

"Vrai et Fort"

22nd Battalion Association

AUCKLAND BRANCH

Telephone 664-792

Secretary:

C. W. Randerson

22ND BATTALION NEWS

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CHRISTMAS MESSAGE (From the President)

Friendship is a Gift that cannot be "Bought or Sold".
But its Value is Greater than a Lot of Gold.
Gold cannot give you Comfort or reach a Helping Hand.
So when you wish for a Gift, Be Thankful - it's the
True and Faithful Friend.

A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year.

George Matthews

EDITORIAL

The editor hopes that this Christmas edition of the Branch Circular will reach you before you go on holiday and joins with the President in wishing you the happiest of Christmases and a splendid New Year. As the years go by, the editor's task in finding suitable material for our Circulars does not get any easier but he makes no apology for covering some ground that we've been over before and hopes that the various contributions will evoke some nostalgic memories. And if the emphasis in this issue seems to lean towards the events of 1941 and 1942, that's because those who should have contributed recollections of other campaigns fell down on the job.

BRANCH REUNION - 4TH MARCH

This is just a preliminary announcement. Auckland Branch will hold its annual Reunion at ALEXANDRA PARK RACEWAY on Saturday, 4th March, 1978. And it will again be a LADIES NIGHT. But we promise the ladies that we will not repeat the mistake of leaving them to their own devices while the men wander off to hold a meeting in secret. We had a most enjoyable function at Alexandra Park in October and this venue obviously appeals to everyone. Apart from that, it is just about the only venue still available at a reasonable catering cost.

Please make a note of the date - full details in our next issue.

SATURDAY, 4TH MARCH, 1978

OUT WITH THE BOYES

Anyone who served with the Battalion in 1940 and 1941 will remember that the Army in those days was equipped with some rather inadequate weapons especially when it came to defence against armoured vehicles. In Libya in 1941, 8th Army was equipped with that all-purpose weapon, the 2-pounder tank and anti-tank gun. I don't want to knock the 2-pounder - within its limits, it was a most efficient weapon but how adequate was it against the well-armoured Mark III and Mark IV tanks of Rommel's Afrika Korps, mounting 50 MM. and 75 MM guns as their principal armament. Our tanks (Matildas and 'Crusaders') had the good old 2-pounder which, by comparison with what it was up against, could best be described as a pop-gun or a peashooter. Our tanks needed to get close enough to the enemy for the 2-pounder to be effective and, before they got that close, the superior fire-power of the Germans was capable of sending them up in flames. The German 88MM. was not then mounted on tanks but it was already in use as an anti-tank gun and it was not till the 6-pounder came along that 8th Army had anything nearly as effective. Our anti-tank regiment also had the 2-pounder and I have vivid recollections of the anti-tank boys going into action with it in Libya. They often fired the 2-pounder from its portee and, in desert warfare, both the 2-pounder and the 25-pounder frequently engaged tanks at point-blank range - never **very** comfortable for the gunners.

Coming down to Company and Platoon level, our anti-tank weapons were the 'sticky bomb' (probably a greater menace to the attacker than to his target) and that grand old weapon, the BOYES ANTI-TANK RIFLE. RON JONES gives his recollections of the infantryman's best (?) friend:-

"The Boyes Anti-Tank Rifle - for any infantryman, just the weapon to leave at home or in the pit. We were first issued with the Boyes in England. A very simple piece of mechanism which was expected to be a serious part of our weaponry. BOB JOHNS gave a valuable piece of tactical advice for its use:- "good for knocking down fences". This was a tribute to its weight. For the first time, we used the Boyes in anger in Greece at Olympus. CAM WEIR had sited it in its position beautifully - all set to knock out the panzers as they advanced up a 1,000 yard road which ran straight towards our position. Unfortunately, for some reason, PAT ANDREWS put me on the Boyes before the panzers arrived. Arrive they did. Before this, I fired a few shots at infantry some 600 and more yards away with unknown results. Also, the enemy had the audacity to bring up a huge pantechicon (ask CLES SMITH what pantechicon is) to a point 600 yards away and, as they manoeuvred it into position, it was like hitting the side of the proverbial barn. When this **truck** was almost off the road, it started to smoke and, like all smokers, it came to a nasty end - must have been loaded with ammunition.

"Then the panzers arrived. They came straight up the road to stop below us some 30 to 40 yards away. They couldn't see our positions as we were firing through scrub down to the road. Well, that was some battle; of course other platoons and companies were

Out With The Boyes (continued)

engaged but I only know of 11 Platoon's effort. There was a lot more to it than me and my Boyes but we were busy. The tanks were almost just in front of me and I perfected the technique of firing a shot and then dropping to the bottom of the pit, waiting while the shot and shell scattered about and, when it moved away, rise slowly - take aim - bang and down again. Those tanks must have had easily irritated crews because they always responded. We had only about 14 men in the platoon at Olympus and 5 of them were killed. If we had had a real anti-tank weapon, we could have had a feast of those tanks but the Boyes was hopeless except against soft transport.

"Somehow, B Company came into possession of a Boyes in Crete. BILL BAKER tried firing it from the hip at planes flying low. If he hit one, the .5 bullet would have gone straight through and would have left just a small hole, unless the pilot or some integral part got in the way.

"I don't remember our having the Boyes in the desert, so that is my record of it in action."

Footnote:- Yes, Ron, we did have the Boyes in the early desert fighting. It was still standard platoon issue, or at least it was in A Company. At MENASTIR (a few miles west of Bardia) in the Libya 1941 show, the Boyes Rifles on issue to 7 and 9 Platoons were in action on the coast road to Tobruk. CHAS. MERRYLEES had the Boyes in 9 Platoon and he had the strength and physique to tote it along on his shoulder as if it weighed no more than a walking stick. The only targets that came within range at Menastir were German trucks, staff cars and despatch riders and the range was pretty close-down to about 20 yards at times. Chas. and his counterpart in 7 Platoon had a ball taking potshots at these targets but history does not record how many 'kills' they were able to claim.

I do not recall the Boyes Rifle being around after Libya 1941. I think it might have been pensioned off about that time (Editor).

SHRAPNEL

While some of us were being evacuated from RIMINI in September, 1944, we were placed on a D.C.3 by courtesy of the U.S. Air Force. It being somewhat cold on the plane, I dug into my haversack to find my grey Kiwi jersey. I was a little surprised to find the garment riddled with holes from shrapnel that had failed to penetrate various other personal articles. Nevertheless, I put it on as it was better than nothing.

As I was being carried from the plane on a stretcher, a Tommy stretcher-bearer asked me what happened to my jersey.

"Shrapnel", I said

"EE" said the Tommy. "Did you have it on?"

(Scotty McMullan)

ARMY MEMORIAL MUSEUM AT WAIOURU

Branch members will have seen the press announcements about the establishment of an Army Memorial Museum at Waiouru. This project is being sponsored by the Army itself, with strong support from the R.S.A. and from the N.Z. Army Association (Inc.), and a public appeal is now under way. The National President of the Army Association, Lt. Gen. Sir Leonard Thornton, has written to Auckland Branch as follows:-

"Over the years many people have expressed concern that the Army has not had a worthy setting for the historical reminders of our military traditions. In fact, if one recalls the considerable part which the Army (including the Imperial Forces and individual officers) played in the colonial period, and subsequently in two World Wars and lesser campaigns in establishing the name of New Zealand among the nations of the world, it is almost discreditable that the situation should have continued so long.

The omission will now be corrected - and at a time when the Army is in need of practical evidence of the support of the community for all that it has stood for in the past and stands for today. The project calls for a major effort by all those who care for such things and value the heritage to which we have each, in our way, contributed a small part.

The Association has been asked to make contact with all regimental and other ex-Army associations and to seek their help in finding a share of the capital sum required - \$700,000. This may sound a large amount, but it will do no more than provide a worthy building in permanent and fire-resistant materials to house the items which are already held (in grossly inadequate accommodation) and those which have been promised by various donors. Separate appeals will be made in all RSAs throughout the country (spearheaded by Brigadier Jim Burrows) and to the business community and the public at large.

I recognise the difficulty that committees have in speaking for their membership if general meetings are held infrequently; nevertheless, I hope that in view of the nature of this appeal, you will feel disposed to make a special effort to tap such resources as may be available, and so help the project along and encourage others to do likewise. (A number of associations have indicated to me that as their membership increases in age, they have found smaller needs than they expected for reserve and welfare funds.) If you and your executive should not find it possible to make an immediate commitment, a pledge (or even a conditional pledge) or a future contribution would be most welcome.

I should also say that arrangements are being made for specified portions of the building to be designated as "gift sections" - a set of doors, the lining of a particular room, portions of the memorial entrance - in the event that organisations or groups wish to be so associated. Plaques acknowledging such donations will be erected in the new building. Should this idea appeal to you, I would be pleased to give further details and forward "price lists".

Army Memorial Museum at Waiouru (Contd.)

I am well aware of the number of calls that we all receive from a number of worthy causes. Nevertheless I commend this appeal without reservation. It is, to my certain knowledge, the first general appeal launched by the Army in more than 25 years - and it is for a national cause in which we can take special pride as participants in the history which it will commemorate. Any sum will of course be useful and welcome but you will appreciate that we are looking for the "hundreds" rather than the "tens". All contributions will be acknowledged with a formal receipt on behalf of the Trust."

Your Branch Committee feels that we should get right behind this appeal and has made 3 decisions:- (1) To make a donation of \$100 available from our Branch funds. (2) To invite our Branch members to supplement this sum by individual donations. (3) To suggest to the other Branches of the Association that all Branch and personal donations be pooled with a view to making a combined Association donation of some substance in the name of 22nd Battalion.

If you would like to make a personal donation, please send it direct to:- 22nd Battalion Association, P.O. Box 13-058, Onehunga.

'SOLDIER COUNTRY'

THE INFANTRYMAN, as seen by a 2NZEF gunner, from Camp to Sidi Rezegh, tersely opens Chapter 2 of a new book, "SOLDIER COUNTRY" by Jim Henderson (24563) who wrote our official history, a 3-year slog, solid, his hardest assignment ever, in 16 publications so far.

But this time, it's Unofficial History with a vengeance, stories both sad and joyful and crazy, brutal and loving, from the ranks of the 2NZEF. Several chapters ("Our Desert Mounties", "Dick Travis VC", etc.), plus poignant yarns are from 1NZEF Diggers. The extraordinary "Starkie", and his grave in Auckland, are pictured.

The whole basis of the book is a careful and very moving selection of stories from the "Unofficial History" page which "24563" has run in "NZRSA Review" for 25 years. Yes, 25 years.

"It's a story which had to be told; a crime if all this, from your countryman whom you now look back at in awe, truly, did not go into NZ's history and homes. Too much was being forgotten, dismissed, even derided.

"The sands and the mud will not swallow all," proclaims the author.

We're not giving anything away on what this gunner writes about the PBI-----but notice how, from Chapter 2 on, Infantryman has a Capital "I" ----- and sappers, gunners, even generals certainly don't run to capitals!

(However, what colours, would you say, the Grim Dig, bold and somewhat sardonic on the cover, has on his lemonsqueezer hat's pugaree? Hmmm!!!!

'Soldier Country' (Continued)

"SOLDIER COUNTRY" has over 70 drawings and photos, 12 in colour. Millwood Press, Wgtn, release it anyday now.

Some oddities and surprises emerge throughout. The German commander at Cassino was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford; Maori Battalion in mid-1942 in the desert had a little German aged about 14 as a mascot and they loved him dearly; nobody yet has solved The Ghost Train Mystery, that Northern Italy winter, War 2---they even got radar onto it without result... And the NZ Battalion (NOT 22!!!) which captured a travelling brothel ---- to say nothing of the Awful Fate of the naked Padre and the Electric Eel. The chapter on Women embraces strange territory.

Bludgers Hill has a weird feud "A Parable of Today", emphasises Henderson with the noble Field Bakery Unit; a teenage Freyberg "had very wet kisses"; and the surely-immortal-now "Waddling Widdlers of Alamein", a real 2NZEF beauty....

But pain, wounds, hospital, death and tragedy are by no means neglected - one such casualty records his daze-of-death state in Cassino's shambles. A gunner shot through the head has a curious fantasy. The sombre, incomparable devastation of Hiroshima fills the chapter "The Bomb: The End", by Doug Smith, Akld, a scene haunting the last members of 22 Battalion in the Army of Occupation, Japan.

"Kip" (Kippenberger) speculates on Our Greatest Soldier within a month of his death. A powerful summary.

Four chapters on POWs (Jim himself, somewhat battered, was bagged at Sidi Rezegh, Libya, 1941) where TV films placed in this setting are derided, include the extraordinary chapter "POWs STRIKE." And they did! Incredibly, one bunch of working captives got time-and-a-half granted for Allied Air Raids!

The Red Cross's work is pictured, praised (NZ sent up to 8,000 life-saving food parcels overseas a week to our POWs at one stage), and the thought is expressed that under the Red Cross, NZ "a reward for remoteness", could harbour POWs in any next war.

SITTING DUCKS

War consists of shooting at the enemy and being shot at by the enemy. Being shot at was not too bad when you had targets to shoot back at. The worst times were those when you could not shoot back, when you lacked the grateful cover of a slit trench or some other shelter and could not even hug Mother Earth for comfort without feeling that it wasn't quite the right thing to show how scared you were. I still remember several occasions when I was the sitting duck or one of the sitting ducks:-

LIBYA, 1941:- On the bitumen road that skirts the Mediterranean

Sitting Ducks (Continued)

coast between Bardia and Tobruk is a place called MENASTIR. It is really only a spot on the map but is named after a nearby well. The Battalion spent some days there in November, 1941, shooting up the German convoys that tried to go past and repulsing some fairly determined attacks. Then there was a lull in the great battle that had been raging near Tobruk and strong enemy forces headed our way. Brigade H.Q. at SIDI AZEIZ (five miles south of us) was over-run, B Company went into the bag and the rest of 22 Battalion suddenly found itself dangerously isolated, with supplies very low and the desert on three sides of us crawling with tanks, half-tracks and miscellaneous enemy transport. LES ANDREW took the only course left open to him and moved the Battalion by night south and east to link up with the Indian Division near SIDE OMAR. A miraculous bit of navigation took us between enemy encampments and we stopped twice during the night to allow German convoys to cross our track. Then, at dawn, we came under shellfire and sat helplessly in our trucks while a brief artillery duel brought casualties on both sides. It was not much consolation to learn that our opponents were the Indian Artillery who had mistaken us for a German convoy.

MERSA MATRUH, June 1942:- The Division was in the Syrian desert on a training exercise when 8th Army suffered its worst (and last) defeat at the hands of Field Marshal ERWIN ROMMEL. We made a five-day dash back into Egypt and, as we moved west along the familiar road from Alexandria, we passed an endless stream of military traffic heading in the opposite direction. It wasn't a retreat; it was a rout and, for us, it was depressing in the extreme. As General Freyberg said later:- "The Army had, for the moment, disintegrated." We spent a couple of days at Matruh while the Division's task (or fate) was decided. Ordered to fight a delaying action at MINQAR QAIM while 8th Army pulled itself together at Alamein, Freyberg would have been well aware that Rommel's panzers would inevitably encircle whatever positions he took up, cutting off every line of retreat. He could easily lose all or most of his Division in attempting to break out of the trap. So the orders we received made good sense. One rifle Company in each Battalion and parts of each of the other Companies would be left out of battle so that, if the worst happened, each unit would have a nucleus on which to rebuild. And while the subsequent break out at MINQAR QAIM was a masterly exercise, achieved with minimum casualties, the wisdom of that hard decision to keep a substantial part of each Battalion in reserve was amply borne out a little later on when the depleted 22nd did meet disaster at RUWEISAT Ridge.

Any way, we of the L.O.B. contingent left our mates behind and headed east under cover of darkness. It was happy hunting at that time for the Luftwaffe and our convoy had not gone far before enemy planes were strafing the road. We were sitting ducks once again. Fortunately for our peace of mind, the convoy soon stopped and we shot out of our trucks with the speed of light and hit the sand as soon as we were reasonably clear of the road. The enemy planes departed and we resumed our journey but a count of heads on our truck showed that we were short of two bodies. Someone said he had seen two askaris

Sitting Ducks (Continued)

take off at such speed that they obviously intended to put miles rather than yards between them and the road. Never did hear what became of them.

HOT PURSUIT, November 1942:- The battle of Alamein had been won, our armour had forced a gap in the German line and the Division was right behind the tanks, ready to move through the gap and exploit a highly promising situation. We were on the crest of a wave - final victory was within our grasp; we would cut off the enemy's retreat and gather in the hordes of Italians and Germans who would be more than ready to surrender. We should have known that next day the rains would descend and bog down the pursuit long enough to let most of the Afrika Korps get away to fight another day. But that was for tomorrow; on that night in early November, we still had to get through that narrow gap. Our trucks were in closed up formation and some Germans were still fighting a nearguard action. We were under fire and again in a sitting duck situation. There were some casualties in the trucks and it was quite uncomfortable until someone up ahead silenced the offending gun.

SANGRO RIVER, December, 1943:- Having crossed the Sangro, 4th Brigade was endeavouring to outflank ORSOGNA by a left hook, the idea being to move through or past GUARDIAGRELE to SAN MARTINO. The 22nd was still a Motor Battalion at that stage. Our Company, supported by DIV. CAV. and tanks, moved out in broad daylight past SAN EUSANIO towards Guardiagrele, which dominated the surrounding countryside from the high ground to our left front. The road climbed a ridge and then turned eastwards to run straight and level for about 600 yards. The catch was that this stretch of straight road was in full view of the German gunners, who, like those at Cassino, knew the range to a centimetre and shelled the road constantly. A section sergeant in charge of two Vickers guns, I was in the first of 6 Platoon's trucks and I told my young driver that, as soon as we reached that exposed piece of road, he was to put his foot hard down and keep it there until we reached the comparative shelter of a low ridge on the enemy's side of the road. "What happens if we get hit?" asked the driver. "You just keep on going", I replied. We duly reached the exposed piece of road and passed over it at a fairly moderate speed. The German guns opened up as soon as we appeared. The shells were passing overhead or landing behind us but far too close for comfort. The truck seemed to be moving far too slowly but I was sure the driver was doing his best and I didn't utter a word. As we reached the shelter of the low ridge and I was heaving a sigh of relief, he asked me in all seriousness:- "When do we get to this dangerous stretch of road"? I almost collapsed with laughter.