

"Vrai et Fort"

22nd Battalion Association

AUCKLAND BRANCH

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A PIECE OF QUIET

When my children were still very young and neither less nor more noisy than other kids of the same ages, I had occasion to go away from home on business for a week or so. My eldest youngster wanted to know why I was going away and was informed that I needed some peace and quiet. He didn't get the message quite right and created one of those imperishable family sayings that parents treasure by telling a neighbour that Dad had gone away for a "piece of quiet". Well, the Auckland Branch Committee and the editor of this publication have been having a 'piece of quiet' for much of this year. It has been a quiet year in terms of Association happenings and most of us have had periods of indisposition as a result of colds, 'flu and other ailments, but we are still in business (in a quiet way) and this edition of the Branch Newsletter is evidence of that.

Escalating costs of printing and the loss of the previous concession on the bulk postage of registered magazines have caused me to wonder if we can now afford to publish more than two issues per year but the Branch Committee has decided that the Newsletters are so well received that we should continue to send out three issues per year, if at all possible. So, God willing, we will try to keep them coming as often as we can and for as long as we can.

KEITH ELLIOTT, V.C.

Though many of us had known for some time that Keith Elliott had terminal cancer, his death on October 7th at the age of 73 was very sad news indeed for everyone who knew him during the war and in the post-war years, as well as for his family. He had seemed almost indestructible and he had long played a central role in the affairs of the Battalion Association, officiating as Padre at many of our Reunions and taking an active part in the preparations for the 50th anniversary Reunion to be held in Wellington next May. We will always remember him with deep pride and affection.

RUWEISAT RIDGE - July 15, 1942:- It is fitting that we record here the story of Keith's V.C., with due acknowledgements to the Battalion History, the N.Z. Herald, the Dominion and the Wanganui Chronicle. He had just rejoined the Battalion after a bout of Malaria to discover that 11 Platoon, B Company was short of a platoon commander and that he, the platoon sergeant would be leading his platoon in the pending attack. The plan was for 4th and 5th Brigades to make a night attack over a distance of 5 miles and take Ruweisat Ridge. 5th Brigade duly reached its objective, with 21st and 23rd Battalions leading and 22nd Battalion guarding their rear. When dawn broke, 5th Brigade was in a very exposed position, with no support on either flank and without the Tank and Anti-tank backing that was supposed to be there at first light. Keith's platoon was on the Battalion's right flank and he could see German tanks approaching across the desert. He therefore took 11 Platoon forward to a less

KEITH ELLIOTT V.C. (continued)

exposed position from which they could do nothing but watch as the Panzers rounded up most of the rest of the Battalion - about 280 of them, mainly from B, C and D Companies. The disasters that befell the 22nd and other N.Z. Battalions in July, 1942 fully endorsed the wisdom of the decision made when 2 N.Z. Div. had returned to the desert, from Syria, in June:- that, while 8th Army was in a state of almost total disarray, it was essential to keep a substantial proportion of each Battalion out of the front line to form a nucleus on which to rebuild, should this kind of disaster occur.

Keith, who had been wounded in the chest, and the 18 men of 11 Platoon were among the few who finally made it to the ridge. They then had to decide what to do next and the obvious options were:- to surrender to the surrounding enemy or to have a go at getting back to the Alamein line from which they had set out the night before. B Company had previously had a period of captivity in BARDIA (during the Libya 1941 show) and, when 11 Platoon had to choose between "Stalag and the bush", their decision in favour of "the bush" was unanimous.

What happened next is best described in Keith's own words to a "Dominion" reporter a few months ago:- "We got right among it. We'd knocked out a couple of machinegun posts and we'd got all these prisoners, Ron Jones, Shorty Lancaster and myself - I'd sent Ron Garmonsway and the others in another direction - and, all of a sudden, another machinegun gets in our backs. I took off. Ran across to this water cart about 30 or 40 yards away from the machinegun. Had a white towel that I used to put on my bayonet to get them to surrender. They were very good at coming out with their hands up but sometimes they'd leave a bloke at the machinegun. I dived for the other end of the truck but, as I moved, a bullet went straight into my thigh. Still there, actually. I reckoned there was no future in this, so I ran about 6 or 8 yards and they didn't see me go."

"The next time they came up, I got the fellow in the machinegun post and then I jumped up and into them. Threw a couple of hand grenades as I went. Between us, we got 140 prisoners and Ron Garmonsway got the D.C.M. for what he did. I was tremendously thrilled about that."

The tally of prisoners 11 Platoon brought back varies from 120 to 140 in various accounts and this does not, of course, include other enemy casualties, killed and wounded, probably at least 30. In the course of the action, Keith received 3 leg-wounds, in addition to his chest-wound. For what they achieved that morning, there has never been any question that Keith more than earned his country's highest award for valour, Ron Garmonsway his D.C.M. and Ron Jones his M.I.D. In fact there is no doubt whatever that every member of the platoon deserved a decoration that day. Keith was presented with his V.C. by General Montgomery, was commissioned as a second lieutenant and returned home in July, 1943. He had been one of the Battalion's original members in 1940.

KEITH ELLIOTT, CIVILIAN

The story of Keith's life before and after his war service is fairly well-known, but here are some brief details. After leaving school, he took over a small dairy farm near Pahiatua at the age of 19 and went back to the same farm when he came back from the war. But he had expressed interest in becoming a clergyman long before, while attending Feilding Agricultural High School, and he said in his autobiography ("From Cowshed to Dogcollar") that he did not join the Anglican priesthood because of any experience he had had in the war. So, in due course,

KEITH ELLIOTT, CIVILIAN (Continued)

he became the Revd. Keith Elliott and was soon known as a big-hearted champion of the under-dog, ministering to "flocks" in Ashhurst, to Maori communities up the Wanganui River, at the Wellington City Mission, in Pongaroa and in Karori, Wellington", before retiring at Raumati South. Tributes to Keith have been given by many people but here are two from men who knew him well in 22nd Battalion. COLIN ARMSTRONG, who was Keith's platoon commander until they were both taken prisoner at SIDI AZIZ in 1941, told TERRY McLEAN that Keith was "a straight, simple, very devout man who became greatly respected and loved while acting as a parish priest". And RON JONES, who probably knew Keith better than anyone else did, told Terry that "he was a great soldier, so I thought, because he was confident and radiated confidence. Sometimes we reckoned he was pig-headed - but that was just us, grouching. When you lived and fought with him, you developed a total faith in him".

CHARLES HENRY POPE - BATTALION CHARACTER

The 22nd Battalion had its full share of "characters" and KAI THOMSON of New Plymouth wrote to us a few months ago about one of the Battalion's original members who was a "character in anyone's language". "Charles Henry (MICK) Pope is in excellent health. He celebrated his 80th birthday last year at the R.S.A. Bowling Club Pavilion, where he is a very prominent member both in summer and winter! For many years, he was a very energetic and efficient Treasurer. He still plays in all the big tournaments, including the Taranaki Open, which has 4 days of qualifying rounds.

Mick is also a life member of the Tukapa Rugby Football Club. In shorts, long stockings, collar and tie, he still has a very trim and athletic-looking figure and still has a very tuneful bass voice, which he uses to good effect on appropriate occasions. At the 80th birthday party of his closest friend, another life member of the Tukapa Rugby Club, Mick entertained the gathering when, quite late in the evening, armed with a broom, he gave a very vigorous haka, followed by the 'Cast Iron Chicken', theme song of the Tukapa Club".

"Due to a set of curious circumstances, to quote W.S. Gilbert, Mick became a cook quite late in his army career. He had no ambitions to become an expert in the culinary art but, to his horror and despite his protests, he was sent to do a course at the Army Cooking School. At the end of the course, he returned to the Battalion, which was then in U area at Maadi Camp, and was posted to, of all places, the Officers' Mess. It was the day the 8th Reinforcements arrived and one of them was my brother, a close friend of Mick's in Civvy Street. That evening, after my brother had settled in, we paid a visit to Mick in the Officers' Mess cookhouse. We had dinner and the three of us sat talking and probably wondering which NAAFI would have a good surplus of stella beer. Suddenly, in strode Major John MacDuff, obviously in a very angry and belligerent mood, his handle-bar moustache twitching. He addressed Mick thus:-

'The meal tonight, Pope, was unquestionably the worst I have ever tried to eat. You would be the worst cook in the N.Z. Division -
No - in the 8th Army - I could go further - in the British
Troops in Egypt'.

Mick was quite unmoved and made no comments but it came as no surprise when, a couple of days later, he was replaced and transferred to Don Company, which was his old home. He remained there and happily cooked for his substantially Taranaki-based company until he returned to New Zealand with the second furlough draft".

ROLL OF HONOUR

538735	MAURICE G. KAIN	Auckland	27/5/89
42473	E.J. ROIL	Rotorua	29/5/89
499629	(Sir) HAMILTON MITCHELL	Wellington	3/6/89
6398	A.G. BELL	Tauranga	18/6/89
423149	R.H. SIMMONS	Otorohanga	18/6/89
	(Padre) T.E. CHAMPION	Sydney	19/6/89
620973	C.S. NICHOLLS	Tauranga	30/6/89
30349	A.I. JAMES	Auckland	7/7/89
30356	L.L. DARCY	Christchurch	29/7/89
411580	L.E. WOOD	Henderson	22/8/89
44238	A.G. KEY	Upper Hutt	25/8/89
6887	J. MCCOOK	Hamilton	3/9/89
471244	M. McG. COOPER	England	1/9/89
6751	(Rev.) KEITH ELLIOTT, V.C.	Wellington	7/10/89
457180	LINDSAY R. BROOKS	Kimbolton	20/10/89

This long list covers a period of about six months and is not an exhaustive one as it includes mainly the names of men who lived in our Auckland Branch district. Maurice Kain was in business in Auckland and was a strong supporter of our Branch for many years. He left a generous bequest to our Branch Welfare Fund. Sir Hamilton (Pete) Mitchell had a big funeral service in the Wellington Cathedral. He had never forgotten an occasion in Italy (Christmas Eve, 1944) when, in the frozen still air, across a barren no man's land, he heard the sound of German voices singing "Lilli Marlene" and it was his specific wish that this unforgettable World War 2 melody be played at the end of his funeral service, a nostalgic moment for the Old Digs present. Padre Champion came to the Battalion early in 1942, about the time of our move to Syria and transferred to 23rd Battalion 18 months later. He died in Sydney at the age of 81. Lindsay Robert Brooks and his wife Jean were involved in a major car smash last month, Jean dying a few days after her husband. They had booked in for the 1990 National Reunion.

HOW TO OPERATE A SCHMEIZER

On Sunday, April 29, B Coy. 22 Inf Bn, encountered a small enemy pocket, near the autostrada, about 10 kilometres out from Mestre and the causeway to Venice. The enemy showed no great stomach for a fight, and soon the company was faced with the problem of disposing of some 50 prisoners. Transport was out of the question because the troops were already in the four three-tonners, and the arrival of two Italian civilians seemed to provide the answer. These two were queried as to their willingness to escort the "Teds" back towards Padova, and they expressed agreement, at the same time indicating by signs and a buzzing noise that they required firearms, whereupon they were handed two German service rifles. On receipt of these the two civvies held a short conference, but handed the rifles back, and this time their gestures and a series of staccato buzzes showed that what they desired was tommy-guns. They were accordingly given two German Schmeizers but were clearly puzzled as to the operation of that particular weapon, and as they stood there, fiddling with the guns, a "Ted" stepped out of the line of prisoners, said "Excuse me" and speaking in good Italian carefully explained and also demonstrated the full working of the weapon. When he had finished he handed the weapon back to the civvy, who smiled and said "Grazie". Everybody appeared quite happy, and off they all went.

1990 NATIONAL REUNION - WELLINGTON

This may be the last reminder you receive that the date of the Battalion's "Golden Anniversary" National Reunion is getting fairly close. It will be held at the Central Institute of Technology, Heretaunga (which means Trentham as far as most of us are concerned) during the weekend of May 18/20, 1990. To register, just send the registration fee (\$20 per head), and your name and address of course, to Wellington Branch, 22nd Battalion Association, Box 14-386, Kilbirnie, Wellington.

As you should know by now, Accommodation can be booked at the CIT complex itself through Wellington Branch but, if you wish to be accommodated away from the Reunion venue, you must make your own arrangements with one of the Motels in the vicinity and the sooner you attend to this the better.

T.F.S.:- T.F.S. deposits totalling \$100 or more by 30/4/90 will participate in a draw for the prize of \$100.

THE DESERT GENERALS

I have recently been reading a book with the above title that was written about 30 years ago by the English writer CORRELLI BARNETT. It was the first complete account of the Western Desert campaigns of 1940-43 and it also set out to assess the characters and abilities of the five Army commanders on our side:- Generals O'Connor, Cunningham, Ritchie, Auchinleck and Montgomery. It was described when published as "one of the most controversial and challenging of all War books" and as being "vividly written and intensely interesting". Barnett's frank appraisal of five British Generals in the desert campaigns was seen then, and is unlikely to be seen any differently now, as "startling", "provocative" and "debatable". The author obviously researched his subject very thoroughly and, over a period of three years, interviewed most of the senior officers of the 8th Army, with the notable exception of Field-Marshal Montgomery, "of whom he is severely critical". As far as his findings are concerned, it seems a pity that he did not also talk to people of somewhat lower rank, including some of the ordinary soldiers who served under the Desert Generals.

We Kiwis who fought in the 8th Army have no direct knowledge of General Sir Richard O'Connor but we can have nothing but admiration for his remarkable victories over the Italians in 1940 and early 1941, when his very small force of 3 Divisions (7th Armoured, 4th Indian and 6th Australian) attacked and routed the many times stronger Italian Armies in Egypt and Cyrenaica, capturing 70,000 prisoners and the fortress of Bardia in a lightning campaign of 6 weeks duration and destroying eight Italian Divisions in the process. After that, the Aussies took Tobruk (another 25,000 prisoners) and O'Connor's tiny force pressed relentlessly on past Benghazi to BEDA FOMM, near EL AGHEILA and was all set to advance across Tripolitania, if Wavell, then C. in C. Middle East, had given his permission. Unfortunately, Wavell had by then been instructed to mark time in North Africa and to send the strongest force he could muster to Greece, with the result that O'Connor's brilliant but brief career as the first of the desert Generals came to an abrupt end - a rather ignominious end in that he was taken prisoner by the first German troops to reach Cyrenaica. So it was that there was no opportunity for Richard O'Connor's tactical skills to be tried out against those of a German commander (ERWIN ROMMEL) with whom he had much in common.

THEN THERE WERE FOUR

We who were in the 8th Army do know quite a bit about the remaining four of Barnett's "Desert Generals" and, in a great many ways, we were in a better position (on the spot and at the sharp end) to assess their relative merits than were Mr. Barnett or the high-ranked British Officers quoted in his book. An Army Commander and his Staff Officers can plan a military operation but the people who carry it out are the members of the Battalions and Regiments sent into action and they are the principal sufferers if there are deficiencies in the plan and the way in which it is put into operation by the Army Commander and his close associates.

In November, 1941, General Cunningham was placed in command of the "Crusader" offensive into Libya by the C. in C., Middle East, General Auchinlech. Like General O'Connor, Cunningham had been outstandingly successful in battles against the Italian forces in Africa; against Rommel's AFRIKA CORPS, he was so unsuccessful that he was replaced, early in December, by Major-General Ritchie. In reality, Auchinlech himself took over command of the battle, with Ritchie as his deputy. A verdict with which no New Zealander who was there could possibly disagree was that Generals Cunningham and Ritchie, while both fine men, lacked the ability and the dynamism needed for success against Rommel.

Auchinlech or Montgomery? - Barnett's book poses such questions as:- Was Auchinlech a tired defeatist or the tireless architect of victory? Was Montgomery a 'Military Messiah' or the inheritor of inevitable success? These questions are of very considerable interest to us who served in 8th Army and to all who study military history. Barnett compares the austere General Auchinlech with the somewhat flamboyant General Montgomery. He praises Auchinlech for saving the 8th Army from a crushing defeat in 1941 and for turning "Crusader" into a moderate victory. He also praises him for conducting the "masterly" retreat to Alamein in June, 1942, for victory over Rommel in July, 1942 and for being responsible for the battle plan that Montgomery put into effect at ALAM HALFA, not long before the Alamein offensive of October, 1942. Barnett criticises Montgomery for being over-cautious and seeks to take away from him the credit for the 8th Army's victory at Alam Halfa. In short, he says that Auchinlech did all the hard work in extremely difficult circumstances, while Montgomery, with much stronger resources at his disposal, merely reaped the fruits of a final victory of which Auchinlech was the architect.

How do Barnett's comments sound to us? Let's consider 2nd N.Z. Division's part in the desert campaigns from November, 1941 to September, 1942:- Libya, 1941:- 5th Brigade (22nd, 23rd and 28th Battalions) got off comparatively lightly but 4th & 6th Brigades and 21st Battalion suffered such heavy casualties at SIDI REZEGH that they were withdrawn from the battle. June, 1942:- As 8th Army was being routed in Libya, our Division was recalled from Syria and travelled westward along the main road to MERSA MATRUH while shattered remnants of the 8th Army went hell for leather in the opposite direction. The Division, with all units reduced in numbers by the withdrawal of L.O.B. contingents, was given the task of fighting a rearguard action for 8th Army and, after the route to Alamein had been cut by 21st Panzer Division, was virtually abandoned to its fate. The magnificent New Zealand break out from MINQUAR QUAIM, through 21st Panzer Div., was no thanks to the high command of 8th Army. July 1942:- Though Auchinlech may have obtained some sort of tactical superiority over Rommel at this time, the month of July, 1942 is for us synonymous with Infantry night attacks that ended in disaster because promised Tank support failed to appear at first light. The whole of the desert period up to August, 1942 is remembered as the period when 8th Army commanders refused to allow Divisions to fight as Divisions, being obsessed with the idea of breaking them up into small groups, when Tank Support was invariably lacking when most needed and when full co-ordination of the operations of Infantry, Armour and Air Force was unknown.

"The Desert Generals" (cont/d)

The 8th Army commanders of that period were just names to us and we were seldom, if ever, given adequate Intelligence information. We seldom knew what we were supposed to be doing or what the enemy was doing and we strongly suspected that the Army commanders knew little more than we did. How dramatically different it all became when Montgomery took over 8th Army. He visited every unit and we saw the top man face to face. All thoughts of retreat to the Delta area and beyond were abandoned and transport was sent well to the rear. We began to receive fully adequate Intelligence information, highlighted during the build-up to Alam Halfa, when we were told in advance just when Rommel would attack, what the battle plan was and what our part in it would be. The effect of these changes on morale was tremendous. The clincher came as dawn approached after the night attack that began the battle of Alamein. We heard the unmistakable sound of moving tank tracks and quickly decided that the tanks were ours, not Rommel's! For the first time in the desert, we knew that we had an Army Commander who knew what he was about.

SURRENDER BY 'PHONE

An interesting sidelight on a war that became the more extraordinary the nearer it came to ending occurred at Venice on Monday, April 30, the morning after B Coy of 22 Inf Bn had entered the city. News reached the OC of B Coy that a force of the enemy on Lido, the long narrow island, famed pleasure resort and strategic key to Venice harbour, had refused to surrender to the Italian partisans. The major, learning that the German headquarters were in the Albergo Wagner, calmly called the hotel on the telephone, and eventually located the enemy force commander, who luckily spoke good English. Following a conversation remarkable for its extreme politeness, the major was invited to visit the island and take over the garrison as prisoners-of-war. The bag proved to be six officers and 350 OR's.

MALEME & THE 3" MORTAR
(From Jack Mitchell)

Before I launch into the Maleme Drome aspect of the No.3 Platoon's performance, a few details about Lieutenant McAra may be of interest to 22nd men who didn't know him. McAra had a detailed knowledge of the performance to be obtained from the 3" Mortar and would wax enthusiastic on detail at the drop of a hat. I was Range finder, using the Barr & Stroud instrument, an accurate and an obnoxious gadget. We had our first field practice using live ammunition on a range somewhere out of Ashbourne, Kent and the range was duly calibrated and the order given, all this followed by a shattering blast behind us. My immediate reaction was to ask "Donk" (McAra's nickname):- what the - - was that? His reply was that that was Charge One. We waited for the required seconds to observe how accurate the range-finding had been; we would have waited a long time for, behind us, the gun crew were in a state of shock as, by a million to one chance, the nose cap of the shell had struck the branch of a tree and exploded in mid-air.

That was my introduction to the Barr and Stroud. I had no great love for the monstrosity as calibration required the exposing of head and shoulders 18" above ground level, enough to make any opposing sharp-shooter lick his lips and take aim. We were fortunate on Olympus Pass that we were able to plot all forward points before Jerry came up against us. "Donk" gave us some very interesting lectures on his beloved Mortars, including a mathematical formula for gauging the distance from the fall of the bomb by the time it took the sound to reach us. The Mortar and all ammunition were brought out from Olympus and the complete Mortar, less ammunition, was taken on board the "Calcutta", Donk resolutely disobeying an order to throw the whole thing away.

Duly established on Crete, we set up in an excellent pit on a terrace overlooking Maleme Drome; all equipment was brought up by manpower from CANEA, the indefatigable Donk insisting that all points within our 1650 yard range be plotted with that bloody Barr & Stroud. Came the airborne invasion and we were in business but the tragedy was that Donk was called away to take over an Infantry platoon which had lost its officer. Donk was killed while leading his men and our Section lost a leadership that would have made an immense difference to C Company.

Mehaffey's trenches were immediately below us and in comfortable range. Excepting for one salvo fired on the eastern end and another towards the Church, which was at our extreme range, we didn't use the Mortar to good purpose. We could have ranged on the dry river bed (Tavronitis River) and the A.A. (Bofors) guns were also within range. The more hot-headed among us were all for firing all available bombs before we obeyed the order to withdraw. In retrospect, I daresay that Jerry's fighter-bombers would have shifted us but our gun position was such that only a direct hit would have been effective. The opinion of our Sergeant that indiscriminate firing would have given our position away and that movement by the gun crew would do the same was accepted finally. I rather think that that was the last time I obeyed orders without question. Recollections such as these are bound to be hazy and probably inaccurate in detail but the actual detail of the movements around our position are firmly etched in my memory.

It was a great pity that Donk didn't make it to give us his ideas - to me he was something of a genius. When we vacated our pit and left all our precious ammunition behind, we took the barrel and sight of the Mortar and dumped them in a slit trench at Company H.Q. Things were hectic and confused until we teamed up with BILL HULTON and made it to the shambles on top of Point 107. Jerry noted our progress and sent his 109s in to let us know the war was still on. Everything has a funny side and I have only to close my eyes to see TIM FOWLER coming up from Don Company's area and identifying himself by a flood of colourful language and much arm-waving; most of us must have been born out of wedlock according to Tim. Suicidal to stay on 107 - only a few folds in the ground for cover and, as Lord Haw Haw had told us, Jerry had "a bomb for every grapevine and a bullet for every blade of grass". He had an awful lot of spares as well. I have always thought that the dispositions above Maleme Drome were all well thought out and that they have barely been recorded. The coastal guns were a fiasco; it took Jerry five minutes of concentrated effort to make them history.

FROM THE TREASURER

There was a very encouraging response to the appeal in our last issue for Branch members to send in their subscriptions and/or donations and we are most grateful to all those who responded, very generously in some cases. Ours is a voluntary organisation and payment of dues is therefore optional but we do expect/hope that everyone financially able to contribute will do so. The annual subscription is \$5.00 and many of our members make donations for general and welfare purposes. We prefer not to send out subscription accounts, a costly exercise in itself, but the continuation of these Newsletters depends on your financial support for the Branch. If you are one of the considerable number who have not recently sent in a payment or if you feel that you may be in arrears, please use the reply slip below.

22nd Battalion Association,
Box 13-058, Auckland 6

November 1989

I enclose the sum of \$ _____, being my current sub. and/or donation.

Name & Address (Block letters):- _____
