the mules and/or donkeys had to be loaded on to the three-tonners. There was much tying and retying of bootlaces, meticulous rolling of cigarettes, and other evasions before loading got going properly. During the tally-ho Lieutenant Rich, running foul of a couple of angry hooves which bundled him off prostrate to hospital, became the last 4 RMT casualty in the North African campaign.

The beasts were taken to [Sidi Bou Ali](#), where 40-odd men from both RMT companies, plus men from other units, were forming a mule pack company, no less. But the story of this new RMT role must wait for another page.

On the [Takrouna- Enfidaville](#) front three battalions still had to be moved into position. As darkness fell on 19 April three troop-carrying platoons wove past dusty olive trees and strange, six-foot-high clumps of fleshy, twisted cactus. The platoons took the [Maori Battalion](#) and [24 Battalion](#) close to the start line and moved up [25 Battalion](#), which was in reserve. Already a lively medium artillery barrage was flecking the heights ahead with sudden bursts of light. Driving back and laagering in the B Echelon area at [Sidi Bou Ali](#), men heard the roar of the main barrage crash down after zero hour, an hour before midnight. The attack was under way.

Several days passed before the RMT, all together again at [Sidi Bou Ali](#), returned to pick up the infantry and bring them out to a rest area. During this time the troop-carriers lay low, a few trucks moving short distances either with walking wounded or with prisoners. Overhead fleets

of bombers and fighters joined in the attack. Sixth Brigade soon took and held its **Enfidaville** sector, but 5 Brigade struck savage resistance in and around **Takrouna**. Many a familiar face was missing ²³ when the RMT collected the tired victors again. Drivers heard of desperate hand-to-hand fighting on rocky platforms and pinnacles. Bodies had hurtled over cliffs. A 17-pounder had taken part in close-range sniping. Even a secret tunnel came into some of the stories.

For the New Zealanders from now on—following the dogged achievement at **Takrouna**—the war in North Africa dribbled away, seeping from one anti-climax to another. The infantry rested. They needed it. Drivers took swimming parties to the beach, went back to **Sousse** for LOB men and for reinforcements, and collected anti-malarial gear from **Sfax**. The Hon Fred Jones, Minister of Defence, turned up to talk on New Zealand's war effort and her rehabilitation plans.

Then in the first week in May 4 RMT gathered up 5 Brigade's riflemen. Over in the west where the going was better the Allies massed for an all-out attack. The Division, far from being in this attack, was booked to hold a piece of the **Enfidaville** front. And quite rightly so, some felt, still distressed at 'ugly things in the hills not far away' [**Takrouna**] and thinking: 'Poor battered Kiwis; it seems grotesquely unfair that a few should have been asked to do so much.' Others thought this a drab final role for 'a ball of fire'.

The 4th RMT took 5 Brigade riflemen about 20 miles west of **Enfidaville** to the heavily mined and booby-trapped area of **Djebibina**. The Luftwaffe had been peeled from the sky: the only vexation during this move came from United States Mitchell bombers which fortunately missed what seemed to be their objective—2 Platoon with **21 Battalion**. Following on with 6 Brigade came 6 RMT, its battalions in reserve. At **Djebibina** the Division's task was to occupy ground without heavy fighting and to lend artillery support to a small French advance nearby. Actually, with a few exceptions, everyone round about was stalling, awaiting the inevitable. The real show—the kill, the death, the flag-waving and final liberation—was away to the north. Within a day or two

6 and 7 (British) Armoured Divisions, bursting through in the main drive in the west, raced north to occupy [Tunis](#) on 7 May.

In their backwater—a forgotten, unimportant front—tired and bored New Zealanders and their opponents waited for the end. This was not of the stuff war films are made. Neither side was keen to get hurt now. Nobody seemed to know what was going on. Nobody seemed to care. On a crazy day, 12 May, the enemy fired off shells in all directions. He meant little harm. He was easing his conscience for tomorrow's surrender—the less ammunition left, the better it looked.

Next day a silence set in, and this time the silence stayed.

The British, the curious British who had clung to old homeland uniforms and bully beef when rocks cracked in the heat, who had been incapable of designing an intelligent petrol can or tank gun until the newcomers' hands reached for their throats, who at all times had shouldered the greatest tasks and had spoken the least, these curious people, the British, had won. Dead beneath the almost apologetic paws of the Desert Rat lay the Desert Fox.

The Kiwis, of course, were still talking about yesterday's race meeting.

¹ [Dvr A. Sykes](#); born [Christchurch](#), 14 Jul 1914; motor driver; killed in action 4 Mar 1943.

² [Dvr S. A. Leggat](#); born [Wellington](#), 25 Mar 1907; oil storeman; wounded 4 Mar 1943; died [Lower Hutt](#), 28 Mar 1948.

³ [Dvr O. S. D. Roberts](#); [Methven](#); born NZ 7 Dec 1917; motor mechanic; wounded 6 Mar 1943.

⁴ [Dvr R. G. King](#); born NZ 26 Feb 1918; driver; accidentally killed 3 Mar 1943.

⁵ **Erwin Rommel**, born Heidenheim, 15 Nov 1891; son of a schoolmaster and one of a family of five; reached **Africa** in February 1941; left March 1943. His war service ended with severe head wounds on 17 July 1944 when an aircraft attacked his staff car, which overturned, near Livarot, **Normandy**. Suspected of defeatism after the failure of the attempt to kill **Hitler**, he took poison and died, 14 Oct 1944.

⁶ Plans for this hook, first discussed back in November 1942, just after the **Alamein** breakthrough, had been developed during the occupation of **Tripoli**, and Maj Stock and Capt Coleman, in the first week in March, had travelled inland to about 20 miles from Wilder's Gap to pick a suitable spot for the NZ Field Maintenance Centre. No left hook from **Tripoli** eventuated, however. Instead **2 NZ Division** was sent by the coastal road to **Medenine** to help hold the expected counter-attack from the **Mareth Line**, and the hook developed from there.

⁷ The Corps, under **General Freyberg** (still commanding 2 NZ Div) consisted of: 2 NZ Div, 8 (British) Armd Bde, 1 Bn Buffs, King's Dragoon Guards, British medium, field and anti-tank artillery regiments, and the Free French (from Chad) under Gen Leclerc.

⁸ While 4 RMT Workshops moved on with **NZ Corps**, 6 RMT Workshops worked at the NZ FMC. The parties rejoined their companies at the end of March, Maj Stock resuming command of 4 RMT Coy, which in mid-February and March had been commanded temporarily by **Maj J. J. Hunter** and **Capt S. W. Ellingham**.

⁹ **Capt I. E. I. Markby**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born Dunedin, 20 Mar 1913; accountant.

¹⁰ 2 Lt M. N'A. K. **Ngarimu**, VC; born Whareponga, 7 Apr 1918; shepherd; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

¹¹ **Dvr A. F. R. McLean**; born Wairio, Southland, 27 Mar

1902; transport driver; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

¹² Dvr J. A. Jepsen; born NZ 19 Dec 1911; tractor driver; died of wounds 27 Mar 1943.

¹³ Dvr L. H. Hyde; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 9 Jul 1913; fencer; twice wounded.

¹⁴ L-Cpl W. G. Fraser; Dunedin; born NZ 9 Dec 1908; butcher; wounded 28 Mar 1943.

¹⁵ Dvr J. Parnwell; Tauranga; born Gisborne, 13 Oct 1912; transport driver; wounded 28 Mar 1943.

¹⁶ Dvr W. McGhie; Auckland; born Scotland, 12 Jun 1918; butcher.

¹⁷ Lt H. H. Brandon; Auckland, born England, 28 Jan 1917; fencer.

¹⁸ Back near Tripoli Arabs, springing from nowhere whenever a convoy halted, hawked matches (origin unknown), eggs (though hens were seldom seen), battered and highly-polished primuses (probably ex-Axis). They sought, unscrupulously, army occupation money, and strove for three things: tea (fresh, or used and freshly dyed with Condy's crystals, from 16s. to £1 a pound), sugar (a little less), biscuits (one egg for one packet). Two packets of army cigarettes were worth three eggs. Along the roads and tracks, especially at mine craters and deviations where drivers had to slow down, the shrill monotonous cry arose: 'Eggis, eggis ... chai ... sukra?'

¹⁹ Dvr R. Cook, BEM; Pahiatua; born England, 25 Jan 1919; lorry driver.

²⁰ Cpl D. McG. Stewart; Invercargill; born NZ 19 Mar 1918;

storeman; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

²¹ Dvr K. B. Bengé; Putaruru; born NZ 14 Oct 1919; butcher; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

²² Dvr A. I. Lunjevich; Auckland; born NZ 2 Apr 1915; labourer; wounded 15 Apr 1943.

²³ The killed, wounded, and missing in the three battalions of 5 Bde were: 21 Bn (19 offr, 341 ORs strong), 7 offr, 164 ORs; 23 Bn (20 offr, 363 ORs strong), 8 offr, 108 ORs; 28 (Maori) Bn (17 offr, 302 ORs strong), 12 offr, 104 ORs.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 14 – MULE PACK COMPANY

CHAPTER 14

Mule Pack Company

'THE Mule Pack Company did one good thing in the war. It ran a magnificent race meeting.'

'It certainly did that.'

'I remember my bet was off to a flying start. It had half a lap lead right to a few yards from the finish. I thought I'd clean up a packet. Then it stopped dead. Wouldn't shift. The blasted thing never finished.'

'We all must have had similar experiences. Mine started off backwards. Just wouldn't go any other way. Those things didn't seem to get the idea of racing, you know.'

Years after old battles and far cities are forgotten, returned men will remember that race meeting in **Tunisia. Here's how it all began:**

MESSAGE FORM

To Comd NZASC

FROM Rear 2 NZ Div

15 April 1943

Please arrange collect 150 mules with local pack saddles from 16 Apr stop Responsible officer to sign contract and examine soundness of mules

They gathered them up all right after a lot of trouble, not all of it from flying heels. Many of the mules and donkeys, old grey beasts, had had it. Some drivers swore that one or two of them had only three legs. Some Arabs temporarily maimed their beasts by sticking long pins into feet and muscles. The working party finding sound mules critically short, counted in donkeys on the basis that two donkeys equalled one mule. ¹

Of the first 150 animals inspected, only 48 donkeys and 24 mules were up to army standard—‘almost as bad as medical gradings among the “Deep Thinkers” in New Zealand,’ grumbled one tired onlooker. After chasing Arabs, complaining to administrators, reproaching sheiks, even hunting up in his palace the Caid himself (a sort of overseer of sheiks) who promised ‘mules très hautes’ and ‘donkeys très grandes’, at last by 20 April they got 1 New Zealand Mule Pack Company up to full strength: 101 mules, 96 donkeys, and also, of course, six officers, five sergeants and 150 others. Of these, 47 men had come from 4 RMT, 39 from 6 RMT, 35 from other NZASC units, and the rest from the battalions. Divided into three platoons, ² the company settled down at **Sidi Bou Ali** in a pleasant little spot protected by trees and cactus and containing a good supply of well water. The idea was that the company, once trained, might pack ammunition, supplies, and water to isolated positions in the Tunisian hills. Happy in their work the muleteers roved the waterfront and scrounged drums and ropes for feed bins, troughs, and halters. Adding to the 60 native saddles collected at **Sfax**, they persuaded Cavalry Barracks at **Sousse** into releasing 50 pack-saddles and harness, and gathered the rest from here and there. From 5 Field Ambulance they collected ointments and dressings for animals suffering from galls and cuts. They fed, watered, groomed, exercised, and began to cherish their animals, which were now responding well to good care and a steady daily ration of green feed, 6 lb. of hay, and 1 lb. of oats (only half a pound for donkeys).

The donkeys handsomely repaid such devotion, for **Sidi Bou Ali** stock, denied good fresh donkeys for years, was becoming badly inbred. When the southern donkeys from **Sfax** turned up, every intelligent native rushed 1 **Mule Pack Company** for stud service. Thanks to spring and a timely doubling of the grain ration all demands were met and honoured to the full. Delighted Arabs departed with beasts contented at last, and happy Kiwi owners, pocketing stud fees of up to 300 francs, heard no complaints from their doubly dear donkeys.

One little ‘donk’ was very undersized. He could carry only a couple of

four-gallon water cans, one on each side of his back. From the army's point of view he was 'US' (unservice- able). If he stalled and sat on his haunches, his driver simply bent down and lifted him to his feet again. A good prod in the right quarter soon sent him on his way. Diminutive in most respects, 'Monty'—that was his nickname—had extremely short legs. Drivers soon developed a warm spot in their hearts for the little chap, and they quickly took pity on him when the stud operations got under way. From ammunition boxes and bits and pieces an adequate ramp was built, and 'Monty', placed on an equal footing, played his part too. One morning he could be found nowhere. In vain men hunted high and low. Then one driver, inspired, raced off. Sure enough he found 'Monty', ears cocked, poised expectantly on top of his ramp.

Muleteers and their charges learned how to pack ammunition correctly and safely over rough distances of up to twelve miles. Then, fearful with movie and still camera, flashlight, notebook and microphone, Public Relations men swarmed over the company. Sweeping aside suggestions, advice and warnings, the action-minded experts in no time had the Mule Pack Company 'looking good and realistic—authentic. What? Eh?' Behind the cactus smoke-candles outburned any tank; in front small incendiary bombs snapped and exploded. In between reared greatly alarmed mules and muleteers. When the uproar at last died down Frank Gillard, a radio commentator, was heard over the **BBC** delightfully describing 'this all-British outfit' as yet another example of RASC adaptability. However, the photographs—apart from those showing a mule discarding water cans to sit squarely upon its driver—looked magnificent.

After all this **1 Mule Pack Company** never went into action. The Tunisian war ended before it was wanted in those mountains ahead. The company curled up and died after just one month of life behind the line. Nobody except a few NZASC men would have known—or cared—about its life and death had not an inspired thought led to this one glad entry in the company's war diary:

6 May 1943: Sgt R **ITCHIE** suggested that Coy personnel wished to run

a race meeting....

One day later:

To: COMDR HQ COMD NZ ASC

7 May 43

SUBJECT: UNIT SPORTS

I hereby respectfully request your permission to hold a Unit Race Meeting on 12 May 43, circumstances permitting.

At a meeting held to inaugurate the ' NZ MULE & DONKEY TURF CLUB' it was decided to ask you to accept the position of patron.M

Trusting these proposals will meet with your approval,

D. F. COLEMAN, Capt.

Officer Commanding.

Next morning:

HQ I NZ MULE PACK COY

HQ COMD NZ ASC

8 May

Dated 7 May (.) Comd NZ ASC approves proposals as set out (.)

[Sgd] A. G. GRAY, Capt.

Within a matter of moments:

Subject: UNIT RACE MEETING

8 May 43

To:

ALL NZ DIV UNITS

An invitation is extended to all Offrs and ORs to attend the Spring Meeting of the NZ MULE & DONKEY TURF CLUB, at SIDI BOU ALI, commencing at 1230 hrs on Wednesday, 12 May 43. Entrance to course ¼ mile north of 1 NZ MULE PACK COY'S area, on AXIS TRACK.

Programme for Meeting attached.

D. F. COLEMAN, Capt.

Officer Commanding.

The New Zealand Mule and Donkey Turf Club (Inc) was away to a flying start, rules drawn up, officials chosen:

Patron: Col S. H. Crump

President: Capt D. F. Coleman

Judge: Capt S. W. Ellingham

Starter: Sgt D. N. M. Ferguson

Stewards: President, Judge, Lt A. T. Gray, S-Sgt T. W. Gill, Sgts. D. N. M. Ferguson, W. Ritchie, J. C. Rogers and J. R. Taylor, Cpl J. T. James, L-Cpls H. Telford and E. V. W. Wilson, Dvrs C. H. Black, L. W. Briggs, W. R. Brown, A. H. Brownlie, C. G. Carter, J. R. Murphy, S. Livingstone, M. K. St. John, S. J. Sampson, D. R. L. Strong, P. G. Sullivan, P. B. Ussher and F. W. Wilson.

Totalisator Manager: Dvr W. G. Gerard.

Totalisator Supervisors: Lts L. F. Irvine and A. E. Thodey.

Clerk of Course: Sgt W. Ritchie.

Secretary: L-Cpl E. V. W. Wilson.

The rules, eight in all, banned saddles (blanket and surcingle only), limited one animal to one race, and wound up in grand style with: 'Thieves, vagabonds, urgers, tipsters, prostitutes, those consorting with prostitutes, all those convicted on charges contravening the Gaming Act 1943 (SIDI BOU ALI), and other undesirables are hereby WARNED OFF THE COURSE.'

Unprecedented activity swept the Mule Pack Company lines. The Turf Club had just four days to prepare, and they swore they'd make a go of it. A track was cleared, levelled, graded, and roped off. Gangs prepared sites for the birdcage, the tote, the band, and the latrines. Nominations opened and closed in a welter of weird names and breeding details. 'Platoons,' noted the war diary, 'confined working of the majority of animals to training preparations for races.' Various Turf Club committees reported steady progress. What about saddle cloths? Corporal Hendrey ³ was painting them up and fixing the numbers. What about racing colours? A search round the Division was collecting enough differently coloured football jerseys. Entertainments? Fifth Brigade Band was coming; the Mobile Cinema Unit agreed to lend its sound system for course announcements (in the hands of Drivers **Black** ⁴ and **Peek** ⁵); Captain Selwyn **Toogood** ⁶ would give the racing commentaries. Afternoon tea would be available. Sergeant Gill and Corporal James ⁷ took over catering, but the numbers that came reduced this service to the provision of free hot water only. How were the programmes? Already fixed, with 850 race-cards run off by 6 RMT Company fans, reported Lance-Corporal Ted **Wilson**, ⁸ who later produced 'Reminiscences', a presentation booklet on the activities of the Mule Pack Company.

Tote. What about a tote? No good without a dinkum tote.

Driver 'Gerry' **Gerard**, ⁹ of 1 NZ Supply Company, was a **Canterbury** farmer before the war and a very keen sportsman, good at tennis, shooting and—this above all—racing and hunting. At **Sidi Bou Ali** the major sent for him. 'What the dickens is wrong now?' Gerry wondered. He was to organise and run a tote.

He arrived as the Mobile Cinema Unit began screening 'Stolen

Heaven' in the company area. At once he nosed out 50,000 numbered tickets from a transport office in **Sousse** for use at the tote. In no time he had the tote— *and* a dividend barometer—made up, and was explaining the working of it to his staff. The unit of investment was 20 francs; no torn notes would be accepted; the tote would not give change; and on the hoisting of a white flag (all correct) two dividends would be paid on each race, at the ratio of 75 per cent for first place and 25 per cent for second. Fractions on the tote pool would go into the next race's pool.

Scrounging, borrowing, lifting, without spending a penny, the company was ready and keen to go over the top on 12 May.

After an early lunch mules and donkeys were taken over to the course. The news swept through the Division. Here was something to write home about. From 11 a.m. until well on into the afternoon trucks streamed into the area, quickly dispersing under the direction of MPs. Doors opened and slammed. Party after party of cheerful, expectant patrons made off to the race track. Attendance figures rose in leaps and bounds to far beyond all expectations. When the GOC, **Major-General Kippenberger**, ¹⁰ arrived the crowd, six to ten deep, lined the track on both sides of the straight. Every unit in the Division was represented. Nurses were there in strength. British, South Africans, Indians, Americans rubbed shoulders, remembered and lied about home-town races. Altogether over 4000, probably 5000, turned up to see the mule Derby.

Undaunted by the huge crowd, the tote staff pitched in and with few hitches saw the job through in triumph. The tote handled 600,400 francs—or £3002, more than the pre-war turnover of more than one country club in New Zealand. Illegal but overlooked, dozens of bookies helped out the overburdened tote, and the best of usually good dividends returned 680 francs for 50.

A happy holiday spirit rose from the sheer novelty of the thing, plus 5 Brigade Band's brisk music, the amusing running commentaries, the

unexpected humorous events. Punters roared over many a close finish, especially in the main event, the Tunisian Cup, a duel between three favourites all the way up the straight, Stung winning in the last two strides from the first favourite, Red Tape. The Tunisian Cup, described as 'a beautifully hand-painted, small-sized vessel of the bedroom variety', was presented by **General Kippenberger**, who spoke of the meeting as a happy inspiration enthusiastically and efficiently carried out—a most enjoyable day's outing for so many members of the Division.

Results:

SFAX MAIDEN of 270 fr. 1st 200 fr. 2nd 70 fr. For donkeys petits. 2½ furlongs.

1. Kindergarten, A. R. Jeffries' (Left Hook—Maori) (A. R. Jeffries). Dividend, 210 fr.
2. Saint, A. B. Clanfield's (Hullo—Virginity) (R. Newman). 140 fr.
3. Old Bill, J. L. Power's (Bairnsfather—Shell Hole) (J. L. Power).

SOUSSE STAKES of 360 fr. 1st 270 fr. 2nd 90 fr. For mules petits. 3 furlongs.

1. Clink, B. Brockbank's (Red Cap—Out of Bounds) (A. Griggs). 680 fr.
2. Grand Sport, F. V. Smith's (Hard Luck—OCTU) (F. V. Smith). 400 fr.
3. In the Mood, S. Livingstone's (Fond Hope—Cuddle) (F. Richardson).

MAADI DERBY of 360 fr. 1st 270 fr. 2nd 90 fr. For donkeys grandes (alleged three year olds). 2½ furlongs.

1. Waitoto, G. Buchanan's (Arawhata—Okura) (L. Hutchins). 130 fr.
2. Black Smoke, A. Waddington's (Soot—Chimney) (A. Waddington). 230 fr.
3. Detention, R. H. Thomson's (The Colonel—Long Term) (R. H. Thomson).

TUNISIAN CUP of 1100 fr. and a cup to the winner. 1st 770 fr. 2nd 220 fr. 3rd 110 fr. For mules hautes et grandes. 4 furlongs.

1. Stung, J. Loveridge's (Bee—Hive) (R. Craw). 150 fr.
2. Red Tape, M. Newton's (Old School Tie—Bludgers' Hill) (M. Newton). 40 fr.

3. Doubtful, J. Tarrant's (Himself—Paddock) (J. Tarrant).

SIDI BOU ALI STAKES of 450 fr. 1st 270 fr. 2nd 110 fr. 3rd 70 fr. Donkey free-for-all. 2½ furlongs.

1. Shufti, H. Telford's (Kiwi—Out of Bounds) (H. Telford). 150 fr.

2. Boozer, W. Sutton's (Six o'clock—Pubs) (W. MacKay). 100 fr.

3. Rommel, D. G. Griffiths' (Monty—North Africa) (D. G. Griffiths).

ENFIDAVILLE NURSERY of 1900 fr. A sweepstake of 50 fr. nominations and 50 fr. acceptance for 12 horses to be drawn. Winner to take all. [Note: first three places all went to Mule Company officers.] 4 furlongs.

1. Black Bint, L. F. Irvine's (Foxbridge—Wahine) (L. F. Irvine). 125 fr.

2. Salutation, A. E. Thodey's (Theio—Queen's Salute) (A. E. Thodey). 100 fr.

3. Pack Drill, M. Newton's (Orderly Dog—French Leave) (A. R. Delley).

To quote 1 New Zealand Mule Pack Company war diary: 13 May: 1x3-ton vehicle went to racecourse and personnel cleaned up the area pack saddles and gear handed in.... 14 May: All personnel and vehicles to be sent back [today] to their respective units....

An issue of two bottles of beer per man was made gratis to Coy personnel as the result of profit made from totalisator 'fractions' at the race meeting, and enthusiastic reception given OC's address to Coy. All Personnel, with exception necessary HQ Offrs and ORs were despatched to various Coys and Bns by 1930 hrs.

Filed away among the last papers of 1 Mule Pack Company was this message from 23 Battalion:

The Officers and Men of the 23 NZ Battalion who attended and thoroughly enjoyed your Spring Meeting wish to tender to you and all those responsible, their sincere thanks for and congratulations on one of the best shows ever turned on for the entertainment of the troops in the field that it has been our privilege to see.

With the hour for goodbye at hand, let us join Bev Hendrey on the return of the animals to their owners, who had gathered in the market

square, Marche d'Olives, in [Sfax](#). Bev says:

The instructions to all drivers of the 50 6 RMT trucks who conveyed the animals to their destination were: (1) on arrival at the unloading point, the 'Jennets' were to be led to a hitching rail and (2) tied securely while (3) all male animals (i.e. the 'Jacks') were to be hobbled and (4) on no account released until the Wog owners had claimed them.

Shortly after our arrival the Caid, accompanied by his retinue, marched with much dignity into the square to see fair play, to supervise the counting and take part in the official handover. Meantime some of the 'Rumpty' drivers, seeing the possibility of some light entertainment, proceeded with the offloading, but (as they later claimed, 'Who were we to know the difference?') inadvertently hobbled 'Jennets' and released quite a number of highly spirited 'Jacks'.

Needless to say as a result of this studied oversight pandemonium broke loose. In every direction in the market place braying donks pursued their handicapped mates. In the centre of the scrambled confusion the Caid and his henchmen, stifled in the mounting dust and uproar, trying to count up to 150-odd donkeys and mules, beating back the alarmed owners, sidestepping charging, fleeing and even actively victorious brutes, called down the curses of Allah on those 'Muskwise Kiwi bastards'....

On this final scene the curtain gently falls on [1 NZ Mule Pack Company](#).

¹ See [page 1 note 1](#).

² OC: Capt D. F. Coleman; 2 i/c: [Capt S. W. Ellingham](#); Adj: Lt A. T. Gray; 1 Pl: 2 Lt A. R. Delley; 2 Pl: 2 Lt A. E. Thodey; 3 Pl: 2 Lt L. F. Irvine; CQMS: Sgt T. W. Gill. The unit's insignia and mascot was a large grey rocking-horse.

³ 2 Lt C. B. P. Hendrey; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 15 Nov

1914; truck driver.

⁴ Dvr C. H. Black; Dunedin; born NZ 4 Nov 1912; barman.

⁵ L-Cpl N. W. Peek; Auckland; born NZ 24 Jan 1911; butcher.

⁶ Maj S. F. Toogood, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 4 Apr 1916; theatre manager.

⁷ S-Sgt J. T. James; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 28 Aug 1914; accountant.

⁸ Sgt E. V. W. Wilson; Palmerston North; born New Plymouth, 22 Apr 1908; journalist.

⁹ Cpl W. G. Gerard; born NZ 21 Mar 1906; farmer; died 7 Nov 1951.

¹⁰ Lt-Gen Freyberg, temporarily in command of 10 Corps, was negotiating the surrender of Field Marshal Messe.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 15 – TO MAADI

CHAPTER 15

To Maadi

ABOUT— *turn!* Head east. Cairo. Get going. Two thousand miles to go: London to well past Moscow— Washington to Greenland— Wellington to Adelaide— Christchurch to Fiji.

Two thousand miles to go. Two thousand miles of film run backwards. Play around with that if you like, but don't forget that lives go forward.

And all those names. Names of men, names of places too. Strange names. Places where men bled and died. The funny men over the radio will make good jokes about these places when the war ends. Strange names. 'They pass like a muffled roll of battledrums,' wrote one man. 'Darned glad to see the last of the blasted dumps,' said another.

Some are singing:

Down beside the main gate near the barrack square

Stands a lonely street light, will you my love be there?

Each little while I wait for you

In reveries of love we knew.

Return to me once more, Marlene,

Return to me, Marlene.

There are 3109 vehicles carrying 12,801 New Zealanders all the way back to Maadi, a fortnight's trip, counting two days' spell. The Division is moving in two groups, refuelling on the way, doing about 120 miles a day, moving east, moving back, moving past Wadi Akarit, Ben Gardane, Tripoli, Misurata, Buerat, Nofilia, Marble Arch, El Agheila, Agedabia, Benghazi, El Adem, Bardia, Capuzzo, Mersa Matruh, El Daba, Amiriya.

Bugler please don't call me back to camp again

Till I've said goodbye to my sweetheart Marlene.

Goodbye my love: though we must part

I'll keep you always in my heart,

I'll keep you in my heart, Marlene,

Forever my Marlene.

Said Monty, to 'you all, my soldiers':

.... I would say to you that we can have today only one thought, and that is to see this thing through to the end; and then we will be able to return to our families, honourable men.

Therefore let us think of the future in this way.

And what ever it may bring to us, I wish each one of you the very best of luck, good hunting in the battles that are yet to come and which we will fight together.

TOGETHER, YOU AND I, WE WILL SEE THIS THING THROUGH TO THE END.

In the fog our shadows blended and were hid.

We were oh so happy, loving as we did.

Now when the fog swirls round anew

I want to be there, dear, with you

As once, Marlene, with you I stood,

As once with you, Marlene.

The old tires are wearing thin. The old engines have stood up to a hammering ¹—but they are old and tired and straining now. No pension,

no ribbons, no green pastures for an old oil-burner. No mention in despatches for all the gallant old parts which did not bust, crack, split, or burn.... Yet of the 3109 vehicles only 13 pack up en route and are dumped; only 14 limp into **Maadi** on tow. The 6th RMT recorded no breakdowns; 4 RMT vehicles (two engines replaced) all entered **Maadi** under their own power, 3 Platoon with a mere nine tires replaced over the 2000 miles.

I cherish still the rose that you wore in your hair,

And I'll always keep it with me everywhere.

Even though our parting brings you pain,

Some day, I know, you'll smile again

When I come back to you, Marlene,

When I come back, Marlene.

Small villages—rough tracks—fair tracks—good roads—repairs—desert—dust—Tunisian money changed for Egyptian —tire pressures—**Kiwi Concert Party**—neat white stone farmhouses under bluegums—desert—maintenance—LAD flat out —55 miles by night, headlights, and mile after mile of twinkling lights—old MINES—KEEP OUT signs—Mobile Cinema screens a punk comedy, 'Jailbirds'. Hot showers, fresh vegetables, more beer near **Benghazi**—slogans still on walls: DUCE VINCEMO (The Duce Will Win), and the brave **Afrika Korps'** WIR KOMMEN WIEDER (We Come Again)—never again, brother, never again. Advancing clocks—scrub like manuka near **Barce**—vast wreckheaps and junk-heaps by the road—an **Alamein** of white crosses. ² **Cairo** coming up—signs and flags appear on the trucks—no welcome, a few citizens spit, a few curse, a few shake fists, the rest ignore the victors— **Maadi**. That night, 31 May, commanding officers read out names of Echelon men, 6000 in all, who with three months leave are going home.

When I close my eyes your face appears so bright

Bringing back the memories of that old street light.

And through the night I dream again

The war is ended and the pain

And I am coming back to you,

I'm coming back, Marlene.

¹ Their engine had taken two drivers, Ray Ross and R. R. 'Scotty' Reid, of 6 RMT, 25,512 miles through five countries in less than two years. This may be the record mileage for one driving team in one truck with the same engine, and also a record for a **2 NZEF** three-tonner motor. The mileage began when 6 RMT was formed, and ended with the Division's return to **Maadi** in May 1943. Scotty did the maintenance, and Ray 'could drive anywhere indefinitely'. Not until nearing **Tripoli** did the engine show its first signs of wear and tear—a tribute to both men.

² 'They were on a road along which they would never go west again,' wrote Dan Davin in *For the Rest of Our Lives* (Nicholson and Watson). ' **Alamein** was behind them, and the ghosts wandering as lonely as whirlwinds over all the battlefields between **Agedabia** and **Alamein** and calling on the memories of lost comrades. In times to come men would hear those voices and suddenly put down their knives and forks or wake at night in sheets beside their wives and think for a moment of old Bob or Bill or Jack and then shrug and begin to chew or sleep again. Till with their own deaths the ghosts were laid.'

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 16 – TO ITALY

CHAPTER 16

To Italy

(a) is in NO sense to be considered as an ally; but as assistance is being given to the Allies by the bulk of the Italian people, they are rated as co-belligerents.

(b) The political situation is a delicate one and the attitude of all ranks should be polite without friendliness.

—Administrative instruction

SOME of the old desert shades had gone. They'd had it. Some trucks—mostly new Chevs and Dodges now—looked different under camouflage coats of green and brown. They had made the trip across safely enough, stored away down in creaking holds and roped here and there, marked and identified, drained of all petrol. Down there in the shadows and the dark they looked strangely passive, almost meek, as if aware of the terrible tests ahead in the cold and the mud and the wrenching, slippery heights of **Italy. Maybe they also had an awareness of the passengers to be, their destiny and fate? Daylight came with a rattle of winches at **Bari**. Ashore—petrol—a roar—the three-tonners lived again, back on the job—business as usual. They formed up, swung away, headed inland, and behind the wheel eyes peered into a new land all the way to **Altamura**, where the rest of 4 and 6 RMT men, without vehicles and impatient, were waiting.**

It took 48 ships to get the Division and its gear across to **Italy. Two groups (or 'flights') took men; five took vehicles. The vehicle flights—four of nine ships and one of five ships—carried an average of 130 vehicles on each ship. Shifting men was comparatively simple: each creature was laden to the Plimsoll mark and told, 'Get going!' Not so the vehicles—the most difficult part of the whole business.**

First, the exact length, breadth, height, and weight of every single New Zealand vehicle had to be written down—and 'vehicle' included everything from jeeps to bulldozers. Before measuring the height of lorries, as many canopies as possible had to be cut down until they were

flush with the tops of the cabs. This made things much more compact and shipshape. But after this order a horrible (and official) idea got to work: now that canopies had been carefully pruned to the level of the cabs, 'wherever possible cabs should be removed also'. Everyone said 'To hell with that', left the cabs alone, and all was well. A great deal of trouble cropped up over fixing the weight of various vehicles. In the end the weight of a Chevrolet or Ford four-by-four three-ton truck was fixed at about four and a quarter tons, and a two-by-four three-ton at about three and a half tons.

Next, every vehicle was given a serial number. The measurements, weight and serial number were put into lists and handed to the brass hats (General Headquarters, Middle East Forces) in **Cairo**. Any mistakes in measuring, numbering, typing, or checking could cause a lot of trouble at the quayside. While this was going on, to complicate matters further, new trucks and cars and lorries were arriving, and they kept on coming in for days after the first lot of ships had sailed.

The Cargo Planning Branch of General Headquarters fell upon these lists of vehicles and worked out how and where everything would be put. They did this by fitting scale models of vehicles into the stowage plans of the ships expected to make the trips over to **Italy**. From these plans the experts made lists of vehicles for each ship. When the plans arrived at **Divisional Headquarters** vehicles were sent off for loading—usually at very short notice. A small group of vehicles was also sent forward as padding—either to fill in any spare space which might crop up, or to replace vehicles which could not be loaded at the last minute for one reason or another.

Vehicles sent off for loading first went to a vehicle marshalling park, where petrol tanks were 'milked', leaving just enough to reach the quay. The code letters for the ships were painted on mudguards, and stickers showing measurements and weights were stuck on to windscreens. Drivers had to hang about in these parks for several boring days. Nobody could ever be certain how many drivers would be arriving or leaving each day, so special arrangements for rations and meals had to be worked out

here, too.

From the marshalling park vehicles moved on to a regulating station, and from there went on in small groups to the quay. A priority list had been made by the Division, but the **Middle East** authorities did not give it much attention. This caused a great deal of inconvenience at the unloading end in **Italy**. Many strongly believed that if the Division had been needed quickly the result might have been disastrous.

Even with the trucks alongside ships, the trouble was not over.¹ Sometimes, by a combination of swift rearrangement and common sense, more vehicles could be loaded; sometimes there just was not enough space, and vehicles were 'shut out'. And of course these shut-out vehicles missed the next flight, which already was booked up and couldn't be altered.

Baggage and equipment was another complicated story because—oh, just because.

The Division moved back again into a grey, old, drizzling **Europe**. Early in October, with clerks reeling from a 'paper war' at last slackening up, the first flight from **Alexandria** to **Taranto** began. Up gangways, along crowded decks, down even more awkward stairs and into cramped quarters men staggered, bent and red-faced beneath blanket roll, winter and summer clothing, personal gear, weapon and ammunition, respirator, bivvy tent (shared between two), anti-malarial ointment and tablets, emergency ration, and (a nice touch this) an empty two-gallon water can. 'They didn't think of a birdcage,' one Kiwi noted in his diary. Once aboard, shoved into holds, sleeping on top of tables, under tables, or in hammocks, optimists peered round and found at least three things to be thankful for: perfect bread and delicious frozen butter and cheese.

The Division, split into two flights and so chopped up and scattered that should any one ship go down no complete unit would be lost, travelled in strangely named ships from far seas: the first flight on the

Dunottar Castle and *Reina del Pacifico*; the second flight on the *Llangibby Castle*, *Nieuw Holland*, *Letitia*, *Aronda*, and *Egra*. A dove fluttered down among 6 RMT drivers on one ship when they had been two hours at sea. The first convoy reached **Taranto** on 9 October and the second arrived 13 days after. It was a strange experience slipping through the anti-submarine nets and into the port of an ex-enemy or co-belligerent. The lollypop green, white and red of Italian flags drooped from sooty masts; the dark rusty stern of a long-drowned ship broke the surface of the grey water, where thousands of jellyfish floated like pale mushrooms turned upside down. Bofors looked up from the tops of sandbagged buildings towards fat silvery balloons, tethered like pigs, and trailing wires high above ships and docks.

Altogether nearly 15,000 New Zealanders (including about 400 from each RMT company) safely made the four-day crossing, most of them stepping ashore at **Taranto**, in the arch of **Italy's** foot. (From a 6 RMT driver's diary: 'Strode victoriously ashore. Soon stopped striding though. Nail in bloody boot.') Six thousand men travelled with the Division's 5000-odd vehicles to **Bari**, just above the heel, where the big radio station had beamed so much hatred across the **Mediterranean**. The vehicles, in their five flights, arrived there from the end of October up to the end of November.

By the end of October both RMT companies, still without their vehicles, were grouped near the little village of **Altamura** on the **Bari-Altamura** road. Drivers, bivvying down with their packs, little tents, straw and sage bush, had been welcomed by a storm, a deluge, and a flood—just a taste of many more to come. Pedlars promptly appeared. They seemed distinctly downtrodden after the spry Arab. They sold grapes, pomegranates, boot polish, nuts, postcards, and apples (some like Jonathans). Big green grapes went for 6d a pound, or two pounds for a packet of V cigarettes, probably the best bargain yet. One serious complaint, almost a national affront, went something like this: *with blasted almond and olive trees planted everywhere there isn't even enough room left for a footy ground*. Such things were intolerable, and

soon 4 RMT (woollen singlets) beat 6 RMT (sweaters) 6—0.

‘A flock of gaunt, grey looking ewes have just passed by my bivvy,’ wrote a **North Island** farmer. ‘There’s an odd lamb among them which seems rather strange in view of approaching winter. But an old bell ram is always with them: one can hear the bell for miles, jangling to and fro. A big black and white collie dog trots behind them; he doesn’t seem to do very much. The shepherd with an old double barrelled shotgun seems more intent on selling us nuts than in worrying about his flock—“Nuts a bono! Nuts a bono!” They [the sheep] have the odd misshapen look of Corriedales, their wool distinctly **Lincoln** in quality.’

Wrote an Otago farmer: ‘Here, for the first time since leaving New Zealand, I picked my teeth with cocksfoot.’

Then came the first pay parade, the captain sitting on a jerrican beneath an olive tree, beside him a heap of brand new BMA currency, every £1 worth 400 lire, and saying, ‘This time we’ll start off with the XYZs for a change.’

Leave parties went in borrowed trucks to **Bari** and to **Taranto**, past pretty shrines standing by the wayside, towards prettier signorinas fallen by the wayside in the cities. But mostly the RMT saw apathy, apathy everywhere, apathy and emptiness, and a hopeless envy of woollen and leather things; not much to eat, a few sweet, sickly, sticky cakes; barbers ‘who did everything except kiss you’; flower shops selling enormous chrysanthemums; ragged children; cobblestones and **Cairo** smells; vino galore, but never a cup of chai. Propaganda posters, with the dull or embarrassed look of political hoardings the day after an election, remained on many walls. Yet one or two posters still seemed ‘a little terrifying. One shows a huge bearded Russian leaning out of his tank as it crunches over the body of an ancient peasant, with a white cross on his breast.’ A victorious **ENSA**, on the other hand, unfolded posters boosting ‘Random Harvest’ (Greer Garson, Ronald Coleman), ‘Minor and Major’ (Ginger Rogers), ‘It Started with Eve’ (**Deanna Durbin**, Charles Laughton), which were coming shortly or now screening at

ENSA's fine, free cinema in Bari. The inhabitants' apathy may have been best, after all.

In the stone walls by the soldiers' camps the snakes soon fell asleep, the mosquitoes and flies vanished, and only an occasional tough old lizard would rustle in the dying grass. At night the bivvies' lights glowed from lamps made from cigarette tins, cords, tubes of tinfoil, driblets of benzine, and bits of chewing gum. And all through the night the lonely, unheroic sound of every army since the world began: up and down, now soft now loud, the surge of sneezing, coughing, coughing, coughing.

Armistice Day. 'Here we are at the 11th again,' wrote Driver Trenwith. 'I just missed "The War to end Wars" but ran slap bang into this one. Yes, sir!' Armistice Day, and still no RMT transport. Two days later the flow began, the pool built up, the vehicles began to trickle out and away, feeling and winding their way up the Italian peninsula, bearing the men and the three kinds of food to keep it all going: food for the men, food for the motors, food for the guns. The 6th RMT, whose trucks were turning up more promptly, ² went to work with other NZASC companies which, first getting the bloodstream of supplies moving from Bari and Taranto, were now on the long run north to Larino in the mountains, a distance of some 180 miles, where the first New Zealand field maintenance centre in Italy was established. ³

Then, on 21 November, about sixty lorries—half from each RMT company—picked up the Maori and 21 Battalions, and 5 Brigade was away, leaving Lucera for the mountains in the north, for the twisted country and the cold valleys where the village of Atessa looked down over five miles to the dull waters of the Sangro River. From the bivvies of Burg el Arab to the shores of a desolate riverbed—the Division was on the fringe of the Eighth Army front once again.

The cities changed to mountain villages, muddy tracks replaced the 'wide and gorgeous stradas', snow-splashed mountains stuck into the horizon, the olives shrank before oak and ash and sycamore, whose loose leaves flamed and fell at autumn's touch. Some leaves circled down on

to graves—German graves, our graves—by the roadside, and drivers looked out and thought that these did not look so lonely or so pathetic as desert graves. The roads wound in and out and up and down, with a good many more ups than downs, it seemed, particularly inland past **Vasto**, where the turn in from the coast began. Here several of the wrecked stone bridges (and lovely things they had been, too) had not yet been replaced or patched up. The diversions were tricky. On top of this were dangerous and narrow corners, hairpin bends, loops, tracks where trucks had to be winched up, and treacherous surfaces sending all four mud tires broadsiding in low gear. By the time he had finished with **Italy**, one driver felt he could muster hill-country sheep in a car in the dead of winter with his eyes shut.

‘Convert the Rimutakas,’ wrote Pat Ward, describing the **Sangro River** area, ‘until every yard is ploughed, or dug, or cultivated; grub all the gorse and plant English trees; leave the roads as they were in the old days when Dad used to pound the old Model T around the tortuous corners; and build on each peak a white stone village (with the tall houses huddled back to back as though for comfort against the cold winds) and you have something of the Italian scene.

‘The traffic is colossal. Trucks slither broadside on, trucks get stuck in the ploughed up ditches, narrow one-way bridges and deviations, swollen mountain torrents. Banks give way—and there's something elephantinely ponderous in a truck turning turtle. Trucks going in both directions are jammed nose to tail for seeming miles. Yet we get through, and if an occasional truck is written off, or a schedule is a couple of days behind, well it's not our fault, we do our best. And the Italian Army, our valiant co-belligerents, aid us nobly. In hundreds, armed with pick and shovel, they patch the roads. It would have been better for them had they always stuck to such peaceful pastimes.’

During the return of the Division to the Eighth Army fold the RMT lorries seemed to be all over the place, taxi-cabs at the beck and call of events. But instead of careering over the generous space of the Desert, they now crept up and down the little wriggling lines of roads. The two

companies were about to become little more than two railway wagons in a vast train supplying or shifting the army. They could be clipped on to, and just as readily clipped off, convoys large and small. They could be shunted into sidings off the road and ignominiously left there. Or, changing the thought, they were to be under the whip of intricate schedules and complicated timetables, and the reins controlling them and all their movements were the narrow roads.

While these infantry-carrying RMT trucks moved north towards the **Sangro** front, other RMT trucks (particularly 6 RMT ones) were away helping the other ASC companies bring up ammunition and petrol to dumps at **Liscia** and **San Buono**. Still more RMT lorries joined in the carrying up of supplies. These were 2 Platoon 6 RMT and also the remainder of 4 RMT, about sixty lorries, filled with 40,000 rations picked up from **Bari** stadium. From **Bari** to the New Zealand supply point at **Gissi** was 200 miles, and over a great many of these miles chains had to be used, for steady rain and swarms of vehicles ahead had mashed up the muddy deviations skirting smashed bridges. After dumping rations at **Gissi** on 23 November, these empty lorries began a variety of tasks while the New Zealanders jockeyed into position for the assault across the **Sangro**. Some lorries moved **23 Battalion** ⁴ from **Gissi** to an **Atessa** still within range of enemy guns; others joined a 58-vehicle convoy bringing POL (petrol, oil, lubricants) packs from **Termoli** on the coast, where the stuff was transferred from train to truck. Others picked up 25-pounder ammunition at **Vasto** and headed for **Casalanguida**, on the way passing a very fine stone bridge near **Carpineto**. Jerry somehow hadn't had time to blow it up. He nibbled away at it with his long-range 170s.

Distinct from these RMT trucks burdened with supplies, petrol, and ammunition were the sixty or so RMT lorries bringing the Maoris and **21 Battalion** up to the front. Those carrying **21 Battalion** debussed their passengers at noon on 24 November near **Atessa** and swung south to **San Severo** on the petrol run, but the remaining lorries stayed on two days longer with the **Maori Battalion**. Then they got going with a vengeance. In a grand swoop south, driving all through the night of 27-28 November

over 87 greasy miles, these lorries arrived with the dawn at Porto Cannone, loaded bridging equipment at engineers' stores, and turned back to the north, the last lorry reaching the delivery point near Forcaiezza settlement, about three miles from the **Sangro River**, by 8 p.m. All this was done within twenty-one hours under the supervision of Captain Burt.

While the bridge-gathering lorries wound south in the dark and dreary night, the New Zealand riflemen were advancing in silence beneath gloomy rain clouds. They held on to ropes and waded the waist-high river; they slogged through other streams and crossed the gravel banks; they tramped over the squelching flats of the north bank and formed up, awaiting the covering barrage. The storm of shell and tracer began. The infantry went forward.

Across the river and into the ridges, the Division took **Castelfrentano** and reached into **Orsogna**, only to be checked, held, then pushed back out of the town. Grey skies hung close over ruin and mud wallow. The rain and the slush increased, and on these muddy slopes the war bogged down for the winter. Through rain and mist, handicapping our Air Force, the sombre slopes of **Orsogna** looked down on exposed roads and tracks feeling their way over the river and beyond. Here RMT convoys splattered along lanes and tracks. How these tracks were kept open only the engineers knew. Drivers ran the gauntlet of the Mad Mile, a long stretch of road climbing steeply past broken brickworks near **Castelfrentano**, and looked to their luck at Hellfire Corner on the road across the **Moro River**. Other names sprang up: Suicide Lane, Mortar Ridge, Angel's Leap.

To the clink and click and spin of chains and the swish of creamy mud, the three-tonners helped bring up ammunition, petrol, and rations all through a half-drowned December. ⁵ RMT convoys brought ammunition from 203 Field Maintenance Centre at **Vasto**, by the wintry Adriatic, to 1 NZ Ammunition Company, handy to the battle area. They carried other loads to dumps near **Casoli**, but on the northern side of the **Sangro**. Further back other RMT lorries had tucked away behind their

tailboards either mules for the **Sangro** heights or some Canadian troops; sometimes a company of Basutoland labourers, or perhaps prisoners of war.

At times a man seemed to carry half **Italy** on his boots. As for his clothes, he never seemed to have time enough to scrape off one lot of mud before the next lot arrived. The cold nagged constantly. Odd bits of skin soon came off when semi-numb hands and fingers fumbled round sluggish engines. These cuts and nicks were liable to fester. Quite a few drivers went round with bandaged or taped hands. 'Good old sunny **Italy**,' they said.

In the **Sangro** zone a new comradeship, an odd trust, grew up between the first and second drivers. Perhaps a lot of night driving had something to do with it. Lights were left off usually over long patches of road within range of enemy guns, and lights were forbidden in certain stretches. A driver put it this way: 'Old Sam wouldn't let me down for the world, and I wouldn't let old Sam down. You drive by instinct (it's amazing how well you can develop that instinct) but sometimes the black shadow you meet on a sticky corner is driven by a bloke whose instinct is only in the chrysalis stage, and then your heart gets stuck under your false teeth, and anything is liable to happen in a tiny moment. On the other hand there are days when the sun is shining, the roads dry miraculously, the air is clear and crisp, and driving is an adventure where we amuse ourselves by having bets as to which one of the section gets round most of the sticky corners without reversing. One of the main difficulties lies in finding parking space. The roads are too narrow, the sides too steep. There are no flat spots, and the occasional basins are bogholes that would sink a butterfly.'

Necessity made queer laagering spots. One driver remembers a mobile bakery occupying a cemetery, trucks wedged between the stones, the old ovens roaring at full blast in a sheltered corner. In another corner a child held a large cross, a priest stood with an umbrella over his head, and sopping peasants looked glumly at a black coffin and a hole in

the ground.

Two reinforcements on the way to 2 Platoon 4 RMT unluckily ran into an S-mine and saw hospital before they had reached their platoon. No. 1 Platoon 4 RMT, moving to its new company area near **Atessa** to dodge deepening mud, had difficulty in getting out some of the trucks, and a man was accidentally crushed between two vehicles and sent to hospital. The third 4 RMT casualty of the month, Corporal 'Darkie' **Hinds**, ⁶ received slight shrapnel wounds when caught in mortar fire near Hellfire Corner. Later, injured at football (he was an exceptionally promising player), he was taken to hospital and died from blood poisoning which may have been due to these wounds.

Incidentally, among the last two reinforcement drafts were ex-officers and ex-NCOs from New Zealand. Some of them reverted to drivers; some remained with sergeants' stripes. That the latter should hold this rank was a rather bitter point for some time. 'They are taking jobs that we have earned and been promised over and over again' was the view of several long-experienced men. In December the NZASC was said to be 83 sergeants over establishment—or top-heavy.

Company headquarters and the workshops sections, first set up near a sodden **Cupello**, had moved early in December to a new base at **Atessa**. This area seemed even muddier than the last, and in fact one platoon, in disgust, camped for at least one night in the bed of the **Sangro** itself. In this new area, while Padre **Read** ⁷ held a church parade on 12 December, the Roman Catholic drivers went to mass at the **Atessa** cathedral—or perhaps church; it was hard to tell where a church ended and a cathedral began—gathering beneath old Biblical murals for their first official service in a church in **Italy**. Flanked by civilians, the soldiers heard an Italian tenor sing 'Ave Maria', and a New Zealand padre conducted the service. One man's impressions read: 'There were seven altars, a shell-hole above one. If the war see-saws, visualise the priests retreating from altar to altar until there are no altars left, no church, and no village.... The women all wore a kind of veil in the shape of a hood, their complexions are lovely, their features very regular. This hood

frames their faces and gives them a loveliness that was seldom conferred by the hats I remember back home.... It was a little difficult to remember that but a short time ago we were at war with these people who prayed with us.'

Other services for RMT's Roman Catholic drivers were held by Padre **Spring**,⁸ who says he has 'a special affection' for the RMT. Padre Spring had travelled to Egypt in the *Sobieski* with one or two of the original officers, and in the desert round **Mersa Matruh** and Smugglers' Cove he was the only Catholic chaplain with New Zealand forces for some nine months. 'Do I know those early RMT boys? I could tell you plenty,' said the padre, 'but alas, the best stories are unprintable.' Still on his rounds in **Italy**, Padre Spring sometimes placed his altar on the back of an RMT truck and said mass for the small contingent of Catholics. Comments one driver: 'He was braver than they usually make them.'

Yet to some men war and religion were (or became) incompatible; they tried to bury—or perhaps to preserve—their bitterness (and anger) in little diaries, but it seemed to grow and some of it spilled into letters home.

The rain continued. Trucks not laagered on the roads began sinking into the soft mud. Bitter talk continued about 'Sunny **Italy**', and many agreed 'You can be sure of a—transport detail when the weather's worst'. A driver, his damp washing turning mouldy, wished he was back in Egypt again. The weather was by no means the only cause of complaint at this time, for several convoys had set out on tasks only to find the job done, or to be switched to other tasks. Then some maintained in their wrath: 'The Army couldn't run a circus', while others cuttingly declared it could—and did. Things improved when a radio truck and a signaller were attached permanently to each company.

When the rain stopped the frost took over. The Army insisted there was no such thing as a frostbitten vehicle. Damage by frost was '100 per cent preventable', and Eighth Army, perturbed at the damage frost and neglect could do to its vehicles, declared that each month a list—a

shameful list—would be published of units in which frost damage had occurred. With little anti-freeze mixture about, these precautions were to be taken: the radiator cap removed, the whole of the cooling system drained, and the engine run for one minute; fuel taps from the petrol tank were to be closed, and the engine wrapped with the bonnet cover. When vehicles were temporarily halted or standing by, engines would be covered and regularly revved up for five minutes. Precautions in starting up were listed, together with fair warning of nine common excuses no longer acceptable. Four of these excuses were:

1. 'I emptied my radiator. Someone else must have taken my vehicle out and failed to drain it.'
2. 'The drainage tap must have been blocked with sediment.'
3. 'The vehicle was in Workshops and I thought they would empty the radiator.'
4. 'I had no muff to blank off the part of the radiator which froze as I was proceeding in my vehicle from A to B on a very cold day.'

Before Christmas Day (veterans ⁹ were putting up Africa Star ribbons as a wry sort of advanced Christmas present) two routine jobs strikingly showed how much it takes just to keep an army ticking over. First, collecting parcels sent from home to the Division took a convoy of 22 trucks. Next, picking up about one day's rations for the Division filled 55 three-ton trucks. As for the beer—52,000 bottles— *that* monopolised a convoy of 30 lorries.

While gathering Patriotic Fund gifts on the last stretch of their long journey from New Zealand, one 6 RMT convoy stopped for lunch at Cerignola, 'which boasts the fifth most impressive cathedral in [Italy](#). We ran our trucks in close formation into the big square of concrete that surrounds it. The cooks opened the usual bully tins, the one slice of bread ration, the good old biscuits, the mug of chai, margarine, and wonder of wonders, raspberry jam in limited quantities. A hundred or more kids immediately surrounded us: "Sigarette, Biscotti, Pane?" For a while we held them off until one kid ducked under somebody's elbow. In a moment the trestles were stripped bare. There is no selfconsciousness about hunger. Later some of us entered the cathedral. Then for several

miles Sam was very bitter. He had given his dinner away, the scene had made him feel rather sick. Inside the cathedral was beauty, taste, and the unlimited expenditure of money: outside was wretchedness, hunger and poverty.'

A good mail at last came in for Christmas. 'Received nine letters,' notes one pocket diary. 'One from Rose, blast it.' One driver got 13 letters. One of them was from 'The Kids', and he wrote back: 'I can visualise the old lady putting on her most schoolmarmy face and saying severely: "June and Dick you will sit down right away and write to your old uncle." And the kids, being kids, would probably answer, "Must we, Marm?"' I don't really blame them. I was a kid once and I had an uncle who went to a war—I suppose it was equally as important a war as this one. I cannot remember if I ever wrote to him, but I know now that I should have.'

Christmas, well welcomed in vino the night before, held its own against dismal rain and slush. General Montgomery's Christmas message included, somewhat ambiguously: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. Surely this describes exactly what we are fighting for?' **General Freyberg** wished his men good luck, Godspeed, and 'may 1944 bring happiness to us all'. But what the cooks—the real heroes of the day—brought in was the most important of all: roast pork, roast turkey, roast and boiled potatoes, kumeras, green peas, cabbage, apple sauce, plum pudding and brandy sauce, two bottles of beer, and accumulated rum rations. Tea: fruit salad, trifle, Christmas cake, apples, oranges, nuts. Usually men drew up four trucks in a square, an extra tarpaulin above them, and below plenty of straw from handy haystacks, for 'everywhere was mud; the kind you *zink* into and you can't *zunk* out of'. Sitting on benzine tins, drivers balanced dixies on knees and ate and drank contentedly enough. In the morning church services were held in the lines (as the padre said 'Goodwill towards men' the five-point-fives opened up) and at **Atessa** again, and the afternoon passed in 'Maori PT'—on the backs down under the truck canopies. 'At least,' recorded one driver, 'we can tie down canopies to keep out the draughts and light the

primus to dispel some of the chill. Not so the infantryman.'

'Much stress,' said 6 RMT's war diarist, looking out on not unpleasant surroundings but most unpleasant conditions, 'has been laid on the fact that this is the first Christmas spent in **Europe**, and there has been much conjecture as to it being the last Christmas of the war. With the news that our much respected Army Comdr Gen Montgomery has been appointed to GOC British Land Forces for the Invasion, all ranks await with much interest the outcomings of the forthcoming year.'

¹ A mid- **Mediterranean** miracle: 4500 NZ vehicles left Egypt, says one authority; 5199 NZ vehicles arrived, says the NZ Vehicle Reception Depot.

² 6 RMT recorded at least 98 lorries ashore on 15-16 Nov; 4 RMT had 99 lorries ashore by 23 Nov, and 29 still aboard ship at **Bari**. The balance (14) of 4 RMT's vehicles drove in on 4 Dec, completing the company and rounding off the move from Burg el Arab to **Italy** in exactly two months. Until these vehicles arrived, and for a short time after, 26 vehicles under 2 Lt Jackson Butler (an ex-4 RMT sergeant) were lent to 4 RMT by the Tank Transporter Coy.

³ Soon afterwards the Field Maintenance Centre moved up to near **Gissi**, and the issuing of supplies to units went on from there. About this a narrator writes: 'The length of the supply line (NZASC convoys had to go as far back as **Altamura** and **San Severo** for supplies), the deplorable state of the roads, the bad weather and the fact that a considerable number of vehicles was late in arriving from Egypt, all made the process of bringing up rations, ammunition and petrol a laborious one, and meant long hours of work for the drivers. It was to their credit that the flow of these supplies to the Division continued evenly with no interruption.'

⁴ After moving 23 Bn these lorries (2 Pl 4 RMT) joined in the carting of bridging material up from Porto Cannone on 28 Nov,

remaining loaded behind HQ 23 Bn near the **Sangro River**. Except for these and for 17 trucks (which crossed the **Sangro** on 30 Nov with more ammunition for the gunners, for in the last week in November the Division handled 795 rounds of ammunition for each 25-pounder), most RMT lorries returned to Company Headquarters, set up near **Cupello**. Four drivers from 6 RMT said goodbye to it all and departed, joining an Italian Mule Pack Coy to act as 'welfare NCOs' among the muleteers.

The mules 'proved indispensable' (the scale recommended was 70 to a battalion) and the Italian muleteers, some of whom were killed in the service of New Zealanders, 'proved satisfactory'. Mules took over from jeeps, which had taken over from trucks. After dark the animals carted supplies, ammunition, and food to front-line positions. They even carried up petrol and ammunition for tanks in forward areas. The 'ball of fire'—that magnificently organised, equipped and mechanised pursuit force of the desert—was resting now on a mule's back.

⁵ Rain up to five inches a month could be expected in the autumn.

⁶ **Cpl A. L. Hinds**; born NZ 29 Oct 1914; bush foreman; wounded 20 Dec 1943; died of sickness 14 Mar 1944.

⁷ **Rev S. C. Read**; **Auckland**; born **Invercargill**, 24 Aug 1905; Presbyterian minister.

⁸ **Rev Fr L. P. Spring**, OBE, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Seadown, South Canterbury, 25 Mar 1901; Roman Catholic priest.

⁹ 'We don't notice it until we check up, and then we find with a queer feeling of dismay how few of the old originals are left, even in a young company like ours; old lamps for new—some of the old lamps were burnt out; some of the new ones don't burn very brightly.'—from a 6 RMT corporal's letter.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 17 – TO CASSINO

CHAPTER 17

To Cassino

THE old year, remarked ‘Darkie’ **Sargent**,¹ was ‘wrung’ out quietly. The rain had been bad enough. The worst was on the way.

Snow fell on New Year's Eve, and all through the first hours of 1944 the big fat flakes kept swishing down ... *send her down, David ... send her down, Hughie ... whoa, this is beyond a joke.* ... A blustering dawn brought sleet, then more snow, and a cutting cold. Snow fell to a depth of one and a half feet; in some places it piled into drifts up to a man's shoulders. Bivvies collapsed. Telephone wires parted. Pits and slit trenches ran with icy slush. Blocked roads led to closed bridges. Vehicles halted. All traffic died. Homeless, cold, and unhappy, New Zealanders sloshed about, their saturated possessions gathered together in muddy bundles. Every available house became crammed with muddy Kiwis. The snow did not freeze. It stayed like soft icing over a horrible great cake of mud. ‘At every step,’ says one record, ‘one floundered in a cold, watery bog which oozed in over one's boot-tops.’ A driver wrote longingly of gumboots: ‘We'd have given anything—anything at all—for just one decent pair.’

Many drivers took refuge in a church at **Atessa**, only to be booted out to join the labour gangs. In the sudden great silence men first set about clearing snow from lorries, then made tracks out to the roads, and then started cleaning up the blocked roads. For 24 hours the Division stayed snowbound. ‘What magnificent fighters these Russians must be,’ wrote many a frozen Kiwi.

With bulldozers, mechanical shovels, graders and dump trucks, engineers opened up a war of their own against snow and mire. These men, working with scarcely a pause, cleared and kept clear the most important supply routes for drivers, doctoring the mashed and broken surfaces with rubble and gravel and ‘corduroy’ (bundles or layers of wood to bind the mud or fill deep ruts) until the Division withdrew, leaving the

Sangro mud for the west coast—and Cassino.

The 4th RMT's first call came early on 2 January. Sixth Brigade, snowbound in its sector near **Orsogna**, was due for relief by 5 Brigade, which was resting at **Castelfrentano**. Over roads cleared just enough in parts for one-way traffic and demanding plenty of skill and caution, 2 Platoon carried **23 Battalion** to Tiko Tiko (or Hongi) Bridge over the **Moro River**, turned, and went back for **21 Battalion**. After this drivers waited beside the river until the mud-stained and weary riflemen of **26 Battalion** appeared from out of the night, and then took them back to 6 Brigade's rest area.

Bringing back **25 Battalion** was 3 Platoon 6 RMT, which had arrived empty at Hellfire Corner at 7 p.m. From there, after a clammy two-hour wait, the 6 RMT men drove on in groups of six, the last vehicle leaving the forward area at 3 a.m. Moonlight helped movement early in the evening, but after midnight travelling became particularly precarious. 'At times you'd think the old bus was just about waltzing on ice,' one driver remembers. 'The trip seemed a succession of skids to me. Then the road would suddenly narrow without warning and here the slushy, slippery surfaces seemed to get worse. You'd peer into the dark and hope like hell. There were snow-drifts all over the place too. We agreed unanimously she was a fair cow.' When the trip was over Brigadier **Parkinson**² asked Lieutenant **Bain**³ 'to thank all drivers involved for what he considered the best job of driving he had seen under most difficult conditions.' The next night **24 Battalion** (relieved by **28 Battalion**) was driven back to join the now complete 6 Brigade behind the line. Not even foul roads and snowdrifts had delayed the two brigades (about 1500 men apiece) from changing over, an achievement all the more creditable when it is remembered that three months ago every man and every vehicle was still in sunny Egypt 'where', as the travel folders point out, 'snow is unknown'.

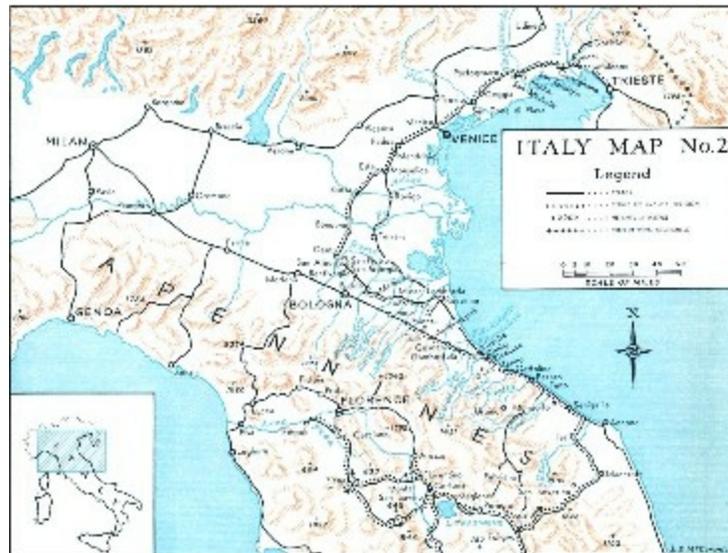
Just after the brigades changed places the snow returned, this time falling for almost two days. The sun came back with just enough warmth to start a slight thaw. The resulting quagmire broke all records.

Roads turned into morasses; cut-up surfaces disappeared beneath the chain-clad wheels of the traffic. A heartbreaking mess smothered the front. 'Never,' wrote a narrator, 'did the Division have worse traffic conditions to contend with ... continuous toil was necessary to keep the roads passable.'

Now a tank transporter platoon, temporarily attached to 4 RMT, was involved in a changeover of mule companies around **Capracotta**, a hamlet perched some 5000 frozen feet up at the inland end of Eighth Army's line. The exchange went smoothly enough in two places. Unaware it was heading for the deep-freeze, the third party (15 trucks and a jeep under Lieutenants **Butler**⁴ and **Brownlie**⁵) drove up an abominable back road towards **Capracotta**. Ice sheathed the road and in parts drivers got out, slogged petrol over the ice, and burned patches clear. Driver **Cyril Williams**⁶ drove cheerfully through the bitter cold and sleet without a windscreen. Driver Earl **Grantham**⁷ was told to keep his truck empty so that drivers carrying mules could sleep in it on the way back. He writes:

It was still snowing hard and very cold when the first truck started somewhere around **Vasto-Jaraldi** on the journey on the slippery ice-covered snow-bound mountain road to **Capracotta**. Others followed at about half-hourly intervals until our boss came along, as usual first in last out, his driver **Bill Winter**⁸ cuddled in behind the wheel with greatcoat, baliclava and gloves: by then it was really cold. The boss (Mr. Butler), called 'OK, go ahead', and they more or less slid away in pursuit of the other trucks. All the time I had been waiting for the boys to load the mules I had kept my motor running, we had to do this to stop the water in our radiators from freezing, and as soon as I got the go ahead I scrambled into my truck, gave the motor a tickle or two, engaged my gears both front and back drive, and prepared to get cracking. Now Mother Nature took a hand in things. My first pressure on the wheel spun it quite easily, but when with clutch engaged and motor revving I swung her out onto the roadway there was a definite metallic click, and the steering wheel spun like a top and became useless in my freezing

hands.



I realised at once what the trouble was: my steering column had crystallised with the sudden cold and had snapped off level with the housing. My one thought was now to stop the boss, but by the time I had slipped, slid and stumbled as far as the first bend in the road, all I could see was snow, snow, and more snow.

I made my way back to my now useless truck, wondering how far the boys would go before they stopped to brew up, or for a check by the boss on drivers and loads. At that moment I never dreamed it would be thirteen days and nights before I would see any of my cobbers again. ⁹

When I reached my truck I made sure that I drained the water from the radiator (that same water was frozen hard about ten minutes later), strapped down my side curtain and smartly hopped into the back, got my primus cracking, and brewed up. The weather was clear, but it was still snowing heavily so I sat wondering how the boys would fare if they didn't get the LAD to me and have my truck mobile by the time they wanted to sleep.

It wasn't long before night fell and the countryside took on a hushed glistening white silence, broken only by the roar of my primus which threw grotesque shadows on my canopy every time I moved.

I don't know what time I finally decided no LAD truck was

forthcoming, but I spread my blanket on the steel floor of my truck, removed my boots, covered myself with my greatcoat and tried to get some sleep. It was early next morning when I was awakened by a movement of my truck and a terrific roaring sound. I gripped my greatcoat with my left hand to toss it back and get up, when my fingers sank into about four or five inches of snow on top of me. My canopy had blown inside the back of my truck and had frozen stiff, and was forming a type of tunnel through which the roaring wind was blowing snow by the bucketfuls, right in on top of me and all my gear.

My clothes were wet through: boots, greatcoat and primus were covered in snow. I managed to get the back closed down after about a half-hour struggle, and by that time I was as stiff and cold as my canopy. My old primus went stubborn on me and it took about a quart of petrol to get her going. There were 24 gallons of spare petrol in my truck as I carried some for the other trucks in the section.

The food situation now became my biggest worry, as I knew now that with this storm the mountainous route over which we had travelled would certainly be blocked, and so it proved to be, as I later learnt there were snow drifts to a depth of 23 feet.

I did my best to dry my clothes and my blanket and boots, but it was too cold to leave much off at one time, so it was a slow job. When I finally succeeded in this task I really went to work on digging up all the food I could find in my toolbox. It wasn't much, the sum total being two tins of bully and two blocks of biscuits, plus my old emergency ration of chocolate, and as things turned out these things lasted me three days and nights, plus lots of cups of tea at all odd hours.

The blizzard raged for the whole three days and nights, and during the third day I took a look outside the back of my truck and found to my dismay that the snow had reached the top of the tray and was only a few inches off the top of the tailboard. To my mind things were now getting serious. What with my food running short and most of the spare petrol gone I was really starting to find a place in my mind for doubt about my

return to my company at all.

So I did a most obvious thing right then and there. I found pencil and paper and wrote a letter to my wife and put all my gear together in one pack. If the blizzard lasted another day and night I was a sitter for a one-way ticket.

That night I sat by my faithful old primus, kept her going full bore and did everything I could think of to keep myself awake because I knew that if I fell asleep I would freeze to death, and I don't mind saying here and now, boy was I scared and lonely!

Sometime that night I heard noises like the slithering of wood on ice, the wind had abated somewhat and as the noise came nearer I recognised the sound. It was skis on the snow, how many I could not tell, so not knowing whether it was friend or foe I stayed put, although I did put my primus out. The sound came closer yet and then stopped. I heard hushed voices, and the canopy on the tail of my truck was carefully raised, making a crackling noise. I could see four forms outlined against the brilliant whiteness of the snow. A head peered in and a voice said: 'Blimey! Aren't you cold chum!'

Taken to this British reconnaissance unit's isolated base ('soon I was in the middle of the old " *ooh ahs*" and being treated as one of them'), Grantham became firm friends with one Tommy, Reg Atwell, who 'should have been a Kiwi, not a spit and polish Tommy'.

One morning a major of this outfit came into the messroom (Grantham continues). Immediately everyone but Reg and I jumped to attention. This major had an enormous moustache (red) and it was about as stiff as my canopy had been. He talked about nothing for about half an hour and all at once spotted Reg and I sitting on the floor. He just about threw a fit, yelled at Reg, demanded a salute, and lectured for about another half hour on the ways of a good soldier. He left Reg with his ears burning and a double load of fatigues to do. I helped Reg with his punishment, carting stores up a steep and winding path with steps

cut in ice feet thick. We were about halfway up this tortuous track when, on rounding a sharp and very slippery turn, we came upon none other than our old friend the major, up to his arms in snow with his arms spread out holding himself up. He really needed help, but Reg, being a chap who did as he was told, stopped, came slowly and carefully to attention, and saluted and said 'Good morning, sir!', then struggled on up and left him.

In Vasto-Jaraldi, during the blizzard and afterwards, the Tommies and I dug 24 soldiers out of the snow, some in blankets, and in one case from under a truck where they had crawled for shelter after being caught in a drift. On one occasion while [we were] taking some of these soldiers to be buried a church bell tolled, and at the first stroke of the bell the snow stopped like magic and remained so until after the funeral, and with the stopping of the bell again came the snow, soft and thick like a blanket to hide such things from the eyes of the world.

The **Capracotta** drivers were not the only snowbound RMT men: in the cold and slush of 4 January 1 and 3 Platoons 4 RMT came to a halt near **Carunchio**. Roads on the way had been bad, with frequent strips of one-way traffic through snowdrifts, but ahead of **Carunchio** lay deep, impassable snow. Both platoons had been heading the same way inland, 1 Platoon (with yet more mules on exchange) optimistically bound for the savagely bombed town of **Isernia**, which is almost twice as far inland as **Capracotta**, and 3 Platoon off to gather charcoal for the Division's braziers from **Pescolanciano**, a few miles short of **Isernia**. For two nights the two platoons stayed by **Carunchio**, the snow piling up, the engineers active, the mules growing hungrier and hungrier until finally the brutes ate into wooden boxes in the trucks, laid bare the contents, and made short work of the drivers' clothes and gear. 'The Ites got what the mules didn't,' said one driver uncharitably, 'but anyhow she was a beaut excuse for a new issue.' Road reports remained vague until Sergeant **Pulley**¹⁰ returned with fresh orders to head for the coast and reach the two destinations by detouring south via **Termoli**, **Lucera**, Gildone and **Isernia**. With the road back to the coast kept open by bulldozing, the

platoons made their way out 'over roads like glass', and carried out their tasks with only one mishap. Passing a heavy convoy Captain Fernandez and his driver pulled out to the edge of the road, the brink gave way, and the vehicle crashed down the bank. The car turned over three times, but neither occupant was hurt.

While 4 RMT's trucks were either snowbound or slithering about after mules, charcoal, and what-have-you, 6 RMT was shifting ammunition up from **Vasto**, bringing up mail from **San Severo**, and taking part in moving Tommies of 5 Division back to more peaceful places in the south. The 6 RMT trucks (42 altogether) were called in because a company of 5 Division RASC was out of action, snowbound. For about a week these 6 RMT trucks did odd jobs for the British, and during long waits (recorded 4 Platoon's sporting page) 'men kept themselves warm by improvising sledges from shovels, etc, and playing in the snow.'

One convoy, turned back once by snow, on 8 January pushed well inland to the aid of **Cameron Highlanders** snowed in at **Castiglione**. This was a memorable journey. The route lay through mountainous country and the scenes, particularly after the desert, seemed incredible—a frozen fairyland, a piece of Antarctica. Ahead, snorting bulldozers cut tracks for the following vehicles. In some places cuttings were made through 15 feet of snow. Surfaces were very slippery with ice, but drivers saw ahead well enough, thanks to the reflections and the moonlight on the snow. The Highlanders, gathered up in slow convoy, were taken about 15 miles south of **Lucera**, and the RMT trucks, loading with petrol at **San Severo** railway station, returned to 6 RMT.

The rumours were strong now. The New Zealand Division was about to move: to a rest area—back to Egypt—to England for the Second Front—to **Yugoslavia**—Southern France—garrison duty in North Africa—to the **Pacific**—going home....

In mid-January 4 Indian Division relieved the New Zealanders. The forward positions were handed over and the guns were dragged back. The

Division pulled out in the gloom, turning its back with a wry shrug on the bitter old heights beyond, aloof, unconquered; and to the swish and lurch of tires, to the grumble of blacked-out column after column of swaying vehicles, the mud-bath between the **Sangro River** and **Orsogna** faded away into the distance, into the past, into memories. A final line was drawn beneath the figures for the two months' fighting round the **Sangro**: 399 New Zealanders had been killed or died of wounds, some 1100 wounded, and 103 taken prisoner or missing. Dead, deep down in the mud, lay plans of a breakthrough up to **Chieti**, then west through the **Apennines**, to **Avezzano**, then Rome. That way was properly gummed up and no mistake. Where do we go from here?

The 4th RMT was carrying: 1 Platoon, mainly stores and petrol; 2 Platoon, **23 Battalion**; 3 Platoon, **21 Battalion**; 4 Platoon, **28 (Maori) Battalion**. The 6th RMT was carrying: 1 Platoon, Bren carriers; 2 Platoon, **25 Battalion**; 3 Platoon, **26 Battalion**; 4 Platoon, **24 Battalion**. The speed was twelve and a half miles in the hour; and the density 40 vehicles to the mile. No lights were allowed before **Lanciano**. The route for the Division, broken into eleven main groups and moving off between 14 and 21 January, was **Casalbordino, Vasto, Termoli, Serracapriola, San Severo** (105 miles, halt for the night); **Lucera, Ariano, Grottaminarda, Avellino, Monteforte, Canello** (100 miles and through the **Apennines**, halt for the night—with old **Vesuvius** active); **Maddaloni, Caserta, Caiazzo** and, finally, **Alife** (about 50 miles). **Alife** was the Division's new training area, some 30 miles below **Cassino** and Fifth Army's front.

8.3.44. Dear Folks. It seems a long way back to the Adriatic side of **Italy**, to the snowed-in mountain tracks, the bitter cold and the grey and dirty **Sangro**. I doubt whether there was one tear shed when we said goodbye. One day there came an order to remove all shoulder titles, badges, unit identification discs, and everything that remotely suggested N.Z. from the trucks ... except ourselves. The officers told the sergeants; the sergeants told the corporals; the corporals told the men—and the men didn't tell anybody because they were told not to. One day we were, and the next day we weren't—the NZ Division completely wiped out

without any great inconvenience to ourselves.

Jesu Maria! The rumours!

It's not very far, this trip across **Italy**, but the greasy roads make the journey extremely hazardous, the old trucks whining up mountains that history has made ever so tall, and screaming down steep hillsides. Several of the trucks had to be towed, and there was hardly a sound set of brakes left in the company. One of the boys [Driver **Corby** ¹¹] was killed on the way across. His section were transporting Bren gun carriers, an awkward load of about four tons, too heavy for trucks listed as three-tonners, though a ton, more or less, is of little importance. Coming down a crazy hill he stripped a bearing, parked his truck on the side of the road, and was waiting for a breakdown waggon when an anti-tank vehicle, out of control, crashed into his truck.

For a while we were known as 'Spadger Force' ['spadger' is English slang for sparrow], a title, I suppose, not inferior to 'Kiwi'. But we never got used to it, it always seemed so silly. What aggravated matters was that we were plumped down in a peaceful valley next to some boys from the Lone Star State. There's only one place in the world for them—Texas. We were so utterly defenceless. We couldn't boast of what the Spadgers had done because they have never done anything.

As for American drivers. Our method was to replace the driver who failed to maintain his truck efficiently. Their method, apparently, was to replace the truck.

Olive groves and oak woods patched the **Volturno** valley, and among these the Spadgers made pleasant camps round **Alife** while the mobile cinema screened 'We'll Meet Again', 'The Meanest Man in the World', and 'The More the Merrier'. In hills rich in blue and purple to the north lay a beautiful village with a noble fountain, **Piedimonte d' Alife**, approached between a great avenue of poplars. Somebody found some double stock growing in a nearby farm garden. The rawness had gone from the air, work and training were not hard, and with a flourish out came the

footballs. Anything remotely flat became a football ground as drivers' packs got down to business again—platoon, inter-platoon, and company games.

These games were not altogether without their moments.

Minesweepers found two Teller mines in a favourite 6 RMT ground. The crowning glory of the season was the 6 RMT v 4 RMT game, played on a sodden ground. ¹² Each team was good, and individual bets ran as high as £30. The teams swayed up and down the field but neither scored. In the last moments Pat Ward went over for a try, but 6 RMT's hopes fell—the referee ruled offside and the game ended in a scoreless draw. The captains told their men: 'The return match will be played in Rome.'

Cribbage fans held more tournaments; the bridge, poker, Slippery Sam, and pontoon experts carried on as usual; and in at least one 6 RMT platoon (3 Platoon) a flourishing inter-section debating contest of three-men teams sprang up. The six sections called for three debates, and the subjects chosen were: 'That the Sword is Mightier than the Pen' (won); 'That Birth Control is Beneficial to Mankind' (won: 'a hectic affair, unsuitable for sheltered ears'); and 'That Science is Responsible for most of the Misery in this World Today' (the affirmative won). One of the enthusiasts, Pat Ward, describes the scene:

A little sea of mud, the rain falling steady and insistent, the trucks drawn up ... [in a circle with their tailboards facing the centre].

The gong was an old shell case; a bedraggled tent drawn over the lot to ensure that even dramatic whispers will be heard accurately; the glow of the swinging charcoal braziers, and every now and then the roar of a plane fumbling its way through the rain and the darkness'

Now the Division had gone from a stalemate in the east to a stalemate in the west. The next task for the New Zealanders was to charge into any breach and harry the retreating foe. But the breakthrough was a long time coming.

The Division reached its new area in the **Volturno valley as Fifth**

Army (under General Mark Clark) attempted to burst through the mountainous positions forming the **Gustav Line**. Beyond lay the great political prize of Rome. The only way of approach was up the **Liri** valley, the mouth of which was overshadowed and dominated by Monte **Cassino** and the heights beyond. Before **Cassino** and beneath these heights Fifth Army was held at bay. Maybe the line could be taken from behind? Accordingly, on 22 January an independent force from the sea landed at **Anzio**, within 30 miles of Rome, but could not advance. In mid-February the **New Zealand Corps**, commanded by **Lieutenant-General Freyberg**, was formed, while **Major-General Kippenberger** (severely wounded and evacuated within a month) took over command of the Division. This corps was made up of New Zealanders, 4 Indian Division (just over from the **Sangro**), an American armoured combat group, and over 600 guns. Its job was to take **Cassino** and exploit into the **Liri** valley. Its first attack near the end of February failed. Foul weather postponed the second attack until 15 March.

During this period demands on the RMT were not heavy. Trucks returned from battalions to carry leave parties into **Pompeii** (near the ruins with their astounding carvings by pavement artists stood Pompeii Cathedral, 'a magnificent affair costing 33,000,000 dollars mostly subscribed from other countries. It has a 3,000,000 dollar organ donated from **Germany**; its pipes are coated with gold.');

to take turns with the two ammunition companies in running 70-truck convoys carrying 200 tons of ammunition from **Nola** to the ammunition railhead at Teano, and later to Rocca d'Evandro station; to move reinforcements up and LOB men back; to bring up yet more mules ¹³ and also ration-carting trailers for jeeps; to gather shingle for new roads and Indian labourers to work on them; to visit **Naples** for mail and to go even as far away as **Bari** on odd jobs; to cart bits and pieces of anything wanted, from charcoal to beer.

Near the end of February, when battalions were slowly and painfully driven in pitch darkness to forward positions over narrow roads and tracks cramped by American guns and tractors, overcast and showery

weather brought back the mud again, and vehicles soon found difficulty in moving through places where tracks had not been built up. The going remained fair along the main route to the front where hundreds of vehicles streamed up and down every hour of the day. To avoid chaos the route was organised so that up to **Mignano** traffic ran both ways along what was known as Route 6. Then at **Mignano** a loop was made by ripping up a useless railway line and putting down a new road, on to which was switched all traffic going up to the front. Vehicles came back by way of the old road to **Mignano**, where two-way traffic resumed.

Off the roads, drivers were given firing practice (the weapons included tommy guns) on the range; Brigadier Crump complimented ASC men on their marching and bearing at a ceremonial church parade; the companies got their cut of 48,000 Players cigarettes given to the Division by workers in a Ford factory in Barton, England; a driver found a violet, the first he had seen since leaving New Zealand, growing on a bank; two platoons of 18 Tank Transporter Company were attached for a while to 6 RMT; Padre Read included in his service a new feature called 'Questions and Answers'; and February's last routine order ended joyfully:

PARCELS FROM NEW ZEALAND

1. The Food Controller in NZ has released for sale to the public for inclusion in parcels to members of **2 NZEF** a quantity of 6 oz tablets of Chocolate packed in Emergency Rations tins.
2. The embossed instructions on these tins to the effect 'Ration is only to be used by order of an Officer' may be disregarded.

Soon after this voluntary church parades began, and Padre Read says:

The subject of compulsory versus voluntary church parades was endlessly discussed by chaplains. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the voluntary principle. I felt that while a man could be compelled to parade, it was ridiculous to imagine that he could be compelled to worship. Further, I believed that 'Freedom of Religion' involved freedom not to worship if one so desired. In previous units I was unsuccessful in

my advocacy of voluntary parades. By the time I reached the RMT's, I had given up trying. However, when in March 1944, Major Doug Coleman of 4 RMT suggested a voluntary parade, I welcomed the idea.

The 6 Coy took a little more convincing, but eventually such parades became the custom in both companies. [The routine order for the first parade said that a church service would be held at which attendance was voluntary. Easy dress was specified.] The fellows turned out dressed in a manner which would have delighted the toughest infantry RSM. Boots shone like mirrors and there was not a button undone on blouses. The officers decided to set an example in easy dress. All were hatless and one appeared in a pullover. Compared with the men, they looked like a gang of pirates. I noticed a difference in the atmosphere of these services and the men's appreciation can be judged from the fact that the attendances remained as good as when compulsory parades were held.

By no means every voluntary church parade was immaculate—for example, the parade on Good Friday 1944. Fifth Brigade Headquarters was near, and Captain Claude Miller ¹⁴ and his band arrived to play for the drivers. The bandmaster seemed shocked at RMT's lack of formality, and later compared the RMT men unfavourably with 23 Battalion, which had staged a very regimental church parade the previous Sunday.

Wally Moore ¹⁵ decided to dodge one voluntary service for Headquarters and Workshops of 4 RMT. Joe Gordon ¹⁶ and three others picked him up, carried him to the railway platform where the congregation was assembling, dumped him at Padre Read's feet, and remarked: 'You can't bolt now, son.'

'Stump' Burleigh remembers giving out the hymn books at a 'full house' voluntary service among 4 Platoon 4 RMT men. The slim paper-covered hymn books gave Stump an idea. He went round announcing: 'Race Cards! Race Cards! Tomorrow's trots!'

The padre found the first voluntary church parade with 4 RMT touched with sorrow, 'for we paid tribute to the memory of "Moke" [or

“Darkie”] Hinds of Captain Dick Todd's platoon, who had died of sickness. Moke was a fine type who appealed to us all. He had often spoken of his little daughter and how she would fare if he failed to return. His platoon and others in the company subscribed enough to produce £100 in NZ currency which I sent to Mrs. Hinds for the benefit of the little girl. In a most appreciative letter, Mrs. Hinds told me the comfort she had received in the knowledge that Moke was so highly thought of by the boys. In units where the casualty rate was higher, such generosity could hardly be expected. Still this was a gesture I shall never forget.’

Padre Read spent many a pleasant (and rather strenuous) day climbing over the tailboards of three-tonners, visiting drivers and receiving the inevitable mugs of tea and generous hunks of New Zealand fruitcake.

During the five years I was overseas (the padre recalls), I dealt with the subject of bad language on only one occasion, surely a record for the Chaplains Department. I was never keen on ticking the fellows off in a sermon. While we were at **Taranto**, I heard officers frequently checking men for their language and decided to back up authority. On the following Sunday I took each of the more common words as a ‘text’, or a series of texts. Several came to me afterwards and agreed that swearing was a senseless habit. That evening as the plonk began to produce the usual songs, I noticed that ‘*Bless 'em all*’ was rigorously adhered to. For once the usual imprecation was forgotten and as I lay in my bivvy tent I was proud of my influence which had lasted for 12 hours

¹ **Sgt F. W. Sargent; Christchurch**; born NZ 7 Jul 1915; law student and solicitor's clerk.

² **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson**, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; **CO 4 Fd Regt** Jan 1940-Aug 1941; comd 1 Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Inf Bde Apr 1943-Jun 1944; 2 NZ Div 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ

Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Inf Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; NZ Troops in Egypt and NZ Maadi Camp Jul-Nov 1945; QMG Army HQ Jan-Sep 1946; NZ MLO, **London, 1946-49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949-51.**

³ Capt T. G. Bain; Auckland; born NZ 14 Jan 1907; accountant.

⁴ Lt J. Butler, m.i.d.; Wellington; born England, 28 Apr 1911; oil installation superintendent.

⁵ Capt J. N. Brownlie; Frazertown; born Hastings, 29 Nov 1918; farmhand; wounded 29 Mar 1943.

⁶ Dvr C. J. Williams; Matura; born NZ 16 Jan 1920; farm labourer.

⁷ Cpl E. L. Grantham; Masterton; born Masterton, 28 Jun 1916; lorry driver and motor mechanic.

⁸ Dvr W. L. Winter; Christchurch; born NZ 17 Dec 1920; builder.

⁹ Lt Butler, striking trouble over the mules (some bickering over exchanging equipment), had left for HQ NZASC for further orders the night the blizzard began. Roads blocked and buried forced him to detour south, some 200 miles in all, via **Termoli, **Lucera**, **Gildone**, and **Isernia**. Eight days later (8 Jan) he reached his men again, humping provisions with **Dvr Corbett** over seven miles of 'Yukon Trail snow' to **Capracotta**. The 14 trucks were completely buried in snow but drivers were better off, finding caches of food and wine, and receiving some supplies dropped by parachute. They stayed snowbound for nearly three weeks. Early attempts to find the lost driver had to be given up. Dvr Grantham adds: 'My special thanks here to Lt Butler, Bill Winter, "Snow" Bundock and Graham Dixon for all they did to make my return possible.'**

¹⁰ Sgt N. A. Pulley, MM, m.i.d.; Matahina, Te Teko; born Wellington, 29 Aug 1911; civil servant.

¹¹ Dvr A. Corby; born Petone, 25 Nov 1913; salesman and storeman; accidentally killed 16 Jan 1944.

¹² 4 RMT: Trevathan, Orr, Higgott, Todd, Sharp, Ayres, Scully (captain), Hanover, Brown, Hinds, J. E. Brownlie, Newland, Eden, Ladbrook, J. N. Brownlie. Emergencies: Taylor, O'Connor, Kelsall, Richards.

6 RMT: Shanks, Kennedy, Benbow, Hoffman, Paul, Thomas, Macewen, Clements, McKiernan, Brown, Ward (captain), Griffin, Foster, Kershaw, Mackay. Emergencies: Kershaw, Matthews, Thomson, Ross, Fowell, Shanks. Referee: A. E. Sutherland.

¹³ RMT delivered most of the 900 mules supplied to 4 Ind Div, which wanted 1500 for carrying supplies in the steep hills.

¹⁴ Capt C. C. E. Miller; Invercargill; born Temuka, 23 Mar 1906; salesman; bandmaster 5 Inf Bde Band Feb 1940-Dec 1944.

¹⁵ Cpl W. C. Moore; Frankton Junction; born NZ 18 May 1912; butcher.

¹⁶ Dvr J. L. Gordon; Russell; born Kawakawa, 2 Sep 1918; farmer.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 18 – TO ROME

CHAPTER 18

To Rome

WHILE the enemy awaited attack, snug and confident as a hermit crab in his rocky shell of ruined **Cassino** and the bombed monastery, over behind the Rapido River the ammunition build-up continued. Section by section, platoon by platoon, RMT lorries added their share. The busiest of the lot in March, 4 Platoon 4 RMT delivered 113,000 25-pounder shells (enough to give each gun in the Division about 1570 shells), 5000 smoke generators (gadgets about the size of thermos flasks which, when lit, poured out columns of smoke), and over 1000 leaflet shells (mainly news sheets containing **BBC** news in German). ¹ No. 4 Platoon clocked up 30,000 miles for March, just double the mileage of other platoons. The lorries ran mainly from Teano to forward ammunition dumps. The dumps fattened and spread out; the piles beside the gunpits grew. The lorries sped up and down. Then:

The day dawned bright and clear. All along the front there was a strange calm.... The valley, the square white buildings of the town, the Monastery, and the hill slopes were quiet and peaceful (says a **2 NZEF** survey, *Roads to Rome*, describing Wednesday, 15 March 1944, the day of the second big blitz on **Cassino**). Men waited expectantly, their ears attuned for only one sound. It came at about half past eight, a distant murmur that swiftly grew to the unforgettable threatening music of a great air fleet overhead.

Smoke and flame mushroomed out from among the buildings of the town as the first wave of aircraft unloaded its bombs. Thereafter until midday blow upon crashing blow was delivered at intervals of between ten and 20 minutes upon the town and the slopes beyond. Squadron after squadron attacked. Dust, smoke, and gouts of fire erupted from the trembling earth as though from a volcano, while the sound of the bombs roared and thundered through the hills.

More than 500 heavy and medium bombers from the American

Strategic and Tactical Air Forces dropped just over 1,000 tons of bombs on an area considerably less than one square mile. [Stray bombs also landed among 6 Brigade and others at **Venafro which, closely resembling **Cassino**, was 12 miles away. Wayward fragments also battered the caravan of General Clark.] At the same time approximately 200 Warhawks, Invaders, and Thunderbolts of the 12th Air Support Command attacked the enemy to the south and south-west of the town. **Boston** bombers and Kittyhawks from the Desert Air Force engaged enemy guns, while high above the bombers, Lightnings and Royal Air Force Spitfires kept constant guard.**

Precisely at noon the last of the medium bombers dropped their loads, and as the amazing spectacle of the air bombardment ended, an equally amazing demonstration of artillery power began. As the black columns of smoke from the last five bombs erupted on the flat, the whole hillside became a mass of fleecy white puffs marking the bursting of shells on almost every yard of ground from the town below to the Abbey above. In all, 610 guns of all calibres fired 1,200 tons of shells within four hours. American, British, Indian, Free French, and New Zealand gunners all co-operated.

Now, while the infantry went forward, then ground to a bloody halt before an enemy quickly recovering behind greater and more secure mounds of rubble and debris—‘houses converted from mouse-traps into bastions of defence’, the Germans said—the RMT's job was to wait. Few transport details (most of them were for more ammunition) came in, and more time was taken up by sport, including hockey, baseball, basketball, and deck tennis. On some nights the mouth-organ or accordion would be out with the wine, and the songs would range from ‘One Day When We Were Young’ to ‘How Ashamed I Was’.

Among all the news and chat in one New Zealand mail were, of all things, school reports. A driver, elated with his two children topping their particular forms, began pontificating on the importance of heredity. A driver cut him short with: ‘How bloody lucky you married a very clever woman.’

The first **Cassino** casualty for 6 RMT came among a few trucks attached to 6 Brigade for day-to-day duties. After dusk on 27 March a three-tonner with a few **26 Battalion** men aboard moved off up towards **Cassino** cemetery area. Only one truck was wanted, and Dick **Reeves**² cut the lowest card. Nearing its destination the truck ran into shelling. Both drivers and a CSM of **26 Battalion** (who was acting as guide) went to help the wounded. More shelling killed the CSM and wounded Reeves who, vainly attempting to drag himself to a first-aid dressing tied to his truck's steering column, bound up his shattered right leg with a woollen scarf. His leg was amputated at a dressing station.

Early in April trucks went up to lift the sorely tried New Zealand riflemen. ('The ASC is like the Valley of Avalon compared with the Infantry. It's only a question of time in the PBI—if you miss this time there's always next time,' wrote one 6 RMT corporal on the job.) Battalions crawled out from the enormous rubble heap that was **Cassino**. They left for good those smoke-stained slopes, drab and depressing beneath an almost continuous blur of artificial smoke. The Division was to rest briefly, then occupy a quieter and more mountainous sector further inland. The 6th RMT, with 6 Brigade, made off for about 20 miles to **Presenzano**, in the **Volturno** valley; 4 RMT, with its brigade, carried on, to rest some 25 miles further on by **Isernia**. Then the platoons left their brigades and returned to the general carrying business. This time, until wanted by the Division, 4 and 6 RMT would be on the run for the British of 10 Corps, which was holding the line beyond **Cassino**.

A nunnery was occupied, quite officially, by 4 RMT on 18 April. This was at **Boiano**, not far from **Isernia**. The nuns lived in the two top floors; Company Headquarters, nodding and beaming, took to the ground floor and basement. All went well until the night of 24-25 April, when a sprinkling of enemy aircraft passed overhead. Patches of panic broke out in the village; in the nunnery a group of alarmed nuns made a beeline for the basement. 'They were dispersed,' in the words of the war diary,

‘only upon repeated assurances of “ *Niente Tedeschi*”. Several soldiers in the village who happened to be guests of civilians at the time suddenly found themselves in the fortunate predicament of having to dispel the fears of womenfolk (inc signorinas).’

This nunnery (the first billet occupied by the company since **Rayak, back in **Syria** in April 1942) had been partly occupied by some Poles who had left their quarters in a filthy mess. Much ‘interior economy’, scrubbing, and flinging about of disinfectant had to be done before drivers moved in. Then a piano turned up; the Town Major seemed a genial, obliging chap; the local cinema reserved a special session for drivers; and arrangements were quickly completed for buying wine at controlled prices.**

But the new quarters did not last even a fortnight. A Polish hospital demanded the building and sent the RMT men out in the cold, to camp in the deserted railway station building. Moving with the cookhouse to the new area was an Italian, an ex-steward from the *Mauretania*, but more recently a medical orderly in the Italian Army. He helped do the chores around the cookhouse in return for some food. He wasn't there very long before he was joined by his wife and daughter. They also assisted with the chores. The potatoes were peeled in record time, and the food and the service brightened up immensely.

At the same time the officers were doing well, too, in their own establishment in **Boiano Piazza, part of the Town Major's building. From here a particularly good view could be had of the population coming out for its nightly stroll.**

The company left the nunnery with a bang—a rousing concert on 27 April. A swing band from the NZASC band helped the fun along, and company artists, organised by Corporal Max Tait, turned on a very bright show. Two girls who had promised to join in backed out at the last moment, but to see Corporal **Roberts³ in rope locks, powdered chalk, and red ink was compensation enough. Long before the final curtain fell the concert had become a popular hit. Made up of humorous**

sketches, choruses, songs, and solo items (one memorable story concerned two ATS girls climbing a wall), it ran to four performances at **Boiano** cinema, where talent-scout Major Toogood, from Headquarters NZASC, booked it for a night's run before other drivers at the Garrison Theatre, **Isernia**. Italian friends were specially invited to one show. They turned up in full force, laughing and applauding delightedly—always exactly at the wrong moment.

Boiano was within an hour of **Campobasso**, probably the prettiest town in southern **Italy** and at least the cleanest. Many a gift for loved ones back in New Zealand was chosen and wrapped up at **Campobasso**, which was full of lovely cutlery—knives, scissors, and so on—delicate lace and embroidery work. It seemed only right and proper that the war had just skimmed past **Campobasso**.

While 4 RMT was based at **Boiano** fleets of its trucks were working on the long and tiring run over the **Apennines**, carrying ammunition from **Lucera** (back by **Foggia**) to near Carpinone. Blowouts on this run gave a lot of trouble until tire pressures were reduced by 15 lb. Working with pressures at 55 lb. in the rear tires cut blowouts by half. Sometimes tires burst because of pressure building up through the constant sway of heavy ammunition loads over rough, winding, mountainous roads. Sometimes blowouts resulted from too much speeding, and platoons got on better by keeping in convoy and halting often.

Meanwhile some 6 RMT men had put up a sign: 'Corporal XYZ—Bridge Builder & Gravel Contractor. 15 trucks at your disposal day or night. If said Corporal should [be absent frisking] apply to Corporal UVW, his Second in Command.'

The 6th RMT was based by **Isernia**, where a gnarled old man, working away with brace and bit, some shellac, and a slab of walnut wood, created three particularly pleasant pipes a day, and sold them as fast as they took shape for 150 lire (7s 6d) each. Here, on 17 April, Major **Pearse** ⁴ replaced Major **Hunter** ⁵ as OC 6 RMT. The unit was especially busy this month, what with one platoon attached to 1 Ammunition

Company, another away helping 4 RMT on its ammunition shifts, and half each of the two remaining platoons divided between 622 Cheshire Field Squadron RE and 572 Army Field Company RE. Scattered far and wide among the British engineers the 6 RMT men (saying among themselves, 'bags uf smashin' groob', and telling an evil story which clearly defined the difference between a 'chum' and a 'mate') carted first of all civilian labourers to and from their reconstruction and repair work on roads and bridges, and then lent a hand in bringing up metal for the roads and material (cement, rubble, sand, gravel, girders, and so on) for the bridges. An odd job or two included running a few loads of AMGOT (Allied Military Government Occupied Territory) flour, almost as precious as gold dust and infinitely more useful, from **Forli del Sannio to **Santa Maria**.**

One 6 RMT detachment, billeted for a while in a mountain hamlet, received an occasional titbit of blancmange made from goats' curds, and thin wafers of dough boiled in olive oil. Drivers had Hell's own job getting rid of this stuff on the sly. Women breast-fed babies quite openly and with a natural grace, and sometimes even four-year-olds were fed like this. It seemed odd to hear a stripling ask in his best Italian: 'Hey Mom, what about a feed?' A two-year-old, Pietro, grinning disarmingly, wet on the floor about eight times a day. Soon the New Zealanders got quite used to all this, and after a while even one driver (a slaughterman in Civvy Street) no longer eyed professionally a very pink and surprisingly clean pet pig. The poverty in some of the shattered villages was appalling. Pathetic groups argued over a few scraps of timber and the twisted bits of iron that were once parts of their homes. A driver remembers 'their dazed, fumbling efforts at rebuilding from the ruins'. Around every army cookhouse little children —often beautifully dressed and inevitably attractive—plaintively held out their billies, begging for scraps and leftovers.

'In another village,' recalls Pat Ward, 'there were about ten pretty girls, one or two really beautiful. There was little for them to do except live, and usually as we went backwards and forwards on our short-

distance work there would be a girl in the front seat ... and, unfortunately, always a Momma in the tray at the back. They seemed as inseparable as the kangaroo and its young. I shall never forget Whitey's confusion when he asked one particular Momma if he could drive Yolanda on her own down to the Ponte (bridge). Momma shook her head and said: "When I married I was a virgin (my mother saw to that). When Yolanda marries she too will be a virgin (I will see to that). *Soldato non marito! Yolanda non ponte!*" '

Spring was now counter-attacking. As the first rare flowers poked through on reconnaissance, 1 Platoon 6 RMT took over 20 new Dodge trucks, the first move in changing 6 RMT from a Chevrolet to a Dodge company by 19 August (when the last four Chevs were replaced in 3 Platoon). Then summer clothing, not to be worn until May, was issued: 'Shorts KD 2, Vests cotton 2, Shirts KD 2, Drawers cotton 2, Trousers KD 1, Hosetops, Bush net and buckles 2.' (The bush net was part of the precautions against malaria-carrying mosquitoes.) And then, finally and without doubt, on 17 April 2 Platoon 6 RMT recorded happily: 'Weather brilliantly fine. Fruit trees well in blossom and many wild flowers out. The first real signs of spring.'

'And how these peasants work!' wrote a driver. 'All day long they are out in the paddocks hoeing, raking, digging. They look healthy, even happy. Some of the girls are moderately attractive, but they seem to have the same instinctive dislike for water as their Egyptian sisters did. In the shattered villages and cities of course the story is a sadder one: hunger, poverty, black markets, disease: all these charming little sisters that tag along after old brother War.'

Leave to the New Zealand Forces Club at [Bari](#) and day leave to [Naples](#) continued, drivers flashing with some pride the newly arrived company souvenir wallets. These wallets, commemorating Christmas 1943 in [Italy](#), were bought from regimental funds, and quite a few lasted out the war and the trip back to New Zealand.

A curious incident was recorded by 6 RMT on 28 April: 'At 0900 hrs

an aircraft thought to be a Kittyhawk and with a red nose and tail, circled the Coy area. No attention was paid it until it displayed hostile intentions by dropping a bomb (approx 100 kilos) near to a bridge on the Isernia road approx 1 mile distant from Coy HQ. No damage or casualties. Flying low over the Coy area the machine departed in a North Westerly direction. It bore what appeared to be American identification markings. YMCA Mobile Cinema screened "The Sky's the Limit" in Coy HQ area at 2015 hrs.'

Throughout May, 'one of the most pleasant months on record', 6 RMT carried on with the road-building and ammunition-carrying tasks, and 4 RMT, except when diverted to carry a British reconnaissance regiment from Vandra to Foggia, kept on the ammunition run from Lucera. Socially, life looked up a bit too. Speculation and discussion on the post-war world began to be encouraged officially, and occasional lectures and talks, hovering around the 'When the lights go on again' theme, filled in spare moments. Two unit historians, F. W. Sargent and H. Gibbs, were appointed with the rank of sergeant to write their units' history, and on 30 May, the day the old FS caps (known to a minority as 'fore and afters') were replaced by berets, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Rt Hon Peter Fraser, visiting the Division, paid a flying call at 6 RMT Headquarters and addressed a parade of about 300 men from the two companies. Just before this men said goodbye with regret to Padre Read, transferred to England for duties among repatriated prisoners of war. His place was taken by Padre Burnett. ⁶

While the RMT worked away for the British, the New Zealand riflemen held sangars (breastworks of stone used in hill fighting) in the peaks and slopes around Terelle and kept firm eyes on a prudent foe. In this rough country supply and the control of movement were the greatest problems, and worries increased when on 7 May the Hove Dump, set forward in a deep and supposedly concealed ravine, caught fire through enemy shelling, erupted violently, and blew itself to smithereens. Two main roads, narrow, steep and tortuous, served the divisional line. Both roads were carefully watched and kept under fire by

the enemy.

It was into this tricky area that two RMT platoons drove at the end of the pleasant month of May. The stubborn front under a two-army attack had cracked, flaked, faltered, and broken at last. On 18 May Polish and British flags rose over **Monastery Hill**. **Anzio** beachhead finally began an advance, British and Canadian troops pushed up the **Liri** valley, and by 25 May the mechanised sweep towards Rome was under way.

Two RMT platoons began the first movement starting off the mass advance of the Division. The two brigades—one in the line at **Terelle**, the other resting 20 miles away round **Montaquila** in the **Volturno** valley—were to join forces at **Atina**, a few miles to the north, and thrust in pursuit up the valley from there. The roads to **Atina** were narrow; to avoid too much milling of traffic, battalions began moving on one at a time. First away, 1 Platoon 6 RMT reported to the resting 6 Brigade, which was to reach **Atina** by way of **Cardito**. Within five days, by 31 May, 1 Platoon not only had taken the three battalions in turn to **Cardito**, but had moved on a British paratroop battalion, brought up and dumped about 70 tons of mixed ammunition, and on other swift little local moves helped on their various ways the brigade band, stores, sundry equipment, and (yes, again) still faithful and smelly mules.

On 5 Brigade's short but dusty and trying move past **Atina** on 28 May, 1 Platoon 4 RMT abruptly ran into trouble. Just by **Atina**, drivers moving D Company of 28 Battalion were edging slowly along the road twisting down to the river. Suddenly a smoke shell burst to the right, then shells smacked hard around the road as trucks stopped and men scattered. Flying fragments shattered Driver Bebbington's ⁷ arm, severely wounded two Maoris in his truck, and fatally wounded Driver **Trott**. ⁸ Under fire, Corporal **Linder** ⁹ drove the wounded back. Corporal **Davis**, ¹⁰ on the scene, reported: 'Driver Bebbington showed great fortitude after being wounded and by his coolness and composed bearing, gave an excellent example to the rest of the drivers.' Two other vehicles were hit in this action, and one had to be towed back for repairs. Two

days later the platoon in close convoy (everyone in picnic mood: 'No Jerry about for miles') took **23 Battalion** on from **Atina**, crossed the cold little gravelly Melfa River, passed by fields and vineyards bordering a pretty country road, and pulled off down a narrow path into a field, where the trucks parked in neat rows of five and everyone climbed out to stretch, to splash quickly in a little creek, and to brew up for morning tea.

'We were just making a cup of cocoa when our peace was rudely shattered by the worst bout of shelling I had been in —worst because it came like a bolt from the blue when we were not expecting any such thing, but were taking it easy in the sun,' wrote one RMT passenger, Private **Dawson**.¹¹ 'Shells came from a slow gun, and we could hear them coming for seconds before they landed, which made it more terrifying still. I dived under the bank of the creek among some brambles and got roughly scratched on chest and arms.'

The trucks were caught with their tailboards down indeed. After 15 to 20 minutes' shellfire from two self-propelled guns (probably 105-millimetre) in the hills to the right flank, trucks and men were ordered out of it, the RMT getting under way and off one at a time 'when possible'. In the words of Captain Burt's report: 'Removal of vehs singly commenced but interrupted frequently by shellfire as enemy observed our movements. Altogether 23 3-ton vehs damaged to varying extents. Bde Major said he would signal for a pl to replace us. Driver **Stables**¹² was wounded in the arm in this action and was evacuated to ADS. During the course of this action the work of the pl in changing tyres and removing vehs to a safe place was carried out without further casualties, although one of the vehicles being evacuated received a direct hit, and there were many near misses. The work accomplished by Sgt Pulley,¹³ driver-mechanics and drivers was of a very high standard. LAD under Cpl **Emmerson**¹⁴ worked particularly well in repairing radiators and petrol tanks, etc., on this occasion and also on the night of 28-29 May with **Maori Battalion**.' Driver Gordon **Richards**¹⁵ carried out urgent repairs under heavy fire, setting a fine example in the withdrawal. That night 1

Platoon had 18 lorries running and roadworthy, and in relays carried **23 Battalion** on towards **Sora**. Camping at **Atina**, the mauled platoon was relieved next morning by 2 Platoon, and the rest was up to 4 RMT Workshops.

These were the last 4 RMT battle casualties for 1944, and 2 Platoon, joined by 4 Platoon, helped move the brigade up towards **Sora** without further mishap. The trucks then left the infantry and returned to urgent carrying duties under 10 Corps, being joined within a day or two by 6 RMT. The latter, toiling over broken and mine-bordered roads, had taken 6 Brigade on past 5 Brigade and up to the neighbourhood of **Balsorano** ¹⁶ before hurrying back to report to CRASC 10 Corps at **Venafrò** for third-line transport work.

Without serious trouble except from rearguards, 6 Brigade probed on to **Balsorano**, then to **Avezzano**. The town had been reached at last, but by a far longer and far different route from the one planned back by the **Sangro** in 1943. Having reached **Avezzano**, the Division pulled back to the **Liri** valley for a month's rest and training and for leave to Rome, which had been entered by the Americans at dusk on 4 June. 'All ears were now on the radio,' noted 6 RMT, for the invasion of **France** had begun on 6 June. The news value of the Italian front depreciated heavily.

Back from the infantry, the two RMT companies really got stuck into the carrying business, moving mostly ammunition. June saw 4 RMT break all its own monthly mileage records in **Italy** by covering 343,446 miles. Still unbroken stood the grand old record of June 1942, exactly two years ago: 346,638 miles, which of course included the spectacular dash from **Baalbek** to **Mersa Matruh**.

Strictly speaking, 6 RMT did not get so far in June 1944; it did 336,547 miles; but briefly attached to the company were 60 three-tonners from the artillery which covered a total of 152,350 miles of their own. If the gunners' mileage can be added, 6 RMT then hovered near the half-million mark with an astonishingly all-high monthly

record of 488,897 miles. This distance—from the earth to the moon and back—was covered with just 100 tires blowing out. The 6 RMT-gunner combination carried an 8000-ton load in June: 6192 tons of ammunition, 1197 tons of petrol, 618 tons of ordnance stores and supplies. Moving ammunition and supplies with a rush involved platoons in heavy work over long hours, and although drivers stood up well to the strain of long hours and the choked and often dusty roads, an avoidable annoyance was poor administration at some dumps, together with some double-talk of orders and counter-orders which led to a certain amount of confusion, waste of time, and ripe cursing. Drivers did not have enough time for regular maintenance and, although by now all except nine old Chevrolet trucks had been replaced by new Dodges, 6 RMT's workshops were still as busy as ever. The artillery vehicles, old and in bad repair, needed much attention and many spare parts.

All NZASC companies took part in this work of clearing various depots in rear areas—Carpinone, **Isernia**, Vairona— and carrying the depots' stocks on to **Alatri**, roughly midway between **Cassino** and Rome. With Alatri well heaped, the lorries ranged further north to build new dumps at **Valmontone** and **Narni**. The weather was very hot; the flies swarmed; the sun beat down; the dust rose up. The 4th RMT Headquarters, now about ten kilometres east of Rome, thought back wistfully to its camping ground a few weeks ago near **Cervaro** with its scarlet poppies, cherry and walnut trees, and a stream of water where a spout bath had been fixed up for appreciative drivers. Daily leave to Rome began. Basically, twelve men were supposed to go from each company, but as 6 RMT put it: 'A crystal ball might have helped the Coy to anticipate the almost daily official fluctuations in quotas.' One or two managed special leave to the Isle of **Ischia** in the Bay of **Naples**, and came back saying it was a damn fine place with beautiful people and houses and wine and everything.

On 20 June a number of Roman Catholic drivers went to a thanksgiving service in Rome, and afterwards saw the Pope. Two good churchgoers returned from St. Peter's. Said one: 'It'd make a rubydazzler

shearing shed.' Said another: 'It'd like to be let loose in there with a motorbike.'

¹ Writing about 'the large organisation engaged in propaganda and "Psychological Warfare" to the German troops' in **Italy**, General Alexander says in his despatches: 'In general the verdict must be that this had no military effect whatsoever.' Most deserters were not Germans but conscripts from other nations. 'There will always be deserters in a war fought in such unpleasant conditions; the surprising thing is that their numbers were so entirely insignificant.'

² **L-Sgt S. D. Reeves; Christchurch**; born **blenheim**, 1 Jun 1921; wounded 27 Mar 1944.

³ **Cpl O. S. F. Roberts; Wellington**; born **NZ** 14 Jul 1918; clerk.

⁴ **Maj R. O. Pearse**, MBE; born **Levin**, 26 Nov 1909; clerk; CO Ry Op Gp Jun-Jul 1943; OC 6 RMT Coy 17 Apr-30 Oct 1944, 4 RMT Coy 30 Oct 1944-24 Mar 1945; died 12 Sep 1950.

⁵ **Maj J. J. Hunter**, m.i.d.; **Kiripaka, Whangarei**; born **England**, 1 Jan 1914; clerk; OC NZASC Trg Depot; OC 6 RMT Coy 11 Sep 1943-17 Apr 1944.

⁶ **Rev H. B. Burnett; Wellington**; born **NZ** 21 May 1903; Presbyterian minister.

⁷ **Dvr J. E. F. Bebbington; Christchurch**; born **London**, 24 Mar 1909; railway labourer; wounded 28 May 1944.

⁸ **Dvr L. W. Trott**; born **Templeton**, 8 Mar 1918; farm labourer; died of wounds 30 May 1944.

⁹ **Lt B. S. Linder; Auckland**; born **NZ** 5 Dec 1921;

warehouseman.

¹⁰ Cpl R. D. Davis; Waipukurau; born Hastings, 28 Jul 1916; transport driver.

¹¹ Sgt W. D. Dawson; Wellington; born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1920; student.

¹² Dvr L. C. Stables; Tauranga; born NZ 2 Sep 1909; farmer; wounded 30 May 1944.

¹³ For their work here Sgt Pulley and Dvr Richards were awarded the MM.

¹⁴ Cpl M. D. M. Emmerson; Greymouth; born South Canterbury, 25 Jun 1919; motor mechanic.

¹⁵ Cpl G. Richards, MM; Mangakino; born NZ 8 Apr 1919; motor driver.

¹⁶ For this 6 Bde move 3 and 4 Pls 6 RMT joined 1 Pl. 2 Pl was carrying parts of bridges for the Engineers.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 19 – TO THE ADRIATIC

CHAPTER 19

To the Adriatic

LAKE Albano lay in a steep, wooded basin. The Pope's summer palace stood on top of the cliff. Here and there along the shores hefty peasant women washed clothes or sold juicy apricots, peaches, and plums: two and a half pounds for 1s 6d. Here and there Americans dynamited for fish, or fraternised. Among shady olive trees a New Zealand YMCA served biscuits and tea to about fifty drivers, who had thankfully taken a day off from the crowded roads and had come here to picnic, to potter with heavy flat-bottomed boats, to bathe in the nude, or just to lie in the sun and smoke and sleep and forget the whole business for a little while. On the other side of Rome a similar party from 4 RMT lazed and loafed round Lake Bracciano.

Next day they were back on the job. These were the mileage months. Back in the long, crowded convoys hauling ammunition over the 90 miles between **Anzio and **Narni**; day after day along Mussolini's tree-fringed autostradas, along highways crammed with traffic running nose-to-tail, making a joke of the Hutt Road on Trentham Race Day. Sometimes speed would be regulated by a labouring tank-transporter ten miles ahead. Sometimes an Indian had smashed into a tree or—more often—another truck, and a road block would snarl up traffic for miles. Trips over the same old roads with the same old ammunition loads could vary by as much as seven or eight hours.**

At times dust churned up in a thick fog, and many a throat grew raw on a diet of dust. Some thought this dust worse than the desert khamsins, for at least the sand was reasonably clean. This stuff was packed, in the words of one sufferer, 'with all the evil of centuries.' The dust gave one driver sinusitis. The MO gave him a bit of a spell.

'What's up?' asked a cobbler.

The driver answered vaguely, 'Oh, it's a long word that begins and ends with "s".'

‘Aha,’ answered his comrade, delighted. ‘So life's caught up with you at last, eh?’

This July 4 RMT, driving 360, 231 miles, sent its old [Syria- Mersa Matruh](#) record flying by 14,000 miles—6 RMT just passed the 300,000-mile mark. Working for Eighth Army, now hustling the dumps north behind the advancing Allies, the two companies, completing their [Anzio](#) lift, shuttled between Venturina and [Arezzo](#) (a 110-mile stretch), loaded with petrol, then saw the month out carrying ammunition from [Narni](#) to [Arezzo](#).

This was 6 RMT's burden for July: 2657½ tons of ammunition, 1132½ tons of petrol, 267 tons of engineers' stores, and 17 lorry-loads of mules. Tire trouble continued to vex both companies. The 4th RMT had 298 tires replaced in the month and, although a close check was kept on speeds and pressures, one platoon travelling at 18 miles an hour lost twelve tires in 140 miles. One 6 RMT truck, just fitted with four new tires, had five blowouts on a 260-mile run. Many of these troublesome tires were made of synthetic rubber, ‘the first consignment of the German processed “Buna” tyres, one of the top stolen secrets’, according to one 6 RMT NCO. ‘Either something was missing, or someone had palmed off several thousand samples of shoddy rubber. Every precaution was taken: speed limits, inflations, overhanging loads: the tyres went on blowing up. Ironically enough, about this time drivers were reading an article dealing with the grand work done by saboteurs in the German tyre factories, and the tremendous difficulties it had created for the German transport companies.’

The RMT freight service was interrupted once. This was when the Division, its rest over, moved north again, leaving [Arce](#) in the second week in July. Moving secretly at night the Division travelled 250 miles northwards, through the outskirts of Rome and on to just south of [Lake Trasimene](#). The 6th RMT took 6 Brigade riflemen to the line (15 miles above the lake), where the battalions would attack the mountain heights overlooking [Arezzo](#).¹ The rough and heavily wooded peaks barred the

way to the next objective, **Florence**, and the next German barricade, the **Gothic Line**, which was just beyond the city and stretched across **Italy**, from **Massa** on the west coast to **Pesaro** on the Adriatic.

Writing about this period, Brigadier Parkinson recalls:

One of the outstanding performances of the RNZASC was I think the manner with which they coped with the ammunition situation in the Div's attack on the **Arno River** and towards **Florence**. I was CRA at the time. G.O.C. believed in ample gun support for all his undertakings. Some halfway through the campaign higher authority said arty ammunition is now rationed owing to D Day and to the demand for aircraft bombs, which has absorbed most of the factory effort. Higher authority said **Florence** must be captured. G.O.C. said in effect 'no ammunition no fight'. What might have been a stalemate was quickly solved by RNZASC who apparently had notes of every partly cleared dump and forgotten depot from **Taranto** northward. These they cleared at a tremendous rate, travelling as far as **Bari** and thinking nothing of coming back practically non stop. Result: even more ammunition than we usually used and the battle finished to everyone's satisfaction.

August once and for all really knocked mileage records silly with the two companies totalling over a million miles— *forty times round the world and very nearly round again*. They burned up almost 100,000 gallons of petrol, enough to keep a carefully driven ten-horsepower car running non-stop for eleven and a half years. The 4th RMT led for distance with 508,419 miles, but 6 RMT was only a hop, step and jump behind with 505,688 miles. The busiest platoons were 4 Platoon 4 RMT with 129,272 miles, and 1 Platoon 6 RMT with 125,388 miles. British RASC companies working on the same tasks did two complete turn-rounds in five days. The New Zealanders took four days. The work all the time was keeping the lines of communication going, the army fed, the guns firing, the trucks and cars and tanks rolling. Keeping the lorries going was not too simple. The 6th RMT, critically short of Dodge spare parts, 'despite a search over most of **Italy**', had to strip a truck to keep the others going. Tire trouble (265 replaced in 4 RMT), still persisting,

cut most loads from three to two and a half tons. But most convoys trundled over good roads. The 4th RMT moved 3936 tons of ammunition and 352 tons of supplies; 6 RMT moved more: 4977 tons of ammunition, 126 tons of supplies, 131 tons of **Naafi** stores, and 36 tons of vehicle parts. In all the two companies moved 9558 tons. They did—and this is no mean feat—the job of 14 New Zealand trains, for the net load of a heavy main-line goods train in New Zealand would be about 600 to 700 tons.

In fact, the two RMT companies had taken over from where the trains left off. They were back on the east coast of **Italy** again, alongside the Adriatic, where the Division, quitting **Florence** and crossing **Italy**, would be in action in September. The two companies now were far from the New Zealand Division, which was still near freshly liberated **Florence**, RMT's work with Eighth Army had taken them about 270 miles from Headquarters NZASC. On 11 August, all New Zealand identification marks removed, the RMT headquarters, workshops, and operating platoons (loaded with ammunition for **Ancona**) left their old haunts round **Lake Trasimene**, left the mosquitoes and the glorious sunsets, cut right across **Italy** via **Perugia**, **Foligno**, and Route 77, covering 160-odd miles, and arrived that night in their new areas by the seaside settlement of Cupra Marittima, well south of **Ancona**.

The Adriatic side of **Italy** was now to loom large in General Alexander's plans. Here most of August's record mileage was piled up. Trucks switched to running ammunition from the railhead at **Ortona** (just above the old **Sangro River**) up the coast to Chiaravalle. 'Clear valley' is about four miles inland from the coast on the road to **Iesi**, soon to become well known to all New Zealand soldiers. The railhead and the dump were about 127 miles apart, and the companies' area at Cupra Marittima was about half-way. Trucks loaded at the railhead, laagered for the night at the companies' area, and went on to deliver the ammunition next day. It went on like that for the rest of August: up bitumen avenues with the trees lacing overhead or past gay little hedges of flowers, and all the time never very far from the lazy breakers. Mile

after mile through orchard and garden, all rich and plump and spoiling; sumptuous tomatoes ² that the damaged factories could not take; world-beating peaches (30 lire for 2 kilos–1s 6d for 5 lb.); not-so-good apples; little ripe pears; rock melons; grapes by the million; and thousands of good old homely ironbark pumpkins. Little villages dotted the coastline. Some were damaged and some were not. The shops were frowsy, bedraggled; and below bare or tawdry shelves fat old women, ugly and angry, quarrelled and nagged. Outside in the milky sunlight how beautifully the young women walked.

Nobody complained about being beside the sea again, and the two companies were quick to hold their own swimming sports, all the more amusing and enjoyable because they were not too serious. Major Pearse won the 50 yards backstroke, and 3 Platoon scored top points in the 4 RMT events. Rugby footballs came out again for pre-season warm-ups, and everyone was remarking on the pleasant friendliness of these east coast Italians when abruptly all villages and casas (houses) were put out of bounds. Enemy agents were all over the place, said Field Security. The restrictions lasted until 2 September, when the **BBC** gave full details of the Adriatic offensive. ³ Carting Italians in army vehicles was jumped on (two 4 RMT men got 60 days' field punishment), and warnings were given against black marketeers who, with bundles of lire, would bribe well for an hour's loan of a vehicle, preferably at night. A 4 RMT driver received 90 days' field punishment for selling a sack of flour and a case of M and V to a civilian in Rome. The 6th RMT, troubled by an outbreak of thieving, arrested a suspect who broke free, jumped over a cliff to avoid recapture, and was found next morning severely injured.

Major Burt had a lucky break this month. He had temporarily taken over 4 RMT from Major Coleman (heading home on furlough). Just four days before handing over to Major Brown and returning to three pips again, he and Major Pearse were invited to an historic meeting. The two New Zealand majors mingled with 100 officers (lieutenant-colonels and up) in the ornate Pergolesi Theatre, **Iesi**, to hear General Leese, alongside two large diagrammatic maps on a floodlit stage, lecture for eighty

minutes on the Adriatic offensive, due to start next night, 25–26 August. General Leese issued this message to his Eighth Army men: ‘You have won great victories. To advance 220 miles from **Cassino** to **Florence** in three months is a notable achievement in the Eighth Army's history. To each one of you ... my grateful thanks. Now we have begun the last lap. Swiftly and secretly, once again, we have moved right across **Italy** an Army of immense strength and striking power—to break the **Gothic Line**.’

An hour before midnight on 25 August Eighth Army (ten divisions, 1200 tanks, 1000 guns) attacked. The New Zealand Division, ⁴ arriving from its rest area below **Florence** several days later, went into reserve, except for the artillery. The ammunition companies had carried the battalions.

RMT went back to the riflemen again in mid-September. ⁵ How quickly passengers changed. Men going into action for the first time at **Cassino** were now veterans; some had become officers. Death and promotion worked fast in the infantry.

The first week in September saw out the ammunition-running from **Ortona**, and companies moved to a new camp, **Mondolfo**, 86 miles nearer **Berlin**, for a short spell (a couple of platoons held a discussion parade on ‘Equal Pay for Women’), and to kick the football about. Routine orders reminded men that, if they broke their dentures not in the course of duty, they would have only themselves to blame, and the bill would be £2 10s, top or bottom, and 3s a tooth, up to twelve teeth. Then, like a seabird rattling its bill with pleasure after downing a fish, the Army went on to remind all ranks that anyhow they'd accepted liability for this long ago on NZ Form 361 (Dental History Sheet).

Seventy-five 4 RMT men recorded personal messages for broadcast in New Zealand: ‘Hullo Mum, hullo Dad.... Keep your chin up. Keep smiling.’ The last time 4 RMT had gone on record was in February 1944, at **Alife**, but the enemy had sunk the ship and all the voices were drowned. This made the company's last proper recordings those taken back in **Tripoli** in February 1943. The year (like the tires) was wearing

away fast, and once again another lot of 4 RMT Christmas greetings cards was divided among the men: three cards free, the rest at three lire each. The designer, Sergeant Grimshaw, ⁶ had arranged for the cards to be printed in Rome, where 6 RMT's own Christmas cards were also run off. The 6 RMT cards, showing snow over three casas, were 'considered most satisfactory'. It was a different story for the 2 NZEF Christmas cards printed on coarse blue paper and showing a machine-gunner, a gunner, and tank men before maps with peeling place names. Both RMT companies judged these cards 'extremely poor', a wretched printing effort and, what's more, a poor showing in a country so famous for its art as **Italy**. With a flourish the RMT ordered more of their own cards and scorned the **2 NZEF** ones.

The spell at **Mondolfo** was marred by a tragedy on 13 September—the day all Kiwi badges, shoulder titles, and fernleaf signs came back again. In the evening two sudden explosions were followed by cries for help. Medical men hastened to a nearby riverbed and found that two unfortunate 6 RMT men (Drivers **Hope** ⁷ and **MacDonald** ⁸) had trodden on box mines. They were suffering from many wounds in their legs and arms. Seventeen days later Sergeant **Kenny** ⁹ and Driver **Reed** (in 2 Platoon 4 RMT, attached to 1 Ammunition Company) were accidentally wounded by the explosion of a mortar bomb. Both men were taken to hospital where **Reed**, a First Echelon man recently back from furlough, died.

The spell soon ended at **Mondolfo**. While 4 and 6 RMT headquarters and workshops settled into new company areas near **Pesaro**—6 RMT Headquarters ('Amazingly apt,' wrote a non-admirer) by **Grotto Calibano**—the operating platoons reported to their battalions.

Reaching 5 Brigade, 4 RMT took the three battalions on to near **Cattolica** on 16 September, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible among grape-vines heavy with fruit, and stayed there three days, changing into slacks to fool malaria-carrying mosquitoes already discouraged by nets, pills, and repellents. The 6th RMT, with 6 Brigade, was nearby too. The artillery kept active, and towards dusk fighter-

bombers went into spectacular dives over enemy territory. Men looking across the bay saw **Rimini** under fire, and on the blue sea destroyers, weaving through launch-laid smoke screens, blazed away at the enemy too.

Two things were notable here. One—and this was a curious, just-before-the-battle-mother experience—was a handsome medieval castle nearby, Castle Gradara, with all the genuine antiques and furnishings, including a splendidly equipped torture chamber. An RMT truck occasionally carried parties up for conducted tours. The other notable thing appeared after dark during the night of 17–18 September. A strict blackout was broken by 16 searchlights in fixed focus lighting up the sky by **Rimini** and throwing a weird blue glow for miles over the battlefield. This was the first of the artificial moonlight which, night after night, was to hang like a phantom over the battlegrounds of northern **Italy**.

Drivers wondered what the dickens was up. They weren't the only ones. Major-General Wentzell, Chief of Staff of the German Tenth Army, reported: 'Last night he did the weirdest thing I ever saw. He lit up the battlefield with searchlights.... He turned on a display like Party Day in **Nuremberg**.... It is a great worry to the boys to be lighted up and blinded and not to be able to do anything about it.'

The searchlights were set well back out of artillery range. Four or five beams, instead of focusing dead on to the infantry's target, usually trained themselves on nearby features or on low clouds, and reflections did the rest. The light could be controlled, too, for the more searchlights used and the closer they concentrated, the lighter it got below. At the same time other searchlights were concentrating over different areas to fool the enemy. This moonlight was also helpful for drivers in forward areas where headlights could not be used. But the idea wasn't new. Back in the First World War, in August 1918, the British had used searchlights in the Asiago sector, up by the Alps on **Italy's** northern frontier. These pioneers had found that the best results came from the

downward glow.

On the morning of 20 September 4 RMT's platoons swung off with 5 Infantry Brigade to a new concentration area near the **Rimini** airfield, a few miles up the coast. This put 5 Brigade out in front of all other New Zealand formations. That morning, to the west of the New Zealanders, Canadian troops were completing the operations on the **San Fortunato** ridge—scene of earlier heavy and bitter fighting—which stood blocking the way to **Rimini** and the plains ahead.

That night the Canadians pushed north of **San Fortunato** to establish a bridgehead over the Marecchia River. The New Zealanders were to take over from this bridgehead, and 5 Brigade would start off the New Zealand drive. As the Canadians pushed on to seize this vital bridgehead, 5 Brigade came up in the night closer to **San Fortunato**. From 7 p.m. 1 and 3 Platoons of 4 RMT began leaving the **Rimini** airfield area to travel north-west across country to a lying-up area beside the **San Marino** railway line and the Ausa River. This wasn't a long move, but the way was narrow and winding. Heavy rain falling in the evening turned the secondary roads which had to be followed into morasses of mud, the genuine **Sangro** recipe. It took 1 Platoon about three hours to get back, and 3 Platoon, wallowing behind along tracks now well churned and saturated, and ditching temporarily no fewer than four trucks, did not return until 5 a.m. Guns and tanks also moving up fared no better, and the wretched infantrymen, without bivvy tents and dressed in summer gear, dug slit trenches and glumly watched them fill with water. To cap all this the Germans dropped mortar bombs on the lying-up area. Drivers, passing unscathed through the mortaring and toiling painfully home, thought of 4 Platoon dodging all this with **23 Battalion** in reserve.

The tornado of war had devastated the countryside between the airfield and 5 Brigade's new positions. 'Trees had been stripped of their leaves and branches, there were shell holes almost everywhere, great oxen lay swollen in the trampled fields, and there were many knocked-out and burnt vehicles on the way,' wrote a witness. Little parties of

soldiers and civilians were still dragging corpses and parts of corpses from ditches and from ruins. So this was journey's end for the shells the RMT had carried last month through flowers and through orchards, when drivers had thought how beautifully the young women walked in the sunshine. Much of this devastation was the work of the New Zealand artillery which, a few days before, had assisted the Canadian infantry against fanatical paratroops, fifty of whom held out on a tiny ridge before **San Fortunato and inflicted shocking casualties. 'Almost every building within sight had either been completely destroyed or very badly damaged. Also there was mud. The country roads deteriorated swiftly under heavy Army vehicles and were now "seas of mud". Trucks and tanks either kept off the roads or took the risk of becoming stuck like flies.'**

This was the last glimpse the 4th Reinforcements had of the Italian front. It was enough to last a lifetime, anyhow. Recalled on furlough, 46 of them left 4 RMT and 19 left 6 RMT on the first step back to New Zealand. The 5th Reinforcement men now became the veterans; there were 123 of them in 4 RMT Company.

Fifth Brigade attacked on the morning of 22 September, meeting strong opposition from paratroops, the pick of the German Army in **Italy, holding Route 16 along the coast, the road to **Ravenna**. By the 23rd the brigade was four miles beyond **Rimini** and on both sides of the highway.**

Meanwhile the 6 RMT platoons had come up from **Cattolica with 6 Brigade, which went into reserve near **Rimini**. Sixth Brigade's riflemen were to carry on when 5 Brigade left off. The 6th RMT found that the night of 22-23 September was by no means peaceful around **Rimini**. Medium guns round about drew counter-shelling. No. 4 Platoon had some close shaves when shellfire injured some **24 Battalion** men in their camping area. Two three-tonners from 3 Platoon had to go back briefly to Workshops for repairs: one overturned on a wet, greasy track; the other stopped shrapnel during sudden shelling in the night. No. 1 Platoon's turn for a spot of trouble came next day, 23 September, when**

6 Brigade began moving before dawn to take over from 5 Brigade and carry on the attack up the main highway and up the Black Diamond route to the left. No. 1 Platoon carried its 25 Battalion riflemen past San Martino, and the battalion began taking over from the Maoris of 5 Brigade. Near the head of the column No. 1 Section, with C Company 25 Battalion aboard, ran into an enemy strongpoint and was pinned down by mortar and machine gun. A driver got a shrapnel scratch on a hand and two vehicles were damaged. Lorries scrambled from the road to the cover of nearby houses. The Germans by now had become very much aware of the movement of the New Zealand column. The RMT got off lightly, but others were not so lucky. It was not until evening that 1 Platoon moved back to join the rest near San Martino. For the remainder of the month the platoon stayed in this area.

Route 16 was still a good target for the enemy, and here on the 24th 4 Platoon had vehicles peppered by mortars. The damage was not serious, and men found nearby stone houses the very answer to their needs at such moments. A three-tonner got stuck in a covered well, but a tank yanked it out. Occasional duties took trucks here and there on unpredictable and sometimes macabre duties: bringing back dead, carting blankets to the troops, bringing back prisoners, helping burial parties. ¹⁰ With one thing and another, 4 Platoon, beginning to feel a trifle down in the mouth, gladly set off to take infantry out for a brief spell. Who knew what glamorous billet might lie ahead? They all landed up at the orphanage.

About this time a driver saw a pair of boots he would remember for the rest of his life. He wrote:

I noticed on the wind that familiar unmistakable sweet smell which meant only one thing. Perhaps fifty yards away, and in a fold of the ground, was an enemy dugout. Nearby, the body lay, face down, as if claspng the earth. It was a 24 Battalion (Auckland) chap sodden with the rain which had been pouring down. I went to tell someone at the Battalion Headquarters, and when I returned a padre had arrived in a 3ocwt. Pickup, together with a WO 1 and another soldier. They had

wrapped him in a blanket, and bound him round and round from head to heels in red sigs. wire. Only his boots protruded from the blanket. He was placed on the floor of the Pickup, and his feet just hung over the back of the tray.

The padre and the soldiers climbed into the cab, and away they went down the narrow, slippery track which lead to the road, the small truck slithering and bouncing in the mud, and the two feet gently bouncing in accord with the vehicle's motion. I watched them out of sight.

The day was bleak and depressing, and over the sodden landscape swept low clouds bringing in from the sea a cold driving rain. The blue had gone from the Adriatic; it was now grey, and foamed by the keen wind. Nebelwerfers could be heard faintly, wailing in the distance. The area seemed to wear an air of complete dejection, and all was brought into sharp focus on one thing. The pair of boots bobbing and swaying over the tail of the truck.

A nice little present turned up on 30 September. The two companies shared 472 chocolate bars, an unexpected and kind gift from Lady Montgomery to transport companies which had worked for Supplies and Transport, Rear Eighth Army.

Operations now became a series of attacks across the hundred-and-one rivers, canals, and creeks of this highly irrigated part of **Italy**. Wet weather came with the end of September and Eighth Army troops bogged down on sticky ground before the Fiumicino River. Not until about 11 October did conditions allow the advance to go on. The October advance carried the New Zealand Division to the Savio River, from which the New Zealanders were withdrawn towards the end of the month. This period, known as the Battle of the Rivers, was to keep Eighth Army fighting for four long, weary, and discouraging months.

October—the Division had been a year in **Italy** now, with rain and cold, then dry weather and dust, then rain again, and more mud. Winter clothing back again (“The singlet reaches my knees; the underpants

reach half-way down my shins'), battle dress and the old leather jerkins, and this time some gumboots for the soft-the too darned soft-underbelly of the Axis.

Nobody got killed, nobody got hurt in the RMT platoons working for the infantry. No RMT truck received serious damage as it carted riflemen up, waited, then carted them—many of them—back a little way for a bit of a spell. It was little, local moves, or just standing still. (One driver read Daphne du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek*, disliked it, and reproached himself 'for wasting good time'.) One truck of 3 Platoon 4 RMT, near **Bellaria**, slid clean into a crater. Three hapless infantrymen reached the medical dressing station before they'd even had a chance. In 6 RMT one lot bagged a German hiding in a farmhouse; another lot set out to round up an enemy soldier and found him to be a shell-shocked British trooper. It was a strange contrast to what was happening just ahead, where the going was bloody and fierce and slow by the vines, by the stopbanks, by the rivers.

Then, at the end of the month, when the battalions had been taken out of the line and to the divisional rest areas in the quiet little Apennine towns and villages unspoiled by war— **Fabriano**, **Camerino**, **Matelica**, **San Severino**, and **Castelraimondo**—4 RMT went on to the **Arezzo**-Pontassieve run to stock a big new Polish dump; then, as October died, 6 RMT died too. The NZASC was to be cut down. The Division was over-mechanised. Roads could get saturated with vehicles too. Too many Kiwis were going off to New Zealand; not enough were coming back. The 6th RMT was going to be wiped out, turned into reinforcements, and scattered. Everyone felt rotten about this. The 4th RMT's war diary obituary read: 'General regret expressed at cessation of long and happy association with sister coy.' Then on top of everything, as the bell began to toll, a package sped through to 6 RMT from Headquarters NZASC. A reprieve? No. A training directive pamphlet with special reference to salutings on the march and at the halt.

Not enough furniture and no building big enough prevented a company Last Supper. Platoons held dinners of their own in a hall near

Fabriano. The 2nd Ammunition Company did its best to send a small orchestra to each dinner. The Field Bakery supplied extra pastry. The Supply Company gave extra rations. The dinners were held by 1 Platoon on 3 November, 2 Platoon on 30 October, 3 Platoon on 31 October, 4 Platoon on 1 November, by Headquarters and Workshops on 2 November.

The last MT stores and spare parts were handed over to RVP (Returned Vehicle Park) at **Iesi**. The accumulated odds and ends of three years went on the black market. Italians with great wads of lire clustered about in the mud, and millions of lire must have changed hands. The company's maps and 'Slidex' went back to Headquarters NZASC. The new Dodges were exchanged among other New Zealand units for dead-beats, ancients, and crocks. Unit cricket and baseball gear was presented to 6 Infantry Brigade. The rain belted down, and snuffling, hawking, coughing queues clogged the RAP. Then, for good measure, injections for everyone. Brigadier Crump addressed the last company parade at 10 a.m. on 1 November. The complete file (an impressive growth) of the driver who escaped from close arrest, leapt over a cliff, landed in hospital and, after a month's treatment, was strong enough to escape again from the grim escort returning him to 6 RMT—the file of this Houdini who was still at large was handed over to Headquarters NZASC. The regimental funds accounts closed at £160 12s 7d, 'to remain for use in future years for possible production of a Unit History'.

¹¹ Officers gathered for a final dinner on 4 November. Heavy rain submerged the area.

On 5 November the mongrel 6 RMT fleet, a travesty of what it had been, handed itself over to the RASC knackers at **Ancona**. Packed into Petrol Company vehicles was 6 RMT's last spark of life, bound for the bullring, bound for one-stop-two, guards, pickets, 'This is the Bren Gun', and saluting. The 344 men, drivers no longer but only huddling passengers, resigned themselves to the long, practically non-stop trip back to New Zealand Advanced Base at **Bari**, none fortunately aware of the final humiliation at Base: nobody ready for them, nobody giving a damn, everyone asleep, and the only 'accommodation' a hopelessly small

number of partly erected tents in a wasteland hideous beneath a freezing moon. That's how 6 RMT died.

¹ 4 RMT: 1 Pl, 28 Bn; 2 Pl, 23 Bn; 3 Pl, 21 Bn. 6 RMT: 1 Pl, 25 Bn; 3 Pl, 26 Bn; 4 Pl, 24 Bn.

Towards the end of July some drivers managed to catch a glimpse of King George VI as he drove past from a visit to the front.

² While poking around the Italian dump at **Mersa Matruh** after **El Alamein** drivers had been surprised at the tons of canned tomato soups, tomato sauces, and so on. They wondered where in **Italy** so many tomatoes could be grown. Now they knew.

³ The *NZEF Times* also printed in its issue of 11 Sep an article describing the Division's move from the **Siena** area to **Iesi**.

Incidentally, other service newspapers in **Italy** were *Union Jack*, *Eighth Army News*, *Crusader*, *Parade*, *Maple Leaf*, *Springbok*, *Gen*, *World Press Review*, *Tank*, *Stars and Stripes*, *APW* (Polish), *Sable* (South African), *Orzel Bialy* (English and Polish versions), *Ariel*, and *Cue*.

⁴ **Maj-Gen C. E. Weir** commanded 2 NZ Div from 4 Sep to 14 Oct 1944 while **Lt-Gen Freyberg**, injured in a plane crash near **Iesi** on 3 Sep, was in hospital.

⁵ 4 RMT: 1 Pl, 28 Bn; 3 Pl, 21 Bn; 4 Pl, 23 Bn. 6 RMT: 1 Pl, 25 Bn; 3 Pl, 26 Bn; 4 Pl, 24 Bn. 2 Pl of each company went to 1 and 2 Amn Companies.

⁶ 2 Lt J. R. Grimshaw; **Auckland**; born England, 2 Aug 1909; farmer.

⁷ **Sgt J. Hope**; **Auckland**; born Matamata, 17 Nov 1915; dairy farmer; wounded 13 Sep 1944.

⁸ Dvr S. A. MacDonald; **Auckland**; born **Hamilton**, 7 Jan 1910; lorry driver; wounded 13 Sep 1944.

⁹ 2 Lt W. D. Kenny; Mosman, **New South Wales**; born **Ireland**, 2 Aug 1920; warehouse clerk; wounded 30 Sep 1944.

¹⁰ On 25 Sep men of 3 Pl 4 RMT spent a little time tending the graves of Tprs D. Baillie and D. B. L. Bowker, of 18 Armd Regt, who were killed on 15 Sep. Tpr Bowker was a brother of Capt S. B. L. Bowker, 4 RMT's new MO.

The following day (26 Sep) Dvr Trenwith, of 6 RMT, wrote in his diary: 'Many dead animals about, three cows and a poor donkey wounded. The latter came over to us for company. Dead Germans in the ditch, and a dead Italian farmer sitting on the stairs of his house.'

¹¹ Driver Trenwith notes on 4 Nov: 'Re. Unit History. First, Regt. Funds pay for it. Cancelled. We pay for it. Paid it, too. That's cancelled. Money refunded, as Regt. Funds have now enough to pay for it. That cancelled. Through an error, vegetables for Platoon dinners were paid from Regt. Funds instead of Canteen Funds. So Regt. Funds now haven't enough to pay for it. So we again paid for it. Cancelled. Naafi Rebate into Regt. Funds enables it to cover costs of books, so again we'll get our money back.'

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

CHAPTER 20 – INTO 1945

CHAPTER 20

Into 1945

ONE down—and one to go. How long, oh Lord, how long? Out and away again at the end of November, away from **Fabriano**, where the anti-freeze stuff came out with the first snow (early snow, an inch thick, on 10 November), away and out and along the old familiar road again, Route 16: **Senigallia, Pesaro, Cattolica, Riccione, Rimini**, where Route 9, cutting inland away from the Adriatic, brought them to new ground past the Savio River, and to **Forli**,¹ the town Mussolini² (born nearby) had made such a fuss of. The RMT's new base was by the railway station, where Headquarters and Workshops settled into buildings. Every decent building in the town was taken over by soldiers. It was a khaki town with scarcely a shred of civilians left.

December was devoted almost entirely to troop-carrying, taking battalions of 5 and 6 Brigades over short distances to and from forward areas, with **Forli** as a base. The company's monthly mileage slumped to 34,000. Chains were used extensively over soft or slippery surfaces. Camping in buildings in varying states of repair made winter conditions much more bearable, and Christmas, begun with a combined NZASC carol service conducted by Padre Holland³ in the Esperia Theatre, was considered 'the best yet'. Workshops' messroom, a blaze of coloured decorations and Chinese lanterns, had been transformed by Drivers **Fordyce**⁴ and **Neil**,⁵ the company painters; beer was backed up by plenty of vermouth, marsala, and other old friends; the cooks did a great job (turkey, pork, roasted and boiled potatoes, green peas, cauliflower and white sauce, fruit salad, trifle and cream); and three typical judgments afterwards were: 'Excellent', 'Best Xmas for years', 'There were some stinking heads next day'. More than one 'stinking head' could be traced to the standby store of the dread 'purple death', the *vino nero*, the heavy, rich, warm wine of the Italian peasants, harmless in moderation but a menace to foreign soldiers swigging it like beer.

A fortnight before Christmas NZASC set up and ran a sort of

commando freight service. This was the celebrated jeep train, the toughest of the lot, including the jeep train on the 'Terelle Terror Ride' back in the post- **Cassino** weeks. RMT contributed a corporal, a driver mechanic, and five drivers. ⁶ The jeep train lumped supplies over tracks to areas too tough for ordinary transport. Night after night, out in the cold, in the mist, in the rain, always mortared and shelled, sometimes taking short cuts and risking being blown up on mines, these drivers certainly earned their rum ration. It could take up to twelve hours to drive by jeep train track the few miles between **Forli** and the front, slithering over the raw track and grinding up the punishing grade just after the **Brickworks Bridge**. In one convoy of 26 jeeps, two crashed over a bank, six trailers had to be dumped, three jeeps burned out clutches, and heavy fire had men hopping like frogs into ditches; but 16 jeeps got through. Without the help of artificial moonlight, movement probably would have been impossible on the tortuous, treacherous tracks. One jeep train man, returning to New Zealand and to his service-car run over a modest hill with a wide bitumen road, was prodded in the ribs by an old lady on his first day out and told: 'Now *do* be careful, driver.'

January 1945: a particularly low mileage month (17,721 miles), with 4 RMT confined solely to occasional short infantry lifts from **Forli** to **Faenza** and back. Trains getting through to **Forli** this month minimised the use of motor transport for lines of communication work. Ski-ing and tobogganing parties opened up a playground about nine miles south-west of the company area. The weather stayed crisp and cold. Water lying in bomb craters in the company area was covered with ice two to three inches thick.

It was a weird sort of war that winter. Over the frozen snow crept white-hooded figures—patrols in snow capes—and tracks of men, tracks of dogs, led to and from wrecked casas and into dark clumps of saplings. And here, early in the night of 14 January, forward units (**21 Battalion**, then **26 Battalion**) heard distinct sounds of a train moving slowly in enemy territory just over the **Senio River**, which separated Eighth Army from the Germans. The mysterious sounds were reported regularly: the

slow puffing of a steam engine, and the definite click of wheels going over jointed tracks. Altogether 21, 22, 26, and 28 (Maori) Battalions, gunners, and members of **10 Indian Division** heard the strange sounds. In vain radar and aircraft attempted to spot the train—or evidence of a train. Railway tracks and bridges in enemy territory were smashed and considered useless for about ten miles around. Yet the noises of the ghost train continued to the end of January. At the end of the war General Polack, who commanded **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** opposing the New Zealanders, heightened the still unsolved mystery by declaring: ‘There was no train running in the vicinity of Castel Bolognese. No such sounds were heard by our forces.’ He could only suggest that the noises were made by long supply columns.

The 4th RMT's platoons lay idle for days. This helped Workshops complete a thorough check of all vehicles. One lorry (of No. 21 Section) had developed a bad knock. The engine had done the equivalent of 80,000 miles, a record for the company. Workshops decided to remove and inspect the motor, and reported: ‘After dropping the sump and removing the head, it was found that the metal in the rear main bearing had started to lift, but the crankshaft and cylinder bores, and also the piston rings, showed little signs of wear and were practically perfect. The engine showed no sign of using oil between changes. The only reason for replacing this motor was that parts for reconditioning were not available.’

Two lists now were very important. Driver **Newland**⁷ was the only RMT man on the list of 40 2 NZEF Rugby players chosen to tour **Britain** after the war. The other list had the 154 RMT names of ex- **Pacific** and 5th Reinforcement men due for furlough in the Tongariro draft. The air was tense, and a platoon clerk said: ‘I have only to step outside the orderly room with nothing more than a piece of toilet paper in my hand, and all the eligible boys bale out of their trucks, bags and all.’

The boys bailed out, bags and all, in earnest in the first week in February when three RMT convoys (114 trucks in all) under Captains Davis, Caie,⁸ and **Robertson**⁹ left for Base at **Bari** with furlough men

who had been given a rousing send-off. The run to **Bari** went like this: first day, **Senigallia**, 76 miles; second day, **Pescara**, 121 miles; third day, **Bari**, 269 miles. The convoys returned about a week later with reinforcements (90 for 4 RMT), ordnance stores, and **YMCA** stores from **Bari**. On their return drivers learned that Major Denis Duigan, who had served with **2 NZEF** in 1940, had given a further £1000 (making a total of £7500) to **2 NZEF** for welfare purposes. Sports trophies, grants to cut soldiers' expenses at forces' clubs, grants for wirelasses, and Christmas welfare at hospitals and casualty clearing stations were some of the ways the money went.

The next job, after a week with nothing doing, came at the end of February—just after Egypt declared war on **Germany**. One hundred and twenty three-tonners left for Ascoli, well south of **Ancona**, to uplift the Folgore Group, Italian troops 'proved loyal and battleworthy'. This unit (Folgore means 'thunderbolt') had fought against the New Zealanders at **Alamein**. Spending the night at **Senigallia**, drivers went on next day through Recanati, to rendezvous with the Italian soldiers at Ascoli. Before the chilly dawn of 27 February the loaded convoy was under way again. Troops and drivers passed the night at **Foligno**, the staging area for the Division's big move to the Adriatic in August. From here the drivers took the Italians into the Apennine ranges well west of **Forli**, where they were to take their place with 13 British Corps.

Then it was back to **Forli**, picking up the infantry, taking them to the Division's rest area (the same little places in the **Apennines** where the Division had rested so pleasantly in the last days of autumn), and joining Company Headquarters and Workshops in **Fabriano**. The rest of March passed in training—physical fitness, weapon training, vehicle maintenance, Rugby, hockey. **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** inspected the NZASC men, and this was followed by a march past during which **Major-General Kippenberger**, back on a visit to the Division after a year's absence, took the salute.

March was a month of peace and beauty. The weather was perfect. It

became, men remember, quite warm during the last ten days.

Good Friday: solemn processions of the Cross—solemn yet somehow unreal, unmoving to Antipodean eyes, whether of the faith or not. Easter Sunday: the great festival of Pasqua, and many a billeted Kiwi forced to cut short the festive feed. The great plates heaped with spaghetti and seasoned with the mysterious innards of poultry—the rare, very rare, meat, and salad with olive oil sauce—the many-tiered Easter cake containing 20 eggs (cost, ninepence an egg, that's what they had to save up for)—the very best wine, tucked away until now—ah, bolt it quickly or leave it untouched; clear out, remembering the doorway, the first blossom on the black bough, remembering forever this blossom and bough, and below in the doorway Momma's and Poppa's eyebrows raised, and tears from the kids and maybe from one or two women too....

To Ancona?

Ah, those roads to war! (wrote Geoffrey Cox ¹⁰ in *The Road to Trieste*). ¹¹ How clearly they are graven into the memories of every- one who rode on them, how much fuller of emotion they are now to hundreds of thousands of men than all your other publicised routes, your Orient expresses with their spies and mysterious businessmen, your Blue Trains speeding to the Riviera, your Union Pacific railways, your Mississippi steamboats. Who of the Desert Army is likely to forget the tarmac winding through the sandhills behind **Mena, past the pyramids, and out towards **Alexandria**, swinging left at the big notice ' **Western Desert**—Beware of Enemy air attack', and then along the ridge through **Alamein** to **Matruh**, and **Halfaya**? Who will forget Route 6, winding up from **Caserta**, with its squalid streets and dirty, shouting, ragged children, and its great palace which Emma and **Nelson** had known, until it crossed the **Volturno** where Garibaldi had fought, on towards the mountains of **Cassino**? Or Route 6 again, entering Rome, through its dusty outer streets, past white gaunt workers' flats? Or Route 2 below **Florence**, where the black fernleaves stencilled on white crosses by the roadside showed where our summer battles had gone. And now Route 16, following the line of the Adriatic Coast northwards, towards one more**

front. Here was **Pesaro**, with its outskirts levelled and blown, and the tangled minefields and wire and severed trees to mark the **Gothic Line**, rushed in an afternoon by the Canadians last summer; **Rimini**, with on its outskirts the cemetery of the **Greek Brigade**, and the luxury hotels along the coast battered and windowless; then the **Rubicon**, with half a dozen streams to make your choice from in arguments about where Caesar had crossed; then the plain suddenly opening out ahead, so that you knew Northern **Italy** for what it really was, another land from the south, a country as different from **Naples** and **Sicily** as England is from **France**....

Up that road again....

The attack burst like a thunderclap over the green countryside beyond the stopbanks. Through the quiet of early afternoon, which was made deeper by the occasional thump of mortar bombs, came a many-toned mounting drone. A galaxy of twinkling silver shapes resolved itself into hundreds of heavy bombers, Fortresses and Liberators, which swung in deliberately over their targets. Then a continued roll of sound filled the air as nearly 2000 tons of 20-pound fragmentation bombs methodically blanketed the enemy's back areas.

In these words a **2 NZEF** survey, *One More River*, describes the blasting of the **Senio River** defences on 9 April. The Division, just back with Eighth Army, was in the centre, with Indians to the right, Poles to the left of it. The description goes on:

Great sections of the terrain were blotted from view by whirling dust clouds, and the distant towers of **Lugo** disappeared for the day behind a yellow haze. The small bombs were designed to kill men, shatter vehicles, and cut communications without blowing the impassable craters that men of the Division remembered so well from a year ago. Here was greater air power than that which blitzed **Cassino** on 15 March 1944, and following the larger aircraft came the mediums and fighter-bombers, working in closer and closer to the front line.

Then came the guns—more than were at **Alamein**. The vines and ditches erupted with hundreds of dancing flashes, as 25-pounders, 4.5s, and 5.5s, and ungainly 7.2s opened their four-hour chorus. ¹² Four [New Zealand] battalions hit the **Senio** together; within a few minutes they were over both banks and playing havoc with the disorganised defences....

Meanwhile, the engineers were braving heavy fire to build the bridges. Men went down, and bridging trucks burned, but a Bailey was over by 2.45 a.m., and the tanks were moving. Two hours later there were three bridges, and others followed.

In the next week, crushing its way through bitterest opposition, the Division advanced 20 miles, clearing next the **Santerno River** and then the **Sillaro**. The Division's prisoners numbered half Eighth Army's total.

The patrolling 'cab rank' of fighter-bombers and the artillery gave enemy armour no rest. The speed and ferocity of the attack sent the enemy reeling and prevented an orderly withdrawal from the **Senio** to the **Santerno**, six miles further on. The latter's formidable defences were pierced on 11 April. Within two days the Division had broken through a belt of territory as strongly defended as any in **Europe**. Across the **Santerno—Massa Lombarda** was occupied well before dawn on Friday, 13 April—battalions fought on to win a bridgehead over the shallow **Sillaro River**, another six miles on. Enough ground had to be cleared for a Bailey bridge to go down and let the armour and lorries pass. At last light on 15 April the New Zealanders went forward again behind a pulverising barrage, and at 4 a.m. on 16 April a bridge was up and in use over the **Sillaro**. By sunset patrols reached **Medicina**, six miles on, to find the **Gurkhas** had taken the town, and that night (16-17 April) a rested 5 Brigade passed through 6 Brigade to push the enemy back two more miles. A fresh German division had been crippled in 36 hours' fighting.

Up with the three infantry brigades in this week of wrath were 22 lorries from 3 Platoon 4 RMT. These lorries were carrying bridging

material and assault boats, canvas-sided, wooden-bottomed boats, each with about four oars; they needed only a few props to become serviceable. These trucks followed the advancing infantry across the scorched banks of the **Senio** on 10 April, and drivers looked out on blackened and roasted and burnt things, and saw where the dragons had been. The big dragons, called Crocodiles (converted Churchill tanks), had hurled black and red billows of flaming fuel over 100 yards, and the smaller dragons (Bren carriers with fuel tanks behind), angrily breathing fire and destruction, had helped too. Pushing on, drivers and vehicles met with no casualties, but the condition of the roads made the going hard. The lorries continued in the advance next day and reached the neighbourhood of the **Santerno River** late at night. In the early hours of the following morning (a bird was heard at dawn singing very sweetly from the broken gun of a crumpled tank) the 22 lorries drove over the **Santerno**. Drivers made a sudden bolt for cover in a casa about 6 a.m. when a mortar 'stonk' lashed down. Fortunately there was no damage.

While this was going on the remaining 100-odd RMT trucks, at first still based at **Forli**, had plenty to do on the day of the attack (9 April). Nos. 1 and 4 Platoons, with the left-overs from 3 Platoon, were busy running up more ammunition, and 2 Platoon reported to Divisional Cavalry Battalion, and then to **22 Battalion**, for short troop-carrying moves on the south bank of the **Senio**. But the next two days, when no orders came through for the hundred lorries, were spent in vehicle maintenance. On 12 April a group of RMT lorries left **Forli** for the Divisional Cavalry Battalion. They were not wanted—the battalion rode forward on tanks. Before dawn next day 4 Platoon took **27 Battalion** north of the **Santerno** and returned early to **Forli**, and the following two days (14 and 15 April) platoons resumed ammunition-running, carrying some 30,000 25-pounder shells up to **Massa Lombarda**, where on 16 April the lorries picked up 21 and 23 Battalions and the Maoris and took them up to the freshly bridged **Sillaro River**. From there these battalions passed through 6 Brigade to resume the attack. The 4th RMT Company Headquarters and Workshops quit **Forli** for a new area by **Massa Lombarda** next day while platoons brought up more ammunition, and

three lorries (for a change) carted prisoners of war back to a cage at **Forli**.

After one night in **Massa Lombarda**, the company moved on over the **Sillaro River** to a new camp near **Sesto Imolese**, where one of the first jobs was burying German dead, two of whom were identifiable. The smell of death lay over the place, and in the ruins prowled the red-scarved Partisans, turning up now in steadily growing numbers, and Sten-gunning out justice or vengeance. (Why did such ferocious citizens make such meek soldiers?) The RMT platoons, 102 lorries strong, loaded ammunition at **Massa Lombarda** for ammunition points and gun positions—and also (though they didn't know it then) for the last set-piece attack, the last of the campaign, the last of **2 New Zealand Division's** war. This was to blast a way over the **Gaiana River**, eight miles on from the latest river to fall, the Sillaro. A few RMT lorries were still delivering ammunition when, at 9.30 p.m. on 18 April, a tremendous barrage broke and raged along the whole front. Drivers saw the night sky fade into a terrible, artificial dawn as monster flame-throwers with trunks of liquid fire searched out, tracked down, and burned up enemy strongpoints. Enemy guns and mortars switched to the river, hammering the engineers and the accompanying lorries, but the work went on and tanks crossed before dawn.

Sooner or later this hide-and-seeK business over the rivers had to end. The end was fast approaching now. The next obstacle, behind a mesh of canals, was the Idice River. Once this was cleared the whole of the Po valley lay naked and exposed. This did not take long. By the time the RMT had brought up 6 Brigade to relieve the **Gurkhas** and, next day (20 April), had brought up 18,000 rounds of 25-pounder shells from Santarcangelo, the river was crossed. Some of the previous day's passengers had seized a patch of the far bank while others had found an undefended ford.

The Idice had had it. So had Old Ted, ¹³ too—everywhere on the Italian front. No more niggling rivers now. The chase was on.

The weather, fine, bright and warm for the last eight days, now became cloudy and cool, with a few scattered showers. But it cleared up next day (22 April)—the fourth anniversary of 4 RMT's hara-kiri under the olive trees of **Atalandi**.¹⁴ The pursuit got under way to the sound of church bells over rich green countryside, and when night returned all of the RMT was over the Idice River: 1 Platoon with the Divisional Cavalry Battalion, 2 Platoon with **27 Battalion**, and 4 Platoon divided between 28 and 23 Battalions. Company Headquarters and Workshops, tottering over 15 traffic-jammed miles in six hours, drew into **Cazzano**, nine miles north-east of **Bologna**, as a few butterfly bombs fell ahead, and 2 Platoon, camping further on with **27 Battalion**, was strafed harmlessly in the night.

The bombs Company Headquarters heard exploding ahead in the darkness were bringing to 4 RMT its first death for 1945. Butterfly bombs, their brief, spiralling, unpredictable flight over, were landing among 1 Platoon with Divisional Cavalry Battalion. Lance-Sergeant Baker, seriously wounded, was carried to the Divisional Cavalry RAP, where he died without regaining consciousness. Four men were wounded, among them an RMT man, Sergeant **Ritchie**,¹⁵ who was slightly wounded in the arm and, after treatment, returned to duty.

The company's next death came within two days. By that time (24 April) the Division, passing through a wilderness of smashed and burnt guns, tanks, and vehicles, and clearing the wreck-strewn road leading through **Bondeno**, was piling up along the south bank of the great River Po. Further wreckage and ruin lay about here, and among the junk and equipment and litter and bomb craters **4 Parachute Division** had abandoned books of theirs telling of victories over the *Neuseelander* in the far-away days of **Crete**. The Germans had set free draught-horses which had hauled more and more supply and artillery wagons as the Allied air force ate into vehicles; and 'all troops,' wrote one Kiwi, 'seemed to be prancing round on horses left in the area by the wily Hun. Big healthy beasts they were.' The most enterprising of the horsemen sold their steeds to needy Italian farmers for a small consideration—£20

to £30 was the on-the-spot valuation.

About dinner time two **21 Battalion** men crossed the big river—over 300 yards wide—in an assault boat, for the Allied air force had left not a single bridge standing. Germans saw the men, but did not fire. Other parties followed, and still no fire. Then, ironically, with the enemy sitting mum, Thunderbolts swept down to strafe and harry the area, for apparently the advance had outrun air intelligence. The only New Zealand casualty for the day was an RMT man, Driver Newland (the company's outstanding footballer), of 3 Platoon, who was killed when a Thunderbolt shot up his lorry carrying assault boats. The other man in the lorry, Corporal Sherson, ¹⁶ while dragging out Newland, received burns on his face and hands as the lorry, a complete loss, went up in flames.

All through Anzac Day armoured and tracked amphibious troop-carriers called Fantails (Heaven knows why) kept appearing, loading up with riflemen, waddling down to the water, and wallowing across. In a matter of hours the New Zealand engineers, shirtless and brown, had thrust a strong pontoon bridge over the river, while downstream a Bailey raft (a 50-foot piece of a Bailey bridge fixed to motor-powered pontoons) chugged over the 300 yards of water, carrying bulldozers, armour and guns. Beyond, the battalions kept on going, and as the Bailey raft crossed again and again the armour with the riflemen grew in strength. The RMT did not go across yet. All company transport (except the 22 lorries carting bridging material for the brigades) left their battalions. The 98 three-tonners reported to an ammunition point, about 15 miles south of **Bondeno**, and returned with nearly 20,000 25-pounder shells, which they dumped below **Bondeno**. Company Headquarters and Workshops were now in this neighbourhood. The ammunition unloaded, 30 lorries went away back to **Forli** to pick up 504 reinforcements.

The main body of the Division had crossed the Po on 26 April. RMT lorries began to make their way across the slender pontoon bridge, some bringing over ammunition; 2 Platoon took the **Maori Battalion** across before breakfast, a slow, four-hour job. The few clumps of resistance in

the eleven-mile stretch to the **Adige River** were overcome swiftly, and by 3 p.m. on 27 April another pontoon bridge, solid enough for three-tonners, was over this river. The RMT sat on the stopbank and watched the nearest approach to a movie battle. First the tanks rolled up tracks bulldozed to the top. Then in line, with everything blazing, they rolled along the top of the stopbank. Under cover of their fire the infantry crossed.

Round here was the town of **Badia**, and in **Badia** was a sugar factory, no less. This was a real windfall in anybody's war. News of the precious stuff spread far and wide by bush telegraph along the Kiwis' diamond trail. All vehicles that could be spared (and some that could not) took the road to **Badia**. It resembled a gold-rush. Trucks, jeeps, three-tonners, with privates, corporals, captains, and colonels (so they say), collected sugar by the ton. Some of it appeared again on the black market in **Trieste**.

The shades of the **Alamein** breakthrough and pursuit were returning now.

Next morning the whips were cracking. The race to **Venice** began. Behind the British **12 Lancers** came 9 New Zealand Brigade, with Divisional Cavalry Battalion leading, **27 Battalion** next, then **22 Battalion**. Thirty-two RMT lorries, well stocked with spare petrol and rations, were with the brigade, ten of them with Divisional Cavalry Battalion, fifteen with **27 Battalion**, and seven with **22 Battalion**. Many of the infantry were now travelling on battalion transport and on attached tracked vehicles. Other RMT lorries went to 21 and 23 Battalions, due to follow up soon, and a dozen three-tonners were with the Supply Column, moving rations. Up secondary roads they advanced, the long columns pouring on with the exaltation of the old days in **Africa**, and by settlements, villages, and along roadsides Partisans and civilians cheered, wept, clapped, cried 'Chow!' (*ciao*, meaning good luck, Godspeed), waved red flags, white flags, pink flags, streamers and toilet paper, raced forward with gifts, wine, daisies and lilac.

As the shadows crept out and thickened they went on to **Este**, through **Monselice** and then, the secondary roads done with at last, on to the perfect national highway, Route 16, and into a riotous welcome in Partisan-liberated **Padua** by midnight. ¹⁷ They had advanced 30 miles almost unopposed—almost. Just north of **Monselice** in the evening one burst of resistance halted the Divisional Cavalry Battalion. This brought RMT's last death in action. Driver **Gray**, ¹⁸ of 4 Platoon, received a severe head wound and died soon after in a dressing station.

Next day another bite forward took the New Zealanders 50 miles on to the Piave River. Among RMT drivers 1 Platoon men with **27 Battalion** had the liveliest time, frequently halting while mopping-up parties went to work. Apart from skirmishes, the drive was one long triumphal procession. **Mestre**, the industrial suburb on the mainland opposite **Venice**, went mad with joy, particularly the slim, brown-faced girls, blue-eyed, radiant in their beauty. This day, 29 April, a flying column including (to its lasting glory) B Company of **22 Battalion** entered **Venice**, seized the best hotel, Danieli's, for a New Zealand Forces Club, and held the gilded salons against all comers. A Kiwi has on record that it was quite impossible to look like a liberator in a gondola.

So April came to an end with quite a few RMT men on the loose in **Venice** of the domes and brown roofs, the vast blue sky, and the pigeons in Saint Mark's square. Others were still away with the lorries, taking riflemen to various briefly troublesome areas, and returning to the Piave River by midnight.

*Il Piave mormorava calmo e placido al passaggio Dei primi fanti
il 24 Maggio ...*

‘The Piave was murmuring calmly and placidly at the crossing of the first soldiers on the 24th of May....’ They sang this at the end of the First World War, and they sang it again to the *Neo Zelandesi*, who remembered the song and took it away with them.

By roadsides transport was packed nose-to-tail, and great herds of

prisoners were being shepherded back, some dramatically guarded by *Partigiani*, decorated with hand grenades and armoury of all descriptions and dressed to match: some in semi-military clothes, others in suits or shirts and slacks. These Partisans, who had liberated in advance at least nine important towns along the New Zealand trail, helped our advance a great deal, and further assisted by guarding the Division's prisoners, which in the end numbered about 50,000. This was indeed the cavalcade of infantry, guns, and armour which the New Zealanders (and Eighth Army, too) had dreamt about eight months before, but which had come unstuck past **Rimini** in the oozing ground of the lower Po valley.

By midnight 17 of 4 Platoon's lorries were over on the other side of the **Piave**, ferried across shortly before the river was bridged. Four hours later 16 of 1 Platoon's lorries, with **27 Battalion** on board, had just moved over the pontoon bridge when an uproar broke out across the water. A German force, completely catching everyone by surprise, charged into some engineers, set briskly to work, killed eight and wounded 22, and made off with 17 vehicles. The raiders enjoyed six hours at large before tanks rounded them up.

On 1 May the Division was heading north and east, along tree-lined Route 14 at the northernmost tip of the Adriatic Sea; Route 14, the last of all the roads along which the New Zealanders would advance in **Italy**.

It was the last time the Division would pass forward like this to battle (wrote Geoffrey Cox). The General must have thought this too, for he remained there for several minutes, his red cap-band towering above the villagers, and watched his force go by. First the tanks passed, starting up with a grinding roar, and then thundering on at what seemed breakneck speed. Their crews in their black berets stood in the turrets waving to the crowds, and their commanders, earphones clamped on their heads, gathered in the bunches of flowers which were thrown to them. Then the lines of Bren carriers, tossing as if in a rough sea until they got up speed, each with its Italian flag, the gift of some village on our way, and each with its smiling troops. Then the three-tonners, with

troops on the top of the cab and the backs jammed with troops sitting among their gear, the lean, smiling, unbluffed New Zealand infantry, enjoying it all but deluded by none of it, bedecked with flowers but with their rifles and Tommy-guns ready for what they knew still lay ahead. They waved and shouted back to the excited Italians, but their faces showed that they knew the job was not yet over.

Onward. Onward in triumph to the end. This one clear aim, this tremendous unity, this comradeship—this they would remember at odd times: before the grill of the bank, the time-clock, the pannikin boss, the howl of the factory hooter, the day by day plodding behind sheep or cows. This memory would return, whispering now and then through all the remaining years, and they would wonder, when is a man really free?

Beneath the burdened three-tonners the tires sang of victory and of all the other roads—early desert and the toppling Tummars—the millrace of **Thermopylae**—the thirsty trudge across the backbone of **Crete** to **Sfakia's** beaches—the inland sweep to **Tobruk** when the horizon crawled with New Zealand vehicles—the caravan trail to **Syria** and the urgent return while Eighth Army reeled back to **Alamein** under a merciless summer sun—the great advance and the dusty ‘left hooks’ which brought the **Afrika Korps** to its knees and to its lonely death—then into **Europe** again, to hold and to conquer, to the snowy **Sangro**, to the smoke-grimed rubble of **Cassino**—then the Adriatic's deadly vineyards once more. And so to the last road of all, the MPs nailing up their final fernleaf signs along this superb Route 14 leading towards the **Balkans**, where the turbaned invaders from the East had seeped and ebbed long ago; Route 14 leading through Partisan-held villages as the barriers of logs and earth tumbled and the liberated crowded the streets, waved from houses, wrenched at rejoicing church bells. On for 60 miles, on over the bridges crossing the Tagliamento and **Isonzo** rivers, on to the threshold of **Yugoslavia** beyond **Monfalcone** port, where the rainclouds hung low over the grey waters of the Gulf of Panzano in the evening. Here 23 RMT lorries drew up with their riflemen, while other lorries camped 20 miles back at **San Giorgio**.

Ten of 4 Platoon lorries with Divisional Cavalry riflemen and seven more with **22 Battalion** entered **Trieste** by noon on 2 May when, acting on radio orders from the Fatherland, the remnants of **Germany's** land, sea, and air forces surrendered unconditionally.

The war was over. But tension stayed in the streets of **Trieste**. No longer church bells rang, no flowers fell. In empty streets grim-faced, heavily armed squads of the Yugoslav Army patrolled zealously, jealously. From their caps the Red Star looked down. In a day the RMT had driven out of the war into the armed peace.

¹ 4 RMT's 130 three-tonners were divided between 5 and 6 Bdes: 1 Pl to Div Cav Bn, 4 Pl to 24 Bn, 2 Pl to 22 Bn, 3 Pl to 21 Bn. Then, while 1 and 4 Pls lifted POL from Chiaravalle to **Rimini**, the others helped further infantry moves up to **Forli**.

² Visiting 1 Battalion *1 Bersaglieri Regiment* early in 1945 the Duce said: 'What could be worse than to have trampling on our soil this scum of the earth—Negroes, Jews, Indians, New Zealanders....' He could have gone much further. The full list of nationalities serving in the Allied Armies in **Italy** was: American (including a Negro division and a Japanese-American unit), French (including Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, and Senegalese), Polish, Gurkha, Belgian, Greek, Brazilian, Syro-Lebanese, Jewish, Yugoslav, British, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, **Newfoundland**, Indian, Ceylonese, Basuto, Swazi, Bechuana, Seychellois, Mauritian, Rodriguez Islanders, Caribbean, Cypriot. Co-belligerent: Italian.

³ Rev J. T. Holland; **Christchurch**; born Newcastle-on-Tyne, 31 Jan 1912; Church of England minister; Bishop of Waikato.

⁴ L-Cpl J. J. Fordyce; **Wellington**; born **Auckland**, 30 Apr 1922; spray painter.

⁵ Dvr K. A. Neil; **Lower Hutt**; born Feilding, 11 Nov 1917; motor painter.

⁶ **The first shift: Cpl R. G. Hambling, Dvrs D. A. Curtin, H. Forman, A. Stewart, M. A. Boyle, H. F. Dunne, W. Reid; second shift: Cpl F. J. Small, Dvrs Boyle, T. Johns, C. M. Austin, I. H. Coleman, D. H. Tarrant, R. A. Wallis.**

⁷ **Dvr G. K. Newland; born NZ 1 Feb 1915; sheepfarmer; killed in action 24 Apr 1945.**

⁸ **Capt I. F. Caie; Gisborne; born Scotland, 9 Aug 1918; car wrecker.**

⁹ **Capt R. J. Robertson, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 19 Oct 1909; salesman; actg OC 4 RMT Coy 24 Mar-30 May 1945.**

¹⁰ **Maj G. S. Cox, MBE, m.i.d.; London; born Palmerston North, 7 Apr 1910; journalist; Chargé d'Affairs, NZ Legation, Washington, 1942-44; GSO 2 (Int) 2 NZ Div 1944-45.**

¹¹ ***The Road to Trieste* was published in 1947 by William Heinemann Ltd.**

¹² **4 RMT's contribution was 113,000 shells (each lorry carried about 200 25-lb. shells). From 2 to 8 April the RMT (after delivering 28, 24, 21, and 23 Bns to the Granarola area), based again at Forli, carried ammunition from Cesena to ammunition points and gun positions of 4, 5, and 6 Fd Regts. A quarter of a million shells were available for the first attack.**

¹³ **Short for *Tedesco* (plural, *Tedeschi*), an Italian corruption of *der Deutsche*.**

¹⁴ **See page 69**

¹⁵ **Sgt A. K. Ritchie; Turua, Hauraki Plains; born Gore, 27 Jul**

1920; driver; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

¹⁶ 2 Lt H. R. Sherson, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 28 Jul 1908; clerk; wounded 24 Apr 1945.

¹⁷ At Battaglia (a few miles south of **Padua**) Lt Robertson received a note 'To my N.Z. Friends', the writer (Pte Gordon **Gilmore**, of 26 Bn, captured at **Sidi Rezegh** in 1941) saying he had been living with civilians since **Italy's** surrender. The address was Grottarole village, about five miles into the hills. Dubious, Robertson sought reinforcement, date of sailing, name of ship, place of capture. (**Gilmore** still has this note, folded and worn.) A civilian returned with satisfactory answers and Robertson, with **Lt F. Crothers** and two drivers, went to the address. 'Village dignitaries and hundreds of peasants waved flags and banners at our approach. After being toasted in champagne, we were taken to our PW. Our comrade was standing in a doorway, very pale and stooped, with long hair like the locals—in fact very difficult to distinguish from them. Fearing capture, he hadn't gone out much lately.' **Gilmore** was 'so happy at being released that I forgot about a big fiesta Professor Beppe Benaccio, the local Partisan leader, was giving for me, and cleared off with the RMT.'

¹⁸ **Dvr J. N. Gray**; born Taumarunui, 10 Apr 1920; farmhand; died of wounds 28 Apr 1945.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

POSTSCRIPT

POSTSCRIPT

May: Company Headquarters moved to **Villa Vicentina**, on the western bank of the Isonzo River and stayed there. Twenty lorries stayed attached to each infantry brigade during the month for various tasks. Lorries moved prisoners of war to **Padua**; at the end of May a big RMT convoy went via **Florence**, Rome, **Naples**, to NZ Advanced Base, **Bari**, with furlough men of the Hawea leave scheme.

June: Three-tonners from the brigades returned to the company for transport details which took them over 25,000 miles altogether: carrying petrol, oil, lubricants, and supplies (including AMG goods) from **Trieste** docks; collecting piles of weapons from **Trieste**; taking a few men on leave through to **Klagenfurt** (about 80 miles beyond **Trieste**), in **Austria**, and others to a trotting meeting and the divisional sports in **Trieste**. The most unusual job of the month: five trucks bore goats from **Trieste** to **Monfalcone**.

July: The company met up happily again with the Americans, and helped **34 US Division** (at a station near **Udine**) on its way to Tarvisio on the Austrian border. With 67 other NZASC trucks, they moved in four days 8175 Americans and 40 railway wagon loads of equipment. Ninety-six three-tonners took the Garibaldi Brigade, 2700 strong, from Poverio to Torre di Zuino; salvage was carted to **Mestre**; on 21 July the Division began its southward journey back to **Lake Trasimene** again, via **Mestre**, **Bologna**, **Fabriano**, **Foligno** and **Perugia**. One unusual job: 20 three-tonners delivered newsprint rolls from **Leghorn** to **Trieste**.

August: The company moved a few miles to a new area at La Torrecella. RMT convoys took 5, 6, and 9 Brigade men to the divisional rest area at **Fano**. Leave parties were driven to Rome, **Florence**, and

Venice. On 26 August a thanksgiving service celebrated VJ Day (15 August).

September: Occasional transport details ended with 4 RMT preparing to carry New Zealanders on a divisional leave scheme to **Britain** across **France** to Calais. Drivers, helped by Workshops, began fitting up extra seats for their passengers.

October: The company left **Perugia** area on 4 October for a temporary headquarters at Forte dei Marmi, on the coast below La Spezia. Then, in a final spectacular gesture, the RMT, each platoon with its special area, spread in a transport chain from **Italy** across **France** to Calais: 4 Platoon based at Forte dei Marmi, 3 Platoon at Aix, 2 Platoon at Dijon, and 1 Platoon at Soissons. Each platoon was divided into three flights working their own stretches (140–210 miles) along this 970-mile route: Forte dei Marmi-San Remo-Aix-St. Rambert-Dijon-Soissons-Calais. On 10 October the first leave party, 105 men, left Forte dei Marmi; other parties followed at daily intervals.

November: The RMT service kept on until 16 November. Then, with winter setting in, leave parties went by train. RMT finished its last task without a single accident, and assembled in **Florence** for the end. Load-carriers were stripped of all superfluous gear, cleaned, and serviced. The company disbanded during the week 24–30 November. Vehicles were evacuated to the NZASC group (part of J Force) due for occupation duties in **Japan**, and to the New Zealand Vehicle and Stores Depot at **Assisi**. Drivers marched out to remaining NZASC units. On 30 November the canteen accounts of all the platoons were balanced and closed—the coldly official, rubber-stamp end of every unit.

Although mileage records are far from complete, 4 RMT's four operating platoons (not including Workshops and Headquarters) travelled some eight million miles during the four years from September 1941 to October 1945. In one year (1944) of 6 RMT's three-year existence, its operating platoons are known to have passed the two-million mark. Altogether the two companies probably travelled on transport and troop-

carrying duties at least twelve to thirteen million miles—say 500 times round the world.

Driver Trenwith ended his diary (he grew to hate it over the years) like this: ‘Up on deck at 7 a.m. Could see land away ahead—New Zealand. Yet there was no joy, no excitement, nothing but a passive acceptance that Home was in sight.... The chaps went off fairly quickly. Felt no joy, no elation at being there. We've been just a little too long away.’

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

APPENDIX – FIRST NEW ZEALAND ESCAPE FROM GERMANY

Appendix

First New Zealand Escape from Germany

THE first New Zealander to escape from Germany to Britain in the Second World War was a 4 RMT sergeant, Bruce Crowley, captured in Greece. The achievement won him the DCM. Before this Crowley had made three escapes: one of nearly five months in Greece, one of ten days in Greece, and one of ten days from Germany to Czechoslovakia. In Stalag VIIIB, Lamsdorf, he compared notes with another determined escaper, an Englishman, Gunner Edgar Harrison, a prisoner since Dunkirk. Plans, made in strict secrecy, were revealed only to the camp's escape committee. The committee gave them papers which were of little help. Before leaving Stalag VIIIB Crowley passed on his plans and intended escape route to two RMT comrades, Drivers E. R. Silverwood and E. J. A. Phelan, who had made several escapes since their capture in Crete.

Intending to escape north to the Baltic, Crowley and Harrison got a job with a working party, Number E243 at the Breslau gasworks. This job away from Lamsdorf took them a good many miles on towards the Baltic. At Breslau gasworks the two collected maps, civilian clothes, a railway timetable and chocolate. After several weeks of final preparation (altogether the plan took five months to complete), the two hid civilian clothes, chocolate, and scraps of food in an attaché case. The case and a small ladder were concealed behind the gasworks' purifiers.

At 2.45 in the afternoon of 23 September 1943 the sergeant scrambled over the gasworks' wall, closely followed by the gunner. They timed their escape to catch a tram at the terminus about 400 yards past the gasworks' entrance, and to connect with the 3.40 train from the

main Breslau railway station. Harrison missed the tram by a few yards; Crowley did not see him again until they met in Stettin. The New Zealander bought a third-class ticket for Glogau at the ticket office, passed through the turnstile guarded by an armed German soldier, and reached the platform just before the crowded train began to move off. Vainly trying to find a seat, Crowley noticed he was being followed by a German soldier. The German caught up with him, touched him on the arm, and pointed out a vacant seat in one of the carriages.

‘I thanked him,’ Crowley continues, ‘saying “Heil Hitler” (the recognised greeting in German), and scrambled in. There were several people in the carriage, but nobody spoke on the journey.’

From Glogau Crowley, carefully following the timetable, changed trains. This was essential because nobody could travel beyond 16 kilometres without a railway pass which had to be shown when a ticket was bought. ‘During one of the journeys in a crowded carriage a German woman asked me to help her with her luggage. I replied “*Freilich*” (with pleasure). When the luggage had been placed on the station platform the woman thanked me, I replied “Heil Hitler”, and returned to the carriage much relieved.’

Crowley reached Stettin at 8.45 a.m. on 24 September, passed safely through the station turnstiles, and at the main entrance caught a tram to a suburb of Stettin called Gotslow, a village on the brink of the River Oder where several coaling ships usually loaded. ‘I inspected the ships from a distance, only to find that they were flying the German flag, so I went back to Stettin, wandered about the port inspecting ships from a distance, and found it quite impossible to get onto the wharf. In any case, no Swedish ships were there. The next step was to hang discreetly about the local Labour Office, and sure enough three Frenchmen in civilian clothes and black berets turned up. I took a chance, said “*Bon jour*”, and asked could they speak English? They couldn't, and seemed to be quite frightened. Doubts were allayed when I produced a letter addressed to me in camp, a stalag identity disc, and a photograph of myself in New Zealand uniform. They took me to the workmen's lager

where they lived. An English-speaking Frenchman told me they often worked on the Swedish ships, they could get me aboard, and they'd look after me until a Swedish ship turned up. No Germans ever visited their lager. I had a shave and a wash, and when I came back into the barrack room, Gunner Harrison was standing there.'

A Swedish ship, *SS Ludvig*, arrived in the port of Stettin on 27 September. The two escapers took the places of two Frenchmen in the gang detailed to load the ship in the evening. An air raid drove them into an underground shelter for half an hour.

The two Frenchmen whose places they had taken then came aboard, followed by two drunk Swedish seamen talking in broken English. 'We decided to trust them,' Crowley goes on. 'One of them took me to his cabin where I produced my photograph, letter and identity disc, and asked to be smuggled into Sweden. We were told they couldn't do this because the Germans searched the ship, but we could chance hiding away in the coal. Like the kind Frenchmen, they would not give us away.'

'When the hold was about three parts full we said goodbye to the Frenchmen and thanked them for their assistance. They wished us luck and commenced to fill the hold as soon as we had got in. They left a shovel with us so we could shovel ourselves out again. The hold was battened down with us in one corner of the hold with insufficient room to sit up, immediately under a ventilator. We laid doggo for two or three hours listening to tramping feet on the deck above.'

'The coal dust was very irritating and we had the greatest of difficulty to stop ourselves from coughing. A Swede afterwards told us that we had coughed while the Gestapo with their dogs were aboard the ship, and he had coughed himself and made a noise on the deck with his feet to distract their attention. Shortly afterwards there was silence, and we felt the tremor of the ship's engines and the gentle movement of the ship in motion. This was a great thrill. We clasped hands in silence, words were unnecessary. Late that night one of the seamen passed down

a thermos full of coffee, sandwiches and a note telling us of the latest B.B.C. broadcast (a British raid on **Hanover**) and advising us of the time we would be in Swedish waters. The following morning, about eleven o'clock, they called down the ventilator that we could make our presence known. We began to shout and bang on the deck with the shovel handle. One of the seamen reported to the Captain that there was a noise in the for'ard hold, whereupon the Captain ordered the hold to be unbattened. We crawled out with great difficulty and surrendered to the Captain. He was very stern at first and made sure that we were kept within sight of the bridge, one seaman being detailed to stay with us. We landed at Landskrona that day at 12.30, 29th September. The Captain had notified the police who were there to collect us. He wished us luck and we thanked him. In Landskrona we were kept in the prison for a couple of days until our identity had been established.

‘During our stay at the Swedish police station, the Danish vice-consul was particularly kind to us. Imagine our surprise when we heard his name: Mr. Arvid Leopold Friberg!’

Their identity established, the two, unescorted, went by train to **Stockholm** where the British colony (‘the Military Attaché, Colonel Sutton-Pratt, treated us like a delighted father’) feted them. A month later they were flown to **Britain**.

* * * * *

Back in Lamsdorf Camp **Padre J. Hiddlestone**, a New Zealand chaplain taken prisoner in **Crete**, received news from **Sweden** that **Crowley** had arrived. The padre told **Silverwood** who, with **Phelan** and a **Dunkirk**-captured Englishman, **Private Fred Simmonds**, began preparations. A few days before Christmas, disguised as foreign workers, they escaped from the compound for prisoners stationed and working at the cement plant in **Oppeln**. They safely boarded a crowded train at the local station. At **Breslau** **Simmonds**, speaking fluent German, bought tickets for **Berlin**. Their papers were checked carefully by the station police and then stamped, saving further explanations along the line. On

the way to **Berlin** the three women in their compartment started deploring the blitz on **Berlin**. One woman was particularly vehement. Her first boarding house somehow had been ruined in the First World War and now the **RAF** had obliterated her second. 'We sat tight and sweated it out,' said Silverwood.

The three had a good mental picture of **Berlin**, thanks to accounts from prisoners who had been at large, but they were not prepared for the enormous devastation, made even more confusing now that all street signs had been removed. They took the underground to another station and asked a minor official how to get to Stettin. He, very decently, bought the tickets for them. The Christmas spirit—and the Christmas crowds—were spreading.

'About halfway to Stettin,' Phelan recalls, 'the railway guard came through inspecting everyone's tickets and express travel warrants. He asked us why we were travelling, and we replied that we were on our way to an arms factory in Stettin: we'd been transferred from a similar factory in **Oppeln**. "Ah," he said, "The Fatherland has need of all good workers now. I hope you find this work to your liking."' "

At Stettin they dodged the station barrier and went out by an unguarded back entrance for employees: no German, apparently, would consider using an unauthorised exit. They found Stettin's wharves fenced and closely guarded, made for a Belgian labour camp, were refused shelter and, tired and depressed, 'walked the streets until we found a hotel sign and risked applying for a bed. The lady of the house said we could stay only one night, and collected our passports to enter full particulars in the house register. We agreed one night's rest was all we wanted: we had to report to the *Arbeit Offizier* (officer in charge of foreign workers) next morning. In the morning our papers were returned. The woman appeared more amiable, and remarked that since we were quiet lads we were welcome to stay a little longer if we wished.'

The hotel served no food, the three had no food coupons for café meals, but managed with 'wicked bowls of watery cabbage soup'

distributed at a welfare centre. Without interference, they independently searched the waterfront for signs of a Swedish boat or Swedish sailors.

Phelan found a sailors' brothel, confided to a Czech girl that he was an escaped prisoner of war, and convinced her when he identified the raucous 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' (and the swing band) playing on her gramophone. A rendezvous was arranged with a Swedish sailor.

That night, Christmas Eve, somebody knocked on the door of their hotel bedroom. As arranged, Simmonds opened the door while Phelan and Silverwood stood poised by the open window, ready for a sudden leap. The landlady entered with a tiny Christmas tree, three slices of Christmas cake, and three apples. She wished them a good *Weihnachten* (Merry Christmas). Leaving the hotel they found the Swede and went by tram to the waterfront—Silverwood still has the large black and white tram ticket. The Swede, knowing the ropes, got them past one remote and carelessly guarded entrance to the wharf. A long train was parked by the ship, *SS Brage*. Crawling from wagon to wagon, the three neared the gangway. The Swede coolly led the German soldier guarding the gangway off for a quick cup of coffee in the galley, and 'we up that gangway very smartly indeed'. They raced into concealing shadows in the little deck at the stern of the boat. Here came a bad fright when someone kicked a piece of coal across the steel deck. Phelan and Simmonds destroyed their papers on the spot. The guard appeared out of the galley, probed around, muttered something about 'bloody cats', and disappeared.

They made for the boiler room and hid under the boilers, an almost unbearable spot. The friendly Swede appeared saying the rope locker aft would be more comfortable. On the way to the locker Phelan blundered into the captain's cabin, saluted, and withdrew. The other two, following a little later, opened the wrong door and fell 14 feet into a coal bunker. Eventually they found their way to the rope locker. Phelan describes their cramped and bitterly cold refuge:

'It was a small cabin-like place partly filled with masses of ropes, netting, canvas and other odds and ends. This material we built into a

wall across the entrance in such a way that a casual sailor looking in would see nothing but the normal jumbled contents of the locker. For five days we lived in this locker, suffering a good deal from the cold, and not daring to sleep at night for fear a snore would inform the German picquet, who paced up and down just above our heads. Our Swedish friend continued to look after us [bringing ham sandwiches and beer, and using his only English phrase: "Take it easy."] and when the ship was due to sail we were provided with kerosene which was liberally sprinkled about. Our rope barrier was perfected and kerosened.

'These preparations proved most necessary, for the Germans searched the ships with Alsatian dogs before they sailed. We had an anxious moment as the guards and dogs looked into our locker, but they went away quite satisfied.'

Nearing Sweden (the RMT men would receive the MM after they had been flown to England), the stowaways were brought out, cleaned, spruced up and fed by the delighted sailors, who then suddenly realised that trouble might start if the three were not 'properly discovered'. Accordingly, Silverwood, Phelan and Simmonds were hustled down to the coal-bunkers, where they smothered themselves in coaldust. Reappearing with a flourish, the sailors escorted the grimy trio to the English-speaking captain.

'How many more down there?'

'No more, sir.'

'Hell! I could have taken a battalion!'

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

ROLL OF HONOUR

ROLL OF HONOUR

4 RMT Company

KILLED IN ACTION

Capt J. A. McAlpine	18 April 1941
2 Lt A. A. Gilmore	May 1941
2 Lt H. H. Gibbons	May 1941
2 Lt J. T. Wallace	24 December 1940
Sgt R. H. Delaney	24 April 1941
Sgt G. J. D. Mellsop	24 April 1941
L-Sgt M. C. Baker	23 April 1945
L-Cpl R. Newton	May 1941
Dvr M. Ashton	5 November 1942
Dvr J. S. Austin	24 April 1941
Dvr K. M. Baillie	22 July 1942
Dvr J. A. Boag	24 April 1941
Dvr A. R. Brown	27 May 1941
Dvr A. R. Cooke	May 1941
Dvr W. Hewlett	3 December 1941
Dvr F. N. L. Hook	24 April 1941
Dvr A. G. P. Kirkwood	27 November 1941
Dvr J. B. F. Lundon	25 May 1941
Dvr P. J. McGillicuddy	5 July 1942
Dvr R. Maudsley	May 1941
Dvr L. E. Maxfield	23 November 1941
Dvr J. K. Milne	21 May 1941
Dvr A. R. Moss	5 July 1942
Dvr G. K. Newland	24 April 1945
Dvr G. R. Osborn	13 September 1940
Dvr G. W. Patrick	24 April 1941
Dvr E. W. Reynolds	24 December 1940

Dvr H. L. Robinson 21 May 1941
Dvr T. A. Speed 25 May 1941
Dvr A. Sykes 4 March 1943
Dvr J. S. W. Thurlow 24 April 1941
Dvr S. H. J. Turnbull 26 April 1941

DIED OF WOUNDS

Cpl O. T. Pussell 25 December 1940
L-Cpl V. L. Norrish 24 December 1940
L-Cpl J. W. Kenning 26 May 1941
Dvr E. M. Allanson 24 April 1941
Dvr E. J. W. Forbes 22 April 1941
Dvr S. Glanville 23 May 1941
Dvr J. N. Gray 28 April 1945
Dvr A. B. Hurst 25 December 1940
Dvr G. H. Jensen 5 July 1942
Dvr S. B. McKay 10 July 1942
Dvr T. McLeod 7 July 1942
Dvr R. B. Peters 6 July 1942
Dvr D. C. Sawers 27 May 1941
Dvr L. W. Trott 30 May 1944

KILLED OR DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Cpl A. L. Hinds 14 March 1944
Cpl E. C. Jaspers 15 November 1941
Dvr J. T. Foster 15 May 1942
Dvr R. D. Hibberd 22 June 1943
Dvr R. G. King 3 March 1943
Dvr I. C. Osborne 31 March 1941
Dvr N. R. Reed 30 September 1944
Dvr W. P. Stephens 16 August 1943

KILLED OR DIED AS PRISONER OF WAR

Capt J. Veitch 3 June 1941
Cpl R. A. Smith 16 April 1942
Dvr R. J. Bowyer 26 September 1941
Dvr A. F. Browne 12 May 1944
Dvr E. H. A. Browne 30 May 1944
Dvr G. W. Corp 12 May 1944

Dvr S. G. Cunninghame 20 April 1942

Dvr C. Hargreaves 8 July 1943

ROLL OF HONOUR

Dvr A. Jackson 22 April 1944

Dvr J. J. McGill 10 August 1941

Dvr T. M. McIntyre 17 August 1942

Dvr A. F. Shalders 12 November 1941

Dvr F. G. Williamson 25 October 1943

6 RMT Company

KILLED IN ACTION

Dvr C. J. Anstiss 11 July 1942

Dvr A. F. Bushell 26 November 1941

Dvr J. A. Cartwright 20 July 1942

Dvr H. J. Coombe 22 December 1942

Dvr W. H. Dick 25 November 1941

Dvr F. W. Halliwell 15 July 1942

Dvr W. E. A. Inglis 27 June 1942

Dvr A. F. R. McLean 27 March 1943

Dvr R. A. Martin 16 July 1942

Dvr M. C. Seaman 6 July 1942

DIED OF WOUNDS

Dvr J. A. Jepsen 27 March 1943

Dvr R. J. Kenning 25 November 1941

KILLED OR DIED ON ACTIVE

SERVICE

Dvr A. Corby 16 January 1944

Dvr C. W. Green 20 August 1942

Dvr W. D. McCarthy 23 June 1942

Dvr R. C. Talbot 8 November 1941

KILLED OR DIED AS PRISONER OF

WAR

L-Cpl A. L. Milne 21 September 1942

Dvr A. P. Brown 29 December 1942

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

4 RMT COMPANY

4 RMT Company

KILLED IN ACTION

Capt J. A. McAlpine	18 April 1941
2 Lt A. A. Gilmore	May 1941
2 Lt H. H. Gibbons	May 1941
2 Lt J. T. Wallace	24 December 1940
Sgt R. H. Delaney	24 April 1941
Sgt G. J. D. Mellsop	24 April 1941
L-Sgt M. C. Baker	23 April 1945
L-Cpl R. Newton	May 1941
Dvr M. Ashton	5 November 1942
Dvr J. S. Austin	24 April 1941
Dvr K. M. Baillie	22 July 1942
Dvr J. A. Boag	24 April 1941
Dvr A. R. Brown	27 May 1941
Dvr A. R. Cooke	May 1941
Dvr W. Hewlett	3 December 1941
Dvr F. N. L. Hook	24 April 1941
Dvr A. G. P. Kirkwood	27 November 1941
Dvr J. B. F. Lundon	25 May 1941
Dvr P. J. McGillicuddy	5 July 1942
Dvr R. Maudsley	May 1941
Dvr L. E. Maxfield	23 November 1941
Dvr J. K. Milne	21 May 1941
Dvr A. R. Moss	5 July 1942
Dvr G. K. Newland	24 April 1945
Dvr G. R. Osborn	13 September 1940
Dvr G. W. Patrick	24 April 1941
Dvr E. W. Reynolds	24 December 1940
Dvr H. L. Robinson	21 May 1941
Dvr T. A. Speed	25 May 1941

Dvr A. Sykes 4 March 1943
Dvr J. S. W. Thurlow 24 April 1941
Dvr S. H. J. Turnbull 26 April 1941

DIED OF WOUNDS

Cpl O. T. Pussell 25 December 1940
L-Cpl V. L. Norrish 24 December 1940
L-Cpl J. W. Kenning 26 May 1941
Dvr E. M. Allanson 24 April 1941
Dvr E. J. W. Forbes 22 April 1941
Dvr S. Glanville 23 May 1941
Dvr J. N. Gray 28 April 1945
Dvr A. B. Hurst 25 December 1940
Dvr G. H. Jensen 5 July 1942
Dvr S. B. McKay 10 July 1942
Dvr T. McLeod 7 July 1942
Dvr R. B. Peters 6 July 1942
Dvr D. C. Sawers 27 May 1941
Dvr L. W. Trott 30 May 1944

KILLED OR DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Cpl A. L. Hinds 14 March 1944
Cpl E. C. Jaspers 15 November 1941
Dvr J. T. Foster 15 May 1942
Dvr R. D. Hibberd 22 June 1943
Dvr R. G. King 3 March 1943
Dvr I. C. Osborne 31 March 1941
Dvr N. R. Reed 30 September 1944
Dvr W. P. Stephens 16 August 1943

KILLED OR DIED AS PRISONER OF WAR

Capt J. Veitch 3 June 1941
Cpl R. A. Smith 16 April 1942
Dvr R. J. Bowyer 26 September 1941
Dvr A. F. Browne 12 May 1944
Dvr E. H. A. Browne 30 May 1944
Dvr G. W. Corp 12 May 1944
Dvr S. G. Cunninghame 20 April 1942
Dvr C. Hargreaves 8 July 1943

ROLL OF HONOUR

Dvr A. Jackson	22 April 1944
Dvr J. J. McGill	10 August 1941
Dvr T. M. McIntyre	17 August 1942
Dvr A. F. Shalders	12 November 1941
Dvr F. G. Williamson	25 October 1943

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

6 RMT COMPANY

6 RMT Company

KILLED IN ACTION

Dvr C. J. Anstiss 11 July 1942
Dvr A. F. Bushell 26 November 1941
Dvr J. A. Cartwright 20 July 1942
Dvr H. J. Coombe 22 December 1942
Dvr W. H. Dick 25 November 1941
Dvr F. W. Halliwell 15 July 1942
Dvr W. E. A. Inglis 27 June 1942
Dvr A. F. R. McLean 27 March 1943
Dvr R. A. Martin 16 July 1942
Dvr M. C. Seaman 6 July 1942

DIED OF WOUNDS

Dvr J. A. Jepsen 27 March 1943
Dvr R. J. Kenning 25 November 1941

KILLED OR DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Dvr A. Corby 16 January 1944
Dvr C. W. Green 20 August 1942
Dvr W. D. McCarthy 23 June 1942
Dvr R. C. Talbot 8 November 1941

KILLED OR DIED AS PRISONER OF WAR

L-Cpl A. L. Milne 21 September 1942
Dvr A. P. Brown 29 December 1942

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

4 RMT Company

<i>Campaign</i>	<i>Killed and Died of Wounds</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Prisoners of War</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	
Western Desert 1940-41	1	5		13			19
Greece	1	10	1	4	1	51	68
Crete	2	11		21	1	173	208
Libya 1941-42		3		8		18	29
Egypt 1942		8	1	24		4	37
Tripolitania and Tunisia		1	2	17			20
Italy		4		7			11
Died		8					8
	4	50	4	94	2	246	400

One officer and 21 other ranks who were wounded when taken prisoner have been included in the prisoners-of-war columns only. One officer and 12 other ranks died or were killed while prisoners of war; all except two of these had been captured in **Crete**.

6 RMT Company

<i>Campaign</i>	<i>Killed and Died of Wounds</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Prisoners of War</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	
Libya 1941		3		4		8	15
Egypt 1942		6	1	14		10	31
Tripolitania and Tunisia		3		8		2	13

Italy			5		5
Died	4				4
	16	1	31	20	68

One other rank who was wounded when taken prisoner has been included in the prisoners-of-war column only. Two other ranks who died of sickness while prisoners of war had been captured in Egypt in 1942.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

4 RMT COMPANY

4 RMT Company

<i>Campaign</i>	<i>Killed and Died of Wounds</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Prisoners of War</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	
Western Desert 1940-41	1	5		13			19
Greece	1	10	1	4	1	51	68
Crete	2	11		21	1	173	208
Libya 1941-42		3		8		18	29
Egypt 1942		8	1	24		4	37
Tripolitania and Tunisia		1	2	17			20
Italy		4		7			11
Died		8					8
	4	50	4	94	2	246	400

One officer and 21 other ranks who were wounded when taken prisoner have been included in the prisoners-of-war columns only. One officer and 12 other ranks died or were killed while prisoners of war; all except two of these had been captured in Crete.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

6 RMT COMPANY

6 RMT Company

<i>Campaign</i>	<i>Killed and Died of Wounds</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Prisoners of War</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	
	Libya 1941		3		4		
Egypt 1942		6	1	14		10	31
Tripolitania and Tunisia		3		8		2	13
Italy				5			5
Died		4					4
		16	1	31		20	68

One other rank who was wounded when taken prisoner has been included in the prisoners-of-war column only. Two other ranks who died of sickness while prisoners of war had been captured in Egypt in 1942.

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

HONOURS AND AWARDS

HONOURS AND AWARDS

4 RMT Company

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj D. F. Coleman

Maj G. H. Whyte

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj I. E. Stock

Capt J. A. McAlpine

Rev V. R. Jamieson (Chaplain attached)

MILITARY CROSS

Capt J. A. McAlpine, MBE

Lt F. H. Muller

Lt A. L. Lomas (NZMC attached)

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

Sgt B. J. Crowley

Sgt R. H. Thomson

Dvr J. A. Snell

MILITARY MEDAL

Sgt C. Mutch

Sgt P. G. Wilson

L- Sgt N. A. Pulley

L-Sgt B. W. Roberts

Cpl A. C. Barker

Cpl E. J. A. Phelan

Dvr J. P. Bruning

Dvr G. W. Corp

Dvr E. F. Foley

Dvr O. Martin

Dvr G. Richards

Dvr C. F. Robinson

Dvr E. R. Silverwood

Dvr A. H. Waddick

Dvr N. J. Prichard

(HQ NZASC attached)

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Cpl C. J. Boland

Cpl T. W. Gill

Dvr R. Cook

Dvr T. Hirst

6 RMT Company

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj G. G. Good

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Capt W. McM. Davis

MILITARY MEDAL

Cpl A. R. Hedley

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

4 RMT COMPANY

4 RMT Company

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj D. F. Coleman

Maj G. H. Whyte

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj I. E. Stock

Capt J. A. McAlpine

Rev V. R. Jamieson (Chaplain attached)

MILITARY CROSS

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L- Sgt N. A. Pulley

L-Sgt B. W. Roberts

Cpl A. C. Barker

Cpl E. J. A. Phelan

Dvr J. P. Bruning

Dvr G. W. Corp

Dvr E. F. Foley

Dvr O. Martin

Dvr G. Richards

Dvr C. F. Robinson

Dvr E. R. Silverwood

Dvr A. H. Waddick

Dvr N. J. Prichard

(HQ NZASC attached)

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Cpl C. J. Boland

Cpl T. W. Gill

Dvr R. Cook

Dvr T. Hirst

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

6 RMT COMPANY

6 RMT Company

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Maj G. G. Good

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Capt W. McM. Davis

MILITARY MEDAL

Cpl A. R. Hedley

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

COMMANDING OFFICERS

COMMANDING OFFICERS

4 RMT Company

Nov 1939–19 Jan 1941 Maj G. H. Whyte
19 Jan 1941–10 Feb 1941 Capt J. A. McAlpine
10 Feb 1941–26 Jun 1941 Maj B. A. N. Woods
26 Jun 1941–12 Sep 1943 Maj I. E. Stock
12 Sep 1943–20 Jul 1944 Maj D. F. Coleman
20 Jul 1944–28 Aug 1944 Maj A. H. Burt
28 Aug 1944–30 Oct 1944 Maj R. T. Brown
30 Oct 1944–24 Mar 1945 Maj R. O. Pearse
24 Mar 1945–30 May 1945 Capt R. J. Robertson
30 May 1945–30 Nov 1945 Maj R. K. Davis

6 RMT Company

14 Oct 1941–2 Feb 1942 Maj A. G. Hood
2 Feb 1942–11 Sep 1943 Maj G. G. Good
11 Sep 1943–17 Apr 1944 Maj J. J. Hunter
17 Apr 1944–30 Oct 1944 Maj R. O. Pearse
30 Oct 1944–6 Nov 1944 Maj R. T. Brown

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

4 RMT COMPANY

4 RMT Company

Nov 1939–19 Jan 1941 Maj G. H. Whyte
19 Jan 1941–10 Feb 1941 Capt J. A. McAlpine
10 Feb 1941–26 Jun 1941 Maj B. A. N. Woods
26 Jun 1941–12 Sep 1943 Maj I. E. Stock
12 Sep 1943–20 Jul 1944 Maj D. F. Coleman
20 Jul 1944–28 Aug 1944 Maj A. H. Burt
28 Aug 1944–30 Oct 1944 Maj R. T. Brown
30 Oct 1944–24 Mar 1945 Maj R. O. Pearse
24 Mar 1945–30 May 1945 Capt R. J. Robertson
30 May 1945–30 Nov 1945 Maj R. K. Davis

4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

6 RMT COMPANY

6 RMT Company

14 Oct 1941–2 Feb 1942 Maj A. G. Hood
2 Feb 1942–11 Sep 1943 Maj G. G. Good
11 Sep 1943–17 Apr 1944 Maj J. J. Hunter
17 Apr 1944–30 Oct 1944 Maj R. O. Pearse
30 Oct 1944–6 Nov 1944 Maj R. T. Brown

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4TH AND 6TH RESERVE MECHANICAL TRANSPORT COMPANIES

[BACKMATTER]

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