

TWENTY-SECOND TO NONE

The History of the 22nd (N.Z.) Battalion

As written by Terence Power Mclean

[**Editorial note:** In early 1946, “TP” or “Tired Terry” as he was affectionately known by the Battalion was commissioned by the War History Branch to write the official history of the 22nd Battalion. TP was the obvious choice, he was a journalist by trade and he had been the Battalion’s Intelligence Officer since joining the Battalion in 1943. He was well-known and well-liked by the veterans. Although his contract was for £500, writing the history was more a labour of love for TP. This did not pay the mortgage or feed his young family, so advancing his reputation as a sports journalist took priority. By about 1952 it became clear that the manuscript was no closer to publication, so the contract was terminated. Another author was contracted, this time for £800 to write the history. And so Jim Henderson’s version, so different in style from TP’s manuscript, was finally published in 1958, one of the last of the unit histories to appear in print.

TP’s manuscript was lost, but fragments of it, including many notebooks containing ideas and details – mostly in TP’s unreadable version of shorthand - remained amongst his disordered papers and files. These were donated by the Mclean family in 2007 to the Alexander Turnbull Library collection where they are today.

Unfortunately, only Chapters One to Thirteen are in the collection. These have been transcribed for reproduction here. There are several versions of some chapters, each showing TP’s heavy editing. For most of the text I have transcribed the edited version, but in some instances I have retained the original where it contains details that might be of interest.]

--oo00oo--

FOREWORD

“My name is Andrew – A-N-D-R-E-W. There is no ‘s’ on it and I’m the boss.”

He looked it. He was the first commander of the newly-formed 22nd New Zealand Infantry Battalion and this was his first parade. As a lance-corporal at the age of 20 in the First World War he had won the Victoria Cross for charging and destroying German machine-gun posts. He had kept to soldiering between the wars. Now, at the instance of another old corporal, the Nazi Hitler, a new war had come, and to Leslie Wilton Andrew there had been given the responsible task of forming one of the battalions, one of the many, many battalions, which would be needed to fight the German horde.

If Leslie Wilton Andrew had any doubts of his capacity for the task he did not show them on this first parade. His figure was stiff, his black moustache bristled and his voice had a rasping edge. “I’m the boss,” he said.

Yet for all the pride in the statement of ownership, Andrew, as it became clear later, was much more concerned with another thing than with the fact that he had been given a command. The words penetrated to the furthest man on that parade ground. “Take a pride in your unit. Remember, you are the Twenty-Second Battalion.”

It became clear later that Andrew not only loved the notion of a battalion but that he could come to love his battalion. For its sake he was prepared to subject himself and every man in it to hard discipline to make the unit as good as he thought it ought to be. He became “Old February” because he favoured the maximum, 28 days, in his punishments. He became loved and hated and feared and respected and gradually the battalion took the shape he desired.

By experience, Andrew knew the perils of active service. By some mysterious affinity with Joseph Conrad, he knew that those perils could more cheerfully be endured and more successfully overcome if, within his unit, there existed a feeling of loyalty. Of Conrad Desmond McCarthy, the literary critic had said, “His thesis was not, as many supposed, adventure. It was the spirit of loyalty.”

To Andrew, a battalion was not enough. To be the boss of a battalion was not enough. To be enough, there must be a pride. Pride could be a weapon, as invisible support for a wavering aim, a staff when duty fought with weariness and fear.

He used to say, “We are the Twenty-Second to None.” The phrase was repeated, mockingly, good-naturedly, sometimes bitterly, and in the repetition men came to believe that it meant something to the battalion.

The 700 of the first parade multiplied. Andrew served his time and returned to New Zealand. The 22nd served in England, Greece, Crete, the Western Desert, Italy and Japan. It suffered dreary days of defeat and pleasant days of victory. It played a small but constant part in the grand drama. From all these circumstances, each one related because it concerned the unit, a pride and a character was developed. Both were similar to the pride and character of the other New Zealand units and yet, because they concerned the 22nd Battalion, they somehow became individual and distinctive to the unit.

This is an attempt to tell the story of the pride and the character which the unit developed to show that, from the beginning to end, the stentorian message of the first parade was the abiding factor of the battalion’s history. More than 4,000 men in time thought it good to “take a pride in their unit.” The feeling was of service both to them and to the unit.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER ONE

12 Jan 40 – 13 Mar 40

Formation and Training

On 18 January 1940, the first parade of the 22nd New Zealand Infantry Battalion was held at the Trentham Military Camp, near Wellington. The battalion had been formed on 12 January of volunteers drawn from the several provinces of the Central Military District, one of the three military districts into which New Zealand was divided. To encourage company spirit, the four rifle companies were established on district bases. Men from Wellington city and the immediate area were posted to A or Wellington Company; from Wanganui, Palmerston North, the Manawatu and Rangitikei, to B or Wellington-West Coast Company; from Hawkes Bay and the East Coast district from East Cape to cape Palliser to C, or Hawke’s Bay Company; and from Taranaki to D or Taranaki Company. The headquarters company, which included battalion headquarters, was made up without distinction of district of men with some precious territorial experience.

For some time prior to the formation of the battalion as a unit of the Fifth Brigade of the Second New Zealand Division, officers had received training in an officer cadet training unit and NCOs in the Central District School of Instruction. Lt-Col Andrew, the commanding officer and the adjutant, Lieutenant P.G. Monk, were regulars of the NZ Staff Corps. All of the other officers were either plain civilians recently commissioned or territorial officers with service in the voluntary territorial units which had functioned in the country from 1930 to 1939. Some of the senior NCOs were of the Permanent Staff, the non-commissioned establishments of the regular forces.

Most of the other ranks were civilians. Some of the older men had served in territorial regiments before the abandonment of compulsory universal training in 1930. Some had served as volunteers in the territorials. By far the greater number were without service background of any kind. They had volunteered after the outbreak of war and were untrained and ignorant of military discipline.

In the first few days from the 12th, forms were filled in without great enthusiasm, civilian clothes were returned to homes, and suits of khaki denims of most unattractive design and cut were issued. It was said in the ranks that the authorities had issued the denim because of their ambition to create a "Sing Sing" atmosphere in the camp. The congregation of men on parade or in the mess hall, especially when some had their hair cropped, undoubtedly created an appearance of woe.

On 15 January, a training programme was begun. By then, companies, platoons and sections had been formed, a rough kinship was developing and the extraordinarily bad language of recruits in their first few days in camp was prevalent. A good deal of language was directed at fatigues required for camp maintenance and some of it upon the commanding officer for his eagle eye on inspection. He was not easily persuaded of difficulties in the performance of any task, not even in the cleaning of latrines of so old-fashioned a pattern that night-soil collection was required, and his trumpet roar at some stage of each inspection could be relied upon. Some of the language, too, was directed at portions of the training programme, especially those which included saluting – in democratic New Zealand, every man was as good as his master and saluting to the recruits implied subservience – and "one-stop-two", the marching and drilling periods in which each man had to cry aloud the phrase in time to the beat of his feet at the halt or on the turn.

Reveille was at 0600 hours, sick and defaulter parades at 0615, breakfast at 0700 and first parade at 0830. Morning training finished at 1200 and lunch was at 1215. The afternoon's training began at 1330 and ended at 1630. In the hour following, the troops bathed and showered and prepared for dinner at 1730. The bugle sounded lights out at 2215 hours. On Saturday mornings, training was replaced by a period called interior economy when the sleeping tents were emptied and tidied, floors were scrubbed and paillasses aired. Both reveille and breakfast were an hour later on Sundays. Leave was granted on a generous scale on Friday nights and from Saturday midday until Sunday midnight.

Parts of the ordinary day soon came to possess special characteristics. Despite the loud cries of "Feet on the floor" from enthusiastic NCOs as reveille sounded, a determined soldier might sneak another half hour of bed at the cost of some discomfort in the ablution stands in a frantic 15 minutes before breakfast. After lunch there was a united move towards the beds and with backs down the troops indulged the ceremony of "punishing the spine", or "spine-bashing", or as it was always called in the Division, "Maori P.T." It was a golden period when no one shouted "Do this", "Do that", "Swing the arms, SWING the arms", and it had more virtues

than the merely recuperative. A good many men were finding difficulties in their adjustment to army life and in the reflective half-hour after lunch they resolved many problems.

The evening, too, had a charm for some, for a wet canteen at which handles of beer were sold was open for about two hours. Despite the discomforts – the building was too small and the queues invariably too enthusiastic – the place became a club and a haven to the private soldier. In it he could talk, discuss personalities, argue and even fight when an opponent would not admit the truth of an argument.

By 18 January, when the commanding officer made his first fearsome impression on the troops, the unit was not yet up to strength. New recruits were arriving each day and many of them were posted to another rifle coy, E, which was meant to serve as a reinforcement coy to the battalion.

The parade was the beginning of a disciplinary campaign and the checking of faults of dress, of failure to salute and of a hundred and one things became rigorous. The publication of offences and punishment of offenders became a daily feature of Routine Orders, and the general impression within the unit was that the CO was a “tough old bastard.” It is possible that the colonel himself wondered where discipline ought to begin. The recruits had a bantering disregard for many of the military forms of discipline; the difficulty was to retain the humour, but in proper adjustment to the discipline.

Towards the end of January 1940, an unexpected recruit posted himself to the battalion. Someone instantly called him “Borax”. He was a semi-fox terrier who was only a little cross-eyed and only a little lovable. He would not yield to caress and he made his home where he pleased, without distinction as to company or platoon. He had enormous, eccentric skill as a cricket fielder, catching a ball in the air with gigantic, convulsive leaps and snapping up a rolling one off the ground with the skill of genius. Borax trained hard for the cricket held in the sports periods on Wednesday afternoons. At any hour of the day or night he would catch stones flung for him by the soldiers and he would even swallow the small ones if others were thrown too quickly in gestures disparaging to his skill. No one had thought of a Borax for the Battalion. Within a few days, no one doubted that he must stay. His piercingly stigmatic glance into nothingness, his crankiness of temperament, his marvellous skill with a ball or stone, these and many other things about him were engaging. In any case, Borax had a mind of his own. He had apparently decided to stay and that, for the time being, was the end of the matter.

By the beginning of February, the unit morale had been tested by heavy falls of rain creating slush about the test lines, by the saluting and other formalities attending the first pay parade, and by an extraordinarily dismal sounding by an officers’ chorus of “The Road to the Isles” at a camp concert. Serge dress of Great War pattern, with a choker collar and many brass buttons, had been issued for purposes of leave to all except Pte Dyer, of A Coy, who was as tubby as his nickname and who had to wait two weeks for the camp tailor to make a suit of large enough size.

The training was now becoming more extensive. On wet days, lectures were held inside. Map reading, marching by compass at night, and training in anti-gas warfare, were some of the subjects taught. There was a heavy accent upon anti-gas training. Many soldiers suffered the curious effects of a not unpleasing disease, believed to be induced by the out-of-doors, and passed into a slumberous state between waking and sleeping as the first words of a lecture were spoken.

As January ended and February began, it was obvious that many rough edges were being whittled. Days were now being spent upon the rifle range and a few Bren guns were available for instruction. On 7 Feb, the first route march was made from the camp to Wallaceville Bridge, a distance of about three miles, and lunch was taken in the field. On 9 Feb, the first of many injections was given, this being for TAB. The normal reaction was a symptom of influenza, but despite the general knowledge of the proper way to treat influenza, a bewildering variety of treatments was tried. It was considered by one school that the patient should lie down and rest, and by another that activities should be normal. D Coy played cricket and bodies were carried from the field. Another coy went for a march and a truck had to be sent to bring in the sick. B Coy rested and Pte J Green had an attack of what was roughly diagnosed as delirium tremens. It was all highly confusing. The one solid discovery was that it was unwise to take a drink after a TAB injection.

The battalion on its first march marched to its pipes and drums. Col Andrew's affection for a pipe band had become known and members of the New Zealand Scottish Society, through Mr I.D. Cameron of Featherston, presented the unit with six pipes and six drums. Several experienced pipers and drummers had enlisted in the unit and the band was formed by L/Cpl E.C. Cameron as the NCO in charge. In the few weeks before the route march, the band had practised enough to develop some of the skill for which it later became known in the Division, in which it was the only unit band. Much will be said at intervals of the unit band. It became a source of pride to the battalion and the rugged individualism with which, in the early stages, the bandsmen wore down criticism became the general property of the battalion.

Inventiveness a characteristic of the Division, was developed in the unit by further falls of rain and unusual but effective methods were employed to deal with leaking tents, wet clothing, and wet blankets. Night marches were held and on some of them the transport and carrier platoons practised with their vehicles. The carrier platoon also spent time training with the Bren guns with which the vehicles were equipped.

The commander of the Fifth Brigade, Brigadier J. Hargest, DSO, MC, inspected the unit towards the end of February. He was an experienced soldier and the satisfaction he expressed with the standard of training and the tone of the battalion was not light praise.

March promised well from the beginning. The recreational training was now becoming extensive and fitness among the troops was increasing rapidly. Inter-coy rivalry was also being steadily developed. Even E (coy), the last and loneliest, had a spirit second to none in the unit. Early in March, a mile run for all of the coys was held on the Trentham Racecourse, next door to the camp and even those men of little athletic ability made grim efforts not to whip in the field. To be last in a race or to do something inefficient on a parade was an act of neglect, particularly if the act affected the standing of the coy, and even the hardy made [excuses] to avoid the free criticism of such folly. The battalion, however, was not developing into a collection of Little Lord Fauntleroy's. A note in Routine Orders at the end of February sternly forbade piquets in the wet canteen to drink on duty.

The Governor General of New Zealand, General Viscount Galway, inspected the battalion on 6 Mar and warmly praised what he had seen in a letter he despatched to the commanding officer. This was praise indeed, but in spite of it, the reaction was smug. This was, on the part of the troops, an evil fault, but their excuse had a point. After the parade itself, the arms drill and the marching and the niceties of a formal parade, the "Old Man" himself, Col Andrew, had been distinctly heard by the battalion to speak words of praise. So unusual an event was cause

for the belief that if the parade had been good enough for the colonel, it must certainly have been good enough for the Governor-General.

By now the battalion was possessed with excitement. Final leave was promised. Rumours sprang from nowhere. The unit was to sail on such and such a date, Hitler's "phoney" war on the Western Front was to end and there would soon be action. All of the stories were straight from Army HQ. But there was no general agreement on dates or places or, in fact, in anything as the rumours swept from end to end of the camp and carried over to muttered speculation in the tents as one by one the men dropped into sleep.

On 13 Mar, all ranks were placed on Active Service. On that day, the few South Islanders left for their homes. The rest of the unit marched out to leave on the following day and the camp became a forlorn and lonely place. It was a minor curiosity of the war that Trentham Camp, clothed so richly from Great War days in military associations, seemed always to become a little careworn after a draft had gone away.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER TWO

Preparation for Departure

13 Mar – 1 May, 1940

If reports were accurate, every member of the battalion spent his ten days of final leave in a state of continuous exhilaration. There had been no such thing as the pain of parting.

The mood persisted for several days. It was not disturbed by the sober task of 30 Mar, by which time most members had returned to camp, of lining Wellington streets from Parliament Buildings to the Justice Department building in Lambton Quay, for the State Funeral of the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon M J Savage, PC. It accounted for the number who returned late from final leave with stories of too many parties.

In the mood, the men wanted to be done with training. They wanted to be aboard ship, bound for a war destination. They did not take kindly to official reports of delays in shipping arrangements and at odd times, a number impatiently ducked through the back fence of the camp for a freedom for which they suffered the commanding officer's rasping "Twenty-eight days!" upon their return.

Sport activities were increased in an effort to combat the mood. Wednesday and Friday afternoons were set aside each week for organised sports, cricket being the chief game, and on other days cross-country running, Rugby football, softball and various other games were played. The accent in military training was placed upon shooting and the ranges were frequently in use, especially by men who had shown indifferent skill in earlier practices. Bren guns, too, were fired and two night exercise were staged.

In mid-April, the battalion moved from tents to huts which had just been completed. The increased comfort, especially in the autumnal weather now being experienced, was great.

The whispers of a sailing date sounded through the battalion like the rustling of leaves in a wind. The authorised marking of clothes pointed the date. Vaccination made certain the time could not be far away. And the publication of an order relating to a State reception and a farewell march through the streets of Wellington on 27 April clinched the accuracy of the rumour that the departure would be about the end of the month.

The general excitement affected the workings of the committee self-appointed to protect the interests of Borax. Soon after return from final leave, the committee had addressed a notably respectful request for permission to take the dog overseas. The request had been declined and the committee, "in committee", after expressing its disapproval of the reply in the strongest terms, determined upon ways and means. In pursuance of these, Pte Booth and comrades of A Coy acquired an extra kitbag from the QM store and at odd times practised the odd manoeuvre of securing Borax in the bag, with just his nose showing, and carrying him up and down a ladder placed against the boiler house. Borax never wanted in intelligence and he soon caught on, but he was not quite well-bred enough to conceal a look of utter desolation and disgust whenever he saw Booth and his henchmen arranging another practice, down behind the showers.

Anzac Day was fittingly remembered by a special parade of the Battalion. Col Andrew, after many days of watching the coys, at last decided that he could not separate A and C Coys in the competition to discover the most efficient marching company to head the unit in the farewell parade and C Coy won the call when a coin was tossed.

The training for the farewell march was intensive. On the morning of 27 Apr, the battalion was entrained at Trentham at 0745 hrs and before then it had been assembled with due formality on a parade in camp. From the Wellington station, it marched to Parliament Buildings for the farewell speeches. The flow of oratory was somewhat checked by light showers of rain. As the unit left the ground, it paid a salute on the march to the new Prime Minister, the Right Hon P Fraser, PC, CM.

The crowd in the city was large all along the route of Lambton Quay, Willis St, Wakefield and Victoria Streets and Jervois Quay to the station. Members of the First Echelon, a few months before, had made the first march of the new war through the city. In the time since, despite the "sham" war on the Western Front, there had been a growth of war fever among the people and the occasional cheering and clapping of the crowd as the battalion marched by expressed a little of the fever. It seemed inexpressibly sad that some of the bands should choose to play "Tipperary", with all its haunting associations of mud and misery and death, but the general mood was of hope, not of sadness, and "Tipperary" on the day was just a song of which everybody knew the words.

As a farewell, the march was a moving experience for the men of the battalion. They were pleased when told that the colonel had praised their bearing and marching, for they had come to consider him their severest critic, but in the hours following the return to Trentham and on the next day, when the camp was thrown open to civilian friends and relatives, it seemed to many of the unit that they had unconsciously passed into a state of suspension between exaltation and grief. They had spent nearly four months in camp. In lean fitness, they were unrecognisable from the men who had entered camp all through January. Now the time was coming when they would be, in fact, soldiers. The imagination could not yet grasp the utter contrast with the previous life.

On the morning of Sunday 28 Apr, an advance party headed by the colonel departed for the ship. The excitement soon became frantic. Before Anzac Day, there had been much talk of sport and some excitement when D Coy, captained by Sjt T C Fowler, won an inter-company Rugby competition for a cup presented by the people of Hawke's Bay. There had been some celebration when Fowler, Cpl M Ashman, L/Cpl P Donoghue and Pte R Ayres had been chosen from the battalion to represent Trentham Camp against Burnham on 26 Apr. But sport now was of complete inconsequence. The ship, the destination, the prospects, these were the

matters of importance. On the last night in camp, on 30 Apr, a cyclone passed rapidly through the wet canteen into the huts. At a word, a man would tear the paillasse of a mate into shreds and scatter the hay, or he would find fun in jumping on a slat bed and crashing wit it to the floor. The cyclone had a happy, explosive violence. The mess, it seemed, would have to be cleared up. All day long, men swept and swore and carried and cursed, but at 1830 hours, when the last inspection was made, there were no complaints on either side.

Kitbags were stacked for the baggage party. The battalion paraded. The wait, as always, was long. A strange quiet settled. The hold on the familiar was slackening. The rustle was loud when the battalion at last straightened for the march to Trentham station.

The transport, according to the Army, was the X3. It soon proved to be more exciting than the dry nomenclature suggested. It was the Canadian Pacific liner, *Empress of Britain*, of 43,000 tons, one of the largest and most luxurious liners in the world. Even Lt Lovie, a Great War veteran whose invariable reply to complaints had been "You ain't seen nothing yet!" was silenced by a size and quality of transport undreamed of by soldiers of the First World War.

The battalion filed silently aboard. Borax was put in his bag and carried up the gangway and not a member of the embarkation staff thought anything was amiss.

The hold on the familiar things had become tenuous and Trentham was now only a place in the battalion's history.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER THREE

2 May – 17 June 1940

Voyage to England

The *Empress of Britain* pulled away from the wharf on the following morning, Thursday 2 May, and that afternoon sailed from the harbour, Thursday 2 May, and that afternoon sailed from the harbour with the other ships carrying units of the Second Echelon. The strength of the Battalion was 756 all ranks. The total included 41 officers, eight warrant officers, 44 sergeants and 663 other ranks (and one dog).

Second in command of the battalion was Major G.J. McNaught, a veteran of the first world war who had won distinction in sport as a member of the New Zealand Army Rugby team which won the King's Cup against Empire competition at the end of the war and followed that with a tour of South Africa in 1919. The coy commands were Major S Hanton (A), Captain J Bain (B), Major J G Leggat (C), Captain xxx (D) and Major E Laws (HQ). WO1 S Purnell was the RSM, the original appointee, WO1 Douglas, a member of the Permanent Staff, having to withdraw for medical reasons.

The full convoy, including ships from Lyttleton, assembled off Wellington Harbour in Cook Strait, and included, in addition to the *Empress of Britain*, the *Andes*, the *Aquitania* and the *Empress of Japan*. The escorting cruisers were HMAS Canberra, HMAS Australia and HMS (later HMNZS) Leander. The sight of the convoy was imposing to the many hundreds of Wellingtonians who gathered near the heads of the harbour to wave a last farewell to the troops. The *Empress of Britain* was a delight to members of the 22nd. There had been no time to convert it to troop carrying and accommodation for officers and senior NCOs was provided in large and luxurious cabins. Cabins on the lower decks had been divided to accommodate the

rank and file and bunks were provided in these, but the quarters were comfortable and the standard of comfort higher than soldiers of the later drafts were to obtain.

Boat drill began on the first day out from Wellington and fatigues, guards and other duties were soon introduced. Mess orderly duties were performed by stewards of the ship. There was some seasickness at the beginning, but it was not long before the good food was being enjoyed by everybody. In the daily programme, reveille was sounded at 0600 hours and sittings of breakfast were held at 0700 and 0800 hours. Fatigues were paraded at 0745 hours. Boat stations and ship's inspections were staged between 0900 and 1000 hours, and the morning training for a time consisted of semaphore, knot tying and lashing and PT. Two sittings of meals were held at 1200 and 1300 hours and in the afternoon training there were periods devoted to a lecture, musketry, routine drill and, later on, route marching round and round the long promenade deck. The evening meals were served at 1700 and 1800 hours. Between 2000 and 2130 hours, a canteen service provided draught beer and cups of tea or cocoa. Lights out was at 2200 hours.

On the first day out, the ineffable Borax was the cause of trouble. "The soldier or soldiers responsible for bringing on board the dog commonly known as "Borax", as Routine Orders phrased it, was ordered to report to unit headquarters. After wrestling with his conscience for some time, Pte Booth at last confessed the hideous deed. Business with Borax it seemed, was gratifyingly brisk. Booth's confession was the third on the list. Two sergeants had forestalled him with categorical confessions.

There was some speculation about the motives of the sergeants. On the one hand, it was believed that they were keen to become staff sergeants and sought this as an opportunity to establish they had the kind of initiative which was thought to be most necessary in a company quartermaster. On the other hand, it was believed that they were tired of their rank and sought reduction in a gentlemanly way. At any rate, plethora of confessions or not, Borax was arrested. Authority was pleased to be stern and Brutus-like in reaction to the first tentative requests for the dog's release. Authority having been proved, there was yielding in the granite and Borax at last was freed. He roamed the ship perfectly happy after that.

On 6 May, the size of the convoy was increased off the coast of Australia by the meeting with the Queen Mary, the Mauretania and the Empress of Canada, each of which was crowded with Australian troops. Course was set across the Great Australian Bight for Freemantle.

Life aboard the ship was, on the whole, pleasant. For the training during the day, the weather was kind, and in the evenings all sorts of games were played. Some of them, like tombola, were legal, and others, like crown and anchor, two-up and chemin de fer, were highly illegal, but each had its school. An entertainment committee promoted impromptu speeches with the audience as judge and everyone except perhaps the competitors thought the occasions diverting. On 10 May a sports day was held on the ship's tennis court and in many events the 22nd's men performed with zeal. Cpl L Mack, aided by a ship's nursing sister, amazed his friends with his skill in threading a needle and two of C coy's men, Ptes G.G. Foxley and M.R. Lord, easily won the biscuit eating and whistling competition in spite of all manner of discouragements.

On the same day, the convoy arrived at Freemantle after averaging 19 knots along the Australian coast. With other units of the Brigade, the battalion entrained on the following morning for Perth and took part in a parade through the city. A compliment was paid on the

march to Major-General Durrant, GOC Western Military District, and at the end of the march leave was granted until midnight.

Some day, perhaps, some permanent form of tribute will express to the people of Perth a measure of the gratitude existing among New Zealand soldiers of the Second Division for the hospitality which was invariably shown to New Zealand troops throughout the war. It was hospitality of kindness and generosity, given without stint, and quite unforgettable in character. It was unfortunate that two members of the battalion should violate it by missing their ship when the leave had ended.

Of the multitude of humorous incidents during the day, perhaps the choicest was the insistence of Pte T Donovan that the fox terrier pup he had brought aboard should become the everlasting property of Captain Laws, to whom it was given as a token of unbounded esteem and regard. Even the police were drawn into the party. A Freemantle constable willingly changed tunics with a New Zealander, who thereupon amazed the gangway guards with his military attire to the waist and his constabulary attire to the neck.

The days of arrival at, stay in and departure from Freemantle were momentous in the war's history. On the morning of 10 May, Rotterdam was bombed and the blitzkrieg was launched upon the Western Front.

Aboard ship, with the ocean all around, a clear sky and clean air, the impact at first was dull. The mind could not readily evoke a picture of the effect of bombs and shells and high explosive. But, three days out from, Freemantle, war stretched its hand and decreed that the convoy must alter course to South Africa and then proceed to England.

Then indeed there was impact. England! To the troops, it seemed a fairy tale. To Colonel Andrew and the responsible authorities, it was war. Each day, rifles were used for loading practice with dummy rounds. Physical training with tugs of war, with medicine balls and with sparring was introduced and it was required that feet should be bathed with methylated spirits. Soft feet were of no use to the infantry soldier.

Of the many impressions created by the four days of leave, from 26 to 30 May, in Capetown, the most lasting was that the people of the city, even as the people of Perth, were perfect hosts. Drives to the beaches, expeditions to Table Mountain, lunches, dinners, drinks – many drinks – were only a part of the hospitality extended. The politeness of the South Africans was such that they even managed to smile at the extreme antics of the Anzacs. The soldiers took charge of traffic, rode on fire engines, distributed beer gratis from a lorry, removed the trousers of a traffic policeman who tried to interfere, made expeditions into District Six, a notorious native quarter, and committed a hundred and one acts of knavery, stupidity and ingenuous boyish folly. As good rivals of New Zealand in Rugby football, the South Africans were more than pleased when a team from Capetown University defeating the Second Echelon team which contained Fowler, Ashman and Donoghue from the battalion. But pleased or no, they made their city free to the troops.

As at Perth, there were exhibitions of the eccentric humour of the kiwis. One man purchased a native baby for two shillings, took it aboard ship and was distressed at his cold reception. Another gave his coy commander a bath full of snakes and was saddened by the lack of humour in his officer.

There were two incidents of particular note in the battalion. Pte R S Traynor, of A Coy, while ashore on leave, suffered head injuries from which, on 29 May, he died in the ship's hospital. It

was the first casualty of battalion history. Time did not permit fellow-members of his coy to attend the military funeral held at the naval cemetery at Simonstown.

In the darkness of 27 May, Sergeant J D Ormond, of Headquarters Coy, while on duty as sergeant of the guard answered a call of "Man Overboard" by diving from the ship into the harbour. Despite the intense blackness of the night, a heavy tide and the known presence of sharks, he swam about for more than half an hour in search of the missing soldier, a sergeant of the No.1 New Zealand General Hospital, and he did not give up the search until he was exhausted. Ormond required assistance from the water. He was later awarded the British Empire Medal for his bravery and was the first person in the battalion to receive an award for services in the war.

Before departure, in a redistribution of troops made because of the assignment of the Empress of Japan to other duties the 21st Battalion was transferred to the Empress of Britain. The Mayfair lounge and the closed promenade deck were used to house the additional passengers, who were absorbed by the huge ship without loss of comfort.

On the grey morning of the last day of May, the convoy sailed on its long zigzag course to England. Away from new sights and new friends, all aboard became possessed with the fearful news of war. France was falling, the British Expeditionary Force had escaped at the eleventh hour from Dunkirk and the enemy forces rolled closer to Paris. Supplied with fragments of news by the ship's wireless, the battalion could only wonder and worry at the future.

This background of the world tragedy, the voyage wore on. Routine Orders in time was increased in size to accommodate the penalties imposed for misdemeanours at Capetown and Pte Donovan achieved the distinction of a second "mention" while in the ship's brig for the first. By the exercise of patience and ingenuity, he removed the screws from the detention room door and there was a great clatter at the next entry of the guard. It was good fun, but the commanding officer made him pay a pound for it.

On 6 June, a skeleton brigade signal exercise was held upon a sand table and dispatch runners from the battalion galloped at speed about the ship. An issue of shorts and shirts for summer wear was made and on 7 Jun a stop was made at Freetown, Sierra Leone. Much amusement was obtained from the antics of natives in canoes when hung about the ship all day. The canoes bore painted signs of a religious character like "No Man Like God," but in spite of the influence the natives were mostly godlessly intent upon barter and braved ship's hoses for the purpose. One soldier, with a ship's blanket, bought a monkey. Another, exasperated by the chattering, yelled: "Get away, you black bastard." The pained native stood upright. "I am British subject same as you are," he said. "Only colour of my skin a little different."

The war, more and more, was filling all minds. Blackout precautions were strictly enforced. The battalion manned two of four Vickers guns on the sun deck. There was general instruction in passive air defence. Submarine lookouts were posted. Route marching was increased and innovations in the training programme of life-saving drill, resuscitation and first aid spoke grimly of the universal hatred. Two platoons from B Coy were posted with rifles on anti-aircraft duties. The aircraft carrier Hermes, unfortunately without airplanes, joined the convoy.

In the midst of such important matters the sporting activities of the battalion, particularly in boxing, had a lesser place, but there was gratification when Pte J R C Hargreaves, who had fought professionally in New Zealand, won the ship's featherweight title and Pte C Noble narrowly lost to Gnr F Richardson, of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment, in one of the best bouts of the tournament.

The officers had their amusements, too. A mock orderly room was arranged at a subaltern's night in the lounge and Colonel Andrew was charged with illegally attempting to dispose of Government property. He had been heard incautiously offering the ship to a nursing sister. Lt Lovie heard the case. Col Andrew was marched in and stood for some time while Mr Lovie, head firmly down, wrote busily at a table. Then the "judge" casually lifted his head and started with surprise. "What! You here again, Andrew!" he said. From time to time during the hearing, Mr Lovie made caustic remarks which showed plainly that he was a good student. Then, at the end, he grimaced and pounded the table in a fury. "Damn it, man," he shouted. "This isn't a pleasure cruise! This is war!"

Once or twice, as the voyage wore on, frightening submarine alarms were sounded. Ships moved into position with the Queen Mary in the centre and the escorts dashed off at speed in the direction of the contact. Sometimes they dropped depth charges and the battalion hoped to a man that a submarine was caught in the mighty convulsions.

So, as the German armies moved towards Paris, the convoy approached the mouth of the River Clyde. Out ahead, five destroyers kept and changed station. Behind them were two cruisers, and behind the cruisers HMS Hood, the largest warship in the world. Behind the Hood, the merchant ships steamed in two lines: The stately Queen Mary and the Empress of Britain were abreast; then followed the four-funnelled Aquitania and the new Mauritania, and behind these two the Empress of Canada and the Andes. On the flanks there were more destroyers and at times an aircraft-carrier or two and behind there were three cruisers and five destroyers. On the day the convoy anchored at Gourock on the Clyde, on Sunday 17 June, Paris fell. The ships from New Zealand had steamed 17,000 miles at an average speed of 19.2 knots. No other body of troops had ever travelled so far to war.

"At Gourock a submarine net lay across the river, with shipping crowded beyond, amongst them a huge battle cruise and small naval craft," wrote Lieutenant W McAra, the battalion mortar officer, in a letter to his wife. "One by one the miles long procession of ships, big and small, naval and mercantile, passed inside and anchored with a rumble of cables. The hills were now close on every side, and considerably higher, with a hint of Highland glens in the merging crests and ridges. Far up the river we could see hanging in the blue the tiny blobs of the balloon barrage over Glasgow, and nearby the three funnels protruding from the water of a French cruiser sunk by some internal explosion a few weeks ago. The decks of every transport were crammed with the troops basking in the sun and idly studying the busy scene, the coming and going of ships and launches, the wide reaches of windless, scintillating water reflecting the blues and whites of the summer sky. A strange Sunday afternoon scene!

"Our band came up on the sun deck and added a final touch to a general contentment and thankfulness. The afternoon wore on with the increasing beauty and peace; the movement of shipping gradually ceasing; the water at last as delicate as satin in colour and texture. On the hills, in the woods and in the gardens, the many shades of green in grass and leaf glowed still more warmly, as though the whole countryside had donned its Sunday best to welcome the boys from way down under. Late in the afternoon, some military and civilian bigwigs came aboard to make the usual speeches (we know it all backwards now). One, a Brigadier Miles, representing General Freyberg, who is still in Egypt, sketched a grimish picture of the job before us that really did us more good than all the assurances of Imperial solidarity and shoulder-to-shoulder guff the others spilled us."

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER FOUR

17 Jun – 31 Aug 1940

Training in England

It became a joke in the Division later on – the notion that the tour of duty of the Fifth Brigade in England in 1940 had been nothing but a Cook's tour. The Fourth and Sixth Brigades sweated in the sands of the Egyptian desert for up to a year before the Fifth joined then early in 1941, and theirs, they always afterwards maintained had been the real war.

That tour, it must be confessed, was twice blessed in being performed among English-speaking people who amounted, in fact, to kinfolk. It was true, too, that the men who experienced it often thought of it in times of battle in the Western Desert, or in Greek and Italian hovels. But the tour for all that was scarcely of the sort provided by the enterprising Thos Cook. It had a little too much reality about it. The battalion trained hard as a member of the force designed to counter the invasion which seemed so natural a consequence of the wreck of France. For many months of the tour, the enemy battalions were massed about the French channel ports awaiting the word. Meantime, the air war of Marshal Goering's Luftwaffe was built up by day and night and from Dover to Penzance, on the beaches and above the cliffs, the English and their kin waited.

The welcome given the men of the battalion by the British was memorable in its sincerity. Even Borax was nobly entertained upon Gourock station by a Scottish dog and from Gourock to Aldershot, in the journey which began on 19 June, the way was lined with sandwiches, pies, cakes, and cups of coffee, offered as a tangible demonstration of friendly feeling.

The journey ended at North Camp station, near Aldershot, and from there the battalion marched to Mychett, a wooded area with a lake nearby. To eyes tired of the always-bounding main, the countryside seemed wonderful, full of leafy lanes and ordered pleasantness, and though the copses and bosky dells seemed almost a cliché, the first impression of them as beautiful never altered.

In the early hours of the first night, after a day spent in pitching tents and arranging cookhouses and paraphernalia, an air raid alarm sounded, and at first light slit trenches enough for everyone were dug with noble enthusiasm. Nor was there much need, then or later, for insistence upon blackout precautions. Only the fools lit matches or showed lights and they were in the minority.

The High Commissioner for New Zealand Mr W J Jordan, inspected and welcomed the battalion on 21 June and on that day there appeared in Routine Orders the promotion to lance-corporal of PTE Keith Elliott. He would appear again in Routine Orders, on a greater occasion. On the following day, there was a route march and on 23 June 48 hours' general disembarkation leave was granted. Men of the battalion were spread over England, Scotland and Wales, but fore most London called and men sped like arrows to its heart. The city by repute was cold to the stranger, but after their first experience none of the Kiwis could understand why. It was not easy for them even to buy a glass of beer in the public houses and in these, the democratic clubs of England, and in other places the reception was affectionate.

With the return from leave, it was evident that the sea voyage, with its rich food and genial surroundings, had had an enervating effect upon the spirit of the battalion. The quality and quantity of food in the camp, after a first, splendid, welcoming meal, had deteriorated and there were many complaints. There was criticism that the NAAFI outside the camp sold a

better meal than could be obtained inside. Much plain speaking, more than one unfortunate incident, and some acts of thoughtlessness show clearly that the spirit of the unit was not yet mature.

Colonel Andrew set himself fiercely at the task of rekindling unit pride. He was a believer in route marching and the countryside about Mytchett became sorely familiar. Discipline which had not been soft became severe. There were agonised yelps from junior officers who were set upon and, chains of army command being well established, more yelps from the rank and file when the word had been passed down.

The battalion remained at Mytchett for two and a half months and in that time training was directed at its incorporation, in a suitable role, in the counter-attack force of the south of England and particularly about the area "Hell's Kitchen" near Dover. Equipment, in spite of the spur of Dunkirk was not readily available. The battalion had its first practices at enbussing and debussing without benefit of motor transport and mortar men of the headquarters company platoon grew adept at pantomime while they waited for weeks for their guns. This was indeed the period of crisis for Britain.

It was a relief that motorcycles were easily obtainable. Half the fun of life for the men would have disappeared if the cycles had not been available for the coaching and riding of officers and senior NCOs. Lieutenant JL Macduff, sitting in the saddle while chatting idly to a friend, as idly released the clutch and bounded at a stone wall. Lieutenant T Thornton, the quartermaster, spread alarm and despondency with a wild charge at tents, trucks and soldiers. There were many scenes of comedy, the merit of which was improved according to the proximity to the spectator of a tall, stalwart tree.

The first essential of the training program was fitness. Marching first and then sport accounted for this. Because of the fear of gas attack, there was much insistence upon precautions with respirators and for this and other specialist work there were many courses. Lieutenant TR Hawthorn the intelligence officer passed a gas course with Distinction and forthwith became known as "Teargas Tommy." Disdaining the frivolity he continued to set his platoon so fast a pace on route marches that the group became known as "Hawthorn's Harriers" and was much admired by less athletic sub-units.

Monday and Wednesday nights were spent in training. Sometimes, this consisted of a march, the digging of defensive positions and the filling in of the trenches at the end of the exercise. It seemed to the troops a highly profitless enterprise, but in its inscrutable way the Army continued to demand these things, and calculated avoidance was liable to be even more profitless. Authority was not pleased with an outbreak of ribald criticism of the Boyes anti-tank rifle soon after its first appearance and in ROs early in July there appeared a most fierce denunciation of all who denied its excellence. New ways of criticising the rifle became quite a game for a time.

Early in July, His Majesty the King inspected the unit. He lunched with the commanding officer and company commanders and later, while walking about the unit, watched the men at their normal training. A few minutes after he had left, an enemy raider dropped bombs in Aldershot nearby and caused casualties. His Majesty in a message to Colonel Andrew congratulated all ranks on their showing.

On 6 July, an issue of battledress in place of the old "giggle-suit" was begun and on 14 July the battalion shifted camp about half a mile to an area adjacent to Keogh Barracks. The training was livening up. An exercise lasting 5 days began with a move around Guildford in MT. Later,

there was digging of positions near Ashdown Forest, a move to Cuckmerehaven, return to area Ashdown Forest and a march of 15 miles to finish.

After a church Parade on 28 July the companies moved to St Leonards Wood and from there to Ravenswood. A night in the open without greatcoats or blankets was spent at Nutley and it was followed by an attack at 0500 hours along the Camp Hill Ridge. "Fighting spirit" for the attack was induced was an issue of coffee laced with rum at 0400 hours and many of the soldiers made the attack in a mood of thoughtful wonderment about the rum and were it had got to in the coffee. The following day, as an end to the exercise, the battalion repeated the first half of the attack as a drill movement and then filled in the slit trenches dug by the enemy. It seemed a highly unreasonable foe.

Early in August, as a culminating act to the passive and vocal complaints about the food, A company held a sit-down strike. The company was not unanimous for about a dozen decided to parade, and in any case the retribution was swift. Col Andrew sat at table on the parade ground and the company was paraded before him. He heard a few men plead their grievance and then brusquely announced that the argument was all to pot. His sentence on the company was 14 days confined to barracks, remission being granted after 3 days. This was the last of the incidents. They had not been pleasant, but was afterwards of some satisfaction that in the worst of the battles fought by the battalion no word was ever raised about lack of food.

The elimination of the distasteful, unwilling spirit in the battalion had been steadily attacked, and the record of the unit in the Brigade 100 mile route march which was now performed gave every member a feeling of the pride which best conquered unwillingness. The start was discouraging, for every company was late upon parade, the excuse of a raid in nearby areas during the night being reasonable. In any case, the brigade start point was reached at the appointed time and the battalion marched from there to Chiddingfold, 16 miles due south, in good time. At the end of the march, the unit was transported to Pheasant Copse and it marched ten miles from there on the second day to West Grimstead Park, a beautiful estate in which herds of deer roamed and where lived Papyrus, winner of the 1924 Derby and the loser, in the famous match race against Zev, the American champion. Pte C Merrylees gained a sudden fame by the learned manner in which he demonstrated the horse's point in short lecturettes and a company remembered the Park with affection because of the success of an expedition for the cookhouse. The side of bacon was seen in the cutting-up stage by the company commander, who had sworn death against marauders, "That looks good bacon," he said. He turned to Pte A Bell, one of the cooks. "Is it local stuff, Bell?" he asked. Bell did not even smile. "Yes, sir," he said. "It came from this very neighbourhood."

The weather was hot when the battalion marched another 15 miles the next day, and in their battledress, tin hat and respirator at the alert the troops marched in some discomfort. At the end of the march, the battalion was on familiar ground, between Wych Cross and Forest Row, in the area of Ashdown Forest. On the next day, the battalion was the last of the brigade units to start and it did not cross the start line until 1040 hours, but well before the end of the 12 ½ miles it was on the heels of the unit in front after a hard, sustained pace on the march. The battalion then enbussed and the night was spent at Partridge Green, only a few miles from West Grinstead Park.

The 19 miles of the march to Whiteways Lodge, at the northern gate of Arundel Park, the seat of the Duke of Norfolk, was the longest in the week. The last mile and a half was a stiff climb, to get the better of which Lieutenant G Laurence allowed his platoon to linger until there was a substantial gap between it and the platoon in front. He then took the hill at a cracking pace,

the only pace, he maintained, for climbing. There was "grousing" of course, but it had the immemorial quality, and though most feet were sore and some were bleeding, every man had an ambition to be marching at the end. The fruit of the ducal orchard and the beer at the local were both of such excellence that they contributed materially to a feeling of comfort, if not of ease.

It had been rumoured that the last section into barracks would be taken in MT, but this was just another Army tale and the battalion marched 10 ½ miles to Pheasant Copse and three more long and weary miles to the embossing point for the ride back to camp.

D Coy won the marching competition held within the unit. Not a man of the company gave up. The battalion had the finest record within the brigade. Not one man failed to finish on the final day's march and the proportion of men who marched the whole day was higher in the battalion than in the other units. The unit, in fact, had become the "Flying 22nd", an alternative title being "Andrew's Angels."

The battalion was much helped by its pipes and drums. These played in front of each coy in turn from day to day and with the magic that seemed to belong peculiarly to the pipes they lifted tired feet over arduous stretches.

The march was not a true hundred miler, nor was it as severe as some performed in later days by the unit. But it had its points. The records of officers and men showed that they wished to do well by the unit. Long marches soon discovered weaknesses and strengths. The strengths were of men like LT. I. Hart, who poured the blood from his boot and put it on again to carry on, and the weaknesses were primarily of those who were constitutionally incapable of marching. The factor of possible air raids on the column was a consideration but it had no noticeable bearing.

Of the news that awaited the troops on their return, the war diary commented that "it took the sting out of the blisters, even if it did not cure them." In addition, there was week-end leave, London leave, late leave, special dance leave and ordinary leave.

This, indeed, sounded like Thos. Cook on tour. But while a proportion of the battalion gallivanted in tall, peaked Kiwi hats all over the United Kingdom, the other and larger was still hard at work. This was the period of continuous air raid warnings. On 12 and 13 August, some of the first severe fights in the Battle of Britain were staged above Aldershot and over the Channel. At 0115 hrs on 16 August a raider bombed Mytchett and in the afternoon of the same day seven enemy planes, thought at first to be an RAF formation, dropped bombs about two miles from the camp and machine-gunned the streets of North Camp. Captain Monk, the adjutant, was taking a shower when the planes appeared. He sped naked for a slit trench. Moments later, Pte Lawless ended a smart sprint with a flying dive into the same trench.

Soon there were stories in the unit of leave. Some were late and had to be told, somewhat haltingly, to the highly unsatisfactory audience furnished by the commanding officer. All, whether late or early, had the thread of wonderful experience. These were the days of dear old ladies who would cry as they said "Thank you, New Zealand," to officer or man. These were the days of the English nation which could not do enough for New Zealanders on service in England. These were, in fact, the days.

Brigadier Hargest inspected the unit and the camp area on 21 August and commented favourably on the state of both. The unit the next day watched a demonstration by the tank hunting platoon formed under Lieut. Laurence. While antics with tank traps and anti tank

bombs were taking place a plane passed overhead. All planes now were enemy until they proved themselves otherwise and the place so recently populous was soon bare.

Diving for cover had become a serious occupation and Borax was not least in the unit in skill. It was possible to tell where he was. Loud and lurid language told, plainly enough, that Borax was happily at work, digging for rats or snuffing about the head of a soldier. Nothing seemed to shake Borax's belief that even the shoddiest slit trench was a place of romance.

To complete the month, there were manoeuvres in the area of West Grimstead Park and an inspection by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke. Sir Alan, in a later message, praised the fitness, physique and bearing of the battalion and expressed his thanks that New Zealanders, whose felt hat of the first war was so well remembered in England, were under his command.

The inspection marked the end of the training period in England. Henceforth the battalion was to be actively associated with the defence of the south coast. It had had troubles in settling down at Aldershot, but it had become fit, keen and soldierly. It awaited the invasion which seemed so certain to accompany the expanding air war with a certain amount of confidence in its ability to play a useful part.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER FIVE

1 September – 3 November 1940

Counter-Attack Role

It seemed appropriate that so distinguished a statesman as the Right Hon Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, should make an inspection of the battalion on 3 Sep, the first anniversary of the declaration of war. The greatness of Mr Churchill's oratory, the virulence of his hatred of the Nazis, the evidence of his determination that Britain should not be defeated, these and his many other qualities had captured the imagination of the members of the unit and they were enthralled and encouraged by the words he spoke on the parade. The soldiers in their few months in England had seen countless examples of the courage which seemed so much a birthright of the British and Mr Churchill, cigar, grim face and invincible V sign, seemed to symbolise that quality.

The wish to do well and to please him on parade was general. Mr Churchill responded as if he had stepped out of a portrait of himself. The set jaw, the bulbous forehead, the slow movement of his speech, parts of an imagined pattern, were found to be accurate. Of itself, the anniversary was a cause for sadness rather than for joy, but with Mr Churchill about there was not much melancholy.

The great man's visit heralded changes. On 4 Sep, with the commanding officer absent on leave, preparations for a move toward the coast were ordered and the move timed to begin at 2300 hours on 5 Sep. At 1430 hours of that day, the time was advanced to 1530 hours.

The advancement came without warning and the to-do was tremendous. It was, in fact, a certifiable example of what later came to be called "scone-doing." "Scone-doing" was the "mucking-about" of all armies since Caesar's at an accelerated pitch within a short period. When some responsible person began to "do his scone", the tendency spread with the certainty of waves from a tone flung into a pond, and men rushed madly about, said harsh words to unprovocative underlings and magically made a tangle of everything they touched.

There were, of course, sound reasons for the activities which transformed Mytchett on 5 Sep from a respectable place to a mad-house. Lately there had been many reports of German assault barges massed in French ports. The air was had continued to mount. The information at battalion level was not comprehensive and what there was suggested that, in the soldiers' phrase, "she was on", that the invasion was under way.

The battalion moved by MT to Warren Wood, six miles from Maidstone on the trunk road from London to Dover and Folkestone. There was furious activity in digging in for the whole of the first night. At dawn, the battalion stood to. At twilight, it stood to. Night and morning, in those few hectic hours of half-darkness, the coys took up their allotted positions and night and morning nothing more remarkable than the eternal passage of airplanes disturbed the tranquillity of the countryside. Slowly the tension relaxed. By the time the march was made to Hollingbourne on 11 Sep, it seemed clear that "she" was not on, at least not this time.

For a little time, as strangers will, the battalion and Hollingbourne were reserved in their relations with each other. For a longer time, they were the closest of friends. The unit was absorbed into the village and quite naturally the men seemed to fall into and become part of the ordinary life of the population.

The treasure of the village was its church, built in the 12th century, and battalion HQ was quartered about it, at the Vicarage, in which the officers were guests of the vicar, the Rev Newman, and at the Manor House, where Katherine Howard had lived and Queen Elizabeth had stayed. Within a short time, an officer quartered at the Manor House was heard to murmur "Katherine" in his sleep, and the tale of it was soon accepted as proof that the battalion was becoming more English than the English.

For a time, A and B Coys were quartered together at Greenway Court, about a mile from the village, and with more than 200 men closely confined the situation was not good. Later, B Coy moved to three houses in Broad Street, next to C Coy, which had quarters in three houses of Brushing Farm. One of B Coy's houses was named Charity and the wits soon made the other two Faith and Hope.

A C Coy report of the time stated that a constant distraction in its area was the firing of the AA batteries on Detling aerodrome. The Coy, however became determined clients of a local on nearly Mucking Hill - the pub was locally called the 'Ook and 'Atchet - and here in the evenings there was escape from the rattle of ack ack fire and the droning of airplane engines.

D Coy had quarters in Eyhorne Street, in the village, and its members made so much of a mark on village life that the street soon was called, in both jest and earnest, Taranaki Street.

Maidstone was a popular place for leave and buses were hired as needed for the trip into town. At week-ends, bus trips could be made for half a crown a head to such places as Canterbury, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Chatham and Gravesend. In off-duty hours, the cultivation of friendship with the people of Hollingbourne was the good fortune of many.

On 14 Sep, after a recce by coy comds, "I" and other selected personnel took part in a skeleton attack in the Dover-Folkestone area, and on the following day, a Saturday, after the battalion first eleven had defeated Hollingbourne in a match, a full-scale, mock attack was made in the darkness to NNW of Dover. The exercise ended at 2330 hours.

A good deal of sport was now being played and competition for places in the battalion Rugby team was extremely keen. It was pursued in spite of the constant air traffic which by now, with variations, had become a normal part of life. On 27 Sep there was a variation with a vengeance

when an ME 109 of the notorious Yellow Nose squadron crash-landed in C Coy's area. The injured pilot was captured and became the first of the battalion's prisoners of war.

On 1 October, an attack was made as a manoeuvre on the ridges running west to Dover. The basis of the exercise was infantry in support of tanks, the tanks being represented by men carrying flags. This needed imagination, but there was nothing fantastic about the route march which followed the exercise. It was a stout 21-miler, performed in 9 ½ hours. The exercise was subsequently discussed by Brigadier Hargest, Brigadier Miles and the commanders of the three infantry battalions, Cols Macky (21 Battalion), Andrew and Leckie (23). Brigadier Miles made particular mention of fifty column activities and cited the occurrence on 30 Sep to show how easily such activities could be pursued. A soldier dressed in Canadian overcoat and with the story that he was of the First London Division was most kindly treated by officers and rank and file during an exercise of the Seventh Imperial Brigade. He was given valuable information about both the exercise and the personnel of other units and though from time to time he conscientiously dropped messages in German from his pockets these were politely returned to him. He was not arrested until a young corporal became suspicious and even then, in the search of him, two Mills bombs in his pockets were overlooked.

There was a strange sequel to this sad tale of espionage. When the prisoner returned to New Zealand Brigade Headquarters, some members of the staff became persuaded that the spy was not entitled to inverted commas. Symptoms of "scone-doing" were beginning to appear when Pte B. Dowthwaite, who had been in the 22nd, strolled along. "Hello Tom", he said. "What the hell are you doing here?" Thereupon he and Pte A M de Lisle, of A Coy, engaged in friendly talk about spying and other matters and the basis of the jape was revealed. But the ease with which de Lisle had obtained information was not a joke.

Lt Hawthorn, newly appointed as Intelligence Officer, contributed to another of the battalion's stories with his reaction to the lugubrious account of Cpl J Hagen of why the respirator presented for inspection was of civilian and not military pattern. This account included London, leave and a large measure of human deceitfulness. Lt Hawthorn could stand no more. "Corporal!" he said heavily. "My interest is NOT in the morality of man – merely in the efficiency of respirators."

The merits of village life had not destroyed Col Andrew's faith in route marching and the lanes and byways about Hollingbourne were regularly tramped by platoons and companies. No one was more popular on these marches and in battle exercises than Mrs G Chapman, a daughter of Mr T H Lowry, of Hawke's Bay. Mr Lowry had donated £10,000 to troop comforts and Mrs Chapman had obtained permission to expend part of the fund in the operation of a mobile canteen. She had travelled from New Zealand in the Empress of Britain and on arrival in England had secured permission from General Freyberg to operate the canteen among the units of the Brigade.

Her first reception in the battalion had not been kind, for Lt D H Nancarrow, whom she encountered when about to dispense cups of tea, was brusquely dissatisfied with her credentials to be in a military zone. Mrs Chapman accordingly drove meekly away. Her later reception in the unit was more enthusiastic and she became enormously popular. Daylight driving along South of England roads was not without risk, but Mrs Chapman was both cheerful and determined and the cups of tea and biscuits she produced at timely moments substantially eased the burden of many a march. The battalion considered it an honour that Mrs Chapman, then and later, adopted it.

Within a few days of the fifth columnist incident, the New Zealand brigade, under command of 1 London Division, took part in manoeuvres and attended a demonstration by the 8th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, of tank and infantry tactics, the tanks again consisting of men with flags. On 7 Oct, a warning order to move to Camberley to Winter quarters was circulated and on the following day an advance party left for the new area. In the excitement of the intended move, an officer still had time to be outraged at the sight of Pte J Selby drinking in a local. "I thought I stopped your leave for two days, Selby?" he said. "That's right, sir." "Then what are you doing here?" "You did not say which days, sir."

The second death within the battalion occurred on 11 Oct. Pte Strachan died in the Main Dressing Station at Maidstone of a cerebral haemorrhage. He was buried with honours at Maidstone.

On that day, Brigadier Hargest in an address to Coy commanders, stressed the "still present need for less confusion in the movement of our motorised troops and the vital necessity of preserving the secrecy as to future moves." Two days later, on a Sunday, leave was stopped on reports from Brigade of increasing enemy activity. Invasion seemed possible and the move to Camberley was indefinitely postponed. On 19 and 20 Oct, officers were flown over the defensive area. There had been a great amount of work by the battalion in the area about Hollingbourne. Lt McAra in his long and informative letters home told of the hours of extra work his mortar platoon had put into training and of the use of exercises in co-operation with the companies in the fields and woods. Col Andrew's demands for perfection had been consistent. In spite of the sports activities, the sight-seeing bus trips, the local leaves, the dances for officers and men, the temporary means of escape from a too-solid military atmosphere, the scare of the stands-to at Warren Wood had not been forgotten. All activities had been based on the proposition that the German was likely to attempt a landing and the exercises where tanks had been represented by flags had stressed with gruesome clarity the England was not yet prepared. Brig Hargest's sober warning re-emphasised the need of constant efforts and vigilance.

At 0407 hours on 25 Oct an order to stand to was received. It was a cold morning with heavy rain. The order was to pack, to arrange for rations and transport, and to be ready to fight. There were no explanations. As the rain streamed down and troops stirred uneasily in the cold, the moments of waiting became tense. All at first was confusion, but the plain statement, "Be ready to fight", was a spur to effort. Within an hour, the battalion was ready. Horrible speculations about ordeal by battle were indulged. The rain fell, the dawn came unsteadily, and men waited.

The countermarching order that the signal had been given purely to test reactions and not because of an imminent attack aroused, as might have been expected, the bitterest of criticism, for soldiers, and particularly New Zealand soldiers, disliked being made to feel foolish. The popularity of Brigade HQ diminished and there were hard words about "brass hats." But Col Andrew seized the chance to demonstrate inefficiencies and to guard against their recurrence, and however great the growling, not many soldiers in honesty could say that the occasion had been a waste of time.

The order had been a test of discipline. Another applied soon afterward. On 27 Oct, a German raider was put on fire by AA guns on Detling aerodrome. In his desperate attempt to get away, the pilot jettisoned his bomb load and the stick of bombs fell across A coy's area. Pte ISG Holmes was killed outright and three other soldiers were injured. They were the first casualties from enemy action.

“The Commanding Officer, with you, regrets the loss of a good soldier and comrade,” the unit RO stated. “He wishes to record his appreciation of the steadiness and excellent behaviour of the members of A Coy when, for the first time in the war, they were under fire from the enemy. Reports have been received from outside observers as well as from coy officers and all mention the speed and calmness with which the necessary work was carried out. Bombing from the air at night is a solid test of discipline. The CO is glad to record that the men of A Coy have stood up to this test.”

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER SIX

4 Nov 1940 – 4 Jan 1941

Last Days in England

The move of the battalion from Hollingbourne to Camberley, completed at 1600 hours on 4 November, had several consequences. One was the inspiration of Lieut FG Oldham in penning the pregnant lines:

“Some girls had nothing on their mind,
A meagre few; the others pined
To see us leave in such a hurry
And only go as far as Surrey.”

Another was a momentous “blitz” from Brigade HQ on the state of vacated unit reserve areas at Mytchett. Thousands of pounds worth of equipment was left to waste. “I was appalled,” Brig Hargest’s order stated, “at the condition the camps were left in – with the notable exception of the 22nd Battalion.” The unit did not entirely escape censure, for some slit trenches had not been filled in, but it had not been careless with equipment and the Brigadier’s bullets for the most part were buried in other carcasses.

Though Hitler’s intentions could only be guessed, it seemed clear that the main danger of invasion in 1940 had passed. The troops had felt the sharp English frosts before leaving Hollingbourne and two great traditional bars to sea-borne landings, rough weather and General Mud, had set in. The possibilities of invasion nevertheless were not entirely discounted and the battle role assigned the battalion in the Camberley area was anti-parachutist in the NW of the Aldershot Command area. There were other tasks, too, and the constant route marching performed by the battalion had the objects of making the ground familiar and of combating the cold in a serviceable way.

There was a mutual sadness on the departure from Hollingbourne and some of it was expressed by Mr Newman in the special service he preached before the unit left the village. The warmth of the battalion’s feeling did not die. At the end of 1943, the battalion flag was sent from the Sangro River in Italy to Hollingbourne and it was flown from the church staff every day until the end of the war. Prayers for the safety and health of the battalion were said at every service in the church.

The billets in Camberley were comfortable and Battalion HQ at Watchetts was in a mansion. If the troops did not become quite so much a part of the life of the town as in Hollingbourne, they at least experienced the peculiarity of existence in a town which had no been much bombed and where the everyday affairs of life in consequence still had a significant place. T might, the black-out was complete and the town was so silent that the noise of soldiers’ boots

on the hard pavements had a ghostly sound. Unit life even attained such refinement that a battalion gaol or "glasshouse" was established. It was decorated for a short time by Pte Broughton, who was never known as anything other than "Hicko" and who became the most famous of the unit's comic characters. The element of misfortune which caused Broughton, arrived happily home, to put himself into an empty water tank was substantial. His discovery of his entombment undoubtedly precipitated an attack of claustrophobia. The noise he made eclipsed, it was said, a combination of thunderstorms, bombings and the crash of falling cities. His rescue was hazardous for Broughton, though partly persuaded of burial, was alive and kicking. Ungentle hands at last subdued him and wafted him to sleep.

Borax had never been much out of the news. He had been made a member of the Tailwaggers' Club of Great Britain and a gentleman connected with the New York World's Fair took the trouble to enquire about him. The girls of the Hutt Valley High School in Wellington made a blanket cover for him for the English winter and Borax acknowledged its receipt with the cable, "*Many thanks. Yelps. Borax.*" A Camberley veterinary surgeon pronounced him fit, though worn in the tooth from too much chewing of stone, and Pte Lindsay was gratifyingly discussing the circumstances with a friend within the observation of his Coy Commander. Later, there was a good deal of explaining done about reasons for being in town without a leave pass.

Borax had come to mean a good deal to the battalion. His fate was strange and uncertain. When it became known that the unit was to go to Egypt, it was decided to leave him in England because of the unsuitability of the desert climate. On 26 Dec, he was posted to a rear party which comprised men who had been graded out of the battalion for medical reasons. Borax left the party not long afterward for the purpose, it was surmised, of finding his way back to the unit. He was not seen again.

A strange mishap was fortunately not attended by casualties during a live shoot of Lt McAra's mortar platoon on 13 November. The first bomb fired exploded about two feet above the muzzle of the gun, deafening the crew and causing shock among its members. The wide swathe of the shrapnel saved woundings. From constant training, including self-imposed extra periods, the platoon had developed admirable efficiency and within a few minutes of the explosion the crew was shooting steadily at the target.

Route marching had been practised on so many occasions that a fast pace could be set for long stretches. On 19 Nov, the unit was taken 14 miles from barracks by MT. It marched the distance back to barracks in 220 minutes marching time, an average speed of a fraction over $3\frac{3}{4}$ miles an hour. Not one man fell out and the medical officer, Lt Manchester, who appeared to enjoy his nickname of "Butch", reported that the battalion could have continued at the pace for some time without loss of efficiency. Three weeks later, on 10 December, the battalion marched 24 miles in a square one day. Col Andrew's voice for once lost its metallic rasp as he watched the finish of the march. "Come on, boys," he pleaded, "Hold your heads up. Don't show them you're beat." "Beat be jiggered," an unknown warrior of Battalion HQ called. "Order the double." B Coy, too, had a humourist. As the coy marched past the colonel, he said gruffly, with passable imitative skill: "Not good enough. Do it again."

Sport had been a considerable interest throughout the stay in England and it was played in many forms at Camberley. In swimming at Mytchett and Hollingbourne, Lt GG Beaven and Cpl M Ashman, both of whom had competed in championships in New Zealand before the war, were particularly successful, and Pte TI Hill became the star cross-country runner of the brigade. The Rugby team suffered only one defeat, to the Fifth Field Regiment by 11 points to three, and its victories included a defeat by seven points to nil of the First London Divisional

side. The team drew in a hard-fought match with the Sandhurst Royal Military College XV, Cpl R Ayres, who had represented the brigade on several occasions, being injured so severely in the match that he had to be returned to New Zealand. Sgt Fowler and his brother Pte T Fowler, Pte J Simpson, Cpl Ashman and L/Cpl Donoghue were also chosen from time to time to represent the brigade.

Cricket was played a good deal at Hollingbourne, often in the ideal form of true village cricket. Soccer activities were directed by Captain TC Campbell, second in command of B Coy, who was known as "Pongo Tom" because of his birth in England and who was a dashing player in both Soccer and Rugby. Pte Hargreaves worked indefatigably for the cause of boxing. He fought successfully against many opponents and gladly trained all-comers. In the divisional championships held at Camberley, Cpl Kettle won the welterweight title and Pte CW Gower the light-weight for the battalion.

The programme of constant training had not been interrupted by the move to Camberley. The frantic fears of August and September period had rested, but the nightly air bombardments of London and other cities were still carried out in strength and the war quite obviously was still going badly. There had been rumours that the stay of the battalion in the country would not be long, but there had been no cause for the troops to anticipate any sudden change until a battalion parade of 26 Nov. Col Andrew, in one of his famously short and sharp speeches, put a heavy rasp on the statement that the first duty of the unit was to "kill Huns." No one doubted the truth of the statement but all were interested in its implication of a move to another place.

Orders soon followed. Transport of all kinds was to be taken to Liverpool. There was a period of great activity while the office work connected with a large move overseas was arranged. Then, for a time, there was normality – route march to Crowthorn and Finchhamstead during which a salute was given to Lord Cranborne, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the divisional boxing championships, seven days leave for five percent of the unit, and so on. From early December, there was a building up of interest in the projected move and the sombre task of saying farewell to English sweethearts and friends was faced.

On 13 Dec, an issue was made of the "New Zealand" shoulder flashes which were afterwards so greatly prized by the division. They were of value to those who had the good fortune to take their leave at the last moment in various parts of the kingdom. The titles were good for a drink in any local and they had the more permanent worth of ensuring a welcome for any New Zealand soldier in any town or place he visited. Perhaps one small instance tells more plainly than any the kind of hospitality provided by Britishers for the members of the unit. A Scottish family deliberately arranged its Christmas dinner and attendant celebrations in the middle of December so that the member of the battalion whom it had befriended might experience the traditional feast in surroundings removed from war.

Lts D Anderson and B Clapham were chosen by the commanding officer as the officers to lead the advance party of 69 men which left the unit on 15 Dec and which sailed for Egypt in the Elizabethville on 18 Dec. With the departure of its transport, the battalion had much cause to be grateful to the commanding officer and members of the Hereford Regiment, which supplied transport as required with great courtesy.

The battalion's first Christmas party, with officers, as tradition required, serving the men at table, was small, for only about 100 men were in camp. A host of official greetings from important personages was received, but the one which the battalion found most delightful was from, of all people and places, the mayor and citizens of Waipukurau.

All leave ended at 0100 hours on 1 January 1941. The gear and baggage which had been packed and marked on 30 Dec amounted to between 50 and 60 tons. The night was freezing hard. There had been skating, with Pickwickian casualties, on the ponds about Camberley. The old year, so full of incident, had been booted out with ceremony. No one quite knew what the new year portended, but the unit had been long enough in a military atmosphere not to worry about the future. The task now was to suffer the cold of a long journey into Wales, with icicles a foot long hanging from eaves, and to board the transport, the Duchess of Bedford, in good order and condition for the journey to Egypt.

Yet there were many regrets in departure. There had been many qualities in the stay: The romance of an old, old land; the experience of air bombardment; the kindness of the British; the welding together in hard work of the unit and the building up of its pride; and the discovery that the courage of the British was good cause for believing that peace would not be made at the mercy of a German tyrant. It seemed entirely possible that the battalion's strength in battle might prove greater than anticipated because of the experience of its members of the implacable British determination not to give in.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER SEVEN

3 January – 3 March 1941

Journey to Egypt

The second great voyage of the battalion was not as comfortable as the first. Unlike the Empress of Britain, which had since been sunk by bombing and torpedoing, the Duchess of Bedford had been converted to troop carrying and the conditions of living were often almost intolerable for the great many men aboard. This was especially the experience in the tropics. The ship was christened, not fondly, the "Drunken Duchess", because of its gyrations at sea, and early epidemics of measles and influenza, the latter caused by the cold of the last weeks in England, and later outbreaks of boredom were a notable contrast to the uniform pleasantness of life aboard the Empress of Britain.

In many ways, however, the voyage demonstrated that discipline generally was of a much higher standard than it had been in the first voyage. The necessity of sleeping fully clothed because of the danger of air attack was borne without complaint and unpleasant memories of drunkenly obnoxious behaviour by many Anzacs in the first leave at Cape Town were offset by average behaviour of a high standard during the stay in the port of the Duchess of Bedford.

There were, of course, variations in the pattern. Photographs of the giant convoy in which the ship sailed were often taken in spite of the order against the practice, and the warning, "Air Raid," was passed from man to man when raids were made on the gambling schools. Col Andrew was dignified by the term "Big Bomber," when he took part in raids.

It was several days before the voyage was begun. The Duchess was boarded at Newport on 4 January and left the roads at 0500 hours on 7 Jan for Belfast Lough. The first boat deck muster in the Lough took two hours and the greatest care in assigning boat stations was taken. On 10 Jan, the Athlone Castle, bearing the 23rd and 28th New Zealand battalions, sailed into the Lough and on 12 Jan the full convoy assembled off the Firth of Clyde.

The assembly was like a parade of world shipping. There were the Duchess of Bedford, Athlone Castle, Monarch of Bermuda, Winchester Castle, Windsor Castle, Empress of Australia, Brittanic, Samaria, Ormonde, Franconia, Penland, Highland Chieftain, Durban Castle, Duchess

of Richmond, New Hellas, Cameronia, Duchess of York, Capetown Castle, Arundel Castle, and the Empress of Japan. The battleship HMS Ramillies was the first ship of the naval escort and the cruisers included HMAS Australia and HMS Emerald. Part of the diversion of the voyage was the identification of the members of the great host, and at dawn and dusk, when the great liners loomed up from and receded into the murk, the sight was unforgettable. Fog station practice, with each ship using its horn at frequent intervals, was notable for the unearthliness of the noise and when gun crews tried out their Oerlikons the noise was like battle.

The course was north and west into the wastes of the Atlantic for a start and the days were cold and gloomy. With the swing south there was pleasing warmth for a time and then great heat as the tropics were approached. The sick parades for each battalion averaged about 30 men a day for the first few days and in the battalion there was great concern at the news that Pte J Calson, of the pipe band, was dangerously ill with pneumonia. He did not rally from the illness and on 16 Jan he became the third of the original band to die. His burial was a solemn moment. The Duchess of Bedford pulled out of the convoy and her engines were stopped as Calson's body was put over the side and the pipes played the unutterably sad "Flowers of the Forest."

The entry into Freetown on 25 Jan was exciting. An airplane, suspected to be French from Dakar, circled at about 8000 feet. The pilot did not reply to signals and the guns opened up. Not much harm was done to either side, but it was very noisy for a few minutes.

Four days in Freetown were not amusing. The great heat was enervating and the fun of chasing bumboats from the ship's sides with hoses grew wearisome. An excessively cautious person had decreed that the sleeping out on deck which had made life bearable for the rank and file just before arrival must cease in Freetown because of the mosquito danger and for two days the troops sweltered with portholes locked until the discovery that the season was not timely for malaria was made.

"To eliminate weaknesses that have developed," as the order stated, coy commanders were changed about before the arrival in Capetown. Major Leggat had become second in command of the battalion following the appointment of Major McNaught as CO of the newly-formed 29th battalion in England. The new appointments were: A Coy: Captain Hanton; B; Captain Laws; C; Major Hart; D: Major Bain; HQ: Captain Bourke.

Capetown was reached on 9 February and there was leave on the first day from 1400 to 2359 hours. The city at night was like a wonderland with street lights blazing and no form of blackout and its hospitality was as great as before. Subsequently, until departure on 12 Feb, a two-hour route march was staged each morning and there was an amusing moment in one of them. An English regiment was marching on the same road as the battalion and there was a momentary confusion as to which unit should have right of way. An account says that Col Andrew's moustaches bristled faintly, he moved smartly to the head of his column and with a crack and a jump the battalion flew past the Tommy column.

Part of the convoy had sailed on to Durban and on 16 Feb the full convoy was re-assembled off the port. On 20 Feb, battalion representatives fought with distinction in a ship's boxing contest. Pte AH Peterson of B Coy won the novice flyweight and Pte Foxley of C Coy the novice heavyweight. The ship's lightweight title was won by Pte BM Wicksteed of D Coy and another of the same coy, Pte Kettle, the 2 NZDF (UK) champion, won the welterweight championship.

A staggering prelude to Egypt was the issue of Bombay bloomers, the infamous shorts which reached the calf and which were as wide as a church door. A soldier dressed in issue looked like a prehistoric monstrosity.

As the convoy moved up the African coast, orders requiring the instant obedience of emergency regulations were published. On 26 February, the convoy was in sight for the first time of enemy territory when the coast of Italian Somaliland was sighted. At 0300 hours on 28 Feb, the Red Sea was entered and at 1800 hours on 3 March, after a voyage of nearly two months, anchors splashed at the port of Tewfik, near the southern entrance to the Suez Canal. The harbour was a mass of shipping. Barrage balloons floated in profusion. First contact with worthy Oriental gentleman, the "Wogs" of the future, was made and the smells and chatter and confusion of the mysterious East was made. There was plenty of both chattering and confusion, in good Anglo-Saxon, when a soldier, aggravated by the highest kipper of all, threw the dish convulsively from a porthole and collected, gravy and kipper, a stately and resplendent colonel.

The battalion left its dancing Duchess at 1600 hours on 6 March and journeyed by train to the New Zealand camp at Helwan, about 18 miles south of Cairo on the eastern bank of the Nile. It was welcomed there by the members of the advance party who had arrived at Tewfik on 16 Feb.

The voyage of the advance party had been exciting. On Christmas Day, a German cruiser of the von Hipper class shelled the convoy. The ships scattered and the Navy and the Fleet Air Arm took counter-action. One ship of the convoy was holed above the water-line. There were no further incidents in the voyage and a material interest lay in the performance of a battalion boxing team organised by Pte Hargreaves. A South African who boarded the Elizabethville at Durban had a formidable reputation as a fighter and challenged all comers. After some persuasion, Pte J Weir agreed to defend both the honour of the battalion and New Zealand against the Springbok and he won the fight with a good deal to spare.

Pte Bonnett also contributed his mark toward the voyage. He was found on his bed by an English officer. "What are you doing here?" the officer asked. "I am on guard." "Then why have you your light?" "How the blazes," said Bonnet, "do you think I can read a book without a light." He scrubbed walls for two days.

The consolidated battalion was soon hard at work. There was little time. Greece and the first fighting by New Zealand soldiers in the war lay immediately ahead.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER EIGHT

4 Mar– 31 Mar 1941

Preparation for War

There was little time. The enormous success in terms of ground and booty won and personnel captured of General Wavell's spirited offensive into Cyrenacia in the last days of 1940 had become endangered by the threat of a German thrust into Greece. General Wavell of necessity re-arranged his desert forces and the Second NZEF and units which had fought in the campaign, were grouped in an expeditionary force intended for the defence of Greece.

The battalion soon learned of the general plan. Within two days of its disembarkation, 617 strong, at 1610 hours on 5 Mar, it was told by Brigadier Hargest that the stay in Egypt would be

short. "Much must be done in the time available" he said. The battalion already had done a little within half a day of arrival at Helwan camp some 20 miles south of Cairo. Col Andrew had the unit out upon a six mile route march, half of it over the strange, yielding unsatisfactory surface sand. The parade was followed by another march of eight miles, six of them over sand.

There was compensation of the marching in leave until early morning in Cairo and there were sounds of incredible revelry in the city. But preparation for war was the primary concern. The essentials of the training programme were physical fitness, movement by day and night, weapon training, trench digging, anti-gas instruction and an inculcation of the offensive spirit. It was a point of interest that training in the Thompson sub-machine gun was assisted by a pamphlet which had been composed on the voyage from England by Lts CN Armstrong and HV Donald. The pamphlet was used in the battalion until the War Office pamphlet later became available.

Within a week of arrival at Helwan on 13 Mar, topees and KD gear were issued, and on 15 Mar base kits were packed off to Maadi camp, a few miles to the north of Helwan on the road to Cairo. Between the two events, on 14 Mar, a violent storm made twilight of high noon when menacing walls of stinging, choking sand were blown in from the desert.

Reinforcements were absorbed. The officer reinforcements included Captain Wooller, who was posted as second in Command of D Coy, and 2/Lt G McGlashan, who was appointed to command No 18 Platoon of the same company.

On Sunday 16 Mar, tents were struck and the camp area cleaned. The battalion slept a cold night in the open, a blanket and a greatcoat to a man and entrained early in the morning for a journey of 140 miles to Amiriya, a stony, bare encampment within sight both of the Mediterranean and Alexandria, a few miles to the west. The interest of the journey was the incredible fertility of the Nile valley and the primitive, biblical methods of cultivation under fellahin.

Two sandstorms and an air raid from Alexandria on 2 Mar were the principal diversions of the nine days spent in the camp. One storm occurred in the afternoon of a day set aside for a route march to the sea. The quality of marching caused excessive displeasure to the colonel and within two miles he ordered the column back to camp for lessons in the "bull ring". The storm, with its cursed flying sand made ill-temper general, but at least camp was a better place than the sea shore to endure it. The bombing of Alexandria on 21 March was a reminder of England and a view of the future. Trucks and bren carriers one and ? short respectively of War Dept establishment were taken over by an advance party which set sail from Alexandria for Piraeus in the City of Windsor. The most notable incident of the party's journey was the behaviour of Sjt Murphy of A Coy who had fought in both the republican and Franco armies in the Spanish civil war, during an air raid upon the ship. Sjt Murphy, mug of tea in hand, coolly commanded a section posted to AA defence as a plane dived at the ship. "Hold it, boys" he kept saying between swigs of tea. "Now!" he said. The rifles and Brens cracked. The plane was within 500 feet of the ship. It was caught by the fire and sheered away.

On 26 March, the battalion boarded the Greek steamer Hellas in Alexandria Harbour. The ship was too small to accommodate all the personnel below decks and the limit of its catering service was hot water. The battalion perforce lived on its reserve rations. The ship sailed at 1620 hours. Captain Campbell was ashore on duties affecting the sanitary arrangements for the voyage. His horrified shouts as the ship gathered way provoked meaningless gestures in

reply. Cheered on by the unit, he hired a small boat and pursued and caught the ship and the army steadfastly subsequently refused to pay for the hire of the boat.

“If events go well,” Lt McAra wrote home just before the voyage began, “the little foothold we can find in Europe in the Mediterranean may prove as disastrous in the end to Hitler as Wellington’s foothold in remote Portugal proved to a scornful Napoleon. On the other hand, it may just as easily lead to another Dunkirk – who knows, or cares, so long as we have the chance of a smack at them at last? The whole camp is as cheerful and a-whistle as though we were embarking for home. We’re as fit as men can be and only ask a fair chance.”

The overthrow of the Yugoslav Government, reported on 27 Mar, coincided with a state of depression in Headquarters Coy, for the Hellas was shipping green seas and there was unpleasantness and seasickness in the well deck where the coy was quartered. On 29 Mar, the escorting cruisers in the convoy fired on a lone plane. On the following day, in the late afternoon, the Acropolis was in view.

The ship berthed in Pireaus Harbour at 1930 hours, almost at the same time as cruisers bearing wounded from the triumphant victory in the Battle of Matapan. The unit was conveyed by MT to a transit camp at Mymettus, on the outskirts of Athens, which was formed as an advanced base for the storage of kit bags and spare gear. The next day slightly more than 100 drachmae, about 5/-, was paid to each man on a pay parade. Leave to the city and ashore left time for only a hurried glimpse at the city of Plato and Socrates. The ancient historic places, it must be confessed, were rather less attractive than the tavernas to the majority.

Time, so short from the beginning, was running out. On the last day of month, Major Leggat led a convoy of trucks onto the Salonika road for the journey north. At 1030 hours, the battalion began a march through the city to the railway station. The reception was warm and there was much cheering from the sidewalks as the battalion marched along. The route led past the German Consulate and from a staff over the building the flag of the Reich floated lazily. It seemed a crazy world to the troops as at 1345 hours they set out upon a journey to Katerine with the object of resisting the followers of the flag in war.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER NINE

1 Apr – 24 Apr

Ordeal by Battle

Greece and Germany were still at peace during the battalion’s 24 hour journey to Katerine and the clanking and rattling of sabres on the Bulgarian frontier. Meanwhile it was not the fashion of Kiwis to be daunted by the future, there was much of interest in the journey and the classical scholars of the battalion were treated with respect as they talked of Parnassus, Olympus and Zeus and his godly company as the train – Chevaux 8, Hommes 40, just like the old days – rattled along through the stoned countryside.

Between Katerine and the Aliakmon River, 15 miles to the north, to smaller rivers, the Tranos and the Asvestaria, ran eastward to the Gulf of Salonika. The military features of the area were anti-tank ditches and concrete obstacles which were positions but not emplacements of the so-called Metaxas Line. The divisional intention was to defend the rivers and the Sixth, Fifth and Fourth Brigades were placed across the front from right to left respectively. The battalion’s role was in divisional reserve for counter-attack and counter-coastal penetration with its carriers on the extreme right flank by the sea. On 2 Apr, Colonel Andrew and other officers

made a reconnaissance and the next day the four rifle coys entered a line facing the Tranos with orders to extend the defensive positions. No. 4 Coy of 27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion was placed under command.

On 5 Apr Major Hart took a party of 200 men to Petras, near the entrance to the Olympus Pass, to build a road of eight miles through forest and gorge. It re-joined the unit before action and Major Bain meantime had been evacuated because of illness and Captain Campbell was appointed to command D Coy. Just before the first enemy onslaught, Captain Monk, on 13 Apr was appointed 2 I/C of B Coy and Lt MacDuff took his place as Adjutant.

At 1203 hours on 6 April, Divisional HQ flashed an immediate signal to all units that Germany had declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia. A devastating air raid was made upon Belgrade and the German columns began a surge into the Monastir Gap, the ancient military highway into Greece from the north.

German successes to the west soon made the Katerine untenable and plans were made for withdrawal of the Division to the Olympus pass, 25 miles south west of Katerine. The Fifth Brigade moved on 8 Apr and at 0700 hours the battalion began the journey. All day there were reports of enemy moves toward Salonika, 40 miles north east of Olympus.

The battalion's new position was given a post of honour astride the Saolinka-Athens road in the mouth of the Olympus pass. The road, which within 10 miles rose from a hundred-odd feet to 3000, entered the pass through a deep gorge and the battalion front of 2½ miles was a naturally strong defensive position. Just forward of the foremost defended locality, Belowa Bluff, there was a bridge over the Elikon River. A little further back a subsidiary road led east and south to the Petras tuberculosis sanatorium, which was staffed by German doctors, and a small road, little more than a track and running roughly westward to Skoteina, could also be covered from the front line.

The 23rd battalion was on the right of the 22nd and the 28th Maori Battalion on the left. From right to left, or east to west, the 22nd coys were A (in contact with 23 Battalion), C (overlooking Petras Sanatorium), B (astride the main road) and D (overlooking the Skoteina road and in touch with 28 Battalion).

No. 11 Platoon and B Coy was sited on the bluff overlooking the entrance to the pass. No 10 Platoon was on the right of No. 11 and No. 12 was astride the main road 200 to 300 yards behind No. 10. About 800 yards to the rear an old fortification, soon called Gibraltar, rose up commandingly. The three inch mortars were sited on it. Battalion HQ was about 1000 yards behind B Coy with the RAP just behind. No 4 Machine Gun coy with 32 Bty of the Seventh Anti Tank Regiment were placed in support of the Battalion. The anti tank guns were two pounders.

"Roughly imagine a long, steep-sided ravine running up into a mountain," wrote Lt McAra in one of his letters. "Across the foot of the ravine passed a road crossing the Elikon stream. About 800 yards inside the mouth of the ravine, Gibraltar rose sheer between the opposing slopes, forming the only position from which guns could be brought to bear on the stone bridge crossing the Elikon and the riverbed beyond. The ridge to the right as you looked down the ravine was held by C Coy with A Coy along the face beyond. That to the left, up which wound the road, was held by B Coy with D in line beyond.

"The wedge of dead ground into which the rifle coys could not fire was the weakest point of our front; once the enemy penetrated the bridge end they could work up the gullies on either side of Gibraltar and take us in the rear. The hillsides were so steep, rocky and bush-covered

that infiltration had every chance of success. Gibraltar itself had obviously been a natural stronghold from earliest times and had ruins of houses and old fortifications hidden by masses of flowering trees, white and pink, for all the world like some Japanese cherry garden – a dreamlike place in the warm sun with butterflies, flowers and a soft wind and the great wall of snow-covered peaks in a half circle behind towering in the clear blue heavens.”

As the days passed, the battalion became like a battery being charged by incidents of the war. On 8 Apr, the Divisional Cavalry made contact with the enemy in the Aliakmon area. The next day, elements of the Cavalry, the New Zealand Artillery and Greek formations with primitive artillery weapons approached from Katerine and passed through the battalion front. On 10 Apr, the German medical staff at the sanatorium deserted – their interest in A Coy’s weapon pits had been keen – and brigade transport had to be supplied to evacuate the unfortunate patients. Fifth column activity had been reported and the Sanatorium building, with its doors banging hollowly and stray dogs barking inside became a suspected and sepulchred place.

The weather was wet, cold and misty on Good Friday, 11 Apr, and fires were lighted for the drying of clothing. There was a snowstorm on top of the pass on this of all days. Divisional Cavalry inflicted casualties and E Troop of the Fifth Field Regiment fired the first artillery round of the Second NZEF war against Germany. Late in the day, a reconnaissance plane flew over D Coy’s area.

At 1655 hours on 14 April, the last elements of the Div Cav passed through the battalion and 65 minutes later three of the Battalion carriers rumbled across the bridge. Four selected demolitions, including the bridge was then blown and the front was closed. What happened next was “not peace, but a sword.”

The first test was sharp and violent. At 2300 hours on the 14 Apr, enemy motor cycles roared down to the demolition over the Elikon. As they halted, they were engaged with small arms fire and grenades from the Height above by Lt CN Armstrong’s NO. 11 Platoon. The enemy replied, but soon withdrew. Five motorcycles left by the bridge showed that the platoon inflicted casualties and that night, enemy patrols could be heard feeling around the frontal wire.

“Next morning,” wrote Lt McAra, “we were just on the point of sitting down to breakfast (bully beef and biscuit hash), when of a sudden the Vickers guns of C Coy’s ridge opened up. We dropped everything and fairly flew into the mortar pits and the beats of the pulse were as one. The machine guns were firing at long range at armoured cars and no other signs of approaching enemy were seen, but in an hour or two the first shells began to come over. Our own 25 pounders opened up in reply. All day long the firing continued, searching ridges and gullies.

Brigadier Hargest squelched through the mud to Battalion HQ just after first light on 15 Apr and at 0800 hours there was a brigade conference. The general situation was not good. The 21st New Zealand battalion on the right was under heavy pressure on the area of the railroad tunnel on the Katerine-Athens line. On the left of the Imperial Forces, there had been enemy penetration of the Greek line. The threat to the rear was real and withdrawal for six or seven miles accordingly was planned for that night to a line across the valley below Ag Demetrious. The battalion intention was for BHQ and Headquarters Coy to move out at 2130 hours and A, C and D Coys at 2230, with B Coy thinning out from 2230 to withdrawal at 2300. C Coy was to hold a rearguard position on the hills above BHQ until the withdrawal of B Coy was completed.

The morning was quiet with occasional exchanges of fire. Light enemy tanks were active on the road and in the afternoon the German artillery began probing for the 25 pounder guns to the

rear. The enemy artillery varied its counterbattery work with fire upon battalion positions. The unit had been supplied with 32 mules to assist in Q work over the rough, stony and muddy roads and at 1030 hours the train began to move non-essential gear. There was one amazing incident, a first indication of the Kiwi capacity – which became marked in later campaigns – deliberately to forget danger for the sake of a matter of personal interest. Two privates, mule drivers for the time being, became argumentative over a matter of precedence, or something equally ludicrous and in that incongruous situation they set to fight it out.

At 1730 hours, Brigade transmitted an immediate order cancelling the withdrawal for 24 hours. For a time, enemy mortaring was extensive and during the night there was sporadic firing. In the early hours, a force could be heard moving forward of D Coy. The Germans cried out in English to draw fire and one enemy soldier said conversationally, “You’ll have to do better than that,” several times. At first light, the company discovered that the wire it had so carefully staked and the mines it had so precisely planted had both been removed.

At 0635 hours on 16 Apr, B Coy called for artillery concentrations on enemy tanks and vehicles moving up the main road. The battalion mortars and the Vickers guns efficiently sought to catch the unwary and arrogant enemy in a blaze of fire. This was concentrated defensive fire and the enemy force withdrew more than 500 yards to protected positions. Two of the armoured fighting vehicles were destroyed and it seemed that about a company of enemy infantry had been killed or wounded. The enemy reaction was angry. The battalion’s anti tank guns were sited for counter-penetration and none could be brought to bear upon tanks forward of the demolished bridge. At 0704 hours, five enemy tanks moved to within 400 yards of B Coy’s front and with cannon and machine gun fire methodically bombarded the area. The artillery registered and made the tanks pull back 200 yards but from the new position there was not much lessening of the fierce fire. Pte J Whibley, the anti tank rifleman of B Coy, gave a splendid exhibition of courage in the situation, by firing his Boys rifle with regularity at armoured vehicles and enemy machine gun posts and the pile of spent cartridges by his gun was large at the end of the day. A light tank brewed up was credited to the rifle.

At 0730, an enemy column three miles long of armoured fighting vehicles, tracked troop carriers and motor cycles came into view on the road from Katerine and when a halt was made within half a mile of the battalion front it was seen that there were at least 40 vehicles, including a 20-ton tank, in the column. Some shooting by the 5Fd was inaccurate and there were complaints of shorts in B Coy’s area. The commanding officer of the regiment, Lt Col Fraser, himself sought to correct the fault and for two hours he calmly directed fire while sitting on a collapsible stool in the Coy area. The score from the Artillery, anti tank rifle and small arms shooting within two hours mounted to ten vehicles, including an ammunition truck, fired by Pte Whibley, and a tank.

Three enemy tanks charged the demolition at 0918 hours and the leading tank drove into the crater to form a bridge. Its crew was killed by rifle fire from No. 21 platoon and the other two tanks, in spite of attempts, could not cross the makeshift bridge. They fired heavily upon nearby targets before they withdrew. Before 1030 hours, B Coy had seven casualties. Four men, Ptes HH Burgess, J O’Brien (A Maori), J Tustin and D Wilson were killed and Ptes CJ Harnish, CS Lovett and AC Murray wounded. Volunteers south to help the chief stretcher bearer, Cpl Hagen, and L/Cpl Donoghue gave covering fire from a Bren, but the enemy response was so vigorous that the bearer party could not reach within 50 yards of the bodies.

Meanwhile the fighting had become general. D Coy’s area was ranged in the early morning and from shell fire in the area of Battalion HQ, Sjt T Logie was killed and Sjt J Tregaea had his arm

blown off. Tregea's behaviour was astonishing. Looking down at his dismembered arm he said casually. "Get my wrist watch off it, will you? I don't want to lose it, too."

C Coy was attacked by a company of infantry and No. 14 Platoon, against which the main trust was directed, used its 2" mortars as well as rifles and Brens in reply. To avoid further casualties, the Germans were compelled to dig in. The activity on the A Coy front was minor, but the Maori BATTALION's assistance with mortaring was appreciated.

At 1530 hours a tank reached the remains of D Coy's wire and bombarded its positions. An enemy armoured troop carrier moved close enough to the line for soldiers to disembark under cover and it was reported that the enemy had penetrated the ravine between Gibraltar and C Coy. A reserve force consisting of "I" personnel, Sigs and ? in the famous phrase, odds and sods was dispatched to hold the position. C Coy put in a patrol and found nothing.

None of us slept that night and dawn found us cold and tired in the pits, said McAra. "I walked half a mile up the road to our trucks and was just on the point of retuning when the early morning stillness was shattered by the machine guns on the ridges. An instant later, the quick, lighter chatter of Brens started up from B Coy. One of my guns (Sjt Smith's) opened up on the bridge and the river bed. It took me 15 minutes to return and the that time my chaps had fired 180 bombs – the whole riverbed was full of drifting smoke and the echoes of violent claps dying among the ridges. A number of light and medium tanks had attempted to reach the bridge, but had failed to get through the blast put down.

"By now rain had set in and was falling steadily. Nor shall I ever forget B Coy's front line – just a soaked and silent man every 20 yards or so along the hillside, lying in gathering pools of water and watching the silent dripping bush in front. Most of their section posts had been made untenable. The eeriness was extreme – the drip drip of the rain among the motionless leaves, the sense of danger impending, the strained faces and the rifles glistening with wet as they poked through the undergrowth. The sunken piece of road where the company had its headquarters was a sad sight with dead and badly-wounded men lying silent and bloodied in the shelter of the cookhouse tent with others struggling up the steep slope or being brought in by stretcher bearers."

[text lost] of heavy armour and air had been used by enemy against the front. A kind word was spoken by Brigadier Hargest. "The 22nd made a steady withdrawal absolutely to time and without excitement," he wrote in a dispatch. "It had borne the heat and burden of the day."

"Heavy mist blotted out the road and hid the retiring coys from the German gunners, a marvellously fortunate thing for us," wrote Lt McAra. "In the disk the silent billows of vapour rose slowly up the gullies, wet and impenetrable, obliterating ridge after ridge. The trip out was a nightmare with infantry and trucks all mixed up the narrow, winding road and all vehicles overloaded and lightless. Just one long strain to keep on the dim road at all and avoid the collisions and overturnings that were fearfully frequent.

"I shall never forget the scene – we were busy loading two trucks when the first of the rifle coys came along the road on their way back, rain beating into their faces and glistening on ground sheets and helmets as they trudged slowly by – the wearing, dragging pace of exhausted men."

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER TEN

17 Apr – 25 Apr

Retreat through Greece

The first phase of the battle of Greece, of Allied resistance against infantry and armour employed in heavy attacks against the front already was over. From now on, certain, constant and crippling factor of the Allied fight was enemy air superiority. From first light to last, in cloud, sunshine and even rain, Messerschmitt fighters and Stuka dive bombers unfortunately ranged the roads and fields, roaring down to within 20 feet of the earth to kill, wound and destroy scorning the futile small arms fire which was all that could be put up against them. Men grew used to the need of diving from trucks for the scant protection of fields and casualties in materiel and personnel daily grew larger. It was frightening and dangerous and humiliating, all in one, and the survivor never forgot and never forgave.

For the battalion, withdrawal from the occupied positions was not enough. Before first light on 17 Apr, B Coy was moving through Ag Demetrious to a commanding hillside to guard against a German follow-up and in the thin rain men fought to keep awake. At dawn, the coy re-joined the battalion, marching through the village between lines of friendly folk among whom some of the women wore crinoline skirts. Reformed, the unit marched three miles southward to the head of the pass and formed up with 28 Battalion alongside and 23 Battalion on the left, the latter on guard over the Kokinopolos track. There was hot food from B Echelon, a marvellous experience, and for lucky men New Zealand mail, only four weeks old.

At 1200 hours, withdrawal through Larissa to Lamia was ordered. While A Coy of the Battalion and A Coy of 28 were left as a rear guard to hold the pass until 1600 hours, the battalion began a march of three miles to a transport area and at 1500 hours it left by MT for Elasson, 20 miles south and thence for Larissa, another 20 miles on. The destination was given as the Almiroa-Volos area, 40 miles south eastward from Larissa on the Aegean Sea. Not until later was it discovered that by an incredible mischance there had been a typographical error in the divisional order, Volos being written as Molos, a village south west of Volos near the Pass of Thermopylae. Lt HV Donald's No. 14 Platoon was the only sub-unit to take the correct route and it completed the journey to Molos well ahead of the battalion, thoughtfully uplifting on the way, enough beer to give every man two bottles.

Larissa aerodrome, on which RAF planes had been destroyed in air raids before the fighting at Olympus began, was safely reached on the night of 17 Apr. The Greek population was wonderfully friendly and eager to make gifts of food and wine.

The confusion caused by the order began in the morning of 18 Apr. General Freyberg directed traffic through Pharsala, 30 miles to the south, but at 0100 hours Col Rowe, a New Zealand officer acting as corps observer (and suspected for a time as, of all things, a Fifth Columnist), directed the unit back through Pharsala to Almiros, 12 miles eastward. There were traffic jams and the battalion became parted, 250 men taking the route directed by Col Rowe and the remainder moving through Lamia and Styliis to Almiros. Brigade was established four miles from Almiros and Col Andrew under orders took the part of the battalion which had travelled through Lamia with him to Molos.

Lt Hawthorne scoured the countryside for the party diverted by Col Rowe and presently located it and the Olympus rear guard force, including the coy of Maoris, in the hills ten miles to the northwest of Almiros. The party was instructed to march by Almiros, Styliis and Lamia to

Molos and after traversing a number of paddocks it beheld, on a road, the wondrous sight of the colonel riding pillion on a motor cycle in search of his men.

Demonstrations were discouraged, but the ranks could scarce forebear a cheer and what was afterwards diagnosed as a happy smile of greeting fitfully illuminated the colonel's face. The colonel took one part of the force in trucks and Captain McDuff looked after the other and the battalion was reassembled at midday on 18 Apr in a place 5.5 kilos west of Molos.

A straightforward account of places passed through and destinations reached must be barren of description of the traffic found on the road. Perhaps the words of Lt McAra best capture the confusion. "On the second night after we pulled out of the pass," he wrote, "we lost our way and became maddeningly and hideously entangled among an artillery convoy, with sawn only a few hours away and the morrow full of enormous uncertainties. At a crossroad an exhausted dispatch rider was directing the stream of trucks to the right, with instructions to ignore a left turning and carry straight on across some fields to another road, all in pitch dark, with no lights showing; drivers were worn out and on edge, men so crowded into the rucks that they could not so much as stretch an aching leg; lurching and swaying with every jolt over the fearful ruts.

"Somewhere up in front of us a driver lost his nerve and stopped. The whole convoy pulled up and for miles in rear of us artillery, infantry and Army Service Corps units slowed and stopped. Furious voices bawled inquiries in the darkness and above them rose a bleat from the offending truck, "Tell that fellow to come and show us the way. I can't see a bloody thing." We sat and listened in resigned despair while the request was shouted back. I could just picture the weary fellow at the traffic point, badgered and fed up after hours of keeping their column moving. When he heard what we bawled back, it must have been the last straw. An overwrought screech came out of the night: "Tell him to clean the -- -- out of his eyes!" Somehow it seemed the funniest moment in years, probably because of the vent given to what everyone felt. Every lorry within earshot shook with mirth. For the rest of the night it became a sort of watchword, whose mere mention raised a laugh and cleared the air; but you had to be there to understand why."

The new task of the fifth Brigade was the defence of positions in the foothills and across the cost road south of Lamia. On the left, Australian forces were placed astride the historic pass of Thermopylae in which in 300BC Spartans of a force of 6,000 Greeks for three days resisted the onslaught of overwhelmingly larger forces of Xerxes' Persian army. On 19 Apr, the battalion took up a front facing the Spherkeios River. 2/Lt McGlashan's platoon was detached to guard the road near Styliis, but it returned before first light on 20 Apr, a Sunday.

At 0800 hours on 20 Apr, the first enemy planes flew over the new positions and their attendance thereafter was constant. In mid-morning, however, four planes which were neither Messerschmitt nor Stuka crossed the line. Unbelievably, they were Hurricanes, the few, in the RAF tradition, against the many. A Stuka was slow getting away and the Hurricanes pursued it out to sea. There were sounds of machine gun fire and smoke began to pour from one of the Stuka engines. The Hurricanes closed in and the German fell away in a spin. It straightened at last and as it dived headlong into the sea there was an explosion and a burst of smoke to mark the spot.

For miles along the front, men stood up out of their weapon pits and cheered and shouted and pounded each other's back in a very ecstasy of excitement. "It was like a Derby finish. Men were leaping in the air, hoarse with excitement, as the black shape hit the sea, exploded and vanished," Lt McAra wrote.

Alas, there were few Hurricanes and many Germans. At midday, a plane bombed D Coy and 2/Lt McGlashan, Sjt JSM Dring, L/Cpls AE O'Neill and GM Sandiford and Pte LP Bosworth were killed and six men, including two officers, were wounded. In the evening, the battalion took up a position five kilometres from the springs of Thermopylae with B, C and A Coys from right to left across the front and D in reserve. The carriers were brigaded with 28 Battalion and patrolled the marshy ground and the banks of the Spherkeios at night. At 2100 hours, the bridge across the Spherkeios was demolished.

From first light on 21 Apr, digging and wiring of the new positions proceeded at speed. Air sentinels were appointed and it became the custom for men to work hard at their tasks until the warning call, at which everyone hastily erected camouflage before going to ground. The Sixth Field Regiment was now in support of the Fifth Brigade, and during the day it first upon German tank movement across the river. At 2030, the battalion gave up its hardly-dug positions to the 25th Battalion and marched to a position one and a half kilometres nearer the springs. The cooks had excelled themselves with a fine hot meal.

Activity during the night was mostly counter-artillery, but on the German side there was evidence of massing of forces in preparation for an assault. All night long, German transport could be seen moving on the hill roads behind Lamia and battalion picquets grew tired of counting the vehicles. It rankled sorely that the Germans drove with lights full on. Enough bombers, enough fighters, even perhaps enough long-range artillery, and that arrogant attitude of conscious superiority might be changed to the skulking furtiveness with which, for want of these things, the Allies were compelled to travel.

From daylight of 22 April, too, there were more demonstrations of German preparations. The unit could see a landing strip under construction two miles to the west of Lamia and east of the town there was digging in of big guns. Unhappily for A Coy, a troop of 25 pounders was sited for snaphooting in its area and reconnaissance planes constantly searched for the guns. Later, artillery ranged the area, though without effect.

Col Andrew returned from a Brigade conference at 1500 hours, The news was black indeed. Greece had capitulated and support for her gallant forces could no longer be expected. There was now no alternative to evacuation of the country by all of the Imperial forces. The evacuation must proceed at speed and to assist it, that which could not be carried on the person must be destroyed.

At 2100, the first company passed the start point for the first stopping place, Ag Constantia, 17 miles south east on the Gulf of Euboea. A clean break from the enemy could not be risked and within the brigade the 22nd and 23rd Battalions were required to supply a rearguard force. In the case of the 22nd, this consisted of Major Hart in command, Lt Leeks and TR Carter and 58 ranks and file in addition to the carrier platoon. The rearguard force was placed under command of 6 Brigade with orders to be prepared to hold the positions for 48 hours. The 23rd Battalion force covered the area of the demolished bridge and the 22nd occupied skeleton positions in the 22nd and 28th Battalion's areas. Part of the carrier platoon's task was to simulate normal activity with road traffic by day.

Brigadier Hargest walked among the members of the main battalion party as they waited to emboss after a march of three miles and talked to them of the campaign and their share in it. The march had reduced the distance to Ag Constantia to 15 miles, but part of the convoy was misdirected along a deviation near Molos and did not reach the destination until dawn on 23 Apr, several hours later than the first party.

The 23rd of April was a day to remember, for it was spent in comparative peace in an olive grove. In the afternoon, the battalion heard of further plans for the evacuation. Anyone cut off was to take to the hills before making for the coast and endeavour to pick up either a British ship or a Greek caique. Appropriate signals from shore to sea were explained and first glimpses were given of a service which later efficiently saved hundreds of men from the desolation of prison camps.

Petrol for 150 miles and rations were drawn from a supply issues depot. The rations included 12 demijohns of rum. In the cold misery of Olympus Pass, it was often asked for and often refused because, it was said, there was not a gallon of rum in Greece. How it had been given without the asking. It had a fate which in later stories was made into a mock Greek tragedy and the CO considered that the liquor could only have a bad effect upon men so dangerously tired. At his order, Lt Hawthorn faithfully destroyed each jar.

At 2030 hours on 23 Apr, there began a nine hour drive to an olive grove north east of Athens, 139 miles south. Ten or 15 miles south of Ag Constantia, the lights were turned on in the trucks and Athens was reached in the early dawn.

The battalion was assembled at 0600 hours on 24 Apr, and embarkation arrangements for the night were made. Late in the afternoon, the task of destroying superfluous vehicles was undertaken. In some cases, all the water and oil was drained from an engine which was then run hard until it seized. In others, sand was added to the petrol with the same dire results. Picks were used on tyres, chassis and batteries. Some of the trucks had been driven less than 2,000 miles and were in perfect condition. Lt McAra grimly commented that only a shareholder of the Ford Motor Coy or General Motors could have been pleased by the destruction.

At 2040 hours on 24 Apr, all men boarded the trucks for beach D, Porto Rafti, in Raftia Bay, 20 miles eastward of Athens. There was further destruction of transport and then a two-mile march to the beach. In the darkness, tired men waded into the sea with arms, respirator, shovel, tin hat and pack still grimly held, to pick up a naval landing craft. Soon, they were boarding either HMS *Glengyle*, a 10,000 ton invasion craft, or HMS *Calcutta*, a cruiser, stumbling aboard in gestures of utter weariness and resignation.

"The kindness of those sailors and their mothering way with the dog-tired troops made one want to weep in one's silly, feeble state," said Lt McAra. "The Navy has been father, mother and all to us." At 0400 hours on 25 April, 26 years to the hour since their fathers were in the last stages of preparation for their assault on Gallipoli, *Calcutta* and *Glengyle* bore away for Crete. Decks, companionways, off corners, were cluttered with dirty, unshaven, tired men, the first British soldiers since Dunkirk to fight against the Germans.

Meanwhile, the rearguard party had had fighting. After beating off Germans near the demolished bridge over the Spherkeios, the 23rd Battalion force withdrew through the 22nd and the force made its way to Cape Kiminia. On the following day, 24 Apr, the force was bombed and machine-gunned. It withdrew with 6 Brigade through Thebes towards Athens and from there toward Argos and Corinth. On 26 Apr, there was more bombing and machine-gunning and the force was placed in anti-paratroop defence. Gradually a withdrawal was made to Tripolitis and from there to Momenvasia, near the southern extremity of Greece, and on 30 April the Brigade and the rearguard force put to sea. They arrived at Port Said on May 2.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER ELEVEN

25 Apr – 19 May, 1941

Out of the Frying Pan

Suda Bay, the chief port of Crete, seemed like peace itself after the turmoil of Greece and the air raids of the short voyage when the landing was made there at 1400 hours in 25 Apr. Because of the combination of exhausted men and indefinite, not to so inefficient, reception arrangements by the shore staff, there were many stragglers when the battalion marched away from the landing place a little later. On the following day, the unit strength was reduced by 50 because of these absentees. Half a dozen of the 50 were leaders in a gigantic binge which began when the staff of a NAAFI hurriedly departed from their store during an air raid. The party continued for some days because of the incidence of further raids. The somewhat austere welcome-home gathering was staged in the orderly room for the stragglers. There was a general realisation that Crete would have to be defended for a time, revellers were not the only ones who wanted to escape the atmosphere of war. "The men are a little trying at present and consider they have earned the right to relax," said Lt McAra. "The island is so sunny, attractive and peaceful a spot that it seems natural and right to take life easily – the one thing we dare not do with the opponent such as we have."

"By heavens, we know each other after the last month," Lt McAra continued. "Beneath the surface one can sense continual cross-currents of exasperation and disgust. One sees the tide of respect receding from certain officers and NCOs. Many of the men are in a fine state of mental confusion that expresses itself in continual bitching at everything from the smallest order to the decisions of the British Cabinet."

Within 48 hours of landing, the unit was in position on spurs down to the village of Platanias, near canes, the capital of Crete, and on 28 Apr it began the occupation of positions on the perimeter of Maleme aerodrome, one of the two airfields of the island, and the western point intended to be defended against the expected airborne assault from Greece.

Crete had been occupied by the British at the request of the Greek Government since November, 1940, but it had not been much fortified in the meantime. Its geographical feature was a high and steep mountain chain bisecting the island for almost all its length of about 200 miles. The lack of all-weather ports – Suda Bay was the only one of consequence – seemed likely to hinder the defence, for the German air bombardment of shipping caused havoc from the beginning. The terrain itself was not easily defensible, for the terraced vineyards and olive groves seriously restricted vision, and these were plentiful in the area of Maleme.

There had been some misunderstandings with the shore staff at the landing and a certain amount of precious equipment had had to be left at Suda Bay. As a result, there were only seven picks and shovels for the building of defensive positions. The delays did not promise well, for the intelligence reports spoke of intense enemy preparations and time was a factor of the greatest importance. The battalion's daily routine was published soon after the occupation of the Maleme positions. Stands-to of all personnel were from 0500 to 0600 hours and from 2030 to 2100 hours, meals were at 0830, 1230 and 1730 hours and fires ere prohibited between 1900 and 0700 hours. There were many tasks, the most important being the preparation and wiring of defensive positions, but whatever the task – and the most pleasant variation was swimming in the sea – one man of each section by day and one third of strength by night maintained a constant watch.

On 4 May, General Freyberg talked to officers and men. "An informal chat that increased one's confidence in the man," Lt McAra said. "He told us the New Zealand Division in Greece was up against five German divisions and acted as rearguard to both the Australians and a few British units, retiring over 300 miles in constant touch with the enemy. General Wavell said to him afterwards, 'I don't believe any other division but yours could have done it,' so the 1914-18 blokes needn't fear we let them down. The general said there were several occasions when he gave up the division for lost, so fast were the Germans coming in on his left flank, but we got away with it."

There were three alarms of attack. The first was of attack on 1 or 2 May with 300 heavy bombers and gliders and the second was of attack between 14 and 17 May with 30,000 troops, one third seaborne. The third alarm, which was only slightly inaccurate in date, was made known on 16 May and was of attack between 17 and 19 May with 11 Corps and 1 Airborne Division, a total of 35,000, with 25,000 to land from the air and 10,000 from the sea. In this third plan, the points of attack were given as Maleme, Canea, Retima and a valley (Aghya) southwest of Canea. Suda Bay was not to be mined and the aerodrome was not to be bombed. The method of attack was to be, it was said, a sharp assault by 100 bombers and fighters followed by use of 600 troop-carrying planes dropping parachutists, 500 in the first wave and 100 in each succeeding wave.

This was, as the event proved, good intelligence and given parity of equipment and personnel the defence might have forced the invader into the sea. This lack of equipment, combined with a number of other factors which hindered the defence, made Crete the most bitterly-remembered of the battalion's actions. The battalion did not escape censure. Its enforced withdrawal from Maleme was much criticised by other units and the charge was even made, in not irresponsible circles, that the withdrawal cost Crete. For its own part, the unit was somewhat critical of the support it obtained, or failed to obtain, on the day. In this atmosphere of criticism, the eventual loss of the island was hardly taken by the fighting men. They thought it could and should have been held. But it is clear now, as it was then when the mists of argument were pierced, that the vital need in the defence was fighter aircraft and field and anti-aircraft artillery. These were not available in the needed numbers, and the ruthless German air bombardment caused many casualties before the ground fighting began.

Crete was an unhappy experience. There were many weaknesses in the defence. On the battalion level, an important request which could not be granted for lack of man-power was that the bed of the Tavronitis river should be defended. On both the battalion and a higher level, representations that the aerodrome should be put out of commission were not heeded. On the highest level, General Freyberg seriously questioned the worth of attempting to defend the island.

The shortages of equipment were widespread. Some French and Italian 75 mm field guns were without sights. A platoon of 27 MG Battalion in support of the 22nd had only Mark VII and few belts for its four guns. The air force at Maleme comprised at the beginning of May six Hurricane fighters, supplemented later by two more, and about the same number of Fulmar, Gladiator and Swordfish machines. It was a gallant but small company and unit was reduced on 19 May to a lone Hurricane. The Germans mounted a heavy attack. A brave pilot flew the machine off the ground and pitched it headlong into the mighty enemy armada. The odds were overwhelming and soon, flaming and spinning, the machine fell away and plunged, in a moment of agony, into the sea. For the battalion, this was the Unknown Warrior of Crete, a man of courage indeed.

The days mounted upon one another in slow movement toward a dreadful climax. Yet these extrovert Kiwis found their diversions and enjoyed themselves as much as if they were at Base with little to do. The people of the villages were friendly. Since so many of their own had died in the Greek fight against the Italian invader from Albania, they had a special feeling toward the soldiers who were in risk of their lives, and made them welcome. Estalliano, a tavern-keeper, became a special friend and outside his tavern there appeared in ti the sign, "KIWI KANGAROO KIPPER KLUB. Proprietor, E. Stallion." It was then the fashion to call the English troops "Kippers". Out of its recent battles, the Division had acquired a sense of its importance, and on Crete there was born that feeling of pride in the Division, as opposed to pride in units of it, which meant a great deal in later days. This promoted friendship and when time permitted there was much visiting among other units.

Thus, outside the real concern of war, the time passed not unpleasantly. The Ordnance Corps functioned and men who had not changed out of clothing for weeks felt gratefully the ecstasy of wearing new and clean gear. An issue of mess tins made it possible to throw away the noisome Meat and Vegetable tins which had had to serve so many men as mugs and dishes. The Kiwi Concert Party and the 5 Brigade Band arrived from Egypt in response, it was whispered in scandal, to a signal asking for entertainments for the troops. On 7 May Col Andrew made an aerial recce of the battalion positions and on his orders much attention was given to the proper camouflaging of weapon pits and of tracks to Coy HQs. Consequent upon the evacuation to hospital of Captain Laws, Captain Bourke and Lt Laurence, changes were made in some officer appointments. Captain Crarer took command of B Coy, Captain Johnson of C and Lt G G Beaven of HQ. Lt McAra was transferred temporarily from the mortar platoon to A Coy and two officers, Lts Wadey and Forster, were detached to command a small force supplied by the unit for the guarding of the RAF radar station at Xamoudokhori. There were no company 2 I/Cs and the signals, anti-aircraft, mortar and six rifle platoons were commanded by NCOs.

One officer, Lt G Sladde, of B Coy, had not managed to escape with the unit from Greece. He had been given up as a probable prisoner-of-war and there was, in consequence, rejoicing when he returned to the unit after an adventurous journey in a caique, or small sailing vessel, from Greece. None of the party in the craft had a knowledge of marine navigation and Lt Slade was principally responsible for performing the feat of steering by the sun and stars to Crete.

Until 10 May, the German air attack had been intermittent and, so far as could be seen, not obviously planned. As from that day, the air bombardment steadily mounted in strength. Suda Bay was much attacked and ships were sunk or damaged in number. On 11-12 May, in the full moon, a night attack was launched about Maleme and one bomber glided with engines silenced while the tail-gunner strafed the area. On 13 May there was a heavy raid on the airfield. On 17 May, Stuka dive-bombers were reported for the first time. Between 1600 and 1930 hours on 18 May, battalion positions were strongly strafed and bombed and a death and two woundings occurred in C Coy. On 19 May, battalion positions were attacked at dawn, midday and at 1635 and 1912 hours and in one attack 150 bombs exploded in the area of C and D Coys within five minutes. On that day, the last serviceable Fulmar was destroyed on the aerodrome and the last Hurricane in the air, but for some days before that, the German attacks had been unimpeded. Meantime, the entire defenced area had been subjected to attack from day to day. As in Greece, the airplane was the terror weapon. Its effect on morale was liable to be considerable.

It could be said, on 19 May, that much had been done in the 24 days since the landing. It was not possible to feel that everything had been done, or that all shortages of equipment had been made up. The poverty of communications within the battalion, the need of reliance upon flags and runners forward of Battalion HQ and upon an inefficient radio set with weak batteries and a telephone to Brigade, was sorely distressing. A multiplicity of commands for the units charged with the first defence of the airfield was potentially a weakness. Too, the provision of only one minefield on the airfield was inadequate..

Nevertheless, the shortages were general and it could be said that worthy attempts to remedy the situation had been made. Within the unit, use had been made of weight Browning MGs taken from disabled aircraft. Each rifleman had been issued with 100 rounds of SAA. Each coy had six Bren LMGs and six Thompson sub-machine guns. Barbed wire which did not, unfortunately, include dannert, had been laid in quantity for all-round defence.

Most satisfying, too, was the provision, at a fairly late stage of preparation, of two "I" tanks commanded by a British officer. These had been dug in in the rising ground behind the airfield for use as required.

With regroupings, the defensive plan on 19 May had become as follows:- Brigade dispositions were the 21st Battalion in immediate support of the 22nd, 23 Battalion at Platania, and 28 Maori Battalion north of 21 Battalion. Later, 21 and 23 Battalions changed places because of the numerical weakness of 21 Battalion. 4 NZ Brigade was to the east of 5 Brigade and beyond it there were Australian and English formations, the latter including Royal Marines. The defending force of about 26,000 included 11 battalions of ill-equipped Greeks and there were a great many line-of-communication troops in the force.

The Battalion dispositions were, from right to left: HQ Coy to the east about the village of Maleme; B Coy on a road running from the airfield to Vlakheronitissa, which was behind the next ridge; A Coy west of B on higher ground than B; D Coy from a bridge over the Tavronitis on the coastal road south along the river bed to a valley at right angles to the river; C Coy on the western outskirts of the airfield, with one platoon just to the south of the airfield about the middle of it.

The principal elements in the supporting forces were: Ten Bofors 17mm anti-aircraft guns sited about the aerodrome (of which Brigadier E. Puttick, divisional commander vice General Freyberg, had written, "They seem horribly exposed... I am afraid they will not last long."); two 3-inch guns on a high feature to the south and two 4-inch coastal-defence type guns on a slope nearer the southern edge of the airfield; artillery three miles eastward comprising 3.7 howitzers and French 75mm and Italian 75/27 guns' a section (two guns) of Vickers MG with each HQ and D Coys.

The AA and field artillery were under different command which were finally responsible to Major-General Weston, RM, whose headquarters was several miles east. A detachment with the two 4-inch guns had five Lewis guns and 15 Don Five telephone sets with several miles of cable, but these valuable pieces of equipment were not available to the co-ordinated defence of the field.

There was peace and quiet in the battalion area on the night of 19 May.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER 11a

[Original, unedited text that was cut from edited version]

On the day before the battle, the defensive situation of which the battalion was a part was as follows.

Each rifleman had 100 rounds of SAA. Each coy had six Brens and six Thompson sub-machine guns. Eight Browning HMGs had been converted from unserviceable aircraft. HQ Coy was grouped to the east of and about the village of Maleme. B Coy was sited on high ground overlooking a road running south from Maleme. To a village Vlakheronitissa, lying behind a ridge overlooking the field. No company position was closer to the nearest edge of the airfield than 1000 or 1200 yards. A Coy lay west of B Coy on higher ground and its northern front was within about 600 yards of the airfield. D Coy, to the left of A, had positions extending from a bridge over the Tavronitis river at the south-west corner of the airfield and along the riverbed southwards for 1000 yards. C Coy covered the airfield proper, No 14 platoon covering the southern edge, No. 15 platoon the western edge and No. 13 the coastal sector at the mouth of the Tavronitis. A section listening post was established on the Tavronitis 500 yards south of D Coy, and on high ground. Lt M Wadey and elements of HQ Coy were on guard at the RAF RDF station at a village, Xamoudokhori, 1000 yards south-east of Vlakheronitissa and 600 or 700 yards south of B Coy's nearest position. Battalion HQ was sited in A Coy's area, in the forward slope overlooking the airfield. To the south was Point 107. Covered by A Coy and tactically the most important of the various features in immediate proximity to the airfield. It was on this point that the 4" coastal defence guns were sited.

In the brigade dispositions, 21 Battalion, much weakened from its disasters in Greece, covered high ground extending from about 500 yards east of Xamoudokhori to a larger village, Kondomari, which lay about 1500 yards south of the main coastal road. To the north, between Kondomari and the road, lay 23 Battalion, with detachments of HQ and D Coy about 500 yards south-east of Maleme and covering the road or track leading southwest from the coastal road to Xamoudokhori. Other coys lay a few hundred yards east covering a track leading south to the village of Dhaskaliana, a collection of houses 500 yards to the south of the coastal road and on the track to Kondomari. 23 Battalion HQ and other elements lay between Dhaskaliana and Kondomari. About 1000 yards to the east, the 7 Fd Coy, NZE, were extended to cover a wadi, or gulch crossed by the road. The Field Punishment Centre - in which members of the battalion happened to be guests - was a few yards south of the Engineer Coy and a detachment of the 19th Army Troops Coy covered across bridge another dry gulch, and the road junction leading to the considerable village of Modion 1000 yards south of the road. 5 FD Amb was located in Modion. Still further to the east lay D Coy, 28 Maori Battalion, covering another bridge and the forward element, by several hundred yards, of the Battalion itself, part of which was grouped about Platania, a village built about the coastal road itself, and part about 5 Brigade HQ, somewhat to the south of the road. The already attenuated brigade was stretched over about 8000 yards from the Tavronitis river to Platania and at the deepest point, between the coast and Xamoudokhori, the depth was about 4000 yards. The coastal road was within 400 or 500 yards of the sea at all parts of the defended area except the Maleme airfield itself, where the road was about 800 yards from the sea.

Four thousand yards east of Platania lay Galatos, a substantial village 1500 yards south of the main road and overlooked by various points - Red Hill, Tuin Hill, Wheat Hill, Pink Hill, Cemetery Hill, Church Hill - which came to be important in later, tigerish fighting. This for the time being was the preserve of a Composite Battalion of Oakes Force, a force some Arty, some

ASC and stragglers, commanded for some time after its inception by Major RF Oakes. A mile or more to the south, covering the Aghya valley road, lay a Greek Regt and three miles west of this 8 Greek Regt had detachments grouped about the road and particularly sited to defend Aghya reservoir. This, to the north, was also the concern of Div Cav. And finally, five miles east of Galatos, lay Canea, the city of Crete, a frequent target for enemy bombardment and the concern for some time being of 4 Brigade. Maleme lay some 16 or 17 miles west of Canea. Suda Bay, Retima, Heraklion and the area east of Canea were defended by British or Australian forces. 5 Brigade, and the 22 Battalion particularly, was the westernmost of the defending forces, except that a Greek regt which had included NZ officers and NCOs defended Kisamos Kastelli, on the tip of the island 15 miles to the west.

Almost the whole of this defended area was torn by the rugged foothills and steep, deep wadis of the mountainous heart of Crete. Over the generations, terraced vineyards and groves of olives had been planted to win the scant fruit of this barren land. Tactically, the advantage was with the attacking force. Cover was ample. Defensive preparations could be remarked without difficulty – as early as 7 May, Col Andrew was much disturbed by the tracks and earthworks he saw in an aerial reconnaissance – and the 26,000 defenders of the island were so thin on the ground that the establishment of a firm base by the attackers was inevitable. The coastal road, the one good road, lay open to bombardment. There was little transport and some of it was not in first-class condition. The men had been fed well, but Suda Port had been bombed with such vigour and efficiency that the provision of ration dumps had been hindered.

The area of immediate concern to the battalion likewise favoured the attacking force. To the immediate west, the narrow Tavronitis River meandered through a wide shingle bed to the sea. To the east, there were foothills and gullies. To the south, the land rose steeply toward the mountains. The rising ground was freely terraced and even from high ground it was difficult to see clearly. The landing strip measured 1100 yards by 150 yards and at its south-western corner contained an administration building erected for the Royal Air Force. Slightly to the east of the crest of Pt 107 were sited two 3" AA guns. Forward of the feature and between A and D Coy areas were sited the two 4" guns.

On 1 May, the battalion strength was 27 officers and 597 other ranks. By 19 May, there had been reductions because of casualties and sickness. A and C Coys and B and D Coys had changed places with each other. Consequent upon the evacuation to hospital of Captains Laws and Bourke and Lt Laurence, changes were made in the officer appointments, Major Hanton was in command of A Coy, Captain K Crarer of B Coy, Captain R Johnson of C, Captain Campbell of D and Lt GG Beaven of HQ. Lt McAra was transferred temporarily from the mortar platoon to a platoon of A Coy and two officers, Lts Wadey and Forster, were detached to command a force supplied by the unit for the guarding of the RAF radar station at Xamoudokhori. The signals, anti-aircraft, mortar and six rifle platoons were commanded by NCOs. There were no company 2 i/cs.

One officer, Lt G Slade, of B Coy, had not managed to escape with the unit from Greece and there was rejoicing when he returned after a most adventurous journey in a Greek caique. None of the party in the vessel had a knowledge of marine navigation and Lt Slade was principally responsible for the steering by the sun and stars to Crete. It was sad that, after performing the soldierly act of returning at the first opportunity to his unit, he should have failed to survive the battle. He was wounded and captured and the German plane bearing him to Greece was shot down.

At this fateful hour of 19 May, the men of the battalion, as of the whole of the force, were apprehensive of the immediate future. They had gathered a good conceit of themselves from the fighting in Greece, but shortages of men and material were everywhere apparent and were accentuated by the intelligence reports of the enemy intentions. Moreover, memories of harassing times at the hands of the Luftwaffe were recent and bitter and with each new day in Crete there had been increasingly hostile enemy air activity. Man for man, the Allied troops might know themselves better than the German; but when the enemy joined more and superior machines to men, the disparity was plain and disturbing. The pickets who stood duty in the battalion on the night of 19-20 May relished the silence and the soft air and the sweet peace of Mediterranean night. The darkness relieved the tension which was the inevitable concomitant of each succeeding day in Crete.

--oo0oo--

CHAPTER TWELVE

20 May, 1941

Holocaust

The morning of May 20 was fine and clear and promised a lovely day. The visibility was at least 20 miles. As with the night, so with the dawn: all was calm and peaceful. The mountains jutted into the silence and there was a soft stir of movement in the sea.

Soon after 0600 hours, the air raid sirens sounded and the "morning hate" began. Three flights of Dornier medium bombers made runs across the airfield and altogether dropped about 100 bombs on the perimeter. At 0700 hours, there was further bombing and strafing.

This normally was the end of the "hate" and the troops rose out of the slit trenches and moved about and made preparations for breakfast. But the unusual was betokened when the warning sound again and 24 heavy bombers, followed soon by larger formations with fighter escort, made runs over the 2 NZEF area.

It was plain enough that unusual was a mild word. For an hour and a half there was bombing and machine-gunning. The vines and trees over a wide area became torn and blackened. The stink of HE was prevalent. With booming and crashing and trembling of the earth, the fury of the assault mounted.

About 0900 hours, a number of gliders, each containing 10 or 12 men landed in the area of the river bed on the battalion's left flank. About the same time, formations of JU 52 three-motored planes crossed the coast a mile or two west of the airfield and making a sweep thundered over the ridge between A and B Coys. From heights of 500 feet and less, they spilled what seemed to be unceasing streams of parachutists, black in the sunlight, intent upon war.

Now was the battle joined in violence. From their slit trenches, riflemen, Bren gunners and Tommy gunners engaged the enemy and in the fierce waves of fire the descending paratroopers died in number. But there were more planes and more paratroopers. From the river-bed, the glider-borne troops put up a stream of covering fire. Within a short time, the German fire-power, with its high proportion of automatic machine pistols and Spandau light machine-guns, mortars and 75mm pieces, was greater than that of the defence.

As the attack developed, it was seen that there were five targets. The first was on the flank of D Coy, in the river bed.. By 1000 hours, No. 18 platoon on the right was forced back from its

forward posts to a tighter perimeter. By that time, the enemy was in possession of the RAF administrative building nearby.

The second drive was on C Coy from the area of D Coy and the RAF building. No. 15 platoon was exposed to fire from almost the rear and its left flank was penetrated with the aid of mortar and machine-gun fire from the Tavronitis. All posts of the platoon were overrun before noon and only one man escaped.

The third drive was against HQ Coy. Enemy dropped in the streets and on the roofs of houses in Maleme. At 1000 hours men were seen in the coy area, but there was no certainty that they were New Zealanders. The fourth drive was on the slopes east of the Tavronitis, near the bridge and behind Nos. 15 and 18 platoons. The fifth drive was along the ridge west of the Battalion area between D Coy to the east and A Coy to the north.

In all the attacks, the enemy fought well and with a high degree of efficient coordination.

At about 1000 hours there was a lull in the air bombardment. The sorties were soon renewed and the defence suffered from the efficient coordination of the air and ground forces.

The losses to the enemy in the initial attack were great and as the fighting developed they continued to be high. Reinforcements were put in by troop-carrying planes which landed on the beach soon after midday.

At 1330 hours, soon after receiving news that the forward posts of A Coy had been made untenable, Col Andrew asked for the services of the counter-attacking force. The fate of HQ Coy was uncertain. C and D Coys on the river flank were under heavy pressure. The situation was complicated generally by the unreliable communications. Contact with Brigade was faint by 1000 hours and as the fight developed messages to coys had in many cases to be taken by patrol.

At 1500 hours, a local counter-attack was made. Supported by two tanks, Lt Donald led a force of about 25 men down the road toward the western fringe of the airfield and the bridge across the Tavronitis. The enemy was clearly dismayed by the appearance of the tanks and the first reached the line of the riverbed with the second in support a short distance behind.

The events which followed were, in the circumstances, tragic. The motor of the first tank failed and could not be made to go. The crew later had to surrender. The second tank could not fire: the ammunition, at this late hour, was found to be too big. Moreover, the traversing mechanism in the turret broke down.

There was nothing that the infantry could do. A total of about 200 enemy had been counted in the area near the bridge. Withdrawal accordingly was made. Ten men of the counter-attack were killed or wounded. Lt Donald was wounded.

The fierce fighting continued. At 1800 hours, the situation was not good. Enemy forces were fairly thick in the valley between Battalion HQ and HQ Coy. C Coy appeared to have lost two platoons and D Coy one and the other two platoons of D Coy had suffered exhausting losses. The enemy were working round and over the ridge to the rear of Battalion HQ and A Coy and the coy was becoming badly pressed.

Among the supporting arms, the machine-gun section supporting D Coy had suffered severe casualties and the loss of one gun. The other section near Maleme was out of action. The 3", 4" and Bofors guns had all been put out of action. The battalion's two 3" mortars, after stout work were unserviceable.

It was calculated that 1800 enemy troops had been landed about the airfield. Many had been killed, but many still were fighting. The battalion itself had suffered heavy losses.

Because of the weak communications, the whereabouts of the counter-attacking battalion could not be discovered. After much consideration, Col Andrew decided upon withdrawal of the rest of the unit to B Coy's lines. Col Andrew advised Brigade that unless orders to the contrary were received he intended to consolidate the rest of the unit with B Coy, the coy having suffered less than the four others. A reply was not received. At about 2100 hours, the time set for the move, a coy of 23 Battalion reached A Coy's lines and the CO and a section went forward with Lt McAra on reconnaissance. Enemy were encountered and in a short fire-fight Lt McAra was killed. The OC then made contact with Battalion HQ and with his force withdrew.

Upon consolidation on B Coy's ridge, Col Andrew discovered that the enemy's push to the east was endangering the line of communication to 21 and 23 Battalions. If the push succeeded, the battalion would be surrounded. There were other momentous factors to weigh. With the withdrawal to the east ridge, the enemy was now in possession of the higher ground lately occupied by A Coy. It was certain that, upon the morrow that the enemy would apply saturation bombardment to the new, restricted area. The grave questions for Col Andrew to decide were whether to accept the certainty of many more casualties and probable surrounding and capture, or to withdraw.

The decision to withdraw was made. By dawn, the remnant of the battalion, of a force of 250 all ranks, was in 23 Battalion's area. During withdrawal at 0100 hours, elements of the Maori Battalion reached the outskirts of Maleme.

The field had been given up – but not without honour. A section leader of C Coy, L/Cpl JT Mehaffey, died to save his men. When an enemy grenade landed in the trench occupied by his section, Mehaffey jumped upon it and stood his ground. He died in the evening from his wounds. He was recommended for a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Lt Slade, badly wounded, asked for a tin of milk and ordered his men to leave him. They went, knowing his end was near, but reluctant not to leave a brave man.

Pte J Hayes, a signaller, was told as he set out from Battalion HQ for C Coy that it was believed that enemy occupied the olive grove of the Coy HQ. Hayes shrugged his roll of field cable higher on his shoulder. "That's my bloody job to find out," he said, and kept on his way.

Sjt Flashoff was badly wounded and not rescued until after dark. In spite of his pain, he broke his bayonet in two, dismantled his rifle down to the firing pin and threw the parts away.

As Pte Donoghue walked with his hands up into the RAP, he said to Sjt G Dillon, who was inside: "I am a prisoner." Dillon looked at the German. "Any more about? No? Right." With a bound he and Donoghue were at the enemy and in a trice they had taken him prisoner.

Of the coys, B suffered least; the term was relative, for no one took much pleasure in the bombing throughout the day.

A Coy took part in the general fire against the paratroopers and soon afterward felt the first pressure of the enemy thrust. This exploited the boundary with D Coy.

C Coy was under heavy pressure from the early morning and sustained so many casualties that only 27 men were left when withdrawal was made. By that time, the remnant was within a small defended area upon which the enemy made a successful assault just after the order for

withdrawal had been given. As the enemy entered the area from the west, the coy withdrew to the east, each man in stockinged feet.

Like C Coy, D Coy made a number of tactical withdrawals to a tighter perimeter. It did not receive the order to withdraw, but on the order of Captain Campbell the coy was formed into three parties, each of which had instructions to move back to the 21-23 Battalion area. Capt Campbell with one party reached that area and rejoined the unit. 2/Lt JWC Craig and No. 17 platoon moved south along the river and by ill-luck encountered the enemy in force. Only four members of the platoon escaped capture. The third party was led by Sjt GE Sargeson and included mostly walking wounded. By moving south and east, it escaped the enemy and reached Sphakia in time to join the battalion before embarkation.

HQ Coy was soon isolated. Pte M Wan, a signaller, was despatched by Lt Clapham with a message for the CO. Wan could not get through and joined up eventually with a party of the coy which was making its way to Lt Wakey's detachment at Xamoudokhori. Lt Wadey was cheerful himself when the party arrived. "We've enough ammo to carry on the fight and blow all Germany to hell," and, in fact the detachment fought bravely to hold the post before casualties and the greatly-superior strength of the enemy caused capture. An odd consequence for Wan was that he managed to retain Lt Clapham's signal, together with a map he had taken off a dead German, through four years of prison camp. Both were concealed at the end in the wooden sole of a boot. The map accurately detailed the battalion positions and described the methods for ground and air co-operation.

There were two instances, both connected with the push between A and D Coys, of the use of captured Allied personnel as shields for attacks. In the morning, a small party of RAF personnel was forced ahead of an enemy group. A party under Major Leggat killed a machine gunner supporting the advance and repulsed the attack. The loss of the RSM, WO I Purnell, was suffered in the skirmish. At midday, a larger force used a group of between 40 and 50 RAF and Royal Marine personnel as a shield. Again the attack was broken and the Allied personnel were released.

Officers and men of British and Australian detachments gave notable help during the day. Three officers and 40 men of RAF Fleet Air Arm units joined the battalion soon after the attack began, but for lack of arms many had to withdraw. An English officer insisted on joining Lt Donald's counter-attack and was wounded in the leg during the fight.

A multiplicity of commands tended to reduce the value of the supporting arms. For reasons which were not available, the 4" gun detachment found itself unable to engage targets in the river bed area. The 3" AA guns were unable to fire with full effect because of the low height at which the troop-carrying planes came into the target area. The MGs fought well, but the secs sustained heavy casualties in almost the first moments of the attack.

Of all the causes leading to the withdrawal from the airfield, the communication weaknesses were perhaps paramount. The "fog of war" descended as the main attack began. The glider-borne landings in the Tavronitis were an obvious target for the artillery, but from the beginning the FOO was out of touch with his guns. Contact forward to the coys and back to Brigade was haphazard. In such circumstances, direction of the battle became extremely difficult. Reliable radio sets down to platoon level might have made a great difference.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER TWELVE

Early Version

As with the night, so with the morning: All was calm and peaceful. Visibility was at least 20 miles. The mountains jutted into the silence. There was a soft stir of movement in the sea.

The prosaic tasks of the day began. These now included shelter from the morning hate. At 0600 hours, there flights of Dornier medium bombers made runs across the Maleme field and dropped about 100 bombs. At 0700 hours, there was further bombing. According to routine, this was the end of the enemy's peculiar method of hailing the smiling morn. Preparations were made for breakfast and what one officer euphuistically described as matutinal tasks.

Then, out of the silence, came a throb, palpable in the air and earth. The ghastly wail of sirens sounded again. The noise grew greater, surging toward a crescendo. The ground pulsed as with an earthquake. The sound moved relentlessly forward and as it reached the field enveloped the tangible world. History said that in the first flight there were only 24 heavy machines. There could have been a hundred, a thousand. It made no difference. They were there. Their bomb doors opened. They spewed out their guts – and the slow, measureless, monstrous sound of bombing rolled over the plain and in the hills. There came more planes, fighters to strafe and bombers to harass and destroy. The dust and smoke rose from the protesting earth. Visibility was reduced to a few yards. The flash of an exploding bomb was seen dimly and the scream of shrapnel pieces sometimes seemed more pregnant of disaster than the explosion itself. And still there were more planes and dust clouds that rose higher and blackening vines and a constant trembling of the earth, almost imperceptible from a bomb a distance away and violent from one at hand. And then the bullets, unseen, but heard in whispers, or cracking directly overhead or in an eerie scream from a ricochet.

It was estimated that 3000 bombs, some of 250lb HE, mostly of an anti-personnel nature, were dropped in the main assault. No eye-witness was quite sure of time or sequence. But these things were not of much import. First there was the sketchy hate. Then the assault from the air. Then, toward 0900 hours, a swishing of motorless gliders slipping down to land, principally in the bed of the Tavronitis. Then, almost simultaneously, formations of tri-motored JU 52 planes which crossed the coast a mile or two to the west wheeled over the area and at heights of 300 to 500 feet spilled their contents, an apparently unceasing stream of parachutists.

Now was the battle of Maleme fairly formed. Men who had lain in slit trenches rose up and violently offered opposition to the invasion. Tommy and Bren guns chattered, rifles cracked, Vickers and Browning machine guns hammered out a greeting; men climbed olive trees so that they might better engage the targets. As each new wave of paratroopers descended, there swept out a merciless hail of small arms fire.

And as the dust and smoke filtered away, Germans died in numbers, in the air, as they touched the ground and tore at their harness, on the ground as they scurried for shelter. The dead sprawled grotesquely in the olive branches or slumped shapelessly upon the ground,. And the wounded sometimes cried out in their pain.

But always there seemed to be more parachutists or gliders swishing in with their loads of ten or 12 men. They were valorous, the enemy, and well-organised. And despite the drumming fire of opposition, they began to collect in groups and to offer fight from the ground. Their section-leaders, well-trained, made use of cover and deployment. Gradually, and then quite distinctly,

the first phase of bombardment and landing gave way to the second, the assault upon the battalion perimeter.

The bombardment had cut what telephone lines there were and the poverty-stricken radio equipment was behaving with exasperating inefficiency. No one seemed to have an eye for visual signals. Runners became casualties and there were few cases of messages getting through. As the second phase began, then, the defensive situation was confused because of the unreliable or fragmentary reports. This steadily deepened throughout the day and finally became the decisive factor. Meantime, it was of much service to the enemy. There could be no proper coordination of the localised resistance offered by companies while comms were defective.

With the emergence of the second phase, it became clear that the enemy had landed a considerable force of gliders, estimated to number 45, in the area of the river bed. Other gliders came down more haphazardly, and though there were heavy casualties among their personnel, the remainder were well prepared to fight. Almost every man had a Schmeisser machine pistol or a Spandau light machine gun.

Estimates of the number of paratroopers for the most part were generous. HQ Coy considered that about 250 landed in its area. Whether or not that number was excessive, most were killed. The wave here, a force of about the eastern end of the Tavronitis bridge, another group on the northern and north eastern slopes of the ridges occupied by D Coy on the left and A Coy in the middle of the battalion zone and, finally a force to the south, in the area of Vlakheronitissa and extending to Xamoudokhori, seemed to absorb most of the paratroopers, apart from stragglers who fell into outlying areas and who were mostly shot.

The first push of consequence was at the junction of D Coy, south of the coastal road, and 15 Pl, which had the impossible perimeter of 1400 yards extending from north of the bridge toward the mouth of the river. North east of the eastern end of the bridge and not far distant from it was a concrete building used for administration purposes by the Royal Air Force detachment at the airfield. In the area of the building, just north of the coastal road, was a tented camp for the RAF personnel. It had been vexatiously apparent from the first that defence of this area would be made difficult by the camp and the building, firstly because fields of fire could not be laid across it and secondly because the RAF personnel, having little or no infantry experience, had only lately begun to receive instruction in small arms and were in no condition to act as experienced soldiers.

[pages missing]

A second group landed south of the battalion area between Vlakheronitissa and Xamoudokhori and began to push at the flank on the landward side of the field. The largest group landed near or with the glider-borne troops and thrust against C and D Coys. The whole of the divisional area had been plastered in the bombing, but the saturation point...

The stress was soon upon the known communication weaknesses. The 18 set to Brigade HQ was functioning weakly but erratically. Because of the infiltration of the enemy, messages to coys had sometimes to be undertaken by patrols. The FOO was out of touch with his guns and at the suggestion of Col Andrew left for the gun line with the object of bringing down fire on the river bed. The section of machine guns on the ridge above the bridge was soon overwhelmed and the other section near Maleme was pinned down and fired little. The 4" guns did not fire. Three officers and 40 men of the RAF and Fleet Air Arm gallantly joined the

defence, but there were few arms among them and most soon had to withdraw through the battalion lines.

As the paratroop attack developed, it was seen that there were five target areas. The first was the flank of D Coy, in the river bed. By 1000 hours, No 18 platoon on the right had to give up its forward posts and withdraw to a tighter perimeter. By that time, the enemy was in possession of the RAF administrative building close to the company area. The send was on C Coy from the area of D Coy and the building. No 15 Platoon was exposed to fire almost from the rear and the pl's left flank was penetrated, the assaulting enemy being assisted by the fire of the mortars and machine guns from Tavronitis. By noon, all posts were overrun and only one man of the platoon escaped death, wounding or capture.

The third push was against HQ Coy at Maleme. Enemy dropped in the streets and on the roofs of houses in the village. At 1000 hours, men were seen in the coy area, but there was no certainty that they were New Zealanders. The fourth push was on the slopes east of the Tavronitis bridge between and behind Nos. 15 and 18 pls. The fifth was along the ridge west of the Battalion area between D Coy to the east and A Coy to the north. In all of these attacks, the enemy troops fought fiercely and well.

At about 1000 hours there was a lull in the air activity, but the sorties were soon renewed in strength. The air and ground co-operation of the enemy forces was exact. A new development was the landing of 75mm guns west of the river.

Lt Slade, badly wounded, asked for a tin of milk and ordered his men to leave him. They went, knowing his end was near, but reluctant not to leave a brave man.

[Pages missing]

Of dust and smoke raised by the enemy air bombardment. Within a distressingly short time of the opening of the enemy attack on May 20, the battalion's air link with Brigade HQ became weak and, hours later, when the CO sought to apprise the Brigade Comd of the weakness of the battalion's position, failed altogether. And, within the 24 hours which determined the fate of Crete, Major Leggat, bearing urgent messages of the battalion's retirement from the airfield, had to rouse a sleeping brigadier who knew nothing of this vital step. In his absence, the important step was to restore the situation. So in the gathering light of a spring morning which might have been lovely but for the hellish implications of daylight, three commanders, a brigade major, and other officers in miserable conference tried to decide upon was and means. There were personal antagonisms, even animosities, among them. All were very tired. None cared to accept another as the loco brigadier. The obvious act, a gathering of forces to fight immediately for the Maleme positions, was apparent to all. And yet, for want of one decisive voice which by a word might - it is too much to say that it would - which might have changed the entire situation of the island, the forces remained static, were fiercely bombarded, had casualties and eventually, and not without bitterness, protestingly yielded ground until within a gruelling fortnight the Navy once more had come to the rescue. It seemed the final irony that the inadequacy, from being a mixture of extraneous things, at last reached into the heart of the defending force.

--oo00oo--

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

21 May – 1 Jun

Retreat to Spharkia

Col Andrew reported to HQ 5 Brigade at 0500 hours on 21 May and returned immediately with the Brigade Major to co-ordinate the defence plan of 21, 22 and 23 Battalions. Battalion HQ was established at Kondimari and the unit was divided into two coys, these for a short time being placed under command 21 and 23 Battalions respectively.

The sporadic fighting of the night grew again in volume with the dawn when the enemy air bombardment was violently renewed. The detachment guarding the radar station was heavily attacked with dive bombers and ME 110s and Lt Wadey was wounded. Troop-carrying planes began to land on the airfield. Charges for the defending artillery had been blown up in strafing and the field could not be effectively engaged. Nor could much be done to stop the enemy MGs and mortars set up near Maleme bringing down effective harassing fire.

At midday, there was a welcome sound and sight when eight RAF planes appeared over the field and dropped bombs, but there were no planes when the enemy, all through the afternoon, relentlessly probed and pushed against the Allied force.

With the darkness, a divisional counter-attack by 20 and 28 Battalions was to be made. Before it occurred, flashes of light and rolls of gunfire spoke of a naval battle. This was the intended seaborne invasion; but only in dribs and drabs was the tale pieced together of how the Navy had broken the invasion with fearful casualties to the German force.

The counter-attack was not put in at midnight, the intended time, and it was nealt dawn when 28 Battalion crossed the start line. The Maoris swept forward and, ignoring terrible casualties, reached the edge of the field. When 20 Battalion made its move, it was almost day and the advantage was with the defence. The heavy losses suffered and the difficulty of movement in the daylight made the situations reached untenable and the attackers fell back to 21 and 23 Battalions, with 20 Battalion on the right of 23 and 28 between 21 and 23.

Support for the main trust was given on the left flank at 0630 hours when Captain Campbell commanded one part of a force and Captain Truesdale, of 21 Battalion, the other, in a counter attack which swept forward with bayonet past the radar station at Xamoudokhori, past Vlakheronitissa, to the valley of the Tavronitis. Here too, the position became untenable with a flank exposed and the force had to fall back. This was the period of crisis and the resolution in favour of the enemy decided the trend of all of the subsequent fighting.

The enemy now had placed his forces in two groups, the first operating along the flat coastal strip and the second among the foothills. Reserves were built up by landings of troop-carrying planes on the field. Advances were generally preceded by localised strafing. In the afternoon, the attacks in the two sectors increased in weight and there was infiltration in the hills toward Ay Marina, five miles toward Suda Bay.

At 0445 hours on 23 May, the two coys of 22 Battalion having reverted to comd, orders to withdraw towards Plataniyas were received. The intention was that 21 and 22 Battalions would occupy high ground facing towards Ay Marina, the right flank being 4 Brigade and the left 23 Battalion. The move was not completed in darkness because of the late arrival of the order, but casualties suffered from strafing were few in spite of observation planes.

The enemy, rapidly following up, continued to exert heavy pressure. 5 Brigade had now become reduced to about 600 effective troops. 1700 hours a Divisional order directed that it should move to a rest area to the rear of 4 Brigade which in turn ordered to hold a line running from the coast through Galatos to the Aghya Valley Road. 19 Australian Brigade was now on the right flank.

From Platania, the Battalion was ordered to continue withdrawal on the side south west of the junction of the Canea-Maleme-Galatos roads. The tasks were the defence of the Divisional HQ from paratroop attacks, the defence of the line of the ridge and counter-attack as required. The move to the rear was made in daylight in small parties moving in single file on the sides of the road, and the enemy air force did not discover it until most of the troops were in the new position.

The battalion strength was now just over 200. The ADMS estimated that in the first three days of the fighting divisional casualties amounted to 300 killed, 700 wounded and 300 missing, the total being 20% of the divisional forces of 6700 troops. After operating under the most difficult conditions with remarkable efficiency, the medical services were now gravely handicapped by the exhaustion of supplies of medical dressings.

Throughout 24 May, the battalion was in reserve. There was a heavy bombardment of Canea nearby. The next day, 25 May, was the first Sunday after Maleme. On the right of the Allied front, there was intense fighting and in the evening was fought one of the bloodiest and bravest fights of the war when 18 and 23 Battalions counterattacked and took Galatos. This was one of the few instances of the fighting in Crete where the enemy, in spite of his superiority of arms and numbers, was put to flight. The men of the two battalions went into the village with teeth bared.

A penalty of the withdrawal from the airfield had been the loss of about 25,000 rations held in a reserve dump. As a consequence, ration supplies from the rear, hindered in any case by the air arm, were now made with difficulty. To some extent, there was lack of food; and this, combined with fighting and weariness, had induced a strange quality, not far short of somnolence. Men resting during the march became almost comatose and had to make a great effort of will to move.

On 26 May, Force HQ directed that the defence of the front was now the joint responsibility of Major-General Weston and Brigadier Puttick. Before a common plan could be agreed upon by the two commanders, the enemy penetrated the right flank of 5 Brigade and began probing at the left flank of 19 Australian Brigade. About 1600 hours, penetration of the boundary between the Australians and the Greeks was reported. At 1430 hours, the Battalion received orders to prepare to counter-attack along the coast and a move was made to take up position. A Coy was heavily strafed while on the march and the move was cancelled when about half completed.

Brigadier Puttick recommended that English troops hold a line west of Suda Bay to allow the New Zealanders to pass through and reform. Major-General Weston regarded the approval of Force HQ as essential before he would agree and when, at 2200 hours, no information or orders had been received from Force, Brigadier Puttick ordered withdrawal to a line west of Suda. The line, running roughly north and south, was called 42nd Street. 19 Aus Brigade was on the right, 5 Brigade on the left and 4 Brigade in reserve.

The withdrawal began at 2215 hours. The Battalion guarded the bridge at the junction of the coast and valley roads until other units had passed through and reached an area south west of

Suda Bay about 0400 hours on 27 May. Half of the Battalion marched straight on to Stylos. In the new position, 19 Battalion was on the right of the Battalion with 28 Battalion beyond it, the Battalion being on the left flank.

At 1030 hours, the Germans put in fresh troops and attacked. The fighting grew fierce. The Brigade counter-attacked and men of the Battalion took part in another of the fierce thrusts against the enemy. This, too, was successful; not until the enemy had been pushed back 1½ miles was the advance stopped. The German reaction was heavy mortaring all along the front, but the thin line held.

In the afternoon, enemy with mule transport could be seen moving, unhindered by artillery fire, across the foothills towards Stylos, seven or eight miles to the east. The force was estimated at 800 and the objective of the drive seemed plainly to be the road leading over the mountains to Sphakia on the south coast. To check the danger, withdrawal to Stylos was ordered for 2200 hours and then put back to 2230. Silently, the defending force disengaged and marched through the night. Stylos was reached at 0400 hours. There was little rest. At 0630 hours, the enemy brought down fire and the position became so serious that at 0800 Division was asked for means to cover a withdrawal by day. None was available and the risk of movement by day was taken. The Battalion occupied defensive positions until 1100 hours and then moved as the rearguard force until 1230 hours, when it passed through Layforce, a commando battalion, which had taken up another defensive line with 2/8 Australian Battalion and personnel of 5 Brigade HQ.

From 1500 until 1800 hours, the Battalion rested. Then it began the march over the mountain road to Sphakia. The troops moved in single file on either side of the road. They were hungry and utterly weary. There seemed no end to the road as it wound steeply onward and upward to an unattainable crest name, with extreme aptness, Phantom Hill. Of all of the tests of Crete, this was perhaps the severest. These men, all men of the fight, were at the point of exhaustion. The wish to lie down, to rest, to sleep, regardless of fate, was maddeningly strong. Yet on and on they trudged, higher and higher; and, somehow, the strange strength which adversity breeds in a community carried them on. "The discipline on the march was a credit to the Brigade," the 5 Brigade War Diary commented.

About 0200 hours on 29 May, the Battalion gained the crest of the pass and after marching on for a couple of hours crawled into shelter by the roadside and spent the clock around. 23 Battalion remained at the crest on guard.

A correspondent of the time laconically noted that the enemy air force now did not do much more than occasional strafing, the main effort having been turned against shipping. To confound him, a force of 60 machines appeared at 1800 hours and bombed Sphakia.

Not to be immediately in the zone of such an attack was cause for some rejoicing. There was even better news. Col Andrew returned from a conference at Brigade with the information that the Battalion was to be evacuated on the following night, 31-21 May.

Escape! There was sweetness in the thought. Crete long since had lost its charm.

All day of 30 May, the Battalion was under cover of clumps of pines on the rocky hillside not far from Sphakia. The rest of the Brigade was nearby, 19 Australian Brigade and Layforce being to the rear in position. The enemy had grimly followed up each successive withdrawal and once more he was barking at the heels of the withdrawing force. At 1400 hours, SA [small arms] and mortar fire began coming over the crest of the pass and in the Battalion area men instinctively

took cover as a mortar bomb came whistling in. It failed to explode and for some reason there were no others.

One “dud” was bad. A second momentarily seemed calamitous. Col Andrew went off again to another conference and returned. Soon his words spread about. The evacuation of the Battalion was to be cancelled. 4 Brigade was to go instead. There was no assurance that there would be ships to take the Brigade away after 4 Brigade had gone.

The Battalion really had not been long enough in Egypt to use with authority that invaluable word, “Maaleesh” (“Never mind – no matter”), with which the Arabs suffered ailments and arrows of outrageous fortune. Yet this was the situation for it. Men shrugged and laughed and uttered the unconquerable battle cry of the Division. “Maaleesh, Dig,” they said. “She’ll be right.”

Such a reaction was made the apter when, as it turned out, the news proved not half as bad as it seemed. At 0500 hours on 31 May, the Battalion was on the march into Sphakia, past the lone dead Kiwi lying by his truck on the winding track; within a short time, in association with the 28 Battalion, it was clearing the village of stragglers and picketing the approaches. Three detachments of platoon strength took up positions to the north and north west of the port and the Battalion held the perimeter while 21 and 23 Battalions, the Australians, some Royal Marines and Layforce passed through.

The day of anxious waiting slowly passed. Just half an hour before this momentous May passed into June, in an atmosphere of confusion, the evacuation of the Brigade and the remaining Allied elements was begun. With Col Andrew acting as Beach Marshal, whalers and auxiliary landing craft which had been hidden along the coast took troops to the light cruiser Phoebe, the destroyers Jackal, Kimberley and Hotspur, and the minelayer Abdil. By 0230 hours, the last of the Battalion was aboard the Phoebe. Half an hour later, the convoy was on its way to Alexandria.

Other things might change. The more they changed, the more the Navy remained the same. Those sandwiches, those cups of tea and cocoa, those bowls of stew, the ineffable kindness, out peace into men who had suffered harshly and made them worshippers for all time of the Service,

The official 2 NZEF chronicle said: “The loss of the island may be attributable to two immediate causes – Firstly, to the ability of the enemy with a large number of aerodromes near the coast to maintain an uninterrupted air offensive against our troops, ground strafing during the day and bombing during the night; secondly, to our inability to recapture Maleme aerodrome in the face of the box barrage laid around it by the German air force. In the longer view, the loss may be attributable to our inability properly to reinforce and supply the island in the face of complete air superiority.”

--oo0oo--